

## FRENCH LITERATURE - 16<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

### Overview

The literature of the French Renaissance had many of the characteristics of Italian Renaissance literature. Individualism, humanism, a spirit of adventure, and a careful attention to form and technique were usually evident. The era of the French Renaissance in literature has been divided into four parts: the period of origins (1494-1515; the national period (1515-1550); the Italian period (1550-1572); and the age of Montaigne (1572-1598).

No literature of importance was written during the age of origins.

At the beginning of the national period the so called *Grands Rhetoriciens*, the Great Rhetoricians, were dominating French poetry; they emphasized technique, rhetoric, and intricacy of versification and rhythm. They were opposed by Clément Marot (1497-1544) who aimed at simplicity, clarity, and elegance. The poetry of Marguerite de Navarre falls into this period. Her best poems are either religious or personal. Her *Prisons* is an allegorical poem in which Christianity and Platonism are blended, and her *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* is a series of theological discussions. In prose, as distinct from poetry, this period saw huge achievements: the work of Rabelais, Calvin's *Institutes*, and a work by Marguerite de Navarre, her *Heptameron*, based around a collection of short stories by Boccaccio.

The Italian period is dominated by the *Pleiade*, a group of poets who stressed the importance of Greek and Latin poetry, and who attempted successfully to enrich the French language.

Montaigne was the greatest writer of the last period of Renaissance French literature. The religious troubles of the time inspired both poetry and prose. The most notable pieces are by Agrippa d'Aubigne: *Les Tragiques*—seven cantos of poetry giving the Protestant view of the religious wars—and the *Menippean Satire*, a piece of religious and political satire written by Catholics, but supporting the moderate party and expressing preference for a French Protestant rather than a foreign Catholic as King of France.

### Discussion questions

Is Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* a naughty set of tales, following in the model of Boccaccio, or a complex period piece, exploring social values and women's views of life?

How does Ronsard's view of poetry cohere with those of other members of the Pléiade? Dubellay and de Baif? Is there a philosophical dimension to the work of this school? Or is metric and attitude the dominant base of the movement?

Does Rabelais share, with Francois Villon, a sense of the intersection between the very serious, even the 'sacred,' and the gross? Is Rabelais noticeably more ironic than Villon, toward the blending of these two forms of sensibility?

Montaigne claims to present himself just as he is. Is that the way you read him? Does he conceal himself in order to reveal himself? What is his attitude toward mankind's tendency to deceive itself?