The Self-Made Cuckold:
Marguerite de Navarre and *Parole féminine*

"La parole, c'est comme les femmes, ça se prend ou ça se donne."[1] It is curious how an old misogynist proverb assembles and identifies concerns of today's French feminists, *femmes-parole*, *donner-prendre*, the suggested relationship between *parole* and *sexualité*. For it is in the relationship between *parole* and *femme*, between language and women, that French feminism finds a rallying point. Recent titles show the importance French feminism attributes to the *prise de parole*, be it in the realm of the theoretical with Marina Yaguello's *Les Mots et les femmes* or Claudine Herrmann's *Les Voleuses de langue*, the personal with Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme* or Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire*, or the ideological with Ida Magli's "Pouvoir de la parole et silence de la femme."[2] The women's movement in France asks many questions and answers few in consensus. One point of agreement: men have been the principal namers in language, and women are as prisoners inside that language, using it and understanding it slightly differently from men, being molded, formed and deformed by it. Thus, it is up to women to *prendre parole*, to develop their own language based on their experience, especially in areas unknown to men, where the equation between *les mots* and *les choses* breaks down. Basic questions remain: is there a *langage féminin* to be had, to be developed, learned, one which opposes itself to logocentrism and phallocentrism? And secondly, is there a *langage féminin* inscribed in our own speech, in our own thought processes, one we cannot escape but rather reveal in every word? And what of the rapport between *parole* and *écriture*, another key word in French feminism? Says Julia Kristeva: "Il existe des particularités stylistiques et thématiques à partir desquelles on pourrait ensuite essayer de dégager un rapport spécifique des femmes à

l'écriture." The problem, though, is to "savoir si [ces particularités] relèvent d'une spécificité proprement féminine, d'une marginalité socioculturelle ou plus simplement d'une certaine structure favorisée par le marché contemporain."[3]

Reflection on these questions has led me to wonder about the existence of an "éternel féminin" in an author of predilection, Marguerite de Navarre. Here is a Renaissance author who, in the midst of the "Querelle des femmes," came down clearly on the side of women, defending their virtue and their equality in marriage, portraying them favorably in a genre that traditionally mocked women. But what about the *parole*, the language? Is there anything at all in the *Heptaméron* that allows us to see in Marguerite a feminist in the modern French sense? How does she tell a story? Do her stories differ thematically, structurally and stylistically from similar stories told by men about the same time? Is it *écriture féminine*? The genre of the *conte* or *nouvelle* provides an excellent testing ground for just this question, since many tales told by Renaissance storytellers were based on medieval *fabliaux*, almost by definition misogynist. These stories were then recounted by numerous authors during the two to three centuries that separate the *fabliau* from the Renaissance *nouvelle*. As we look at one particular and exemplary tale from the *Heptaméron*, comparing it to previous male renditions, we may find a partial answer to the questions,"What does a woman writer do with an essentially misogynist genre?" and "What, if anything, about Marguerite's story reveals her 'féminité'?"

In making the *nouvelle* fit her needs, Marguerite made many changes. She invented new stories, enveloped her tales in Christian paradox, concentrated more on love than on sex and incorporated into her tales a group of storytellers whose interrelationships have received recent critical attention.[4] It is also in this area that critics have searched for proofs of Marguerite's feminism. However, a careful reading of the debates following the *nouvelles* shows how the *devisants*

trip over themselves in contradiction, sometimes uttering exaggerations and *boutades* in fiery arguments. Though it is clear that the male *devisants*, with the exception of Dagoucin, are at times misogynists and that the women *devisants* often defend their own sex, trying to find Marguerite's feminism in those confused debates is like citing the Bible to bolster one's own opinion: one can always find a quotation to prove the opposite. Furthermore, we know that, as Marguerite wtote the discussions following her tales, she differentiated the storytellers, endowing them with distinct personalities. And where exactly is the author? I disagree with one critic of Marguerite as feminist who says that it is "in the exchange of ideas after a story is told that the essence of the *Heptaméron* is to be found."[5] For my part, it is in the tales themselves that I say "cherchons la femme," woman as character, woman as writer, woman as inventor and manipulator of *parole*. And what better way than to take a tale, told and retold by men in French and Italian, first as a *fabliau*, "Le Meunier d'Arleux," then in the anonymous *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* of 1461, afterwards by Philippe de Vigneulles in his *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* of 1515, the same tale adapted by Boccaccio in the *Decameron* and told by Longarine in the eighth tale of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*? The question is: what might a woman do with a tale of a man who makes himself a cuckold? What narrative stance will she adopt, what changes in motivation or characterization will occur? What, finally, is *féminin* in this specific narrative act?

The plot of the tale I am going to discuss is fairly simple in its broadest outline. A husband desires his wife's chambermaid. The maid, to counter the husband's insistent demands, reveals the situation to her mistress, who advises her to feign acceptance of the proposed rendezvous, explaining that she, the wife, will replace the maid in the bed. The husband, faithful to the appointed hour, lies with his wife, thinking she is the chambermaid. All would be will had the husband not promised to share his good fortune with a friend. In the mid-

dle of the night the husband leaves the bed and his friend takes over. Finally the husband discovers his error and laments the fact that he has made himself a cuckold.

This story, which has seen many different versions, springs, as I said, from a _fabliau_ by Enguerrant D'Oisy, "le Meunier d'Arleux." Here the young girl is not the chambermaid but, less credibly, a maiden the husband introduces into his house as his niece. The story proceeds in the stated fashion, with one notable and amusing variation. The friend gives the husband a pig for the privilege of lying with the young girl, but when he discovers that his partner was not the beautiful young _demoiselle_ but the wife of the _meunier_, he demands the return of his pig, and even goes to court to plead his case. One of Boccaccio's stories has been compared to ours, but its differences are significant. A priest, in pursuit of a young noble woman, is tricked into lying with an ugly chambermaid, thinking it is his lady. Philippe de Vigneulles, in the _Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles_ of 1515, gives the story an interesting twist. The old husband, believing himself with the maid, finds himself unable to perform, at which point the wife unveils her identity, mocks him and upbraids him for his infidelity. The husband gets the last word though, claiming that "Mon mambre viril est plus saige que moy, car il t'ait bien congneu du premier cop et pour ce ne volt huy dresser, mais je ne te congnoissoie point."

By far the most similar of these tales to Marguerite's eighth _nouvelle_ is the ninth _nouvelle_ of the _Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles_, an anonymous work that appeared in the court of Philippe de Bourgogne in 1461. Though the emphases are different and Marguerite adds certain elements not in the _CNN_ version, both stories follow the broad outline sketched above. The similarity between these two _nouvelles_ led Pierre Jourda to postulate a source for Marguerite in the _CNN_ story, especially because this collection of tales figured in her father's library.[6] But my

purpose is not a study of influences, but rather one of differences, differences which might be attributed to a feminine perspective on this traditional *topos*.

The study seems to lend itself to analysis of structural, narrative and rhetorical techniques, though of course such neat divisions tend to overlap on occasion. I will include under the rubric of narrative technique remarks on psychological analysis as well as point of view and voice. My remarks on rhetorical technique will focus on the female use of irony in Marguerite's tale and will lead to a discussion of how the two stories create and project a different male and female sexuality.

A structural comparison of the two tales is facilitated by the fact that the tales are almost exactly the same length, four pages (excluding the debate following Marguerite's tale) in the Pléiade edition.[7] Even though the tales recount essentially the same story, differences are evident from the first sentence. The 15th century version begins by introducing the husband, then proceeds to qualify his social status through his possessions, *chasteau, bel et fort, fourny de gens et d'artillerie* and immediately justifies the actions he will take in the story, for "comme a seigneur de son estat appartenoit, devint amoureux d'une demoiselle de son hostel, voire et la premiere après sa femme." Not only is it proper for him to fall in love, in view of his *état*, but the lady is worthy of his attention. More justification follows: "Car *Amours* si fort le controignoit . . . ." He could do nothing, the narrator says, "tant estoit il au vif *feru* de l'amour d'elle."

Marguerite also presents the husband in the first sentence, in fact gives him a name full of significance: Bornet. The wife gets more than equal time in this first sentence, an "honneste femme de bien, de laquelle il aymoit l'honneur et la reputation." But there will be no excuses for the husband, no justification for the transgressions to

come but rather a curiously modern comment on the old double standard: "Et combien qu'il voulust que la sienne luy gardast loyaulté, si ne vouloit-il pas que la loy fust esgalle à tous deux." Whereas the Burgundian husband simply "devint amoureux," Marguerite's disapproval of Bornet is obvious in her "alla être amoureux de sa chambriere," and the narrator Longarine cannot refrain from adding that in this change "il ne gaignoit que le plaisir qu'apporte quelquefois la diversité des viandes." The equivalence of _sexualité-manger_ inherent in the provocative word _viande_ reveals early in the tale Longarine's ironic disapproval of Bornet's mentality, based on appetite rather than sentiment. What follows in the _CNN_ is the introduction of the _demoiselle_ and a description of the husband's attempts to seduce her, her threat to inform her mistress, his continued advances and the maid's decision to speak to the wife, who "sans en monstrer semblant, en est tres malcontente." So ends the first page. Longarine structures her tale differently after the comment about the _diversité des viandes_: she introduces Bornet's neighbor and friend who becomes party to the husband's designs on the chambermaid, approves it, and somehow (the story doesn't reveal how) helps him to reach his goal, "esperant avoir part au butin," another well-chosen word to underline the masculine vision of the woman as prize. Thus we find in Marguerite's tale another element of motive and psychological analysis and a hint that our husband may need the moral support of his friend. The chambermaid finally appears, her dilemma is presented as is the reaction of the wife when she learns of her husband's desires. Whereas the other wife was "tres malcontente," Marguerite's wife is "bien aise d'avoir gaigné ce point sur luy."

What we see, then, in the respective first pages of these two tales is first a difference in the presentation of the husband--strong, persistent, succumbing to a sexuality clearly justified by the narrator in the _CNN_, and _méchant_, not too bright, and in need of counsel from his fatuous but self-serving

friend in the Heptaméron. The wife in the first story gets only slight mention, whereas Marguerite's wife dominates the tale from the beginning. Marguerite's tale is peppered with short psychological analysis, the comment on the "diversité des viandes" and a special depth afforded to a woman who is delighted to catch her husband in his attempt to be unfaithful.

As a brief structural analysis will show, the remaining three pages of each tale reinforce the findings of the first page, that Marguerite has created a strong woman who dominates the scene. On the second page of the CNN tale, the maid complains to the wife, who devises her trick. On the night of the assignation, a friend of the husband arrives at the château. He is entertained and at the end of the evening, in a scene of 15th century "locker room talk," the "chevalier étrange" asks the husband if he knows a wench with whom he might spend the night. The husband, eager to please, proposes sharing his chambermaid. Marguerite's story, of course, follows a different line. Once the plan is concluded between the wife and the maid, the tryst takes place. The happy husband has in the meantime informed his friend, who is waiting in the wings. By the end of the second page, the husband and his friend have both had their turns in bed, and the friend has stolen a ring from the woman's finger.

As we see, the CNN narrator takes longer to arrive at the bedroom scene, and when he does, he lingers longer, nearly the whole third page, in fact. The husband's undressing takes on great importance in a six-line description, and the marvelous sexual prowess of both men is emphasized and praised. The third page concludes with the husband's return to bed, his further exploits and his awakening the next morning to find his wife by his side. Her direct discourse response is short, six lines, an insult followed by a possessive "aultre que moy . . . n'aura ce qui doit estre mien." On the other hand Marguerite's addition of the ring episode at the end of the second page permits a denouement of the action

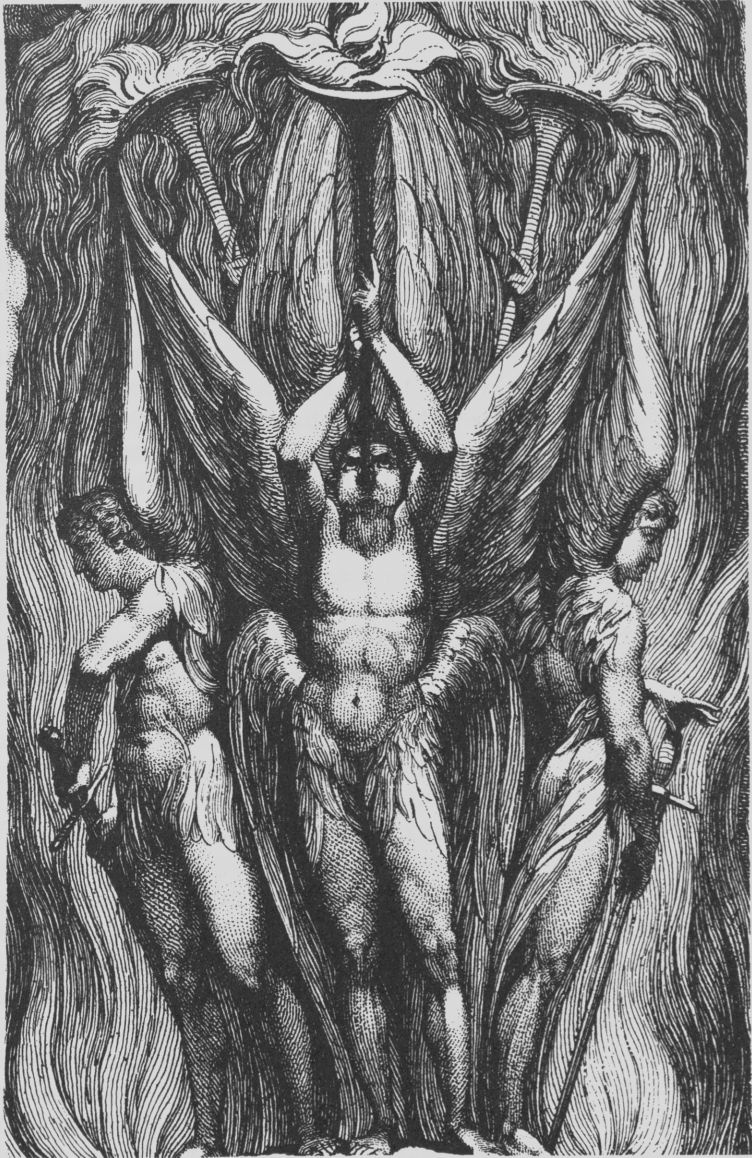
on the third page of her _nouvelle_. After the neighbor's visit to and departure from the bed, both men fall asleep and only upon seeing his wife's ring on his neighbor's finger the next morning does Bornet realize what has actually transpired. His short question to his wife, "Qu'avez-vous faict de vostre anneau?" opens the floodgates of female speech; and Marguerite's story ends with the wife's 35-line answer, to which the husband is accorded no response. After the husband's discovery in the _CNN_, he informs the _chevalier_ and importunes him first not to reveal what has happened and, secondly, never to see his wife again. The jealous husband's pride and the secret are both protected. On the contrary, the husband in Marguerite's story is justly punished. The truth is eventually known, and "l'appeloit on _coqu_, sans honte de sa femme."

The comparison of structures points up several aspects of a female or masculine approach to this tale. First, in the area of justification. The opening portrayal of the husband in the _CNN_ as victim of his love for a _demoiselle_ worthy of him, his offer to share the maid with the unexpected visitor (an obvious act of hospitality), the comments on the sexual desire of both the husband and the _chevalier_, and a possessive wife all tend to to make the reader appreciate the dilemma of the husband. On the other hand, Bornet's concupiscence goes right along with his inability to act alone and with his fear of being caught. Thanks to the insertion of the ring episode, the discovery of the error takes place when the men are alone, and the sheer _bêtise_ of the two, as they discuss the situation, is enough to make the modern reader wonder what this clearly superior wife is doing with such a mate. In addition to putting the wife in an advantageous position, the ring serves as a symbol of faithfulness. The wife is delighted to give up her ring to the man she believes her husband. In this way, she reasons, he will know her true identity. In this and other ways, it is the wife who is

justified in the Heptaméron. The narrator, for example, explains that it was because she believed it was her husband that the wife refused nothing to her bedmate. In addition, at the end of the tale, we are made privy to the thoughts of the husband, who recognizes his own wrongs and praises his wife.

The 15th century version spends a great deal of time on "man talk," discussion between the two male friends, but also discussion and portrayal of the sexual act. Marguerite's comments on sexuality are shorter and more veiled, as we shall see in the comments about irony. Dispensing with the attempted seduction and tryst in the first two pages, she allows the woman to speak at great length, but reasonably and intelligently, at the end of her story.

Finally, though, and as the structural comparison might suggest, it is Marguerite's narrative technique that differentiates her tale from the CNN version and from all those which had previously told the same story. Whereas it is clear that the action was seen and told by a male narrator before Marguerite, the vision and voice are clearly feminine and perhaps even feminist in this tale of the Heptaméron. In the past we have been made conscious of masculine desire and motivation, with the appearance of the wife only to push the intrigue along, but in the Heptaméron the emotions and thoughts of the wife come to the fore. We learn that the wife loves but mistrusts her husband. And while the CNN describes the disrobing of the husband in detail, the focus of Marguerite's tale at this same point in the story is on the thoughts of the woman, "qui avoit renoncé à l'auctorité de commander, pour le plaisir de servir." The narrator recounts the woman's patience during the sexual interlude, a sort of lying back and thinking of England, if you will, "se reconfortant aux propos qu'elle avoit deliberé de luy tenir le lendemain, et à la mocquerie qu'elle luy feroit recepvoir." Bornet's actions are recounted, but it is the wife we are made to see, and always in a favorable light.



When the husband must face his wife after the night in question, he finds "sa femme plus belle, plus gorgiase et plus joieuse qu'elle n'avoir accoustumé, comme celle qui se resjouyssoit d'avoit saulvé la conscience de sa chambriere, et d'avoir experimenté jusques au bout son mary, sans rien y perdre que le dormir d'une nuict." In this sentence physical description heightens her presence and importance and is intertwined with psychological analysis and comment on motivation. And, of course, the long speech in direct discourse at the end of the tale forces us to look through the eyes of the wife. The infrequent psychological analysis in the _CNN_ describes men together, the banquet the husband holds for the _chevalier_, the _chevalier_'s desire, the husband's wish to please his friend and guest, and later the discussion between the two men when the husband has discovered his error.

The most interesting aspect of this comparison rather transcends those classifications of structure or narrative and rhetorical techniques, or perhaps overflows into all those areas. Here I am speaking of a portrayal of male and female sexuality which is strikingly different in these two tales which recount much the same story. A military-erotic vocabulary appears throughout this tale of the _CNN_, with the verbs _besoigner_, _travailler_, _aller aux armes_, and references to the _jour des armes_. But the narrator also underlines a male perception of a sexual ideal throughout these four pages. Reiterating the sex-work equivalence the narrator reports that the husband "n'y eut gueres esté sans faire son devoir." And the husband's performance is painted with glorious exactitude: "Si tres bien si acquitta que les trois, les quatre foiz gueres ne luy cousterent, que madame print bien en gré, qui tost après, pensant que ce soit tout, fut endormye." The _chevalier_'s performance proves even more remarkable, and the narrator adds an interesting comment about the woman, _esmerveillée_ at this night of pleasure "qui aucunement traveil luy

estoit." Again madame falls asleep. For the husband returning to bed it is aux armes, "se ratoille tant bien luy plaist ce nouvel exercice." Though the lady be not aggressive, she is appreciative and is described by an obviously male narrator as "plus contente d'avoir eu l'adventure de ceste nuyt que sa chambriere." The creation of male sexuality includes a comment on desire and anticipation. Following the husband's proposal to share the maid, "Le chevalier estrange mercya son compaignon, et Dieu scet qu'il luy tarde bien que l'heure soit venue!" And the narrator comments on sexual satisfaction. Remembering his promise to the chevalier, the husband, "trop plus legier que par avant" rises and recommends to his friend that he return when "il aura bien besoigné et tout son saoul." And off goes the chevalier, "plus esveillé qu'un rat et viste comme ung levrier." Not only do we see the act from the masculine point of view, but the narrator constructs a mythical male sexuality which seems to be reinforced by the masculine perception of female sexuality.

How different from Marguerite's text, with its tongue-in-cheek irony emphasizing the distance between the male sexual myth and its reality! With the narrator's recounting of the husband's performance in bed, we see the topos has changed dramatically. "Et quand il eut demouré avec elle, non selon son vouloir, mais selon sa puissance, qui sentoit le viel marié," says Longarine, insisting on the man's realization of his failure to meet the standard of the CNN. The same quiet irony pervades the text even with the arrival of the younger, more virile neighbor. "Il y demoura bien plus longuement que non pas le mary, dont la femme s'esmerveilla fort car elle n'avoit poinct accoustumé d'avoir telles nuictées." With this realistic female evaluation of her husband's performance, her solace is in the thought that the morning will bring her justification. Compared with the 15th century "hommes armés" of the CNN, we have here ordinary men who, overcome with fatigue after

their dubious exploits, "se vont tous deux reposer le plus longuement qu'ils peurent." Nor does the wife spare her feelings in the confrontation of the following morning. "Vous pensiez bien que ce fut à ma chamberiere, pour l'amour de laquelle avez despendu plus de deux pars de voz biens, que jamays vous ne feistes pour moy." Note the lack of exaggeration in the "deux pars de vos biens" when compared with the reported frenzy of the men in the CNN. Here is a narrator, and perhaps an author, unwilling to go along with male braggadocio, informing us with a wink and a chuckle about what happens when male desire gets its own way. Gone also is the masculine attitude toward female sexuality, with its eager participation, replaced in the Heptaméron with the wife's detached observation and patience, and a narrator whose portrayal of the scene includes the following seemingly feminist distinction: the wife "cuydant que ce fust son mary, ne le refusa de chose que luy demandast (j'entends demander pour prendre, car il n'osait parler)."

I began these remarks with a reference to the importance of speech, of parole, in modern French feminism, and it seems appropriate to return to them now, since the link between speech and women is a particularly strong one in this tale. In the century that was the 16th, profoundly concerned with the implication of parole,[8] here is a tale where the women do essentially all the speaking. And she does go on, for 35 lines, giving her husband lessons on desire and psychology, on his responsibility to her and to God, and even threatening to leave him if his behavior does not improve. But every bit as important as what she says is the fact that she is allowed, made to speak, by the narrator, whereas the men are kept silent. The neighbor, in bed with the wife, "n'osoit parler," but she, at the same point, is reflecting on the anticipated pleasure of speech: "elle eut patience, se reconfortant aux propos qu'elle avoit deliberé de luy tenir le lendemain." Let us

remember that in the CNN women have no voice. The wife is allowed only a short, unpleasant riposte when the husband discovers her identity, and whereas in Marguerite's tale it is the men who dare not speak, in the CNN the narrator specifies that "Madame mot ne sonne." In fact, Bornet seems punished by the very act of speech. It was, after all, his inability to act alone, his need to inform his friend of his lust for the chambermaid that led to his self-cuckoldry. And let us not forget that in the CNN the whole affair is silenced, whereas in the Heptaméron, "comme toutes choses dictes à l'oreille," the truth comes out, Bornet's final punishment by parole.

What can we say, then, about feminism in Marguerite's Heptaméron? First, that it is there, imbedded in the structure and rhetoric of the tales. Secondly, that it consists, at least in this tale, not only in a defense of women, but in bringing them to the active fore, of making them scheme on occasion, and in allowing them the right to speech, which Marguerite sees as a form of action. It is presenting action, even sexuality, from a female perspective. We have also noted the importance of psychological analysis in this tale, an aspect which has not gone unnoticed in criticism on the Heptaméron.[9] Whether or not this constitutes a feminine trait in literature will provide subject for debate for many years to come, I suspect. What I hope to have shown is that even when Marguerite used those old bawdy tales based on medieval fabliaux, stories she probably heard recounted over the years, she wrote them down differently from the way they came to her. Far from stitching together tales between debates that bandied about the old male-female questions, she actually went about the creation of modern women, using structures from the past which she filled with a new feminist spirit.

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NOTES

[1]Cited in Marina Yaguello, Les Mots et les femmes (Paris: Payot, 1978).

[2]Claudine Herrmann, Les Voleuses de langue (Paris: des femmes, 1976). Annie Leclerc, Parole de femme (Paris: Grasset, 1977). Marie Cardinal, Les Mots pour le dire (Paris: Grasset, 1975). Ida Magli, "Pouvoir de la parole et silence de la femme," Cahiers du Griff, 12 (1976), 37-43. See also Elaine Marks, "Woman and Literature in France," Signs, 3 (1978), 832-42, and New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

[3]Julia Kristeva, "Feminité et écriture: Questions à Julia Kristeva à partir de Polylogue," Revue des sciences humaines, 168 (Oct-Dec 1977), 496.

[4]See for example Regine Reynolds, Les Devisants de l'Heptaméron: Dix Personnages en quête d'audience (Washington, D. C..: University Press of America, 1977) and Betty Davis, The Storytellers in Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron (Lexington, Ky.: French Forum, 1978).

[5]Judith Suther, "Marguerite de Navarre's Quiet Victory over Misogyny," Explorations in Renaissance Culture, 2 (1975), 46.

[6]Pierre Jourda, Marguerite d'Angoûleme, Duchesse d'Alençon, Reine de Navarre (Paris: Champion, 1930),

p. 733.

[7]Conteurs français du XVIème siècle, ed. Pierre Jourda (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

[8]See among others Barbara Bowen, " 'Lingua Quo Tendis?' Speech and Silence in French Renaissance Emblems," French Forum, 4 (1979), 249-60; Florence Weinberg, " 'La parolle faict le jeu': Mercury in the Cymbalum Mundi," The French Renaissance Mind: Studies Presented to W. C. Moore, L'Esprit Créateur, 16, No. 4 (1976), 48-68; and Alice Berry, "Rabelais: Homo Logos," Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 3, No. 1 (1973), 51-67.

[9]For further comments on this topic see Marcel Tetel, Marguerite de Navarre's "Heptaméron": Themes, Language and Structure (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1973) and Nicole Cazauran, L'Heptaméron de Marguerite de Navarre (Paris: SEDES, 1976).