



Evangelische Frauen Schweiz (EFS)
Femmes Protestantes en Suisse (FPS)

Marie Dentière or the feminine face of the Reformation

In 2002, during commemoration of the Reformation, the first woman's name was added to the monument in Geneva's Bastions Park. The name of Marie Dentière now appears, not on the wall itself, but on an adjacent stone block.

Yet for centuries, this historical character did not enjoy the best reputation, to say the least. Fortunately, modern research has radically changed the image we have of her. From a barely tamed shrew with an explosive and uncompromising character, Marie Dentière's reputation has evolved to that of a person who, while certainly not typical of the early days of the Reformation, was also one of the leading intellectuals of this religious movement: an historian, educator and shrewd theologian.

In this sense, engraving her name on Reformers Wall is a sign of the appreciation we are now able to show for this woman who paid such a high price for her involvement at the very centre of the Protestant Reformation: the price of imposed silence and a damaged reputation.

Marie Dentière was born into the minor nobility in Flanders in 1490. While living in Tournai where she became Prioress of the Augustinian Covent at the Abbey of Saint-Nicolas-des-Près, she converted to the Lutheran Reformation and left the convent. She moved to Strasbourg and married a former priest, the well-known Hebrew scholar, Simon Robert, with whom she had two girls. In 1528 the couple moved to Bex and then to Aigle where Simon Robert served as pastor until the year of his death in 1532. Marie Dentière then married Antoine Froment, 14 years her junior. Originally from Dauphiné, he accompanied his compatriot, Guillaume Farel - one of the leading Reformers, particularly in Neuchâtel - on evangelization campaigns while also serving in the pulpit of Yvonand. The couple moved to Geneva in 1535. From this second marriage, Marie Dentière had another daughter, Judith.

In 1536, Marie Dentière published *Guerre et Deslivrance de la ville de Genesve* (meaning: "The war and deliverance of Geneva"). The book reveals her solid intellectual and theological education and her very good grasp of the Bible and Canon Law.

When Calvin returned to Geneva, relations between the Reformer and the couple deteriorated. But the grounds for the quarrel had been aided in some senses by Farel who, on 4 February 1538, wrote to Calvin: "Froment isn't skilled enough nor sufficiently attuned to the Church. You know he acts in agreement with his wife even when she is not manipulating him." On 6 February 1540, Farel wrote again to Calvin who was still in exile in Strasbourg: "Our Froment is the first who, following his wife, has degenerated into a tare amongst the wheat."

During this time Marie Dentière, who was also a friend and confidant of Queen Marguerite of Navarre, wrote *l'Épître très utile* (meaning: The very useful epistle). Scandalous for its time in making the case for equal treatment of men and women in their ability to read and interpret scripture, the book was seized and its printer, Jehan Girard, was imprisoned.

In 1540 Froment was pastor in Massongy in Chablais when the couple opened a small boarding school for girls in their home in order to give Marie's three girls, along with other girls, a thorough education including studies of Greek and Hebrew!

In 1561, the year Marie Dentière died, she was writing a preface to a sermon by Calvin on how women were to dress that was more like a theological pamphlet and which she signed 'MD'.

With compassion and intelligence, Marie Dentière went right to the heart of the religious questions of her time. So when she visited the convent of Jussy on 25 August 1536 to try, as had others, to convert it to the Reformation, Marie Dentière made one of the most beautiful declarations of faith: "I lived for a long time in the shadow of hypocrisy," she said. "But God alone made me see my state and I came to the true light of true faith." It is by that light of truth that she interpreted the story of her life and what became of her city, Geneva.

Dr. Isabelle Graesslé
Director of the International Museum of the Reformation, Geneva

Bibliography

Isabelle Graesslé, *Vie et légendes de Marie Dentière*, Bulletin du CPE 55/1 (2003), p. 3-22, followed by excerpts from the work of Marie Dentière.

Doris Brodbeck (Hg.), *Dem Schweigen entronnen. Religiöse Zeugnisse von Frauen des 16. bis 19. Jahrhunderts*, Religion und Kultur Verlag, 2006, S 304-312.