



*Marguerite de Navarre  
and Renée de France: Gender,  
Power, and Sexuality in Betussi's  
and Brantôme's Illustrious Women*

Gabriella Scarlatta



## Marguerite de Navarre and Renée de France: Gender, Power, and Sexuality in Betussi's and Brantôme's *Illustrious Women*

Gabriella Scarlatta

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN-DEARBORN

**Abstract:** Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* is the first biographical compendium of famous women in Western literature. Written in 1362, it inspired similar compilations, including Giuseppe Betussi's 1539 Italian translation entitled *Libro delle Donne illustri*, in which Betussi included his own addition of fifty illustrious women, and Brantôme's French translation, *Dames illustres* (1665-1666). Betussi's and Brantôme's collections seem to approach the art of literary portraiture of royal women in analogous ways, namely from a cultural and political angle aimed at emphasizing qualities traditionally bestowed upon their gender, such as chastity, piety, charity, and generosity. However, a close reading shows that both Betussi and Brantôme created distinct texts that established a legacy that was well-rooted in the defense of women as they highly boasted about women's sexual and political roles. By delving into the intersections of power, gender, and sexuality, this article investigates two women considered 'illustrious' by both authors: Marguerite de Navarre, Queen of Navarre and sister to French King François I, and Renée de France, Duchess of Ferrara, daughter of King Louis XII and Anne de Bretagne. Their portraits show that the authors debated over issues of gender roles and identities, and crafted portrayals in which marriage, sex, and motherhood were strictly linked to Marguerite's and Renée's roles and accomplishments as wives and mothers of the most important blood lines of their time.

**Keywords:** gender; power; sexuality; Betussi; Brantôme; encomiastic; Catalog of Women

ierre de Bourdeille (c.1540-1614), the Sieur de Brantôme's *Mémoires* were circulated in manuscript form following his death. Considered one of the most precious sources of information on many aspects of sixteenth-century French life, the *Mémoires* were published about fifty years later in Leyden, in 1665 and in 1666 by Brantôme's first editor, Jean Sambix, who re-titled the first two books *Dames illustres* and *Dames galantes*.<sup>1</sup> Both books have sparked much interest ever since their publication, and have prompted many editions to follow.<sup>2</sup>

Brantôme's accounts as the semi-official chronicler of the Valois court undoubtedly were sparked by the vivid curiosity he developed while spending time with his grandmother, Louise de Daillon du Lude, who served as Marguerite de Navarre's lady in waiting, and his

---

<sup>1</sup> For Brantôme's printing history and editions, see: Etienne Vaucheret's Introduction to Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames, poésies, et tombeaux*, ed. Etienne Vaucheret (Paris: Gallimard, 1991). All references to Brantôme's text will be to this edition. All translations from Italian and French are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Cottrell, *Brantôme: The Writer as Portraitist of his Age* (Genev: Droz, 1970), 9–10.

mother, Anne de Vivonne, at the Court of Navarre. Later on, he became a habitual presence at the Valois court.<sup>3</sup> In 1556, King Henri II granted Brantôme the Abbey of Brantôme, thus propelling his brilliant diplomatic career at court and deepening his social networks which would provide much of the material for his memoirs. At the French court, Brantôme favored the Catholic Guise clan, becoming François de Guise's faithful companion. A riding accident in 1584, however, left Brantôme severely injured and confined to his estate in Périgord, where he would dictate his memoirs to his secretary for the next couple of years.<sup>4</sup> It was then that his writing acquired a restorative function and became a sort of therapy, according to Robert Cottrell.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Brantôme spent the next thirty years working on his texts.

Brantôme dedicated his first book, *Dames illustres (Illustrious Dames)*, to King Charles IX's sister, Marguerite de Valois, who was Queen of Navarre by marriage to Henri de Navarre (future King of France Henri IV), and the second book, *Dames galantes (Courteous Dames)*, to the King's brother, François the Duke d'Alençon, to whom the writer was intimately connected.<sup>6</sup> In his preface, Brantôme explains the genesis of the first book and clarifies his goals in writing it: he did not intend to waste his time talking about the ladies of Antiquity because others had already written about them, namely Giovanni Boccaccio, who "en a fait un beau livre à part" or "had written a beautiful book on this subject."<sup>7</sup> Rather, he would amuse himself by writing only about contemporary noble ladies. The first collection of women's portraits in Western literature, Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* or *Famous Women* (1361),<sup>8</sup> featured 104 women from Antiquity to its author's times and was in fact Brantôme's main model for his *Dames illustres*. This book also provided the inspiration for Giuseppe Betussi (1512-c.1573),<sup>9</sup> who, in 1545, translated Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* from Latin to Italian, also adding to it fifty contemporary women's portraits. Betussi began his literary career in Venice in 1542, where he befriended the poet Pietro Aretino and the publisher Gabriel Giolito, and where he participated in intellectual, artistic, and scientific circles. Here, he also became well acquainted with the new book market and its demands. He travelled throughout the courts of Northern Italy, as well as in France, Spain, and England, mingling with the European nobility and intellectuals in search of literary patronage.<sup>10</sup> His translation of *De mulieribus claris* into Italian,

<sup>3</sup> Brantôme's father was François II de Bourdeille, and his mother was Anne de Vivonne, who was at the service of Jeanne d'Albret, Marguerite de Navarre's daughter. His sister, Madeleine de Bourdeille, was at the service of Catherine de' Medici, wife of King Henri II of France, thus creating ample opportunities for Brantôme to experience court life, both through accounts and personally.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of Brantôme's life and more on his writings, see: Etienne Vaucheret, *Brantôme Mémoires et conteur* (Paris: Champion, 2010); and Madeleine Lazard, *Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme* (New York: Stechert, 1945).

<sup>5</sup> Cottrell, *Brantôme*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> The *Vies des dames de France illustres de son temps* contains seven discourses, including *Sur Mesdames, filles de la noble maison de France*, henceforth *Filles de France* or *Daughters of France*, where Renée de France and Marguerite de Navarre are featured, 158–197.

<sup>7</sup> Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), xi–xii. All references to Boccaccio's text will be to this edition. Boccaccio's inspiration for his *Famous Women* came from Petrarch's *Lives of Famous Men*. Another important book inspired by Boccaccio's *Famous Women* is Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1405).

<sup>9</sup> Betussi is mostly known for his work as a polygraph, writer, and editor, and for his "vulgarization" of Boccaccio's Latin works, including *Famous Women*.

<sup>10</sup> For more on Betussi, see: Lucia Nadin Bassani, *Il Poligrafo veneto Giuseppe Betussi* (Padova: Editrice Antenore,

Betussi claims in his introduction, was motivated by compassion for Boccaccio's book itself, as it had been read exclusively by men and literati, and therefore had remained for the most part unknown to noble and virtuous women who did not read Latin.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to his translation into vulgar Italian, Betussi promised, the book would be accessible to many female readers. They would thus preserve the memories of many ancient as well as contemporary illustrious women and hold their lives as exemplum and inspiration. His goal, therefore, was to not only immortalize these women by making their exemplary lives available to more readers, but also to rouse within his public "il miglior spirito di virtù," or "the best virtuous spirit."<sup>12</sup> In fact, he claims to have encountered women whose virtue alone, rather than birth rank, increased their splendor: "Perciò che non basta solamente essere uscito di sangue illustre, e di ceppo reale ... se anco i meriti delle virtù non mantengono et accrescono lo splendore."<sup>13</sup> Betussi's book was published four times between 1545 and 1596, and was translated in five languages, including French and English.<sup>14</sup> His compendia, as Sarah Gwyneth Ross notes, ranked among the most popular of sixteenth-century women's biographies,<sup>15</sup> a fact that speaks to the popularity of the genre during the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

In this article, I explore the creation of Betussi's and Brantôme's distinct portraits, which established a legacy rooted in the defense of women. Despite their initial intent to follow in Boccaccio's footsteps, they created instead distinct texts that express great admiration for, and boast highly of, women's accomplishments.<sup>17</sup> In fact, both authors—the first an influential Italian polygraph, writer, intellectual, and editor, the second a well-connected and respected French aristocrat, soldier, and memorialist—inserted their influential voices in the *querelle des femmes* by focusing their encomiastic writings on women's sexual identity, and by crafting subjective biographies that would have a tremendous impact on the genre and its

---

1992); and Giuseppe Zonta "Note Betussiane," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 52 (January 1908): 321–356. According to Nadin Bassani, it is in Venice that Betussi developed a penchant for the reportage and the hearsays of his days, 3. These, I argue, would then be weaved in his portraits of illustrious women.

<sup>11</sup> Betussi, *Libro di M. Gio. Boccaccio delle donne illustri tradotto per Messer Giuseppe Betussi con una additione fatta dal medesimo* (Venice, 1545), iii–v.

<sup>12</sup> Betussi, *Libro delle donne illustri*, iv. The vulgarization of Boccaccio's *Famous Women* had a tremendous impact on the proliferation of biographical compendia.

<sup>13</sup> Betussi, *Libro delle donne illustri*, iv. Boccaccio's book follows the same structure as Petrarch's *De viris illustribus* [*On Illustrious Men*], an unfinished catalogue of biographies written in Latin, starting with the name, parentage, and rank of the man in question. Betussi and Brantôme followed this same structure. However, Petrarch provided few details of what set these men apart and why they were so worthy of being included in his work. For more information on Boccaccio's sources, see: Brown, *Boccaccio Famous Women*, xvii–xviii.

<sup>14</sup> The latter edition of 1596 by Filippo Giusti featured new biographies.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Gwyneth Ross, *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 96. See also: Glenda McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> The biographical compendia showcase the lives of ancient, modern, and mythological women mostly to celebrate their feminine virtues and contributions. As a genre, it became important insofar that, as Beatrice Collina argues, they provided a plethora of female types from which literature would continuously draw. Beatrice Collina, "L'eseplarità delle donne illustri fra Umanesimo e Controriforma," in *Donna, Disciplina, creanza cristiana*, ed. Gabriella Zarri (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1996), 112.

<sup>17</sup> On Boccaccio's *Famous Women* and its subsequent renderings up to Betussi, see: Vincenzo Camuto, "Una galleria di donne illustri: Il *De mulieribus claris* da Giovanni Boccaccio a Giuseppe Betussi," *Cahiers d'études italiennes, Boccaccio à la Renaissance* (Grenoble: UGA Editions, 2008), 131–147.

fortune. They also wrote on a subject, the “illustrious women of their times,” that was of great interest to the sixteenth-century public, and whose names circulated throughout the early modern period, not only in literary texts but also through visual material, such as historical majolica, prints, paintings, traditional panels, and *cassoni*.<sup>18</sup> As Diana Robin argues, the two cultural phenomena of the early modern period—the *querelle des femmes* and the proliferation of women’s biographies—are closely related,<sup>19</sup> but should also be studied together because biographical catalogues had a remarkable bearing on the ways in which female power and sexuality were perceived, consumed, and disseminated.

Most of the same characteristics and encomiastic language associated with illustrious women—chastity, modesty, religious zeal, education—would recur in the biographies of many women throughout the sixteenth century. This can be attributed to the text acting as both a substitution for the living person and as a way through which readers can become acquainted with the subject of the biography. In fact, one of the main purposes of the compendia was to render the person immediately recognizable.<sup>20</sup> And while the praises and historical facts were well put together in generalized encomiastic language, readers also became intimately acquainted with some of the women’s unique traits and individual particularities, as we shall soon see.

### **The *Illustrious* Marguerite de Navarre and Renée de France**

In order to better delve into the intersection of power, gender, and sexuality, I focus on two women considered “illustrious” by both Betussi and Brantôme: Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), daughter of Charles d’Angoulême and Louise de Savoy, married to the King Henri II de Navarre, and sister of King François I, and her cousin Renée de France (1510-1575), daughter of King Louis XII and Anne de Bretagne, who married the Duke Ercole II d’Este of Ferrara. They were both sisters of King François I: the first by blood, the second as sister of his wife, Queen Claude de France. They were both *filles de France* [*Daughters of France*] in Brantôme’s eyes and noble women in Betussi’s, and had much in common when it came to kinship, religion, dynastic power, and female virtue.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, they both embodied what the cultural tradition considered the epitome of feminine qualities: spiritual virtue, chastity, modesty, charity, intellect, and piousness.

Betussi and Brantôme positioned their texts at the intersection of literary writing and historical account due to the difficulty of disseminating what existed as history, legend, or

---

<sup>18</sup> See: Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400-1650* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 93.

<sup>19</sup> Diana Robin, “Woman, Space, and Renaissance Discourse,” in *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts. The Latin Tradition*, ed. Barbara Gold, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter (New York: SUNY Series in Medieval Studies, 1997), 167.

<sup>20</sup> See: Cottrell, *Brantôme*, 60–70.

<sup>21</sup> As Kelly D. Peebles notes, Marguerite and Renée were also both influential in the political and cultural arenas, “The marriages of all three (including Claude de France) forged dynastic alliances ... Their kinship offered them an opening for creating diplomatic relationships between the courts within which they were born and into which they were married. And their familial kinship was further strengthened by a shared religious conviction.” Kelly D. Peebles, “Embodied Devotion: The Dynastic and Religious Loyalty of Renée de France (1510-1575),” in *Royal Women and Dynastic Loyalty*, ed. Caroline Dunn and Elizabeth Carney (New York: Palgrave, 2018), 124.

myth. They frequently oscillate between chronicle and narration, which leads to a blend between extraordinary events and history in their works.<sup>22</sup> Brantôme, in particular, claims to be reporting only historical accounts that he directly “heard from,” or “saw himself,” or that he “has from a good source,” or even that he “heard from his grandmother.” Moreover, in order to speak only the truth, Brantôme allegedly limited himself to discussing women whom he knew personally or heard about first-hand, beginning with Princess Yolande of France (1434–1478).<sup>23</sup>

Challenging early modern assumptions of gender, power, and sexuality, Betussi's and Brantôme's works also intersect with the literary and artistic encomiastic tradition, as they are crafted in defense of women.<sup>24</sup> In fact, by virtue of the works' title, “illustrious women,” Marguerite and Renée are women shown to be worthy of being known and admired, and also defended. They became exempla of wifely devotion, another *sine qua non* of noble women. Indeed, as chaste wives, their ability to provide heirs and, therefore, ensure the continuation of their husbands' noble dynasty, was paramount and scrupulously emphasized by both writers, a concept to which I shall return later when exploring the ways in which their sexuality was obliquely portrayed.

According to Virginia Brown, Boccaccio made a case that “Good literature (*bonae litterae, litterae humaniores*) taught that true nobility came not (or not only) from lineage, but (also) from noble conduct—that is, from virtue.”<sup>25</sup> In particular Christian virtue: Christianity should be a guide to ultimate salvation for all women, a concept to which both Betussi and Brantôme often return. However, while Betussi sides with Boccaccio and often reminds his readers that for a worthy woman “non bastando solamente l'essere uscite di nobil sangue, quanto anche si conviene operar cose degne del grado” or “it is not enough to come from noble blood, rather, she must also produce deeds worthy of a noble station,”<sup>26</sup> Brantôme views nobility and royalty in particular as a necessary qualification.<sup>27</sup> However, there is a significant difference between Betussi's and Brantôme's writings and their source. In fact, Boccaccio does not hesitate to claim that women are less gifted than men and that theirs is the inferior sex,<sup>28</sup> whereas Betussi's and Brantôme's approach is wholly encomiastic and features an adulatory tone throughout.<sup>29</sup> Their portraits never question women's worth and qualifications, rather they are meant to broadcast, and by extension, increase, Renée's and Marguerite's power,

<sup>22</sup> See: Collina, “L'esemplarità delle donne illustri,” 112.

<sup>23</sup> See: Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 159. These claims occur throughout his memoirs. Yolande was the daughter of Charles VII and Marie d'Anjou, and sister of the future Louis XI.

<sup>24</sup> See: Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *Boccaccio Famous Women*, xx.

<sup>26</sup> Betussi, *Libro delle Donne Illustri*, 211. Obviously, all female readers, and not only noble ones, were Betussi's primary audience, thus, it was in his best interest to state that all women could, through worthy deeds, achieve a noble soul.

<sup>27</sup> Brantôme includes only the *fille de France*—daughters of the royal House of France—with the exception of Marguerite de Navarre who did not descend directly from a king, as we shall see. Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 159.

<sup>28</sup> Boccaccio's *Famous Women* became very popular and so did its versions and translations: Donato degli Albanzani and Fra Antonio di S. Lupodo also translated the work into Italian. For a complete list of these editions, see: Brown, *Famous Women*, xxi.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly enough, Boccaccio dedicated his *Famous Women* to Joanna I, Queen of Sicily and Jerusalem (c. 1326–1382), descendant of the French house of Anjou, and Brantôme wrote one of his discourses about her, *Jeanne Ière reine de Naples in Dames illustres*, 198–218.

intellect, influence, and social position. Even when compared to men, such as their husbands, both women fare exceptionally well. In both Betussi's and Brantôme's books, virtue, its derivatives (virtuous, virtuosity), and all that virtue encompasses, such as goodness, morality, chastity, worth, honesty, integrity, and moral righteousness abound, and so do those adjectives that express Christian values, such as pious, religious, spiritual, and devout. The latter are particularly important because Renée's and Marguerite's religious behavior and reputation were a subject of severe criticism and a concern to both writers, as both women had been accused of harboring Reformers and of promoting the "Lutheran religion."<sup>30</sup> Brantôme, in fact, briefly mentions the conflict between Renée and her husband noting that he loved her deeply and respected her honorably as the daughter of a king, but that "Vray est qu'ilz furent quelque temps ung peu mal ensemble, pour la Relligion lutherienne de laquelle il la soubçonnoit" or "It is true that they experienced troubles for a while, because of the Lutheran Religion, of which he suspected her."<sup>31</sup> After all, they were in the midst of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, when religious anxiety and Christian values were a public and private preoccupation and were considered a hot topic in women's educational manuals.<sup>32</sup>

### Giuseppe Betussi's *Libro delle donne illustri*

I now turn to a close reading of Betussi's compendium published in 1545, which includes European royal women such as Renée de France, Marguerite de Navarre, Anne de Bretagne, Mary, Queen of Hungary, and Margaret, Queen of Scotland, among others. These women, the author claims, consistently displayed noble behavior, regardless of their family of origin.<sup>33</sup>

Betussi writes about Marguerite de Navarre first, and notes that she is extraordinarily capable in her "ragionamenti" or "discussions" (210), and that her diplomatic and political opinions are exceptionally superior, and are always welcomed by her beloved brother the king, as well as by the entire court. Betussi stresses Marguerite's intellectual gifts: she is particularly smart and well versed, she speaks French, Italian, and Latin with ambassadors and men of importance who are thoroughly impressed by her qualities, which in turn gain her their respect.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, she is "a donna di grandissimo ingegno" or "a woman of great intellect"

<sup>30</sup> A complete bibliography of works that discuss Marguerite's and Renée's Protestant leanings can be found in recent studies such as: Gary Ferguson and Mary McKinley, eds., *A Companion to Marguerite de Navarre* (Boston: Brill Luden, 2013); Barbara Stephenson, *The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); and Eleonora Belligni, *Renata di Francia, Un'eresia di corte* (Turin: UTET, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> "et fut donnée [Renée] à Monsieur le Duc de Ferrare, qui l'ayma fort, et la traitta honnorablement, comme fille de roy." Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 172–173. In Marguerite's portrait too, Brantôme mentions that some people suspected her of the "Relligion de Luther." 177.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Juan Luis Vives's *The Education of a Christian Woman*, and also Boccaccio's preface in *Famous Women*.

<sup>33</sup> According to Betussi, nobility is something acquired by a noble soul, while for Brantôme nobility comes from one's noble family. The different approaches might be explained in part by the writers' own origins: unlike Brantôme, who belonged to an ancient aristocratic family and did not have to work, Betussi was not of aristocratic descent and had to secure his livelihood through his work and artistic patronage.

<sup>34</sup> According to Richard Cooper, Betussi met the Queen of Navarre in Paris in 1534. See: Richard Cooper, "Marguerite de Navarre et la Réforme italienne," in *Marguerite de Navarre 1492-1992*, ed. Nicole Cazauran and James Dauphiné (Mont-de-Marsan, France: Editions Interuniversitaires, 1995), 179.

(210). Marguerite's portrait also features a series of compliments that could easily be attributed to other royal women of her time: she is devoted and pious, with her thoughts always turned to God. Betussi continues that her grace also needs to be praised because her courts in Navarre and France are morally righteous places that have always been very regal and honest, and are enlivened by "buoni costumi" or "good customs" (211). She has proven that, in order to follow God's teachings and to lead a virtuous life, a woman does not need to lock herself up in a monastery, a castle, her home, rather, she can live "mondanamente" (211) that is in public, albeit in her husband's company. Betussi concludes by stressing the importance of Marguerite's relationship with her husband, thus clearly emphasizing the importance of marriage in the queen's life and to her worth.<sup>35</sup>

Renée's portrait follows Marguerite's after four other women of high rank. The Duchess of Ferrara is likened to her mother, Queen Anne de Bretagne, in all her actions and magnificence. Renée is also compared to St Paul, who helped men and women follow God's way. Betussi delivers his praises with simple adjectives: Renée is magnificent, generous, very Christian, royal, knowledgeable, and pious. In particular, she is truthful because she knows and follows the truth, "È di quelle rare donne, a cui Iddio ha dato grazia di conoscer la verità" or "She is one of those rare women to whom God gave the grace to know the truth" (215). She is humble, with a great heart, honest, modest, and full of good and holy habits, "vero esempio del sangue e del ceppo onde è uscita" or "a true example of the blood and lineage from which she descends" (216). She reasons and talks with caution, which Betussi assures is marvelous to see and hear.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, nobody can deceive her because she is sensible and wise, and possesses a great intellect and spirit, and a rare type of righteous knowledge, "lume di sapienza" (216). But most of all, she is generous. Indeed, her charitable works are already well known by everybody, Betussi emphasizes, a quality that other people have stressed about Renée as well, including Brantôme as we shall soon see, who have observed firsthand her generosity and benefited from her protection.<sup>37</sup>

### **Brantôme's *Dames illustres***

Unlike Betussi, whose superlatives and compliments recur in his other portraits as well, Brantôme writes personal accounts of events that he himself witnessed or which had been reported to him directly by credible sources. Brantôme knew both Marguerite and Renée personally, having met them and having benefited directly from their friendship and patronage.<sup>38</sup> By describing in finer details and pointing out the exact source of his story, he

---

<sup>35</sup> Here, Betussi concludes by stressing once again that the nobility of the soul is independent from the nobility of rank, and the one that bestows eminency upon the woman and secures her a place in Heaven: "Questi secondo l'occasione sono di que' veri mezzi, per li quali si diventa Illustri appo il mondo, e chiarissime in cielo, non bastando solamente l'essere uscite di nobile sangue, quanto anche si conviene operar cose degne del grado." Betussi, *Libro delle donne illustri*, 211.

<sup>36</sup> There is no information as to whether Betussi ever met Renée de France.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Renée Burlamacchi's account about Renée's generosity and protection when her family had to flee the Catholic league in France. Burlamacchi was in fact named after Renée de France. *Sin and Salvation in Early Modern France: Three Women's Stories*, ed. Colette Winn (Toronto: Iter Press, 2017), 46. See also Vaucheret's Introduction to Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 1193.

<sup>38</sup> Despite being a staunch Catholic who fought actively against the Protestants, Brantôme admired both women's

compellingly crafts an eyewitness account and presence that are both palpable and immediate and gives his voice authority. As Dora Polacheck claims “this technique serves as a source of pleasure for himself (‘réjouir ma mémoire’) as he reconstructs through his writing what he has seen and heard in a court that was the essence of his existence.”<sup>39</sup>

In Brantôme’s *Dames illustres*, Renée’s portrait precedes Marguerite’s, as Renée is the daughter of a king of France.<sup>40</sup> He follows the same structure established by Petrarch in his *Lives of Famous Men*: first, he describes her parents and her husband, and then talks at length about her children.<sup>41</sup> Renée is praised as the mother of three daughters and two sons. In her role as dutiful matriarch, she provided for their physical health and beauty and for an exhaustive humanistic education that included sciences and letters. This curriculum is described at length, as Renée was “fort savante,” or extremely well educated herself (172). Both writers were careful readers of Boccaccio. Brantôme included one of Boccaccio’s ancient illustrious women into his portrait of Renée, the noble Apulian Busa of Canosa, when comparing the two women’s impressive charity. He included a story about Busa helping Roman soldiers who escaped war and ended up at her door seeking refuge<sup>42</sup> to highlight Renée’s virtue in providing protection to Protestants at her Ferrara court, and later to both Protestants and Catholics at her castle in Montargis, France, which she did after the death of her husband in 1559, and throughout the bloody Wars of Religion.<sup>43</sup> And even during her years in Italy (1528-1560) she never forgot her native France, and continued to help her compatriots by providing them with protection and money. Brantôme heard it from somebody who knew it well, that Renée saved more than a thousand poor French souls who would have otherwise died of hunger without her help. In fact, Brantôme’s source heard her claim that that was her duty because, had France not been ruled by the Salic Law, she herself would have become queen of France and they would have all been her subjects.<sup>44</sup> By citing these significant words, Brantôme clearly situates himself on the side of royal women and openly advocates for their right to rule despite their sex.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, his acquaintance and familiarity with Renée, at whose court in Montargis he had spent some time in 1567, are revealed in the intimate details

---

religious zeal even if it was for the “religion nouvelle,” or the reformed religion.

<sup>39</sup> Dora Polacheck, “Brantôme’s *Dames illustres*: Remembering Marguerite de Navarre,” in *Memory and Community in Sixteenth-Century France*, ed. David LaGuardia and Cathy Yandell (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 141.

<sup>40</sup> Marguerite did not directly descend from a king of France, as the other *filles de France*, but Brantôme explains that she nonetheless deserves to be included in this section because of her great virtues. Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 176. As previously mentioned, Brantôme was very intimate with Marguerite’s family and court through his mother and grandmother, but also personally.

<sup>41</sup> Boccaccio follows this structure as well. See: Brown, *Boccaccio Famous Women*, xx. Betussi also translated Boccaccio’s *De casibus virorum illustrium* [*On the Fate of Famous Men*]. See his *I casi de gli huomini illustri* (Venice, 1551), and Boccaccio’s *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, trans. Louis Brewer Hall (New York: Frederick Brewer Publishing, 1965). Brantôme as well wrote compendia of famous men, *Grands capitains estrangers* and *Grands capitains français*.

<sup>42</sup> Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 285–289. Boccaccio concludes Bosa’s portrait with these words: “let us give generously to people who are laid low by the blows of Fortune, burdened by the wrath of heaven, unfairly oppressed by poverty, imprisoned for someone else’s crime, and, finally, to all who are worn down by worry and need” (289). These words seem to describe Renée’s generous life as well.

<sup>43</sup> Brantôme visited Renée in both Ferrara and Montargis. Here, he prefaces his account with: “J’ay bien veu, moy,” “I clearly saw it myself.” Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 175.

<sup>44</sup> The French Salic Law (Loi salique, 1317) excluded women from the succession to the throne. See: Brantôme, *Dames illustres*, 174.

<sup>45</sup> See also the portraits of the other queens in his *Dames illustres*.

of her portrait (172–176). As readers we sense Brantôme's sincere respect and affection for the Duchess,<sup>46</sup> something also found in the pages dedicated to Marguerite de Navarre, who is praised for her literary gifts and exceptional attachment to God. Here too, his respect and affection reveal an authentic admiration for the Queen of Navarre in which the assurances “je le tiens de bon lieu” or “I have it on good authority,” “Je l'ay ouy conter à ma grand'mere” or “I've heard it told to my grandmother” abound. In fact, Brantôme chronicles private details of Marguerite's life because he could count himself among her true *intimes* (intimate friends).

Marguerite is praised for her great spirit, for her knowledge, and for her writings, including her poetry book, *La Marguerite des Marguerites* (1547).<sup>47</sup> She is celebrated for her love of and respect for her brother, King François I, as well as for her unwavering commitment and loyalty to the French crown.<sup>48</sup> Brantôme mythicizes her diplomatic mission to Spain, when she negotiated for the release of her brother who had been taken prisoner by Charles V after François I's defeat at the Battle of Pavia in 1525. Thus, Marguerite's portrait becomes a veritable legend as she is credited for saving the King of France's life.<sup>49</sup> In this event, Marguerite also fulfilled roles traditionally performed by men: negotiating with a powerful emperor and scolding him for his cruelty toward the French King; traveling to a prison in a foreign country; talking sternly with prison guards, and riding back in only eight days in order to reach the French border before her safe conduct to stay in Spain expired. It would usually take fifteen days to cover that distance, Brantôme points out, and in doing so, he shows his readers Marguerite's physical courage and strength. He provides this specific account, which he heard directly from his grandmother, with the aim of displaying and honouring Marguerite's diplomatic and political skills. These skills would normally only be associated with men closest to the king, and in so doing, he highlights the ways in which the Daughters of France shattered gender limits and performed heroic actions usually associated with men of high rank. With this example too, Brantôme displays his partiality toward the unfair nature of the Salic Law and states: “Bref, c'estoit une Princesse digne d'ung grand empire” or “In short, she was a Princess worthy of a great empire” (181).<sup>50</sup> Brantôme's admiration and respect for Marguerite are unmistakably palpable and sincere and vindicate why he wanted to include her in his *Filles de France's* portraits despite the fact that she was not the daughter of a king.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Brantôme was a close companion to François de Guise, first husband of Renée's eldest daughter, Anna d'Este (1531-1607), whom he greatly admired. He writes about her as Madame de Guise throughout his memoirs. See: Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 60–70, 520–521, 607–609, 704–706, 708–709, 800.

<sup>47</sup> Marguerite de Navarre is better known for her *Heptameron* (1558), but she also wrote mystical poetry, *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (1531), and many more texts in prose.

<sup>48</sup> Both Betussi and Brantôme wrote about Marguerite's close and intimate kinship to the King of France for reasons pertaining to both politics and patronage.

<sup>49</sup> For more on Marguerite's devotion to her brother, see: Polacheck, “Brantôme's *Dames illustres*,” 146–147.

<sup>50</sup> On more examples of Brantôme's disapproval of the Salic Law, see: Claude La Charité, “La construction du public lecteur dans le *Recueil des Dames* de Brantôme et les dédicataires, Marguerite de Valois et François d'Alençon,” *Publics et publications dans les éloges collectifs des femmes à la fin du Moyen Age et sous l'Ancien Régime* 47, no. 3 (2011): 117–118.

<sup>51</sup> He claims: “Certainement elle ne fut point née fille du Roy de France, et par consequant point fille de France ... Mais pourtant ceste Marguerite, comme disoyent de grandes personnes d'allors, elle estoit censée comme fille de France ... Voilà pourquoy nous la mettrons parmi elles.” Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 176.

## Sexuality in the Eye of the Beholder

While both Betussi and Brantôme wrote extensively about gender and power and their interconnectivity, in both Marguerite's and Renée's depictions, neither writer overtly addressed sexuality, undoubtedly because of the women's royal descent and social standing. The Queen of Navarre's and Duchess of Ferrara's identities appear stripped of sexuality all together. What is remarkably emphasized is their worth as chaste and faithful wives to their husbands, and dedicated mothers to their children. Furthermore, the institution of marriage that united them with their powerful spouses was celebrated. In the early modern period, as Constance Jordan argues, "marriage, leading to the generation and education of children, became a prerequisite of good citizenship."<sup>52</sup> Brantôme, in particular, stresses the concept that marriage was "the institutionalization of procreation."<sup>53</sup> Remarkably, both writers cover details about Marguerite's and Renée's offspring with enthusiasm and admiration. Both women fulfilled the royal woman's responsibility to produce heirs: Marguerite with one daughter and Renée with three daughters and two sons. This was beneficial to their powerful husbands, as well as their kingdom and duchy.<sup>54</sup> Brantôme overtly stresses their offspring by flaunting their fecundity as proof of their sexual fitness, noting, for example, that Renée "fut-elle très-heureuse en lignée, car elle en produist à son mary la plus belle qui fust ce crois-je, jamais en Italie" (173). In these words, the narrator shows great pride as he draws attention to how Renée "produced for her husband the best lineage ever seen in Italy, I believe." Indeed, the ability to birth legitimate heirs became yet another of both women's illustrious qualities. After all, for royal women, sexuality was directly linked to power, as it automatically guaranteed the continuation and survival of a dynasty, its legitimacy, and legacy. As Waldemar Heckel states, "one indisputable role of the royal female in the vast majority of cases is that of font or conduit of power and legitimacy."<sup>55</sup>

In his introduction to *Dames illustres*, we learn of Brantôme's manifest fascination with this particular facet of sexuality.<sup>56</sup> Here, he amuses himself with a long tirade about men's impotence and their inability to sleep with their queens, and therefore procreate heirs. Men's impotence not only threatened masculinity, but directly resulted in women's lack of power, because without heirs, a queen not only was unable to fulfill her most important role, but she also had to relinquish her queenship.<sup>57</sup> Brantôme provides the example of King Alfonso II d'Aragona, who, having married a very beautiful young woman, and having been together with her for a very long time, "ne la congneut jamais," or "never got to intimately know her" (162).<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>53</sup> See: Cottrell, *Brantôme*, 120.

<sup>54</sup> Marguerite had a daughter, Jeanne d'Albret, with her second husband, Henri II d'Albret, King of Navarre, and Renée and Ercole II d'Este had five children: Anna, Alfonso II, Lucrezia, Eleonora, and Luigi. Marguerite's grandson, Henri III of Navarre, would ascend to the throne of France as Henri IV in 1589, and Renée's son, Alfonso II, became the new Duke of Ferrara in 1559.

<sup>55</sup> Waldemar Heckel, "King's Daughters, Sisters and Wives: Fonts and Conduits of Power and Legitimacy," in *Royal Women and Dynastic Loyalty*, ed. Carolyn Dunn and Elizabeth Carney (New York: Palgrave, 2018), 19.

<sup>56</sup> Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames*, 159.

<sup>57</sup> Brantôme also discusses queens who kept their virginity due perhaps to their frigidity or holy devotion, or perhaps due to a holy vow they made.

<sup>58</sup> Alfonso II d'Aragona, called the Chaste (1162-1196), was separated by his first wife Mafalda because they did

People thought that it was perhaps because of his devoutness, his nickname was “the Chaste” after all, or because he wanted to better save his soul, “c’estoit pour sainteté et pour mieux sauver son ame, comme si le mariage en aporait la dampnation!” or “as if marriage would bring people damnation!” Brantôme sarcastically adds (162). But others claim that he was “inhabile” or impotent, which Brantôme deems more likely, “ce qui est le plus vraysemblable” (162), as there were many men that were afflicted by this problem.<sup>59</sup> However, to his knowledge, there were no women afflicted by this problem, once again taking sides with royal women who understood the significance and implications of their sexuality.<sup>60</sup> In fact, he adds, “Il se trouve bien plusieurs femmes qui rencontrent des marys inhabiles et impotens, et ausquelz on a noué l’aiguillette” or “There are a lot of women who find impotent husbands unable to perform, and whose needle has been broken” (162).

Why this long diversion about men’s inability to produce heirs right before his portrayals of the Daughters of France? Although Brantôme often digresses from his main subject, and asks forgiveness to his readers for having diverted,<sup>61</sup> in this particular case he seeks to praise Marguerite and Renée, and other *filles de France* for fulfilling their marital duty. Additionally, he displays admiration and gratitude for the women maintaining responsibility as keepers of the family lineage, at all times and in all places—especially the bedroom.<sup>62</sup> Because this sexual diversion opens the chapter on and is set up as an introduction to the *Filles de France* discourse, it is undoubtedly another trope used by Brantôme to compellingly defend women and their right to power, this time through the sexual intercourse needed to produce heirs.

### **The Queen and the Duchess: The Power of Sex, Marriage, and Motherhood**

A close reading of Marguerite de Navarre’s and Renée de France’s portraits shows Betussi’s and Brantôme’s preoccupations in crafting the literary legacy of two important women of noble descent and of dynastic authority. Betussi seems more concerned with the genre’s encomiastic conventions and less apprehensive about a compelling articulation of the reasons why his praises were rightly owed, thus preventing the reader from gaining a deeper acquaintance with his subjects. Furthermore, Betussi appears to be less political, and does not overtly show an emotional attachment to his illustrious women. Brantôme, on the other hand,

---

not have any children. He would then marry Sancha de Castilla with whom he had four children.

<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Brantôme mentions a book on male frigidity, *De frigidis et maleficiatis*, 162, cited as well by Marguerite de Navarre in story XVIII of the *Heptameron*. See: *The Heptameron*, ed. and trans. P.A. Chilton (London: Penguin, 1984), 218.

<sup>60</sup> “desquelles il n’en trouve aucunes dans ledict chapitre des froides, ny des refusantes et qui s’en abstiennent: j’entends celles qui sont du monde et mariées et, comme les autres, requises et bien pourchassées et sollicitées.” The only exception, according to Brantôme, is Queen Aedilthryda, wife of King Ecgfrid in seventh-century England, who was married three times and yet remained a virgin (162). See: *The Church Historians of England, The Historical Works of the Venerable Bede, Volume I, Part II*, ed. and trans. Joseph Stevenson (London, 1853), 467.

<sup>61</sup> For example, at the end of his discussion on impotence, he states: “J’en alleguerois une infinité d’exemples, et de femmes, et de mariées et à marier, et de filles, ainsin perjurantes et negatives; mais je les remet à ung autre traité, craignant encores d’avoir esté trop long en ceste digression; mais je suis excusable, d’autant qu’elle m’est venue ainsin en ma pensée et memoyre, si que possible je l’eusse peu oublier” (166). Cottrell notes that most of Brantôme’s scholars have criticized him because of his numerous and lengthy digressions. Cottrell, *Brantôme*, 79.

<sup>62</sup> After all he wrote a whole second book (*Dames galantes*) where he described and philosophized over the sexual adventures of courtly women.

since he was personally and politically connected to Marguerite and Renée, is more willing to unveil the intimate details of their lives so that his readers are better able to appreciate their worth and qualities. Ultimately, the encomiastic language of both writers was also leveled at the powerful men with whom Marguerite and Renée were associated—their husbands and the French kings—as kinship was fundamental in the reception and dissemination of their biographical portraits.

In drawing inspiration from Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, Betussi and Brantôme crafted portraits in which the connection between gender, power, and sexuality played a central role within the context of court society, where the expressions of monarchical power, the nobility, and the raising bourgeoisie were often at odds with gender roles. Indeed, both writers debated issues of gender identity and roles. Moreover, while carefully respecting early modern conventions and expectations, they produced meaningful portrayals of the Queen of Navarre and of the Duchess of Ferrara. In these depictions, their sexuality is linked to their roles as mothers and wives in order to distinguish them from ordinary women and to protect them from the traditional misogynistic depiction of women as sinners, sexual temptresses, or as defects of nature.<sup>63</sup> Both Betussi and Brantôme inserted their portraits in the revisionary tradition in order to amplify their voices in the defense of women, and willfully spread their exemplum.<sup>64</sup> As Cox compellingly explains:

Women placed at the apex of the social and political hierarchy are required by their position to cultivate the 'heroic' virtues from which their sex is normally excluded. They are not, in the process, conceived of as overcoming the intrinsic biological limitations of femininity; rather, they are conceived of from the start as a different species, a kind of heroic 'third sex.'<sup>65</sup>

Not only are Marguerite's and Renée's moral identity, religious zeal, and greatness of spirit compellingly portrayed by both authors, but their far-reaching public roles as queen and duchess, wives and mothers, and guardians of two of the most important European bloodlines, are glorified and mythicized. Thus, the notion of the "heroic third sex" is clearly exemplified in the pages of both writers, especially in Brantôme's work, where the quintessential characteristic of an illustrious noble woman was to reproduce descendants.

Finally, because one of the goals of the authors was to publish their admiration for their subjects, they succeeded in producing captivating portraits that could be circulated and consumed, engender respect, and build on a legacy of feminine excellence.<sup>66</sup> As Betussi notes in his introduction to his catalog, "se si conosceranno secondo i grandi eguali a queste, saranno certissime di non morire già mai" or "if they will be known as equal amongst the great, they will for certainty never die" (iv). In this context, the biographical compendia is to be seen as a

---

<sup>63</sup> For more on women's portrayal in literature, see: Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Betussi's and Brantôme's legacy in both Italy and France is remarkable as other authors subsequently published biographical compendia in their mould, including Paolo Giovio, Tomaso Garzoni, Blaise d'Evron, François Billon, and Pietro Paolo di Ribera.

<sup>65</sup> Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 170. While Cox refers to Torquato Tasso's *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca* (1582), in which he praises among other women Renée de France, this concept of heroic and queenly virtue is applicable as well to Betussi's and Brantôme's portraits.

<sup>66</sup> Polacheck goes so far as to argue that for Brantôme, "portraiture becomes an inventory of traits and deeds that are carefully chosen, assembled, and transformed by his particular biographical process into a myth of perfection and human exemplarity." Brantôme, *Dames illustres*, 148.

sixteenth-century phenomenon where each text builds on the preceding one by adding new biographies, or elaborating on and refining the same ones, thus providing more detailed portraits of the illustrious women whose lives were to be admired and emulated.<sup>67</sup> As I hope to have shown, through Betussi's and Brantôme's biographies, readers became better acquainted with Marguerite's and Renée's unique traits, their roles as wives and mothers, and their strength and courage—the first in diplomatic missions, the second living in a foreign country—all the while under attack because of their Reformed ideas.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> As Camuto argues, “Ogni singola unità testuale contribuisce ... all'aggiunta di una raffigurazione biografica ('antica' o 'moderna') nell'ideale galleria cinquecentesca di figure e comportamenti femminili” (“Each and every text contributes ... to adding a biographical representation ('ancient' or 'modern') in the ideal cinquecento gallery of feminine figures and behaviors”). Camuto, “Una galleria di donne illustri,” 147.

<sup>68</sup> Both writers skilfully praised Renée's and Marguerite's religious zeal in order to offset, perhaps, their strong ties to well known reformed figures, such as Lefèvre d'Étaples, Jean Marot, Jean Calvin, and Guillaume Briçonnet that prompted accusations of heresy by the Church authorities.