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Women around Calvin : Idelette de Bure and Marie Dentiere

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WOMEN AROUND CALVIN. IDELETTE DE BURE AND MARIE DENTIERE

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How did Calvin view the opposite sex? Did he consider women as appendages to men with no public voice at all in church matters? Did he value the union between man and woman as valuable independently of the necessity to procreate? What were his own sexual mores? We shall try to consider these questions today in relation to Calvin's wife Idelette de Bure, on the one hand and his female religious adversary, Marie Dentière on the other hand. Calvin's own sexual morality was only ever assessed by his contemporaries in a polemical context so that it is extremely difficult to say anything significant about it. His disciple and successor Theodore Beza in his first *Life of Calvin* published in 1564, remarks briefly on Calvin's private life during his marriage and after the death in 1549 of his wife, Idelette de Bure. Beza in what, we must remember, is a defence of the reformer against various attacks on his reputation notes that Calvin was married and that his marriage was most chaste despite the accusations of adultery levelled not so much at him as at those close to him (his sister-in-law, Anne Le Fert and his stepdaughter Judith). But according to Beza, similar things happened in the house of Jacob and David.

"But he has yet to be born, the man who could so much as suspect him of whom we speak. He lived for about nine years in the state of

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chaste matrimony. After his wife's death he remained a widower for 16 years until his death. Who could be a stauncher enemy of any adultery? It is true that the Lord tested him on this through persons who were close to him. Far worse things happened in the house of Jacob and David."¹

1 Calvin's marriage with Idelette de Bure

Beza naturally does not mean that during his nine years of marriage Calvin abstained altogether from sexual intercourse with his wife. More likely, he means that during that time the marriage was untainted by adultery, in contrast with the marriage of his brother Antoine who was actually granted a divorce after his wife was convicted of adultery. As will be mentioned in more detail later, Calvin's stepdaughter Judith was also accused of adultery in 1562. Calvin and Idelette did in fact have at least one son of their own who died a few days after his birth in July 1542. This is attested very briefly by Calvin's correspondence for that year with Pierre Viret and Jean Sturm.² Calvin's adversary Jerome Bolsec, who was banned from Geneva after opposing Calvin on predestination and who re-converted to Roman Catholicism, comments extensively on the reformer's sexuality in his hostile biography published in 1577. He notes that Calvin had an iniquitous youth, the hallmark of any heretic. He points out that the reformer's father Gérard Cauvin was a blasphemer.³ We know in fact thanks to Jacques Le Vasseur, a hostile but

¹ Theodore Beza, *Discours de M. Théodore de Besze, contenant en bref l'histoire de la vie et mort de Maistre Iean Caluin avec le Testament et dernière volonté dudict Calvin. Et le catalogue des liures par luy compose*, n. p., n. 1., 1564, p. 33-34.

² See Herminjard, A.L., ed. *Correspondance des réformateurs dans les pays de langue française*, 9 vols, Geneva ; H. Georg and Paris, G. Fischbacher, 1866-1897, vol. 8, no. 1149 (letter from Calvin to Viret, 19 August [1542]), p.103 and no. 1173 (letter from Jean Sturm to Calvin, 29 October [1542]), p. 170.

³ (*Histoire de la vie, mœurs, actes, doctrines, constance et mort de Jean Calvin, jadis ministre de Genève. Recueilly par M. Hierosme Bolsec, docteur médecin à*

honest chronicler of the Noyon Cathedral, that although Gérard Cauvin speculated with the church's money and died excommunicated, there is no record of him ever having been convicted of blasphemy.⁴ Bolsec is also the first to claim that Calvin himself was convicted of sodomy as a young Catholic cleric, a crime for which he would have been burned at the stake had the sentence not been commuted at the last moment to branding with a fleur-de-lys on the shoulder. Under the weight of this opprobrium Calvin sold his benefices and left for Germany and Ferrara. As we know, the branding legend, for legend it is, had a very long posterity so much so that at the beginning of the 20th century Emile Doumergue was still defending Calvin's memory against it. According to Bolsec, Calvin's morals did not improve once he was installed in Geneva. Not content with the charge of sodomy, considered as a heresy in itself, Bolsec accuses the reformer of having intercourse with most of Geneva's married women under the cover of pastoral guidance. Although admitting that he has no proof of the reformer's promiscuity, Bolsec weaves together rumours put about by "several people of sound judgement" and calculated to make Calvin appear as the local lecher and his home as a seat of depravity. Interestingly enough he makes no mention of the reformer's marriage. This is how he describes his dealings with the opposite sex:

"I know that... there was talk of many married and unmarried women who regularly went to see him at his home unaccompanied, ex-

Lyon. Cited here after *Histoire des vies, meurs, actes, doctrine et mort des trois principaux hérétiques de notre temps, à savoir, Martin Luther, Jean Calvin et Théodore de Bèze, iadis archiministre de Genève. Recueillie par Noel Talepied C. de Pontoise et M. Hierosme Hermes Bolsec Docteur Medecin à Lyon. Le tout pour aduertir et divertir les Catholiques de ne se laisser abuser par leurs doctrines mortifieres*. Iouxe la copie imprimée à Douay par Iean Bogard, 1616, 39v. –124v., (Hereafter referred to as: Bolsec, *Calvin*).

⁴ Le Vasseur, Jacques, *Annales de l'Eglise de Noyon jadis dite de Vermand, ou le troisieme liure des Antiquitez, Chroniques ou plustost Histoire de la Cathedrale de Noyon*. Par M. Jacques le Vasseur, docteur en theologie de la Faculté de Paris, doyen et chanoine deladite Eglise, Paris, 1633, chap. 90, 1151).

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cept for a small child carrying a Bible under his arm. If they met a relative or a friend along the way who asked where they were going, they would say demurely that they were going to visit that holy man to get a resolution to a doubt. And they stayed for a long time. There was particular talk and a rumour concerning the wife of a foreign nobleman who took refuge here for religious reasons and whose name I shall not reveal out of respect. I will say though that he lived near Geneva, just next to Saconay in the territory of Gex. The lady in question was young, beautiful and gay. She often went to dine with Calvin and stayed overnight when her husband was out of the country...⁵

“Rumour concerning the wife of a foreign nobleman” is a fabrication by Bolsec with a very remote basis in fact. His biographer is probably referring to Calvin’s fairly close relations with Jacques de Falais (d. 1556) and his wife Yolande de Brederode, both of whom he converted to the Reformation. Yolande was initially more responsive than her husband and the reformer did no doubt make use of her to influence her consort.⁶ However, there was no question of an intimate relationship. Moreover, things did not turn out as Calvin would have wished: de Falais did indeed convert and settled in 1548 for a short time in Veigy in the proximity of Geneva but the couple’s friendship with Calvin did not survive de Falais’ sympathies for Joris and Castellio or for that matter the nobleman’s support of Bolsec. Bolsec’s insinuation of Yolande’s adultery with Calvin would suggest that the erstwhile Carmelite was quite unconstrained by any sentiment of posthumous loyalty to his defender.

⁵ Bolsec, *Calvin*, 70r-70v.

⁶ The best recent treatment of the de Falais episode is by van Veen, Mirjam “*In excelso honoris gradu. Johannes Calvin und Jacques de Falais*”, *Zwingliana* 32 (2005), pp. 5-22. See also sources and literature cited *ibid*.

2 The life of Idelette de Bure

So was Calvin the most chaste of men even in his marriage, as Beza says, or was he an adulterous, amoral lecher, using his parishioners and even married noblewomen to satisfy his sexual cravings, as Bolsec would have it? We can provide some sort of answer to this question if we examine the figure of his wife Idelette de Bure⁷ and what is known about her relationship with the reformer. Idelette de Bure was the daughter of Lambert de Bure the Elder, a merchant of Liège and of Isabelle Jamaer, daughter of Antoine Jamaer and of Ydelecte. She was also the sister of Lambert de Bure, the Younger. The de Bure family was converted to Luther's doctrines around the 1520s. While Idelette's father retracted under pressure, her brother the younger Lambert was among those banished from Liège for contamination with the Lutheran heresy. He settled in Strasbourg judging by Calvin's letter of 1541 where he mentions his "wife's brother as living in the same city."⁸ By then Lambert was calling himself Lamprecht de Bure. As regards Idelette's marriage with Jean Stordeur, the Anabaptist, the evidence is not clear about where and when the marriage took place. There is a strong possibility that he is mentioned as "*Jean le tourneur*" in the list of those who were banished from Liège at the same time as Lambert de Bure the Younger, in 1533. The union between him and Idelette would have had to take place in Liège and been concluded in a Roman Catholic church as Liège had no Lutheran or for that matter Anabaptist preacher. It is also possible that a lawful marriage was never concluded. Calvin indeed refers in

⁷ Sée Heusser, G, *Calvins Ehegattin Idelette von Büren*, Basel: Verlag christlicher Schriften, 1884; Braekman, Emile M. : "Idelette de Bure, de vrouw van Calvijn", *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire du Protestantisme Belge* 10-7 (1986), pp. 175-190. Forthcoming : Braekman, Emile, *Idelette de Bure, épouse de Jean Calvin*, Paris, Olivetan.

⁸ Cf. Braekman, (1986) p. 177.

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a letter to a *fout* (love-making union) of Idelette and Jean Stordeur and not to their conjugal union.⁹

Idelette had two children from her union - legal or not - with Stordeur. The first child was a son whom we know to have been an Anabaptist too. Indeed, later, after settling in Geneva, Idelette apparently complained to François Bauduin, Calvin's secretary, that Calvin would not allow his stepson to be brought up in the religion of his natural father but had him forcibly converted to his own. The second child was a girl Judith who also accompanied her mother and stepfather to Geneva. She did not marry until 1554, some years after her mother's death. In 1562 she was up before the consistory for adultery as Calvin wrote to Heinrich Bullinger: "I wrote recently to Blarer, but I could not write to you for I was overcome by fever. Shortly prior to that, shame came upon my house because of my stepdaughter's disgrace."¹⁰

To return to Calvin's own marriage to Idelette, we are not clear at what stage she and Jean Stordeur landed in Strasbourg. According to Charles Rahlenbeck's article "Idelette de Bure" (in *the Biographie nationale de Belgique* (Brussels), vol. 3, col. pp.167-168) they went straight from Liège to Basel but there is no evidence for this. Nathanaël Weiss, on the other hand,¹¹ suggests that they initially went to Geneva where they first encountered Calvin. They left the city when the Anabaptists were banished by the authorities on 19 March 1538 and moved to Strasbourg where Idelette's brother had been living. The Council Registers of Geneva refer to the matter quite explicitly: "Johannes Bomecomenus a printer and Jean Tordeur, a turner from Liège, men who stick to the opinion that baptism should not be administered to children, were interrogated and it was declared that they were to be banned

⁹ Calv. Opp. Vol. 12, col. 580.

¹⁰ Cf. Doumergue, *Calvin. Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 7 vols, Lausanne-Neuilly, n. p. 1899-1927, vol. III, p. 574.

¹¹ "Un portrait de la femme de Calvin", *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du Protestantisme français* 56 (1907), 226.

just as other members of this sect.”¹² As Calvin was also to take up residence in Strasbourg shortly afterwards, the three met up again when the reformer was put in charge of the French-speaking congregation. This sequence of events would explain why the Stordeurs attended Calvin’s sermons in Strasbourg and why they proved easy to convert even though Beza and Colladon in the second Life of Calvin of 1565 note that Stordeur had initially been one of Calvin’s “opponents” or “contradicteurs” in Geneva. Initially, they lived in the house of Lamprecht, Idelette’s brother. This is what Beza and Colladon say on the subject of the Stordeurs’ conversion in their 1565 Life of Calvin:

“ Il y eut aussi lors cest heur qu’il (Calvin) ramena à la foy un fort grand nombre d’anabaptistes qu’on luy adressoit de toutes parts...Il y eut aussi de ce nombre un nommé Jean Stordeur natif du Liège; lequel estant décédé peu après, il print sa veufve à femme...(ce qu’il fit par le moyen et conseil de M. Bucer).”

However, on his arrival in Strasbourg, in 1539 Calvin had no designs on Idelette and no plans to marry. Initially, he stayed at Bucer’s house then moved to a large house in what is now the rue du Bouclier. There he received and lodged several French guests and refugees, including an old lady called Madame du Verger, who took over the running of the household and stayed until 1540 when Idelette and her two children moved in after her marriage to the Genevan reformer. Initially, however, Calvin had no such thoughts although as shown by a letter from the beginning of his Strasbourg period, he had an idea of what marriage represented:¹³

“I give an impression of being against celibacy, but so far I am not married and do not know if I ever shall be. When I take a woman to be my wife, it should be to help me all the better dedicate myself to God,

¹² Geneva State Archives: R. C. vol. 30, fol. 202r.

¹³ Cf. Ollier, D., “*Le mariage de Calvin*”, Revue chrétienne (1892), pp. 210-226, esp. 211. See also Braekman (1986), p. 182.

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by freeing me from all the banal, day to day cares and worries. I shall not on any account marry on account of fleshly desire, no one can reproach me with this.”

3 Calvin’s concept of marriage

This suggests that Calvin had the same conception of marriage as many ex-priests of the time. A wife was primarily either a sort of housekeeper or a person of the opposite sex offering legal protection against sexual promiscuity. However, in the eyes of his contemporaries, a Reformed minister had to be married, otherwise he exposed himself to charges of licentiousness. Philip Melancthon and Calvin’s Strasbourg friends, especially Martin Bucer, attempted to put him under pressure but the reformer could not be brought to commit himself. According to Heusler (after Bonnet and Staehelin), and Calvin’s own correspondence, the reformer was, nonetheless, engaged to be married on 28 Feb. 1539, or so he wrote to Farel. We do not know who the bride was but the wedding never took place and Calvin carried on as a single man. On 19 May 1539 Calvin declared in another letter to Farel: “Do not take me for one of these love-sick fools that forget everything on seeing a pretty face ... The only beauty that makes an impact on me is a woman who is gentle, chaste, modest, a good housekeeper, patient, and exclusively devoted to looking after her husband.” On 6th February 1540, Calvin tells Farel that he had been contemplating marriage again. Apparently the lady was of noble birth and wealthy, way above Calvin’s own social station. However, so far as the reformer was concerned there were two major obstacles to marriage. Firstly, the lady in question knew no French; secondly he feared that she would not be able to draw a line under her social origins and become a simple pastor’s wife. Indeed, the lady in question turned out to be unwilling to learn French and so nothing came of the marriage once again.

On 21 June 1540 he wrote again to Farel: "If you are watching out for my wedding, I fear it is quite pointless. I have not found any one so far and wonder if I should carry on searching" (Calv. Opp. 11, col. 52). However, Bucer and others were not to be discouraged. Jean Stordeur had died of the plague, leaving Idelette alone with their two children. She naturally could not return to Liège and so carried on living in Strasbourg where she had a brother. Bucer, on getting to know her, found that her modesty, as well as her cultured demeanour and her devoutness were the very qualities that Calvin was looking for in a wife. Nothing is known of their relationship prior to the actual marriage which took place in September of 1540 in Strasbourg. Idelette and her two children moved into the house in the rue du Bouclier and as Mme du Verger moved out, Idelette immediately took over the running of the household. Although the marriage was one motivated by external pressures and by Calvin's totally prefabricated vision of an ideal wife, it turned out to work, at least for the reformer, for we do not have any independent testimony by Idelette except for the briefest mention by Bauduin of her complaint about Stordeur's son being prevented from being brought up in his father's Anabaptist faith.

Be that as it may, one thing was clear from the outset. Although Idelette suffered from poor health it was entirely up to her to see to the running of the household, her two children as well as a sickly husband. She also helped the reformer by caring for the sick. Calvin was pleased with his choice and had nothing except words of praise for his wife in such testimonies as survive in his correspondence. He writes after his wife's sick-visit to Ami Porral, the syndic and chronicler of Geneva, in his last days: "Since my wife's visit, I have felt his courage and good mood increase, and this has come about not by chance but through the fact that she was guided by God's wondrous counsel."

Idelette was a cultured woman who knew Latin and who occasionally corresponded with Calvin's friends. François Bauduin wrote to the

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reformer on one occasion "I greet your wife all the more confidently as it was she who answered my letter" (C.Opp. 13, col, 138). On another occasion Calvin wrote to Pierre Viret when Idelette was recovering from her difficult childbirth: "She can now dictate in Latin herself to a secretary. But even dictating tires her out completely" (C.Opp.11, col. 430). Indeed Idelette gave birth to a son on 28 July 1542 but the infant did not outlive the first few days and the mother never really recovered from the illness which followed the birth. Calvin took the death of his child as an expression of God's will. As regards Idelette, a series of illnesses followed and she finally died in 1549 of "sleeping sickness". The doctor Benoît Textor who was a friend of Calvin's had already on one occasion nursed Idelette back to health but he could do nothing this time. In a letter written on 2nd April 1549 Calvin describes his wife's last hours in a way which sheds rather more light on their relationship. As Idelette lay dying, Calvin reports, a friend of theirs François Bourgoing passed away. On hearing this Idelette exclaimed from her deathbed: "Oh! glorious resurrection", and bade all those present to take note of Bourgoing's heart suspended far above the ground. She then added: "Oh God of Abraham and all our fathers, the faithful have placed their hope in you from time immemorial; no one has ever been disappointed therefore I too place my hope in you and await the resurrection."¹⁴ Shortly afterwards Calvin left her bedside as she was transported somewhere else. He was shortly summoned back to witness her very last moments and conducted the prayers at her bedside. He also pronounced a few words of consolation of the grace of Christ, of the hope of eternal life etc. He notes that Idelette listened very carefully to both the prayers and the instruction. She died peacefully very shortly afterwards (Calv. Opp. 13, col. 228-229). Calvin on his own admission (*ibid.*) plunged himself into work so as to forget the pain of her loss.

¹⁴ Calv. Opp. 13, col. 228-229.

In a letter to Viret of 7 April (Calv. Opp. 13, col. 230-231) he notes that were it not for the help of his friends, his naturally soft and sensitive nature would give way to the overwhelming grief. Indeed, Calvin has come a long way from his initial wish of having a wife who would take care of the day to day tasks and leave him free to devote himself to serving God. He discovered sometime in the course of their union the value of his wife as companion and friend as well as housekeeper. As he puts it in the same letter: "I have lost the best life-companion, one who, if it came to it, would have accompanied me willingly not just into exile and poverty but also into death. As long as she lived, she was a loyal helper in my ministry. She never bothered me with her problems. She never feared or fussed about herself; throughout her illness she never bothered me with her children." In an effort to ease his sick wife's cares and worries, the reformer offered to look after her children in her dying hours, the very children that she "never bothered him with" during their marriage. Idelette reacted to his offer by saying: "I have already commended them to the Lord" whereupon the reformer said that this did not stop him from doing his part. She apparently replied: "if they are in the care of the Lord, I know that they will be entrusted to you."

What conclusions can we draw from this scarce documentary evidence about Calvin's marriage? First and foremost, as we said above, Calvin came to appreciate his wife as a cultivated, kind and selfless companion, one totally devoted to him. As he got to know her, Idelette obviously became an individual to him rather than simply an impersonal conception of what a wife should be. One interesting feature of the marriage was that procreation was not its primary aim, contrary to the mores of the time. However, this does not mean that Calvin's union was a precursor of a modern marriage. Although Idelette was a highly cultivated woman, her role was to devote herself to her husband, assist him in parish work, and follow him wherever destiny took him, all this without expecting any help from him whatsoever. Her feelings mattered little.

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Calvin never once asked himself if she was happy or how she conceived her role of "life-companion". Moreover, although of great help in pastoral duties, Idelette was emphatically not supposed to take up any public duties in the church or have anything to say in matters of doctrine. The death bed scene is emblematic: it was Calvin's job to say the prayers and pronounce words of consolation and instruction; Idelette's duty was to listen attentively.

4 Marie Dentièrre for an active role of women¹⁵

The example of Marie Dentièrre (1495-ca. 1561) is extremely revealing of Calvin's thoroughly negative attitude to women taking up a position on any public issues, especially religious issues. Like Idelette, Marie Dentièrre was of Belgian origins but there the similarity ends. Her father belonged to the lower ranks of nobility in Flanders and the original form of the name was d'Ennetières. Marie entered the Augustinian order at the convent of Prés-Porchins in Tournai where she received her education and eventually became its prioress. Like many Augustinian monks and nuns, she came under the influence of Luther's doctrines early on and fled the monastery in 1524. Like most of Europe's religious refugees at the time, she sought refuge in Strasbourg where she married Simon Robert who was eventually to become pastor at Bex. After some years spent in that region under the aegis of Guillaume Farel, Simon Robert died in 1533 leaving Marie widowed with children. The next we

¹⁵ On Marie Dentièrre see McKinley, Mary, ed., *Marie Dentièrre ; Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre and Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2004 ; Graesslé, Isabelle, *Vie et légendes de Marie Dentièrre*, Centre Protestant d'Etudes, Geneva, 2003 Kemp, William and Desrosiers-Bonin, Diane, « Marie d'Ennetières et la petite Grammaire hébraïque de sa fille », *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 55, (1998), pp. 117-134 ; Backus, Irena, « Marie Dentièrre. Un cas de féminisme théologique à l'époque de la Réforme ? », *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme français*, 137 (1991), pp. 177-195.

hear of Marie Dentière, is 1535, the year of the Reformation in Geneva. By then she has married Antoine Froment, one of the key players in the city's Reformation movement. Marie Dentière was not merely a helper to Froment. She became an outspoken participant, preaching her opposition to religious celibacy and advocating an active role for women in the new church. In August of 1535 she accompanied Froment and Farel on their attempt to convert the Poor Clares Order of Geneva, urging the nuns to leave the convent and forsake celibacy. Jeanne de Jussie, the abbess of the convent wrote an account of the visit portraying Marie as a nun who had violated the vow of chastity, "a false abbess, wrinkled and with a diabolical tongue... who meddled in preaching and in perverting the people's devotion". In 1537 after Calvin's arrival in Geneva, Froment was made preacher in Thonon in the Chablais, south of Geneva but both he and his wife kept in touch with the Genevan events. When Farel and Calvin were expelled from Geneva in 1538, Marguerite, the pro-Reformation Queen of Navarre wanted to learn more about the events and she asked Marie Dentière whom she knew already for more information. Marie responded by sending to Marguerite a copy of one of the rare theological treatises written by women in the Reformation. The work was entitled the *Epistre tresutile*. What was the nature of the relationship between Marie Dentière and Marguerite de Navarre? Marie Dentière, in an earlier issue of the *Epistre*, mentions a small Hebrew Grammar written by her (Marie's) daughter Jeanne from her marriage with Simon Robert. Marguerite is referred to as Jeanne's godmother but no further details are given. Jeanne incidentally was to marry Jean-Raymond Merlin who became professor of Hebrew at the Lausanne Academy. Although dedicated to Marguerite, the *Epistre* was intended for a wider audience hence its publication in two issues both of 1539, one mentioning the Hebrew Grammar, the other omitting this reference. As both were to be destroyed by the Genevan authorities after being censored, only one copy of each of the two issues is extant. The *Epistre*

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is highly critical of the Genevan authorities who expelled Calvin and Farel and also of the meagre role that women were allowed to play in the Reformation. She says:

“Have we two Gospels, one for men and another one for women? Slanderers and enemies of truth cannot accuse us of excessive impudence and arrogance, and true believers cannot claim that women lack all sensibility, if we talk about the Holy Scripture among ourselves.”

It is plain that Marie did not share Calvin’s view of what a good wife should be: a passive recipient of doctrine. It is equally important to note that Froment did not share Calvin’s view of women’s role in the church either. Indeed, it was he who helped his wife get the *Epistre* published by the Genevan printer Jean Girard in 1539. However, if Marie hoped for similar support from Calvin she was to be disappointed. In 1540 Froment was appointed pastor at Massongy, village between Thonon and Geneva, still within the jurisdiction of Berne. At that time his fellow-pastors in the region complained about him trading and speculating on wine apparently with the help of his wife who openly “ran a shop”. When castigated, the couple remained resolutely unrepentant. However, the first record of Marie’s confrontation with the Genevan leader dates from 1546 and has nothing to do with illicit shopkeeping. Calvin relates this encounter in a letter to Farel dated 1st september 1546 (*Calv. Opp.* vol. 12, no. 824, cols. 377-78):

“I am going to tell you a funny anecdote. Froment’s wife came here recently. In all the taverns, at almost all the street corners she began to harangue about long pastoral robes. When she realised that news of this had got back to me, she excused herself laughing the while and said that we dressed indecently, or else you (Farel) taught in error when you said that false prophets could be recognised by their long garments”.

Unfortunately there is no record of the sort of robe that Marie advocated for pastors in place of the long black one that was standard wear in the Genevan church. Calvin goes on to say that he argued with Marie

and rebuked her sharply when she said that the pastors were comparable to the Jewish scribes in Luke 20: 45 who wanted to flaunt their office by walking about in long garments. We can surmise from this that Marie found the clerical garment exaggerated and that she would have preferred something less conspicuous and less intrinsically "male" by way of a pastoral robe, a view shared by the radical reformers of the time. Calvin concludes his letter thus: "Feeling under pressure she complained about our tyranny, about how it was no longer permissible for people to speak their minds. I treated the wretched woman as I should have." Calvin is totally contemptuous of Marie's misguided but brave attempts to give women some sort of voice in religious matters and to alter the status of the pastor by making him wear less formal robes. Is the conviction hers or does she mirror her husband's views? Froment was to preach a sermon in 1548 attacking the church leaders of Constance, Berne and Geneva for making their ministries into a source of private gain and losing sight of the spirit of the Reformation. As result of this sermon he was removed from his pastoral office at Massongy. From then on he made his living as a secretary. Marie's reactions to these events are not known. Some historians think that she is the author of a preface to Calvin's Sermon on the modesty of women's dress published in 1561. Calvin had preached it in a series of sermons on 1 Timothy first published in that year but there is no reason for an explicit link between the initials denoting the author of the preface and the person of Marie Dentière. The only clues offered as to the likely identity of the prefacer are the initials themselves and a passing mention of "froment" in the sense of "wheat", which appears both in the preface and Marie's Epistle to the Queen of Navarre published under the name of M. D. "a Christian woman of Tournai". It is very difficult to believe that Calvin's attitude to women speaking out on religious issues altered between 1546 and 1561.

5 Opened and closed possibilities for women

Be that as it may, it was Calvin's view of the pastor's wife as essentially an exploitable and passive, albeit cultivated, being that took a foothold. He found Marie's alternative model to be too risible to merit more than a public rebuke. It did not even pose a serious threat. Marie had no female imitators in Geneva or in France. Her view of women's religious role coincided too closely with that of Anabaptist and other radical groups to merit serious attention.

If there is any conclusion to be drawn from the stories of these two women that Calvin confronted the most directly in his career, it is that his Reformation opened potentially all sorts of possibilities for religious expression which he, like Luther in another register, made sure to close off as quickly as possible. The position of women was one of these closed off avenues.