



*Representing the Life and Legacy
of Renée de France: From Fille de
France to Dowager Duchesse*

**Kelly Digby Peebles and
Gabriella Scarlatta (eds.)**

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There has been very little scholarly work on the life and legacy of Renée de France (1510-1574) available within modern historiography. While much focus has been placed on other members of her family, such as her father King Louis XII (r.1498-1515) and her mother Anne of Brittany (1477-1514), scholars have often ignored the intricate aspects that highlighted the vibrant and prominent life of Renée de France. And her life and legacy prove to be vital to the overarching understanding of early modern Europe.

In this edited volume, Kelly Digby Peebles and Gabriella Scarlatta have brilliantly brought together various approaches and disciplines to understanding the complexly influential lifestyle that existed throughout the course of Renée's life, both in France and Italy. With thirteen chapters written by ten different authors, no stone has been left unturned in trying to decode how Renée de France interacted and influenced her family, friends, and other prominent contemporaries in sixteenth-century France and Italy. By tracing her life chronologically, from her childhood in the royal court, to her adult life in Ferrara where she became known as Renata di Francia, before returning to France in the midst of the French Wars of Religion, the reader will walk away from the book knowing how Renée's existence was influenced by contemporary religious and geo-political events.

In the introduction, Peebles and Scarlatta set the stage by addressing how the royal politics of early modern Europe worked, and how both France and Renée operated within this framework. They also explain the logic in why they have chosen to trace her life in chronological order, and why they have decided to approach her life from so many various angles. While each of the subsequent chapters delves into certain periods of her life individually, which can sometimes detract from the overarching biography of Renée's life, the chronological approach gives direction as the reader progresses through this edited volume.

Following from the introduction, Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier's chapter provides further insight into the foundation that shaped Renée throughout the entirety of her life. From the strategy deployed by her mother to keep the duchy of Brittany independent of France, to the makeup of her mother's court that helped to shape the liberal mind of Renée (especially regarding the close relationship that she enjoyed with her two tutors, whom Renée would employ later in her life at her own court), Wilson-Chevalier brilliantly demonstrates that Renée's upbringing had profound effects on her future humanistic and reformation minded lifestyle.

Further commenting on the childhood of Renée de France, Roger S. Wieck draws attention to the primer that Renée used whilst growing up in the royal court of France.

Speculating on who actually produced the primer, and uncovering any potential insights into the humanistic strategies that her mother, sister, and other prominent ladies displayed in the royal court, Wieck intertwines visual history with religious ideals to provide a glimpse into how Renée's early childhood education potentially brought about her liberal mental framework as she reached adulthood.

Transitioning to Renée's adult life, several chapters explore the literary and epistolary aspects that further enhanced Renée's status as a prominent figure in sixteenth-century Europe. Dick Wursten re-examines primary sources and asks new questions to argue that Renée's court was full of freethinkers who challenged traditional religious norms. Wursten also delves deeper by analysing how Renée's Ferrara court became the centre of a political showdown between the papacy, the Holy Roman Empire, and France. But most interestingly, Wursten makes new conclusions about the relationship between Renée and Jean Calvin (1509-1564). Guillaume Berthon then analyses in his chapter what two poems by Clément Marot (1496-1544) tell us about his faith and his relationship to Renée. Robert J. Hudson draws on this further by analysing how Marot's time spent at Renée's Ferrara court affected him and his writings.

The edited volume then dives deeper into how Renée led her life at her Ferrara court. Scarlatta expands on the literary theme by demonstrating how Renée's court acted as a protected space where "religion and literature innovatively intermingled" so that these writers and artists "could flourish in spite of politico-religious anxieties and pressures" (210). Marzia Pieri demonstrates that space of the theatre could further highlight the religious liberalism that Renée employed at her Ferrara court, while Wilson-Chevalier again goes into a detailed analysis of how religious liberalism was portrayed in the art displayed there. But most fascinating is the sociological and gendered approach in Eleonora Belligni's chapter, which explores how Renée and other women at the Ferrara court displayed what she calls a "simulated celibacy," where these women acted against traditional marriage norms to elevate their status and agency during the Wars of Religion.

The book then concludes by shifting focus back to Renée's final years in France, where Peebles explores how she acted as a mediator between the two faiths following the Amboise Conspiracy, and how even though Renée very much acted in the public sphere, she was extremely private about the wellbeing of her family. Finally, Cyril Cvetkovic concludes the analytical chapters by exploring how the gardens at Renée's Château de Montargis actually aligned with her own well-known political beliefs.

While some paragraphs in this book could be extremely long, the switching between "Renée" and "Renata" could be quite confusing, and some chapters were more descriptive than analytical, *Representing the Life and Legacy of Renée de France: From Fille de France to Dowager Duchess* proves to be an extremely well organised and enjoyable book to read. The refreshing perspectives, chorological order, new interpretation of primary sources, and modern historiographical techniques culminate in this fantastic edited volume that clearly shows just

how influential Renée de France's life was during the sixteenth century. By shining light on all aspects of Renée's exciting life, perhaps a new feminist figure has emerged from this time period—and one that deserves far more recognition, even as this volume allows readers to appropriately grasp the lasting legacy of Renée de France's life and ideas.

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