

Feminist Rhetoric
for the Renaissance Woman in
Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron

In sixteenth-century French literature the most important work which can be called feminist in inspiration is Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron. The humanist tradition of the Renaissance favored a resurgence of interest in the "woman question" (Querelle des femmes). Such writers as Vives, Castiglione, Erasmus, Cornelius Agrippa, and Guillaume Postel theorized on the place of women in the scheme of things and on the education proper to woman's estate.¹ However, unlike her masculine contemporaries, Marguerite de Navarre eschewed theory and in its place advocated a practical guide of "feminine conduct" which can be gleaned from the tales of the Heptaméron collection and from the lively debates, or epilogues to the tales, in which feminist issues and masculine-feminine attitudes are set in lively confrontation.² The issues which are explored in this paper are Marguerite de Navarre's indictment of the masculine power structure of the period, her particularized concept of feminine chastity, and finally the feminist rhetoric found in the tales themselves in which women give vent to their griefs, express their individuality, and assert their dignity as human beings.³

If Simone de Beauvoir has been moved to address the problem of the rapport between the sexes in our century as the relationship between aggressor and victim, the same observation is true of Marguerite de Navarre's era.⁴ Males literally possess and own the women in their families. The power of men to control the destiny of women is strikingly portrayed in the tales of Rolandine and her aunt (Nouvelles 21 and 40), both of whom defy the authority of

father and brother respectively and marry men of their choice, secure in the knowledge that, justice and conscience being on their side, there is nothing wrong in seeking self-fulfillment. Rolandine's aunt accuses her brother, the Count of Jossebelin, in the following terms:

Mon frere, je n'ay ne pere ne mere, et suys en tel aage, que je me puis marier à ma volonté; j'ay choisy celluy que maintesfoys vous m'avez dict que voudriez que j'eusse espousé. Et, pour avoir faict par vostre conseil ce que je puis selon la loy faire sans vous, vous avez faict mourir l'homme du monde que vous avez le mieulx aymé!⁵

The young woman in this tale has succumbed to a typical fate. Since her parents are dead, her brother exercises complete authority over her in loco parentis. At his choice she may be married off or placed in a convent. The novella tells us that his niggardliness in not providing his sister a dowry is the reason she is not married. When Jossebelin discovers his sister has entered a clandestine marriage, his wrath leads him to kill the young woman's husband (a man he had formerly praised) and lock her up in a forest retreat.

Jossebelin treats his own daughter Rolandine in similar fashion and for the same reasons. She too resorts to the clandestine marriage in an attempt to defy parental authority. Later, when such intimidating symbols of power as the Church and the King attempt to coerce her into letting them annul her paroles de présent marriage,⁶ she holds firm, declaring that intention and divine witness rather than consummation constitute the marriage bond: "Elle leur fait responce que en toutes choses elle estoit preste d'obeyr au Roy, sinon à contrevienir à sa conscience; mais ce que Dieu avoit assemblé, les hommes ne le povoient

separer" (p. 171).

The Heptaméron abounds in examples of the all-pervasive masculine power structure. In the tale of Françoise and the Prince (Nouvelle 42), the Lorenzaccio episode (Nouvelle 12), and that of the homicidal Duke who kills his son's fiancée (Nouvelle 51), we see men bent upon asserting their will over the destinies of women with whom they come in contact. Their reasons seem to be grounded in the will to absolute power over the lives of women, the desire for sexual dominance, and the greed factor or the manipulation of family money with as little possible going to female members. Indeed, Marguerite de Navarre's harsh treatment of the clergy is an extended feminist diatribe against the injustices men perpetrate against women. Already feeling superior by nature to women, the arrogant and sensual Cordeliers are willing to violate the vow of chastity, rape their victims, and consider the act a peccadillo because of the inequity of the sexes implicit (so the clergy believe) in the order of Creation. In the cases of the Prieur de Saint Martin des Champs and Sister Marie Héroët in Nouvelle 22 and the monk in Nouvelle 31, lust reaches a pathological level. The Prior, using the authority and power of a religious office, plots the seduction of the nun while the monk stoops to kidnapping a friend's wife and killing several of his domestics in order to possess the woman. It is not surprising, then, that the Queen of Navarre should conclude that the male propensity for aggression and outright murder (rather than persuasion to effect change) is one of the more abhorrent aspects of the "masculine mystique."

If men were intent upon subjecting womenkind's will, they were equally engrossed in subduing her body--the reason, no doubt, that Marguerite de Navarre devotes so much discussion to chastity and its relationship to feminine self-esteem.⁷ The particular aura of feminine chastity which serves as a protective mantle for women in the courtly society depicted in the Heptaméron requires some interpre-

tation for the modern reader. Although it follows (given Marguerite de Navarre's evangelical leanings) that chastity as defined in Christian terms must play a major role in her concept of virtue, the Christian ethic is not the only consideration. Chastity as viewed by the Queen of Navarre has a worldly dimension in addition to its merit as depicted in the Gospels. It is a secular virtue as well, affording women dignity, self-respect, and freedom from the frequently disastrous results of sexual entanglements.⁸ The chaste woman who is not dominated by sexual drives (as most men are in the Heptaméron) becomes the porte-parole of rational humanity.

The battle between the pure and the impure is, stated in other terms, the struggle between the rational and sensual poles of human conduct with the palm going to women for their undisputed superiority as exponents of rational behavior. Sexual immorality, while not unknown to women, is attributed as a masculine vice by Parlemente (Marguerite de Navarre's spokeswoman among the devisantes); hence, women who transgress sexually, in a sense, betray their true rational natures and become like men, the decidedly inferior sex on this score.

In only one way can women preserve their integrity in a masculine oriented society--by being virtuous. Women who share their sexual favors indiscriminately lose all respect and become as it were public domain. This point is made eloquently in the tale of Françoise and the Prince (Nouvelle 42). In essence, Françoise tells the Prince that she is in no way insensitive to his physical charm, that she will even lay down her life to save his, but will not offer herself as a sexual object in tribute to his masculine vanity. Were she to do so, she would be sotte, aveuglée, capitulating to masculine lust and thereby betraying her feminine integrity. In fact, there are several women in the tradition of Françoise who refuse to proffer sexual

favors as men's due or as the price of acceptability. Among the striking examples let me cite those of the muleteer's wife (Nouvelle 2), the batelière (Nouvelle 5), the Princess (Nouvelle 4), and Marie Héroët (Nouvelle 22), a cross section of noblewomen and commoners which would indicate that Marguerite de Navarre's particular concept of chastity is egalitarian. Eternal vigilance is necessary for the woman who would defend herself against the predatory male who demands immediate satisfaction: "Exercice sans repos de la volonté, la vie des femmes à cette époque tient plus du courage que du plaisir."⁹

The issue of marriage in the Heptaméron is the essential bonding device which unites the devisantes and the one most closely connected with feminine chastity. Marriage is the one societal institution which offers women protection against the vagaries of masculine desire. Also, in the spiritual order, it has the prestigious status of being a sacrament of the Church.¹⁰ The most serious statements on marriage are found in the credos of Oisille and Parlamente, the feminine coterie's most respected spokeswoman. Oisille believes: "Dieu a mis si bon ordre . . . tant à l'homme que à la femme, que, si l'on n'en abuse, je tiens mariage le plus beau et le plus seur estat qui soit au monde" (p. 269). Extra-marital liaisons are odious to her as well as revenge-adultery, which is acting irrationally and losing one's honor in the process. Parlamente continually exhorts the devisantes not to love at all or to love with as perfect a love as that of Rolandine, who never compromised herself and who, by her example, worked to the increasing of all women's honor. She points out realistically (Nouvelle 43) that honor for men and women is different in the eyes of the world, if not in the eyes of God. A man who avenges himself on his enemy is accounted the braver for it, and if he has a dozen mistresses in addition to a wife, he is judged equally valorous. Yet rage and concupiscence can have no place in a woman's heart.

Parlemente considers that good women are more reasonable in love than men. The love of men is for the most part merely a matter of their pleasure and many have the hypocrisy to despise a woman once she has surrendered to their desires (Nouvelle 44 bis). Unfortunately, decrying the double standard of sexual morality will not change it; hence, women have every reason to cling to marriage as an institution which, despite its abuses, works toward their best interest.¹¹ Two striking examples of feminine reaction to marital infidelity are those of the Lady of Loué (Nouvelle 37) and the Wife of Tours (Nouvelle 38). The symbolic gesture of the wife in the first tale, using water and fire as symbols of purification and reconciliation to impress upon her husband the error of his ways, confirms the sense in which Renaissance women sought to change one aspect of the status quo. Women do not kill their adulterous husbands.

By eschewing violence, Marguerite de Navarre shows her feminist propensities, declaring that change is best effected through forbearance and persuasive action. Similarly, the Wife of Tours, who brings an array of creature comforts to her husband's assignation place for his enjoyment, shows that in the order of moral perfection women can exercise a role apparently impossible for men. The results seem to be worth the effort, for the husband, overwhelmed at good returned for evil, reforms:

". . . sans le moien de ceste grande douleur et bonté, il estait impossible qu'il eust jamais laissé la vie qu'il menoit" (p. 271). Again, Mettra has grasped the particular quality of Marguerite de Navarre's feminism: "Le féminisme renaissant--si l'on ose employer un vocable qui n'a guère qu'un siècle--n'est jamais agressivité mais toujours désir de réconciliation. . . . Et c'est un peu de la même manière que la femme pressent l'homme, comme un bloc dur, irréductible qu'il faut ramener à soi, rendre mobile, avec des armes toutes féminines."¹²

So far it has been seen that the Queen of Navarre chose to implement her feminist critique by a pointed



The tale of the neglected wife (Houelle's 12)

censure of the masculine power structure, and by a personalized view of feminine chastity and Christian marriage. Behind these theories there is an underlying rhetoric found in the speeches of several women appearing in the tales, a persuasive plaidoyer féministe which reveals with psychological acumen the condition of women, their rights and aspirations, as conceptualized by Marguerite de Navarre. In my judgment the rhetoric of Renaissance feminism in the Heptaméron is best seen in the monologues of the dame d'honneur (Nouvelle 4), the neglected wife (Nouvelle 15), the Lady of Pampelune (Nouvelle 26) and Françoise (Nouvelle 42).

Men are frequently intent on sexual conquest as an affirmation and proof of their masculinity as the Princess discovers in Nouvelle 4. Justifiably outraged by the attempted rape on her person by a nobleman of her acquaintance, the Princess seeks the advice of her dame d'honneur. The Princess's initial reaction is to disclose publicly the attempted crime and by so doing to discredit the nobleman. Since rape has not occurred, the gentlewoman advises the Princess to say nothing. This temporizing action, however reprehensible it may be in a contemporary context, appears wise in the light of the social conditions of the period. The dame d'honneur argues that, even were the Princess's powerful brother to avenge her, public opinion would hold ". . . que le pauvre gentil homme . . . aura faict de vous à sa volonté; et que la plus part diront qu'il a esté bien difficile que ung gentil homme ayt faict une telle entreprinse, si la dame ne luy en donne grande occasion" (p. 32). According to the gentlewoman, the Princess's satisfaction will have to be her knowledge that the nobleman failed in his attempt, a more galling punishment than any the Princess can inflict. The best interests of women, unfortunately, cannot always be served in ways that are direct and just. Prudence, in certain instances, must replace precipitous action.

The tale of the neglected wife (Nouvelle 15)

contains the inevitable shibboleths by which we have come to judge the unfavorable condition of women during the Renaissance: misappropriation of the dowry, marital neglect, the subjection to the double standard. The young wife in question chooses, against parental opposition, a husband of less wealth and status than she. The man she loves and esteems repays her choice by neglect and an adulterous liaison with his best friend's wife who is also the King's mistress. Eventually, out of loneliness and frustration, the young woman takes a platonic lover. The husband's ire is aroused and he calls his wife to account. Her confession is a clever example of oratory and self-defense presented in legalistic fashion with the wife executing the roles of attorney, defendant, judge, and jury. The genesis of her changing attitude, from love to hate, is minutely detailed. The thought that he should want to kill her appears monstrous. There can be no doubt how the guilt must be assessed. In the following tirade, with its antithetical juxtaposing of vous and je, we have a vigorous reductio ad absurdum of the husband's charges against her:

Et s'il fault mectre à la balance l'offense de vous et de moy, vous estes homme saige et experimenté et d'eage, pour congnoistre et eviter le mal; moy, jeune et sans experience nulle de la force et puissance d'amour. Vous avez une femme qui vous cherche, estime et ayme plus que sa vie propre, et j'ay ung mary qui me fuit, qui me hait et me desprise plus que chamberiere. Vous aymez une femme desja d'eage et en mauvais point, et moins belle que moy; et j'ayme ung gentil homme plus jeune que vous, et plus aymable que vous. Vous aymez la femme d'un des plus grands amys que vous ayez en ce monde et l'ayme de vostre maistre, offensant d'un cousté

l'amityé et de l'autre la reverence que vous devez à tous deux; et j'ayme ung gentil homme qui n'est à riens lyé, sinon à l'amour qu'il me porte. (p. 123)

Furthermore, if these arguments are not condemnation enough, the young wife calls God as her final witness: "Et combien que la loy des hommes donne grand deshonneur aux femmes qui ayment autres que leurs maris, si est-ce que la loy de Dieu n'exempte point les maris qui ayment autres que leurs femmes" (p.123). The husband is nonplussed by his wife's logic, and in lieu of responding to her accusations, he avoids confrontation by seeking refuge in a time-tested male stratagem: ". . . il ne sceut que luy respondre, sinon que l'honneur d'un homme et d'une femme n'estoient pas semblables" (p. 124). The sexism which was implicit in the moral structure of the sixteenth century is taken to task severely in this novella. The mal mariée's spirited defense of her actions is an unmasking of masculine pretense to superiority in the moral order, as Albistur and Armogathe have noted.¹³

The Lady of Pampelune (Nouvelle 26) is an example of Marguerite de Navarre's ability to portray a virtuous heroine who is not an abstraction but a fully fleshed-out character. That virtuous women are not insensitive to passion, that they restrain passion when they are not in a position to accept it morally is the Lady of Pampelune's legacy to her would-be lover, Lord D'Avannes. Men like D'Avannes have made preoccupation with virtue, chastity and honor women's work by their artful seductions in the guise of platonic love. If they would cease to think of women as fortresses to be assaulted, perhaps a common ground of understanding might be achieved:

Monseigneur, avez-vous pensé que les occasions puissent muer ung chaste cueur? Croiez que ainsy que l'or s'esprouve en la fournaise, aussy ung



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cueur chaste au milieu des tentations s'y trouve plus fort et vertueux, et se refroidit, tant plus il est assailly de son contraire. Parquoy, soiez seur que, si j'avois aultre volonté que celle que je vous ay dicte, je n'eusse failly à trouver des moyens, desquelz, n'en voulant user, je ne tiens compte, vous priant que, si vous voulez que je continue l'affection que je vous porte, ostez non seulement la volonté, mais la pensée de jamais, pour chose que seussiez faire, me treuver [sic] aultre que je suis. (p. 216)

The Lady makes it clear that she wills not to give her sexual favors and that there must be true communion between men and women before intimacy can take place.

The need of women to have autonomy over their sexual selves is a constant theme in the Heptaméron. Although sexual conduct is always defined within the framework of Christian morality, it is also closely associated with such factors as self-esteem and, to an extent, human respect. One of Marguerite de Navarre's most appealing women is the commoner-heroine Françoise (Nouvelle 42), who is quite prepared to resist the charms of her seducer-Prince. It should be noted that her refusal does not appear to be motivated by spiritual concerns. Simple logic dictates that Françoise's low estate will not permit her to be either wife or royal mistress, and self-esteem prevents her from being a whore: "Et, si pour vostre passe temps vous voulez des femmes de mon estat, vous en trouverez assez en ceste ville, de plus belles que moy sans comparaison, qui ne vous donnoront la peyne de les prier tant" (pp. 290-91). How can she be flattered at his persistence when it would appear that the Prince, having been rejected by the vertueuses of his house, is pursuing her because he equates low rank with lack of virtue?

Furthermore, the reward of indulging in a casual affair with a nobleman is tantamount to humiliation at the hands of the great: "Et suis seure que quand de telles personnes que moy auriez ce que demandez, ce seroit ung moien pour entretenir vostre maistresse deux heures davantaige, en luy comptant voz victoires au dommaige des plus foibles" (p. 290). The attitudes of the Lady of Pampelune and Françoise bear witness to a heightened feminine consciousness about sexuality: "C'est cette attitude de la conscience féminine qui va déterminer le regard posé par l'homme sur la femme renaissante. Ce n'est pas l'homme qui invente la femme, c'est la femme qui impose à l'homme l'image qu'elle veut donner d'elle-même."¹⁴

The sixteenth century in France, then, is the first great era of feminism. Beyond the praise and defense of her sex which Christine de Pisan had accomplished a century earlier, Marguerite de Navarre effected a metamorphosis of the feminine condition. The self-awareness of the women in the Heptaméron, their will to power, and their desire to assume control of their lives, all has a decidedly modern ring to it. The women in the Heptaméron have been demystified. Gone are images of the Lady and the Unicorn, the Virgin, and the fallen Eve, shrouds under which medieval man concealed the true nature of women in order to exalt her mythic qualities of temptress and saint. The women of the Heptaméron are free of this absolute character. Released from the thrall of mythic privilege, the feminine characters in the novellas react as flesh-and-blood women to the problems and ambiguities in their lives. Finally, as the Reformation successfully began to challenge the established hierarchies and habits of thought, a number of women were capable of inferring that changes in their own condition were now no longer inconceivable.

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NOTES

¹Vives' De Institutione Feminae Christiani (1523), written for Catherine of Aragon, stressed the "wifely virtues" of forbearance and self-effacement; Castiglione's Il Cortegiano (1528) included a treatise on the education of the Lady; Erasmus' Colloquies (1495-1499) contained many dialogues on the role of women and the institution of marriage; and Cornelius Agrippa's De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus declamatio (1529) set out to prove the excellence of women from statements of well-known authors, history, the Scriptures, and the decisions of civil and canon law. Postel's visionary work, Les très merveilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde, predicted the end of the old order under masculine domination and brutality and the ushering in of a utopian age with a feminine redeemer in the New World.

²For appreciations of Marguerite de Navarre's contribution to French feminism, see Yvonne Rodax, The Real and the Ideal in the Novella (Chapel Hill, 1968), pp. 62-80; Germaine Brée, Women Writers in France (New Brunswick, 1973), Chap. I; E. Telle, "Le Féminisme de la Reine de Navarre," L'Oeuvre de Marguerite d'Angoulême et la querelle des femmes, (Reprint: Genève, 1969), pp. 355-97; Clements and Gibaldi, "Images of Society: Women and Marriage," Anatomy of the Novella (New York, 1977), pp. 165-82; Maité Albistur and Daniel Armogathe, Histoire du féminisme français (Edition des femmes, 1977), pp. 106-09. For a general treatment of feminism during the Renaissance, see R. de Maulde la Clavière,

Les Femmes de la Renaissance (Paris, 1898); Ruth Kelso, Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (Urbana, 1956); and Alain Decaux, Histoire des françaises (Paris, 1972), Tome I.

³Concerning the nature of Marguerite de Navarre's feminism, Clements says in The Anatomy of the Novella: "Doubtless the most important figures in the tradition who attempted to liberate the literary depiction of women from the Janus-like stereo-types of the Saint and the Whore were the two famous women novellists Marguerite de Navarre and Maria de Zayas. With these two writers . . . one discerns the very conscious and deliberate attempt to direct the novellistic depiction of the female from the ironic toward the mimetic mode of fiction, in the process bestowing upon women in the novella not just a more realistic image, but a more admirable one as well" (pp. 78-79).

⁴Simone de Beauvoir assesses Marguerite de Navarre's role in French feminism as follows: "Mais l'écrivain qui servit le mieux la cause de son sexe, ce fut Marguerite de Navarre qui proposa contre la licence des moeurs un idéal de mysticisme sentimental et de chasteté sans pruderie, s'essayant à concilier mariage et amour pour l'honneur et le bonheur des femmes." Le Deuxième Sexe (Paris, 1949), Tome I, p. 179.

⁵Marguerite de Navarre, L'Heptaméron, ed. Michel François (Paris, 1964), p. 276. Subsequent quotations from the Heptaméron will be from the François edition.

⁶The paroles de présent marriage is a union in which a couple declares face to face that they are wed to each other. A marriage was considered to have taken place even without consummation. This type of

marriage became invalid after the deliberations of the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

⁷ See Daniela Rossi, "Honneur e conscience nella lingua e nella cultura di Margherita di Navarra," JMRS, V (Spring 1975), 63-87. Rossi accurately categorizes the honneur-conscience conflict which is at the heart of much debate in the Heptaméron. False honor is the concern for respectability and reputation. True honor is the interiorization of a personal sense of right and wrong which has nothing to do with societal approval or disapproval: Inoltre il dramma psicologico che tormenta la donna di fronte alla scelta tra amore e riputazione prova come la nozione de honneur abbia un' importanza fondamentale nel mondo femminile dell'epoca di Margherita" (p. 70). The character who best lives up to Marguerite de Navarre's exterior-interior concept of honor is Françoise in Nouvelle 42: "Non a caso questa figura rappresenta uno dei personaggi femminili più cari a Margherita, che ne traccia un ritratto dovè prevalgono insieme, l'amore per il principe, la reticenza, la modestia, il profondo senso della propria dignità. Ed ella sembra apprezzare più di ogni altro proprio quest'ultimo aspetto soprattutto nel momento in cui prende in considerazione il livello sociale a cui la ragazza appartiene, un bas et pauvre lieu" (p. 80).

⁸ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Toward a Recognition of Androgyny (New York, 1973), notes that a woman who denies herself a love affair may perhaps be doing so out of a sense of her own self as discoverable in the control of sexual passion. See p. 87.

⁹ Claude Mettra, "La Française au XVI^e siècle," Histoire mondiale de la femme (Paris, 1966), p. 330.

¹⁰In addition to the spiritual dimension of matrimony and the protection it offered against the womanizer, marriage spared women both the limbo-like existence experienced by Rolandine and her aunt and the forced clausturation: "Et peu importe que nous pensions aujourd'hui que le mariage n'est plus libérateur. Il l'était, semble-t-il en 1540 pour un certain nombre de femmes qui purent, grâce à lui se sauver de l'ensevelissement monastique," Albistur and Armogathe, p. 109.

¹¹See Ian Maclean, "The Renaissance Notion of Women," Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature (Oxford, 1977), p. 5: "Although in marriage authority is vested in the husband both he and his wife should be equally committed to the institution of marriage and the family; in their insistence on this, Renaissance moralists reflect St. Paul's teachings on matrimony."

¹²Mettra, p. 308.

¹³Albistur and Armogathe, p. 107.

¹⁴Mettra, p. 331.

