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Marguerite of Navarre: a mystical fable¹

Marguerite d'Angoulême, duchess of Alençon, queen of Navarre, sister and wife of kings, patron of reformers and monasteries, was a figure of indisputable authority, which she wielded in the theological and political realms to the extent of what was possible for her times and gender. However, her writings are diffused with figures that represent truth, knowledge, and meaning as shrouded in the weak, the little, the inconsequential, the fool. In this, she poetically draws and re-elaborates traditions of knowledge (and non-knowledge), wisdom and folly, in an original and creative fashion, which restructures mystical and hermeneutical traditions and destitutes and recomposes language.

1. Paul and the logos of folly

The unintelligibility of God's wisdom to humanity, the scandal of Christ's cross in the eyes of worldly wise, and the exaltation of the humble, the "nothing", the rejected, the foolish, are at the center of Paul's λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ in his *First Letter to the Corinthians* (1 Corinthians 1:18–25; 3:19) and reverberate throughout the Pauline epistolary.² In Paul, the Cross is a sign of contradiction which reveals the secrets of the heart and the incomprehensible logic of a God who

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¹ This essay is part of HORIZON-MSCA-2022-PF-01-01, project n. 101105789 — Folly and the Feminine in the Renaissance (Folie).

² 1 Corinthians 1:28-29; 2 Corinthians 12:10-11.

elects without reason or merit, choosing «what is low and despised in the world» (1 *Corinthians* 1:28), what is nothing (τὰ μὴ ὄντα), to reduce the things that are to inconsistency and nothing, to destroy them (ἵνα τὰ ὄντα καταργήσῃ, 1 *Corinthians* 1: 27-29). This is the folly of the message which Paul announces: ἡ μωρία τοῦ κηρύγματος (1 *Corinthians* 1:21). The logos of the cross is folly, scandal, excess; but «the word (*logos*) of the Cross is folly for those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God» (1 *Corinthians* 1:18).

This foundational text has been the engine of multiple exegeses, a “semantic energy” focused on the three elements through which the cross is presented: *logos*, folly, and power, which allows different «plays of possibilities» and «displacements of accents», as in the analysis by French philosopher and theologian Stanislas Breton.³ The relationship between God’s power and human response, the possibility to see in the folly of the Cross an ultra-wisdom available to the human mind, able to generate speculative knowledge, are only some of the hermeneutical possibilities played out in the endless exegeses of the Pauline text. One of this chapters is the “Fools of Christ”, where the Pauline text interacts fruitfully with the Platonic concept of «an outburst of love, inspiration, enthusiasm, and the reciprocal dwelling of God in the soul and the soul in God», as Plato expressed it e.g. in works as the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and *Ion*.⁴ These figures of the excess are characterized by what Breton calls a «representation, on condition that it be understood as closely as possible to the theatrical meaning», a «bodily conversion of the ineffable» which is reproduced in the world as a stage.⁵ Fools from the East and the West embody the «folly, excess, alienation»⁶ of the *logos* of the cross in their thoughts and actions.

In a similar vein to Breton’s, Michel de Certeau’s reflection on the emergence of a new kind of mystical ‘science’ in the 16th-17th centuries pointed to a late antique episode from Palladius’ *Lausiac History* (5th century), chapter 34.⁷ An ignorant woman, servant in

3 Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, Engl. trans., New York, Fordham University Press, 2002, p. 11. On some of these possibilities, see Christophe Chalamet, Hans-Christoph Askani (eds.), *The Wisdom and Foolishness of God: First Corinthians 1-2 in Theological Exploration*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2015.

4 Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, p. 31.

5 *Ibidem*, pp. 37-38.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 31.

7 Cuthbert Butler (ed.), *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, II, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1904, pp. 98-100.

a monastery, the last among the last, mistreated and loathed by everyone, feeding from the crumbs of the table, «who was, as they say, ‘the monastery sponge’, really fulfilling the Scriptures: *If any man among you seem to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise*»,⁸ is proposed as a model of piety to a saintly anchorite by an angel. The anchorite comes to visit the monastery, inducing all the others to confess the indignities they had visited upon the woman, and recognizes her as a spiritual mother. The virgin, unable to bear the sudden admiration and honour received, leaves the convent and disappears. In the episode there is a trait that we have already seen as a characteristic of the fools for Christ: the theatrical aspect of their actions. The woman is described as «παρθένος ὑποκρινομένη μωρίαν καὶ δαίμονα»,⁹ «maiden who feigned madness and demon-possession»;¹⁰ she is seen as *performing* the madness, which at the same time is pronounced as the real fulfillment of Christianity. In Certeau’s words, it poses an «unresolvable question: Is that madness real or affected? Or real because affected? Or made up of several kinds of madness? The tale will end without answering these questions».¹¹

Through the spoken word of the angel, who gives the mystical foundation to the meeting and its reversal of the established hierarchy, the anchorite proclaims an impossible genealogy: him and the other women of the monastery are children of the madwoman. However, the mad woman does not participate in the symbolic space of the convent, she disappears without leaving to her spiritual children the possibility of saying anything more about her, to assimilate her into a saint, to appropriate her into the monastic space; she remains beyond language and rationalization.¹²

After her, other madmen and women appear, and populate with their laughter the history of Christianity, obeying to the Pauline order «to become foolish in order to become wise» (1 *Corinthians* 3:18). Indeed, following Certeau’s analysis, we can see in the modern age a re-appearance of these figures: «half lost along country roads and in back-room talk behind the scenes of history, something very old

8 Robert T. Meyer (ed.), *Palladius: The Lausiaca History*, New York, The Newman Press, 1964, p. 97.

9 Butler (ed.), *The Lausiaca History of Palladius*, p. 98.

10 Meyer (ed.), *Palladius: The Lausiaca History*, p. 96.

11 Michel de Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, p. 32.

12 Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, pp. 37-38.

returns» as «members of a dynasty of spiritual pioneers»,¹³ a dynasty inaugurated by Palladius' 'sponge' and theorized by Cusanus' *idiota*.

Thus, Certeau individuates as a crucial place of the modern construction of the mystical space the figures of the wilderness, as an «embodiment of 'popular' wisdom in contrast with the networks of the 'civility' and the professionalization of knowledge», especially theological knowledge; the «illiterate but enlightened man»,¹⁴ the «humble layman»,¹⁵ the poor: this is the mystical space. Marguerite's characters will inhabit this space.

2. Folly and femininity

In this brief and highly selective history of the different masks and reappearances of the fool for God, before landing in the French shores of the XVI century, it is necessary to mention a certain attribute that this folly can take: the feminine gender.

Within the Western intellectual tradition, femininity has frequently been aligned with matter, corporeality, sensuality, and, more broadly, with the domain of the irrational.¹⁶ This association is often traced to Platonic philosophy; in particular, *Timaeus* introduces a gendered framework by identifying the feminine with the «receptacle», a category signifying passivity, indeterminacy, absence, and dependency (*Timaeus* 42b–c), a formulation with profound metaphysical ramifications.

Early Christian thought perpetuated this framework by aligning “femininity” with weakness and legitimizing its subordination to men, a stance commonly rationalized through the narrative of Eve's transgression.¹⁷ While recent scholarship has interrogated and expanded upon this binary paradigm, seeking to complicate its interpretive scope, a fuller contextualization exceeds the present

13 Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, p. 205.

14 Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 204.

15 Certeau, *Mystic Fable* I, 235.

16 See for instance Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason. “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

17 Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ideology, History, and the Construction of “Woman” in Late Ancient Christianity*, «Journal of Early Christian Studies», 2, 2 (1994), pp. 155-184; Emanuela Prinzivalli, *Antropologia, fisiologia femminile e malattie di donne negli antichi scrittori Cristiani*, «Med Secoli», 23, 1 (2011), pp. 205-226; Lavinia Cerioni, *Feminine Metaphorical Language: Platonic Resonances in Origen of Alexandria*, in Ead. (ed.) *Gendered Allegories: Origen of Alexandria and the Representation of the Feminine in Patristic Literature*, «Open Theology» 10, 2024, n.1, pp. 1–14.

discussion. Nevertheless, the themes of inferiority and sinfulness – frequently attributed to the feminine in Christian theologies, and exemplified through gendered figures such as Lady Wisdom in *Proverbs* 1-9 and her foil, Lady Folly (*Proverbs* 2:16–19) – also harbor the potential for paradoxical inversion, within the Pauline logic of the exaltation of the lowly, the “nothing”, and the rejected. Folly thus emerges as the place of potential inversion, destabilizing the ostensibly “natural” categories through which the world is conventionally understood. Thus, Christian theologies and practices are suffused with a gendered dimension of folly; as Jean-Marie Fritz has shown, «la complicité de la folie et de la féminité»¹⁸ dominates the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,¹⁹ when «les grandes figures de la déraison sont féminines».²⁰ The most famous voice of folly in the XVI century, in fact, is also a woman: Erasmus’ *Moria*, which appropriates in herself all the prejudices commonly attributed to her gender and at the same time takes the role of truth-teller, becoming a Silenus, like Socrates and Christ, who conceals her secret behind a foolish mask.²¹ In Erasmus, the Silenic law is an hermeneutical principle: as beauty is concealed within what appears ugly, the Scripture hides in itself, beyond its simple appearance, its treasure, which the apt exegete has to uncover through the decryption of allegory.²²

18 Jean-Marie Fritz, *Le discours du fou au Moyen Age: XIIe-XIIIe siècles : étude comparée des discours littéraire, médical, juridique et théologique de la folie*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1992, p. 88.

19 Sharon Farmer, *Feminine Folly, Burgher Calculation, And Anti-Communal Rhetoric In Thirteenth-Century Tours*, «Studies in Iconography», 17, 1996, pp. 143-176. Here it is impossible to adequately mention the theme of folly in the Franciscan tradition; see at least Isabella Gagliardi, *Pazzi per Cristo. Santa follia e mistica della Croce in Italia centrale (sec. XII-XIV)*, [Città?], Protagon Editori Toscani, 1997; Ead., *Novellus pazzus. Storie di santi medievali tra il Mar Caspio e il Mar Mediterraneo (secc. IV-XIV)*, Firenze, Società Editrice, 2017.

20 Farmer, *Feminine Folly*, p. 90.

21 Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963; Michael A. Screech, *Good Madness in Christendom*, in W. F. Bynum, Michael Shepherd, Roy Porter (eds.), *Anatomy Of Madness Essays in the History of Psychiatry. Volume 1. People and Ideas*, London, Routledge, 2004, pp. 25-39; Elizabeth McCutcheon, “Tongues as Ready as Men’s”: Erasmus’ Representations of Women and their Discourse, «Moreana», 52, 2015, pp. 299-331.

22 See Gaetano Lettieri, *Introduzione. Erasmo libero. Il labirinto e la seduzione della teologia*, in Gaetano Lettieri and Lorenzo Geri (eds.), *Erasmo libero*, Roma, Viella, 2023, p. 39; in the same volume see also Ludovico Battista, *La parola “scatenata”. Erasmo mistico a partire dall’Elogio della follia*, pp. 63-140.

Lastly, it is relevant to recall what Certeau describes as the interplay of genders in the practice of the fools in his abovementioned chapter: «all disguised, men or women, wise men or fools, masks and mockeries of identities, *disappear* into a public, common intermediary zone. The essential is not, therefore, the transgression of an order (which is always there where positions are to be distinguished), but rather the *loss* of distinction in a non-place where there is a play of identities shifting to and fro, like semblances. The crowd, that chasm in which differences disappear, is the eclipsing of sex (male or female) and of *logos* (wise or foolish)».²³ The essential is the loss of distinction, the actual mystical space that those bodies strive to inhabit. Thus, we can encounter the same affirmation of a gendered distinction that, at the same time, is claimed to be fading away.

3. Guillaume Briçonnet and the discourse of folly

The last step in this long march towards Marguerite of Navarre's writings is a brief turn to her spiritual teacher and advisor, the bishop Guillaume Briçonnet, whose lasting influence on Marguerite's thought has been repeatedly proved.²⁴

Guillaume Briçonnet (1470-1534) was in the early decades of the 16th century a prominent figure in the theological political field. The son of Guillaume Briçonnet the elder (1445-1514)²⁵ –cardinal and minister of king Charles VIII and protagonist of the failed Council of Pisa-Milan against Pope Julius II– Briçonnet the younger was Bishop of Meaux since 1515, holding numerous ecclesiastical benefices and civil powers, particularly as a royal legate during critical moments of tension between France and the Papacy.²⁶ From the beginning of the 16th century, he emerged as a model of the bishop-reformer, advocating for the renewal of monastic and clerical life, with strong support from the Court.

23 Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, p. 44.

24 See e.g. Cynthia Skenazi, *Les Prisons' Poetics of Conversion*, in Gary Ferguson and Mary B. McKinley (eds.), *A Companion to Marguerite de Navarre*, Leiden, Brill, 2013, pp. 211-235, 212; see below.

25 See Bernard Chevalier, *Guillaume Briçonnet (v. 1445-1514). Un cardinal ministre au début de la Renaissance*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005, p. 398. On Guillaume Briçonnet the younger, see Michel Veissière, *L'Évêque Guillaume Briçonnet (1470-1534) : contribution à la connaissance de la Réforme catholique à la veille du Concile de Trente*, Provins, Société d'histoire et d'archéologie, 1986.

26 Veissière, *L'Évêque Guillaume Briçonnet*, pp. 32-35.

When Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples had taken residence in the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, following his patron, he had given start to a period of intense Biblical, Patristic, and mystical scholarship, guided by a unified vision which, suspicious of traditional university learning, looked for a revitalization of education and Christian life; it is one of the unifying character of what will be deemed as “the Circle of Meaux”, the heterogeneous group of humanists and theologians gathered by Briçonnet in 1521. The bishop invited Lefèvre and a group of his disciples from Paris to assist in his reform efforts, focusing on the renewal of lay religiosity; in June of that same year, he began an extensive spiritual correspondence with Marguerite d'Alençon, sister of king Francis and key ally in the reformistic project.²⁷

As Richard Oosterhoff pointed out, three of Lefèvre's major intellectual models in his Parisian years – Ramon Lull, Ramond de Sebonde, and Nicholas of Cusa – were, in different ways, proponent of the centrality of the *idiota*. It is not by chance that it was no other than Lefèvre who published the Latin short *recensio* of the *Historia lausiaca*, which included the story of our “sponge”, *stulta propter Christum*.²⁸ In this interest for the figure of the *idiota*, the Fabrist circle was an important participant of a culture that hungered for an immediate experience of God, emphasizing the paradigm of «untutored knowledge»;²⁹ Kent Emery had already observed how «within Lefevre's circle, the logics of Lull and Cusanus supplied the means whereby to account for the mystical experience above reason, and to interpret the writings of medieval mystics, many of whose works Lefevre edited, and many of whom were *illetterati*, or in the paradoxical sense, *idiotae*».³⁰

27 *Ibidem*, pp. 169-180. The correspondence is edited in Guillaume Briçonnet and Marguerite d'Angoulême, *Correspondance*, eds. Christine Martineau and Michel Veissière, with Henry Heller, 2 vols., Droz, Geneva, 1975 and 1979.

28 *Paradysus Heraclidis*, in *Pro piorum recreatione et in hoc opere contenta: Epistola Jacobi Stapulensis editoris ante indicem. Index contentorum. Ad lectores. Paradysus Heraclidis. Epistola Clementis. Recognitiones Petri apostoli. Complementum epistole Clementis. Epistola Anacleti*, [Paris], ex officina Guy Marchant impensis Jean Petit, 1504, 19^v.

29 See Richard J. Oosterhoff, *Idiotae, Mathematics, and Artisans: The Untutored Mind and the Discovery of Nature in the Fabrist Circle*, «Intellectual History Review», 24, 2014, pp. 301-319; Id., *The idiotae's authority: Fifteenth-century hierarchies in dialogue*, in Neil Kenny (ed.), *Literature, Learning, and Social Hierarchy in Early Modern Europe. Proceedings of the British Academy*, Oxford: Oxford University for The British Academy, 2022, pp. 163-180.

30 Kent Emery Jr., *Mysticism and the Coincidence of Opposites in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France*, «Journal of the History of Ideas», 45, 1984,

Brignonnet's core theology,³¹ as it is shown in his lengthy correspondence with Marguerite, is rooted in a Dionysian Christian Platonism, centered on the paradoxical revelation of the divine in its contrary, and the Rheno-Flemish mystical thought, focused on the problem of the annihilation of the will, especially Jan Ruysbroeck (d. 1381, edited in 1512 by Lefèvre in Latin, *De ornatu spiritualium nuptiarum*) and Hendrik Herp (d. 1477).³² Brignonnet's theology, centered on an affective reading of the Pseudo-Dionysius, manifests a clear anti-intellectual trait, which believes that the «*Theologia mystica* est accessible aux "idiots" mieux qu'aux "docteurs"». ³³ The imaginative fabric of the text is ruled by the Pseudo-Dionysian theory of God as speaking through ἀνόμοιοι ὁμοιότητες (*dissimilia signa* in Lefèvre's translation): thanks to their absurdity, the dissimilar signs of the divine attracts the reader and forces him to go beyond the image to the contemplation of the invisible.³⁴

The bishop proposes to his illustrious correspondent a spiritual apprenticeship, which involves common readings: the Scriptures

pp. 3-23, 7.

³¹ On the theological tenets of Brignonnet's theology, see Cathleen Eva Corrie, "Sy Excellente Pasture": *Guillaume Brignonnet's Mysticism and the Pseudo-Dionysius*, «*Renaissance Studies*», 20, 2006, pp. 35-50; Glori Cappello, *Niccolò Cusano nella corrispondenza di Brignonnet con Margherita di Navarra*, «*Medioevo*», 1, 1975, pp. 97-128; Reinier Leushuis, *Spiritual Dialogues and Politics in the Correspondance Between Marguerite De Navarre and Guillaume Brignonnet (1521-1524)*, in Henk Nellen and Jeanine G. De Landtsheer (eds.), *Between Scylla and Charybdis. Learned Letter Writers Navigating the Reefs of Religious and Political Controversy in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden, Brill, 2011, pp. 17-34; Viviane Mellinghoff-Bourgerie, *L'échange épistolaire entre Marguerite de Navarre et Guillaume Brignonnet : discours mystique ou direction spirituelle?*, in Nicole Cazauran and James Dauphiné (eds.), *Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1992): actes du colloque international de Pau (1992)*, I, Paris, Eurédit, 2006², pp. 135-157; Michèle Clément, *Existe-t-il une langue mystique en français au xvie siècle ?*, in Chantal Connochie-Bourgne and Jean-Raymond Fanlo (eds.), *Fables mystiques*, Aix-en-Provence, Presses universitaires de Provence, 2016, pp. 225-238, online at <<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pup.48105>>; Jean Lecoite, *La "théologie mystique" de Guillaume Brignonnet et les origines de la doctrine spirituelle de Marguerite de Navarre dans Les Prisons*, in Marguerite de Navarre, *Les Prisons*, eds. Jean Lecoite and Simone de Reyff, Paris, Éditions Champion, 2023, pp. 70-93.

³² Lecoite, *La "théologie mystique"*, pp. 73-74; Herp's *Speculum perfectionis* is largely borrowed from Ruysbroeck's doctrine.

³³ Lecoite, *La "théologie mystique"*, p. 83.

³⁴ Jan Miernowski, *Le Dieu Néant: Théologies Négatives à l'aube des temps modernes*, Leiden, Brill, 1998, pp. 10-11; see also Id., *Signes dissimilaires. La quête des noms divins dans la poésie française de la Renaissance*, Genève, Droz, 2000.

on the first place, and then the Dionysian corpus, indicated as the sublime model for exegesis and spiritual practice.³⁵ Interestingly, in a case, the correspondence mentions a booklet, the *Contemplationes Idiotae*. The name that is hidden behind the pseudonym “idiota” is now believed to be the one of Raymond Jordan, a 15th century French canon regular; the work had been edited by Lefèvre and dedicated to Michel Briçonnet, Guillaume’s cousin and bishop of Nîmes.³⁶ In 1519, Guillaume Briçonnet translated into French the second part of the work, which concerned the Virgin Mary;³⁷ in a letter to Marguerite, on December 22, 1521, Briçonnet mentions Jordan’s text, which he had just sent to the duchess, implying a spiritual use of the booklet, as a spiritual “exercise”.³⁸

Two years before, in the dedication letter of his translation to the abbess and sisters of the abbey of Faremoutiers, Briçonnet wrote:

«Monseigneur saint Pol dit que, n’ayant le monde en la sapience de dieu congneu par sapience dieu, il luy a pleu (assotissant la sapience du monde) par sotise de predication le saulver; et se aneantissant la divine sapience a voulou perdre la sapience des sages et reprouver la prudence des prudens».³⁹

Briçonnet inscribes the discourse in the words of Paul to the Corinthians (*1 Corinthians* 1:21) and to the Philippians (*Philippians* 2:7-8): the divine wisdom annihilated itself losing the wisdom

35 Briçonnet, in this perfectly aligned with Lefèvre, believes in the apostolic nature and provenance of the corpus. On the Dionysian myth in France, see Jean-Marie Le Gall, *Le mythe de saint Denis, entre Renaissance et Révolution*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2007.

36 Guy Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d’Étaples et l’Intelligence des Écritures*, Genève, Droz, 1976, p. 76.

37 *Les Contemplations faictes a l’honneur et louenge de la tres sacree vierge Marie, par quelque devote personne qui s’est voulu nommer L’idiote, translatees par levesque de Meaulx. le xiiii. Aoust. M.D.XIX*, [Paris, Simon de Colines].

38 Briçonnet to Marguerite, *Correspondance*, vol. I, letter no. 20, p. 102: «je ne passeray plus avant quant à ce, car assez avez à vous exercer au livre de l’idiote de vraie patience, que vous ai naguères envoyé». It seems that this is not the same part which he translated and dedicated to the sisters of Faremoutier; it is instead the second part of the treatise, *De vera patientia*. There is no trace of a printed French translation of this part, but clearly Briçonnet owned or even authored this translation. See Clément, *Existe-t-il une langue mystique*, p. 233.

39 Guillaume Briçonnet to the abbess and sisters of Faremoutiers, Meaux, August 14, 1519, in Eugene Rice Jr. (ed.), *The Prefatory Letters of Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples and Related Texts*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1972, pp. 412-414, 413.

of the wise and saving the world with the folly of its logos, *sotise de predication*. Briçonnet invited then the sisters to imitate this annihilation in humility, following the example of the virgin Mary, and, having this excellent mirror before their eyes, to «aneantir par recongnissance de vostre nichilité et que estudiez en sotise, qui fait les ames sages, enyvrees au pressover que vostre doulx espoux Jesus a tourné seul». ⁴⁰ The spiritual guidance leads to a practice, a study in folly, an application to the paradoxical exercise of ebriety in Jesus' mystical winepress.

This mystical practice is similarly qualified in the correspondence with Marguerite, where a theory of ignorance is clearly stated through a Dionysian lexicon and a simplification of the Cusanian doctrine of the *docta ignorantia*. ⁴¹ At its core, a Dionysian concept of God as «supereminetement logé sur tout entendement et substance, pour verité il n'est point congneu [...] et, par ce, l'excellente et parfaicte ygnoracion est la vraie congnoissance de celluy qui excede et tran(s) cende toutes choses congnoissibles» ⁴²; this passage is Briçonnet's own translation of Dionysius' letter to Gaius, as he could read it in Lefèvre's edition. ⁴³ True knowledge is the perfect ignorance, as God exceeds every knowledge and substance.

This theory of ignorance is best explained in letter 36, ⁴⁴ which plays with the theme of *sçavoir* as *cécité*. ⁴⁵ As in the letter to the sisters of Faremoutiers, the basis of this theory of *oubliance* is a kenotic Christology : «la sapience» (feminine in French), «vray et seul Filz», true Son, «se oublier par exinanition, pour non seulement prendre et se unir à nature humaine, mais en icelle oubliant son royaulme, égalité paternelle, et soy mesmes s'est caché». ⁴⁶ Wisdom forgets herself and hides in her opposite, the poor human nature. After a long meditation on God as «lumiere de l'entendement» who marked, imprinted, and illuminated human nature with the light of his knowledge and who revealed in the Incarnation the blindness and

40 *Ibidem*.

41 Nicole Cazauran stresses how it lacks the philosophical density and coherence of the thought of Nicholas of Cusa: see Cazauran, *Le vocabulaire de l'ignorance*, p. 45.

42 Briçonnet to Marguerite, *Correspondance*, vol. II, letter no. 58, p. 42.

43 [Pseudo] Dionysius, *Theologia vivificans. Cibus solidus, cum scholiis Fabri, et Clichtovaei ad litteram commentario*, Paris, Henri Estienne, 1515.

44 Cazauran, *Le vocabulaire de l'ignorance*, p. 46.

45 Briçonnet to Marguerite, *Correspondance*, March 6, 1522, vol. I, letter no. 36, p. 178.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 180.

ignorance of human nature, Briçonnet's text invites to a dwelling in the heart's place of rest, its home of light, which is true wisdom, where the blind man will be illuminated with a blindness that sees («cecité voiente»), transcending all light and brilliance.

The letter closes with the image of the divine Word as overflowing plenitude of light, to which the human nature answers in the always greedy frenzy of love, longing to soar at once into the vast forest of His love. In this voyage,

Ignorance en est portiere, engendrée par oubliance. Pour y parvenir, il fault sortir du monde, de la chair et de soy, qui est s'oublier et mourir. Lors le sçavoir de saint Pol, qui est Jhesus Christ, le doux aigneau, peut mener par science de son humanité jusques à l'huis. Mais ne peuvent plus avant penetrer dame Ygnorance qui ne habandonne jamais les devotz esperitz jusques ad ce qu'ils soient jusques au trosne des seraphins où dame Ygnorance tient son domicile, qui voille et bande toute creature et met barriere au passaige.⁴⁷

In this enigmatic passage, we are confronted with a woman, *dame Ygnorance*, who is the gatekeeper, born of forgetfulness. To arrive at her door, one must practice the *oubliance* that the letter has described as the kenotic process which imitates the Son's own kenosis. To go to this threshold, one must follow the *sçavoir* of Saint Paul; and we now know what this knowledge is, namely, folly. But one cannot go further, as Lady Ignorance never abandons devoted spirits until they come to the throne of the seraphim, where Lady Ignorance has her dwelling. There she veils and blinds every creature and sets a barrier across the passage. The mystery of God is unknown even to the seraphims—who were represented in Scriptures covering their eyes—so there is a pious ignorance, an inscrutability of God, that characterizes even the seraphim before the throne of God. Ignorance is close to the highest divine throne, and she is at the same time warden of the gate and last obstacle in the soul's ascent. To this puzzling figure the epistolary opposes another woman, “Dame Raison”, who «doibt aussy estre folle et en sy loingtain país bannye que destituée de toutes cures et solitudes»: in this passage from letter 74, Briçonnet describes the process of annihilation of the soul as a destitution of

47 *Ibidem*, pap. 192-193.

the rational power, that needs to become foolish to allow for the complete purification of the soul.⁴⁸

Many other passages could be drawn upon to support this discourse of folly, which unfolds not as speculative theology but as a meditation on images –sometimes gendered– that confront reason with its own limits: the checkmate of logic, the astonishment and intoxication of the Lord's banquet, where one is invited to a death within life, to folly within wisdom, to a language beyond speech.⁴⁹

4. Marguerite of Navarre: «et l'idiot en Dieu est fait précheur»⁵⁰

At last, our journey on the traces of the discourses of folly reaches its destination, namely, the literary writings of Marguerite, in which these intellectual traditions and religious stances –nourished by her theological education, administered by the bishop of Meaux, and enriched by her readings and personal religious understanding– take a new, poetic form.

My analysis will thus briefly consider the queen's production as a whole, building up on some critical literature, trying to put it in context and arguing that this discourse of folly is at the core of her religious stance, which was rooted in the mortification of pride and self-interest (*cuyder*), a posture firmly condemning both intellectualism and false devotion, the aspiration to a deifying transformation of the loving soul,⁵¹ a «vie mourant d'amour deifiée».⁵²

Without being strictly defined in systematic terms, this motif functions as a fil rouge which we can point out in various stage of her thought, constituting what I believe can be interpreted as a mystical stance. Thus, my perspective does not answer the question –always difficult and methodologically fraught– if Marguerite *was* a mystic, namely, if she lived and interpreted her religious stance

48 Briçonnet to Marguerite, *Correspondance*, December 22, 1523, vol. II, letter no. 74, pp. 81-82.

49 Briçonnet to Marguerite, *Correspondance*, before the 24th of June 1523, vol. II, letter no. 60, p. 50.

50 Marguerite of Navarre, *La Navire*, ed. Robert Marichal, Paris, Champion, 1956, v. 439; see Michèle Clément, *Introduction*, in Marguerite de Navarre, *La Complainte pour un detenu prisonnier et les Chansons spirituelles. Œuvres complètes*, Tome IX, Paris, Garnier, 2001, pp. 7-59, 41.

51 See Isabelle Garnier with Isabelle Pantin, *Opening and Closing Reflections: the Miroir de l'âme pécheresse and the Miroir de Jésus-Christ crucifié*, in *A Companion to Marguerite De Navarre*, pp. 109-159, 153.

52 Marguerite de Navarre, *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse*, v. 884, 196.

as involving a direct experience of the presence of God, to use a reasonably broad definition of mysticism. Rather, I will try to trace her use of a mystical language and “mystical” figures, in the sense above mentioned by Certeau. In doing this, I am following Michèle Clément’s thesis in her study on the early development of a French mystical language in 16th century France, the age before the so-called “mystical invasion” which saw the blossoming of French mystical literature. Clément indicated Lefèvre, Briçonnet and Marguerite as three different stages in the development of a profound interest in mystical discourse around 1520, which they made accessible outside their circle through an intense activity of publication, translation and mimetic appropriation.⁵³

Clément focused on the correspondence between Marguerite and Briçonnet, underlining the experimental nature of Briçonnet’s language, whose innovations “acclimate” into the French language a mystical phrasing that he retrieves from different Latin sources and twists to his needs.

Clément’s conclusion is worth quoting in full, as it is the necessary premise of my work:

«L’œuvre de Marguerite de Navarre continuera discrètement d’élaborer ce langage mystique, avec certains vers des *Prisons*, certaines de ses chansons spirituelles, et magistralement avec *La Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan*, comédie mystique, peut-être unique dans la littérature française, et dont la source est une des lettres de Briçonnet où il lui recommande d’être « desraisonnable » (nov.-déc. 1522, t. I, p. 223-228). L’œuvre de Marguerite de Navarre est en effet entièrement à venir au moment où se clôt sa correspondance avec Briçonnet : son avant-dernière lettre, en octobre 1524, propose en relecture à Briçonnet l’ébauche du *Dialogue en forme de vision nocturne* – une de ses toutes premières œuvres – et l’on peut dire sans extrapoler que les vingt-cinq ans de production littéraire qui l’attendent seront marqués par cette relation épistolaire, moment d’apprentissage d’un style : la fable mystique est la matrice de l’œuvre de Marguerite de Navarre.»⁵⁴

Clément identifies the «apprentissage d’un style» as the enduring legacy of Briçonnet to Marguerite. This is a mystical style, a mystical language, which she then practiced with remarkable results

53 Clément, *Existe-t-il une langue mystique*, n. 15.

54 Clément, *Existe-t-il une langue mystique*, p. 231.

throughout her literary career, with some notable peaks in major works such as *La Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan* and *Les Prisons*. Explicitly using Certeau's meaning of the term, she then reclaims the "fable mystique" as the matrix of Marguerite's work. I would like to corroborate this statement, populating it with a broader meaning, offered by Certeau's himself in his text, as an attempt to define the «area of the "fable"»:

As early as the thirteenth century, that is, since the time when theology became professionalised, spirituals and mystics took up the challenge of the spoken word. In doing so, they were displaced towards the area of the «fable». They formed a solidarity with all the tongues that continued speaking, marked in their discourse by the assimilation to the child, the woman, the illiterate, madness, angels, or the body. Everywhere they insinuate an "extraordinary": they are voices quoted –voices grown more and more separate from the field of meaning that writing had conquered, ever closer to the song or the cry.⁵⁵

Between the late Middle Ages and the early modern era, the mystical space, according to Certeau, was formed by an assimilation to the figures of the nothing: the child, the unlearned, the fool, the angel, the body or the woman. The experimental language that Briçonnet practices and takes as a model the Dionysian corpus is ruled by this assimilation, which goes in the direction of the paradox, the loss of meaning, the ineffable, becoming closer to the song of the fool, the cry of the weak, the babble of the child. Marguerite of Navarre's texts, at least her "religious" production (if this kind of distinction still makes sense), firmly belong to this area of the "fable", as they are subtly inhabited by such figures and cries.

As a matter of fact, since at least Barbara Swain's 1932 study on folly, there has been a general recognition of the presence of the theme of folly in Marguerite of Navarre's works, especially in one of the figures of her *Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan*, a shepherdess «ravie de l'amour de Dieu». In Swain's analysis, she is a symbol of «spiritual ecstasy» who closes the history of French medieval fools.⁵⁶ Charles Béné's article on folly and wisdom in the Renaissance described the

55 Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, p. 13.

56 Barbara Swain, *Fools And Folly*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1932, pp. 181-183.

«sage-folie» as incarnating the queen's ideal.⁵⁷ Robert Cottrell, in his seminal work on Marguerite's theology, describes the *Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan* as enacting «the humbling of human knowledge before Christian folly».⁵⁸ Barbara Marczuk⁵⁹ had indicated the figure of the spiritual fool as a major character in four of Marguerite's "comédies profanes", *Le Mallade*, *L'Inquisiteur*, *Trop*, *Peu*, *Moins*, and, above all, the *Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan*. Teresa Brock pointed out how in Marguerite as well as in Erasmus, «discourses on the Pauline notions of wisdom, folly, and love converge around a female allegorical figure».⁶⁰

I believe this recognition should be put into dialogue with other studies, which have hinted at what I am describing with Certeau as the «area of the fable». Robert Cottrell recognized the presence in her texts of «la notion que le Christ parle plus souvent à travers la bouche d'un homme simple, d'un fou, d'un "nul" qu'à travers la bouche d'un homme puissant ou sage»;⁶¹ this *bon homme* is indeed a figure of the Pauline *stultitia*,⁶² wiser than the wisdom of this world. More recently, Dariusz Krawczyk has studied the figure of the child in Marguerite's work, pointing at the wholly symbolic and evangelical value of the topic in her texts.⁶³ Foolish women, simple men, children: these are the displaced, mystical heirs of the ancient sponge, elusive in their language and ungraspable by reason.

Marguerite's discourse operates thus according to a dichotomy between the «fol plaisir» or «fole folie» of the soul who is ignorant of God and lost in his pleasures, as in the first two books of *Les Prisons*⁶⁴

57 Charles Béné, *Folie et Sagesse dans la littérature du XVI^e siècle*, «Studi Francesi», 67, 1979, pp. 1-14, 12.

58 Robert D. Cottrell, *The Grammar of Silence: A Reading of Marguerite de Navarre's Poetry*, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1986, p. 144.

59 Barbara Marczuk, «*Vrayment voicy de plaisans fous*»: la folie dans le théâtre profane de Marguerite de Navarre, «Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme», 26, 2002, pp. 33-49.

60 Teresa Brock, *A Love That Reforms: Improving Gender Relations by Contesting Typologies of Women in La Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan and L'Heptaméron 10 and 42*, «Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme», 43, 2020, pp. 51-79.

61 Robert D. Cottrell, *Figures emblématiques dans la Coche de Marguerite de Navarre*, in Nicole Cazauran and James Dauphiné (eds.), *Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1992)*, vol. 1, pp. 309-325, 315.

62 *Ibidem*, p. 313.

63 Dariusz Krawczyk, *Figure évangélique de l'enfant dans l'oeuvre de Marguerite de Navarre*, in Anna Ledwina (ed.), *L'enfant dans la littérature d'expression française et francophone*, Opole, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2019, pp. 11-20.

64 See Nicole Cazauran, *Marguerite de Navarre et le vocabulaire de l'ignorance*,

and the folly in God of the *ravie*, between the sinful carnal ignorance and the blessed ignorance of children and poor, exalted in a crucial passage of *Les prisons*:

«*Et la façon fut en lisant ung texte / Où Jesuchrist sa bonté manifeste,
/ Disant à Dieu : “Pere, je te rendz graces, / Qui aux petis et à
personnes basses / As revelé tes tresors et secretz, / Et aux sçavants,
gentz doctes et discretz, / Les as cachez : tel est ton bon plaisir”*».⁶⁵

Similarly, in the *Comédie de la Nativité*, the shepherds (*bergers*)⁶⁶ gain access to the Word in their simplicity and weakness through charity, shocking Satan who calls them «*folz continuelz*».⁶⁷

In *L'inquisiteur*, the namesake character, hearing songs that seem mocking to his self-conscious ears, investigates as to the nature of the sound: they are children, the manservant answers, singing «*en liberté et sans contrainte / Jouans, chantans, tousjours joyeux, / Passent le temps à chose maincte, / mais tousjours ont au ciel les yeulx*».⁶⁸ Thus, the manservant confesses that «*en innocence / n'y a rien que felicité / et qu'au pris de leur congnoissance / tout sçavoir n'est que cecité*».⁶⁹ In front of this joyous, free and loving song – which at some point loses all syntactic coherence and is reduced to lallation⁷⁰ – all learning is ignorance: and what is better than sound to defy reason and prudence?

In *Le mallade*, the doctor accuses the maidservant (*la chambrière*) – who has revealed the true medicine as the faith only in the promise of the Lord – with a gendered charge of sorcery and prattle, boasting his superior knowledge: but it is she, ignorant and female, who can heal the patient.⁷¹

in Ead. (ed.), *Variétés pour Marguerite de Navarre 1978-2004. Autour de l'Heptaméron*, Paris, Champion, 2005, pp. 31-56, 39.

65 Marguerite de Navarre, *Les Prisons*, book III, vv. 483-489, pp. 193-194.

66 Barbara Marczuk-Szwed, *Le mysticisme biblique de Marguerite de Navarre*, in *Marguerite de Navarre 1492-1992*, pp. 403-421, 404.

67 Marguerite de Navarre, *Comédie de la Nativité de Jésus Christ*, in Ead., *Œuvres complètes. Tome IV. Théâtre*, eds. Nicole Cazauran, Geneviève Hasenohr and Olivier Millet, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2002, pp. 35-81, 74.

68 Marguerite de Navarre, *L'inquisiteur*, in Ead., *Œuvres complètes. Tome IV*, pp. 271-299, 285. See also Cathleen Corrie, *Marguerite de Navarre's L'Inquisiteur: The Way is Simplicity Itself*, «Christianity & Literature», 52, 2003, pp. 471-495.

69 *Ibidem*, p. 287.

70 «Pappa», «dodo», «cza»; *ibid.* pp. 291-292.

71 Marguerite de Navarre, *Le Mallade*, in Ead., *Œuvres complètes. Tome IV*, pp. 243-259; Marczuk, «*Vrayment voicy de plaisans fous*», p. 36.

This general rule of subversion operates also in the portrait of the poor, ignorant female at the heart of the III book of *Les prisons*, identified by scholarship in Marguerite Porete, the mystical author of *Le miroir des âmes simples*, burnt as an heretic in 1310.⁷² Divine power can shine better when it is reflected in the opaque mirror of the scarce feminine knowledge: «et se voit myeulx sa puissance divine / Oû moins reluyt science feminine».⁷³

Lastly, we must go to the Ravie of the Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan, who represents the most fo-reign of Marguerite's characters, seduced by a lover who only she knows. Interrupting the dialogue/debate between la Superstitieuse, a superstitious pilgrim, la Mondainne, all focused on instant pleasure, and la Sage, wise reader of the Word, this shepherdess enters stage singing love songs. Her words and the other's never meet, as she is accused of folly and mystification; there is no possibility of rational transmission of knowledge. She impersonates the Bride of the Song of Songs, sustained and yet burnt by the absence of her Lover. She knows only her love, despising action and works: «Je ne sçay rien sinon aimer». This love makes her forget her own body; she desires to be shipwrecked in the sweet sea of love, where she will feel neither body nor soul, nor life, nor desire for Heaven, nor fear of Hell, but only the wish to be united with her beloved as one. The final song of the play, which the Ravie sings alone, is a hymn to this doux amour, to an adored Amy who operates in the law of reversal, a love that kills and resurrects, that consumes without ceasing, in which «le saige on nomme fol, / Et qui est Pierre, on nomme Pol». True wisdom is folly, names have no meaning, only love. despising action

72 On Marguerite of Navarre's debt to the *Mirror of Simple Souls* see Jean Dagens, *Le Miroir des simples âmes et Marguerite de Navarre*, in *La mystique rhénane. Colloque de Strasbourg, 16-19 mai 1961*, Paris, P.U.F., 1963, pp. 281–289; Suzanne Kocher, *Marguerite de Navarre's Portrait of Marguerite Porete: A Renaissance Queen Constructs a Medieval Woman Mystic*, «Medieval Feminist Newsletter», 26, 1998, pp. 17–23, and Catherine M. Müller, 'La lettre et la figure': *Lecture allégorique du Mirouer de Marguerite Porete dans Les Prisons de Marguerite de Navarre*, «Versants», 38, 2000, pp. 153–167. On the problem of spiritual authority in Marguerite, see Dariusz Krawczyk, *Figures féminines d'autorité spirituelle dans les œuvres de Marguerite de Navarre*, in Michèle Clément, Isabelle Garnier, and Dariusz Krawczyk (eds.), *L'Autorité de la parole spirituelle féminine en français au XVIe siècle*, Leiden, Brill, 2022, pp. 188–207.

73 Marguerite de Navarre, *Les Prisons*, book III, vv. 1397–8, pp. 238–9.

and works.⁷⁴ «Je ne sçay rien sinon aimer».⁷⁵ This love makes her forget her own body; she desires to be shipwrecked in the sweet sea of love, where she will feel neither body nor soul, nor life, nor desire for Heaven, nor fear of Hell, but only the wish to be united with her beloved as one.⁷⁶ The final song of the play, which the *Ravie* sings alone, is a hymn to this *doux amour*, to an adored *Amy* who operates in the law of reversal, a love that kills and resurrects, that consumes without ceasing, in which «le saige on nomme fol, / Et qui est Pierre, on nomme Pol».⁷⁷ True wisdom is folly, names have no meaning, only love.

5. A Mystic Fable

This abbreviated trajectory –from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians to Marguerite’s dramatic and lyrical production, mediated by centuries of reception of the logos of folly– sought to indicate in Marguerite the persistence of what, following Michel de Certeau, may be termed the “area of the fable”: a paradoxical non-lieu inhabited by figures of (female) weakness and nothingness, transfigured and redeemed by a God who works through opposites. Within this horizon, Marguerite’s oeuvre may be construed as the enactment of a mystical practice of language and text, one that mobilizes paradigmatic configurations of folly drawing upon the semantic force set in motion by Paul’s letter.

74 This a very important notation, emphasized in the analysis offered by Nicole Cazauran, Deux «ravies de l’amour de Dieu» dans la *Comédie de Mont de Marsan* et le *Mirouer des simples âmes*, in Ead., *Variétés pour Marguerite de Navarre 1978-2004. Autour de L’Heptaméron*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2001, pp. 91–117, who draws a parallel between Marguerite of Navarre and Marguerite Porete; this position against works is one trait that could assimilate the two positions. Instead, Barbara Marczuk tended to emphasize the originality of Marguerite’s *Ravie*: Marczuk, «Vrayement voicy de plaisans fous», pp. 19-20: «La “folle ravie”, qui, dans l’état actuel des recherches, semble être une invention originale de Marguerite, est aussi isolée parmi d’autres contemplatifs qui s’expriment dans les oeuvres de la Reine [...]». Dans le théâtre profane de Marguerite, la dialectique de la folie et de la sagesse se joue sur le plan rigoureusement métaphysique. Les fous sont les charnels qui ne connaissent pas Dieu ; les fous spirituels et ravis ne connaissent que Dieu. Cette représentation, issue de l’évangélisme et nourrie de la spiritualité mystique de la Reine, dépasse la conception de la morosophie humaniste et de la sage folie qui structure l’univers dichotomique de la sottise».

75 Marguerite de Navarre, *Comédie de Mont-de-Marsan*, in Ead., *Œuvres complètes. Tome IV*, pp. 453-497, 488.

76 *Ibidem*, p. 495.

77 *Ibidem*, pp. 495-497.

Abstract: This essay proposes a reading of the feminine figure of folly in the works of Marguerite of Navarre (1492-1549), intended as a specific reception of the theme of the unintelligibility of God's wisdom to humanity, the scandal of Christ's cross in the eyes of worldly-wise, and the exaltation of the humble, the "nothing", the rejected, the foolish (1 Cor 1:18-25; 3:19). The essay will focus on Marguerite's sources, first and foremost her spiritual father, Guillaume Briçonnet, and the theological traditions that mediated this notion from late antiquity to the early modern era. In both Briçonnet and Marguerite, the gendered presupposition implying a closeness between femininity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, materiality and irrationality on the other plays in favor of this paradoxical reversal: gendered figures of folly, precisely because of their gender, can better represent the nothingness saved by grace. In doing this, their words intercept one of most famous characters of the literature of the century, Erasmus' Madam Folly, a woman, an ambivalent and paradoxical prophetess of truths.

Il presente saggio propone una lettura della figura femminile della follia nei testi di Margherita di Navarra (1492-1549), intesa come specifica ricezione del tema dell'incomprensibilità della sapienza divina da parte dell'uomo, dello scandalo della croce di Cristo agli occhi dei sapienti del mondo e dell'esaltazione degli umili, dei "nulla", dei rei, dei folli (1 Cor 1, 18-25; 3, 19). L'analisi si concentrerà sulle fonti di Margherita, in primo luogo il suo padre spirituale Guillaume Briçonnet, e sulle tradizioni teologiche che hanno trasmesso tale nozione dall'antichità tardiva all'età moderna. In Briçonnet come in Margherita, il presupposto di genere che associa la femminilità alla materialità e all'irrazionalità opera paradossalmente in senso positivo: proprio in virtù del loro genere, le figure femminili della follia possono rappresentare con maggiore efficacia il nulla redento dalla grazia. In questo modo, le loro parole entrano in dialogo con una delle più celebri personificazioni letterarie del secolo, la Signora Follia di Erasmo, donna e profetessa ambivalente, rivelatrice paradossale di verità.

Keywords: folly; learned ignorance; mystical theology; Pseudo-Dionysius; follia; ignoranza colta; teologia mistica; Pseudo-Dionigi.

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