Irony as Dissimulation in the *Heptaméron*

The *Heptaméron* by Marguerite de Navarre depends heavily on the theme of dissimulation for the basis of its intrigues as well as for the development of its narrative and rhetorical techniques. Trickery, knavery and disguise of motive create the traditional plot lines in which the characters utilize a variety of dissimulating tactics, such as the mask, the screen of religion and *tromperie par finesse*. The discussion among the ten *devisants* who relate the *nouvelles* also frequently revolve around the topic of dissimulation, and their interpersonal relationships illustrate its functioning. Indeed, the creation of these ten *devisants*, whom Marguerite placed on a different level of reality through their suggested identification with actual friends of the author, represents an important instance of dissimulation on the part of the implied author. The use of irony in the *Heptaméron* offers another opportunity to observe dissimulation at work in the narrative and rhetorical techniques of the implied author.

As Vladimir Rossman has pointed out in *Perspectives of Irony in Medieval French Literature*,[1] irony usually appears in dictionaries and theoretical treatises under three headings: Socratic irony, irony as a rhetorical device and irony of fate. I will discuss Marguerite's use of irony according to this classification. It is clear that the use of irony involves dissimulation by the implied author. In fact, etymologically, the Greek word for irony, *eironeia*, means dissimulation or pretense, a connotation which was preserved through the Renaissance.[2] Its presence is therefore of more than cursory interest in a study of the use of dissimulation in the *Heptaméron*.

Larousse defines Socratic irony as "Méthode de Socrate qui, feignant l'ignorance, questionnait ses disciples, et par ses questions les amenait à reconnaître leur erreur."[3] For Aristotle eironeia represented "self-depreciation," the opposite of boastfulness. With these clarifications in mind one can discover Marguerite's use of Socratic irony. First the choice of genre indicates an attitude of self-depreciation, since the nouvelle ranked low in the hierarchy of literary forms. We also note the lack of literary pretense expressed in the prologue of the Heptaméron, where Parlamente suggests the pastime of storytelling, an idea she received from the court:

> ". . . et d'assembler jusques à dix personnes qu'ilz pensoient plus dignes de racompter quelque chose, sauf ceulx que avoient estudié et estoient gens de lettres; car monseigneur le Dauphin ne vouloit que leur art y fut meslé, et aussy de paour que la beaulté de la rethoricque feit tort en quelque partye à la vérité de l'histoire" (Prologue, 9). 4

But Socratic irony also provides a governing structural theme in the Heptaméron. It has long been recognized that love, its many forms and aberations, joys and misuses, provides the basic subject matter of this work. That Marguerite illustrates these diverse facets, saying "Et nostre boucquet sera plus beau, tant plus il sera remply de differentes choses" (XLVIII, 317), without really taking a stand on love per se, indicates an attitude of Socratic irony. She is indeed feigning ignorance, questioning her disciples or perhaps allowing her disciples to question each other, in an attempt to lead them to truth through this thought-provoking process. Krailsheimer has suggested that Marguerite, had she finished the projected ten days of her work, would have led her

devisants to a final consensus.[5] Even if such speculation were to be proved erroneous we certainly observe in the *Heptaméron* an implied author who refuses to dictate her views to her narrators, but leads them through experimentation in multiplicity to recognize their errors. This dialectic represents the true function of the debates which follow the *nouvelles*.

Rossman states that irony as a rhetorical device consists of the equation of two opposed elements.[6] These elements may be single words constituting verbal witticism or they may be longer speeches used to portray dichotomy in characters or ideas. This constitutes the broadest definition of irony, recognizing it simply as a divergence between what is said and what is meant. Sarcasm, then, also falls under this classification. For example when Saffredent tells the tale of "Roy Alphonce, duquel la lascivité estoit le septre de son royaulme" (III, 22), who seduces the wife of a *gentilhomme* who "feit un fort grand deuil, dont elle fut reconfortée par le Roy le plus souvent qu'il luy fut possible" (III, 23), a tongue in cheek interpretation imposes itself thanks to the ironic tinges of words like *septre* and *reconfortée*. In the tale of the dame de Pampelune, this woman's feelings for a *religieux* elicit an ironic interpretation, for we know that this woman's love is carnal rather than spiritual: "Croyant asseurement que un tel amour spirituel et quelques plaisirs qu'elle en sentoit n'eussent sceu blesser sa conscience, elle ne falloit poinct tous les jours d'aller au sermon et d'y mener son mary" (XXXV, 255). Such examples of the implied author saying the opposite of what she means abound in the *Heptaméron*, working together towards an ironic presentation of certain characters and ideas.

Identification of irony in any writer requires the ability to state with certainty the views of the implied author on a given subject. This

problem is complicated when dealing with an author from an era whose sociological norms differ greatly from our own. Furthermore Marguerite de Navarre possessed the intelligence and the intellectual freedom afforded by her royal birth to alter her position from the accepted norm. How then can we identify her views in order to contrast them with the position she takes in the _Heptaméron_. The critic must use his sense of intuition, basing his analysis on his knowledge of the lift and times of the author, as well as on the text in question, to determine the presence of irony.

Religieux in general and _cordeliers_ in particular are clearly the butt of Marguerite's ironic appraisal. For example, the inconsistency of the _prieur_ from Sainct-Martin des Champs (XXII) implies irony. On the one hand, "le bruict de sa sainctеté courut par tout le royaume" (XXII, 176), and in reality he violently attempts to rape a young nun. Although the implied author uses the technique of presenting these _religieux_ in wicked acts to demonstrate their true personalities rather than implying the opposite of her statements, the reader infers an ironic context. Since the reader is aware of the traditional presentation of _religieux_ in the _Heptaméron_ he automatically suspects any praise of a religious person. When Marguerite speaks, for example, of "ung grand et beau Cordelier que le dict gentil homme avoit prins pour son confesseur, lequel avoit telle puissance de commander en la maison du dict gentil homme" (XXXI, 237), the reader immediately mistrusts this individual. When Oisille describes a Cordelier named De Valé as "estimé homme sçavant et grand prescheur" (XLVI, 308), we surmise that he will prove just the opposite.

Marguerite's handling of women involves a more subtle irony. What is woman's role in society? How far should she go in protecting her virtue? What sort of treatment should she expect from men?

Would Marguerite agree, for example, with Oisille, who insinuates that a woman should prefer death to forced submission (II), or would she side with Longarine, who joyously tells the story of the woman who happily chooses dishonor over death (LXII). In one case the expression of the implied author must be ironic, for she allows her narrators to paint a sympathetic portrait of both women who choose opposite courses in similar situations. Does woman's role consist of a subservience to man exemplified by the wife of Bernage, who is forced to drink from the skull of her lover (XXXII), or of a boldness typical of the wife of Bornet who tricks her husband by replacing her chambermaid in the "extramarital bed" (VIII)? Again, Marguerite's attitude is slightly ironic towards at least one of these women, for she cannot sincerely praise two opposites. On this subject the voices of the implied author and of the narrator are in contradiction. It is therefore impossible to deduce Marguerite's exact position on this subject, but only to affirm, in the presence of these opposites, that an ironic treatment exists.

The implied author is slightly more definite in her ironic treatment of love. Even though she extolls love, this exultation sours under the examination of most tales, in which an unhappy end to love is either stated or implied. Love may last "selon la coustume, comme la beauté des fleurs des champs" (XIV, 114). Marguerite states her opinion concerning happiness based on love through wise Geburon: "Et, comme si la volunté de l'homme estoit immuable, se jurerent et promirent ce qui n'estoit en leur puissance: c'est une amityé perpetuelle, que ne peult naistre ne demorer au cueur de l'homme; et celles seulles le sçavent, qui ont experimenté combien durent telles oppinions!" (XVI, 132-33). Marguerite's entire attitude towards love is ironic, as the traditional unhappy endings of her love stories

illustrate. She may lead the reader to expect a happy ending, remarking that two lovers symbolize all that is virtuous or that their love has never been equaled. The repeated failure of love in the _nouvelles_ leads the reader or the listener to interpret this information ironically. The stories of Amadour and Floride (X), Rolandine (XXI) and Elisor (XXIV) show instances where true love fails because of character flaws, whereas the failure of potentially perfect love may be ascribed to society, as is Dagoucin's first tale (LX) or the story of Rolandine's aunt (XL). Whatever hope for love is given by the author, the reader learns to interpret it as an ironic cue. The difficulty in the interpretation of irony is brought out by Parlamente's story of an English lord, which may be Marguerite's most ironic statement concerning love in the _Heptaméron_. In this tale an Englishman explains to the seigneur de Montmorency that the tiny jeweled glove attached to his coat was left by a beloved young woman who once touched his heart with her gloved hand, but refused further favors. Does Marguerite share Parlemente's delicate irony as it appears at the end?

> Le seigneur de Montmorency, qui eut mieulx aymé la main que le gand d'une dame, luy loua fort sa grande honnesteté, luy disant qu'il estoit le plus vray amoureux que jamais il avoit veu, et digne de meilleur traictement, puis que de si peu il faisoit tant de cas, combien que, veu sa grand amour, s'il eut eu mieux que le gand, peut estre qu'il fut mort de joye. Ce qu'il accorda au seigneur de Montmorency, ne soupsonnant poinct qu'il le dist par mocquerye (LVII, 355).

Marguerite's position remains unclear in this passage. Is she laughing with Montmorency, or

implying disapproval of his pragmatic views? As this passage indicates, Marguerite's use of irony as a dissimulating rhetorical device has given depth to the Heptaméron by increasing the number of possible interpretations. The limited clues concerning Marguerite's exact position on the all-important subject of love in the Heptaméron suggests a goal not only of ambiguity, but of dissimulation.

The use of irony also proves important in the narrative technique of the Heptaméron. Johnathan Raban, in The Technique of Modern Fiction, cites W. Fowler's definition of irony from his Dictionary of Modern English Usage:[7]

> Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsider's incomprehension.

Raban goes on to observe that in irony, the outsider thinks that he has grasped what is going on, because the ironic statement makes sense in its "open form." Both the "open message" understood by the outsider and the "secret antithesis" understood by the privileged reader must hold true.[8] This definition applies to a technique that the implied author uses extensively, that of dramatic irony, a plot device in which the reader knows more than the protagonists. The story of Oedipus provides the classic example of dramatic irony, for the spectator of the play knows long before the king what the messenger will reveal. Classical theater often equated dramatic irony with irony of fate, for the discrepancy between reality and appearance in events was created by the gods. C.G. Sedgewick provides clarification and amplification on this point:

> Circumstances are wrongly interpreted by man, they seem otherwise than they really are. Similarly, things bear a promise upon their face that is at variance with the actual issue. A man who becomes conscious that he has been duped thus, may readily conceive that circumstance--the Scheme of things--has been mocking him, "saying one and giving to understand the contrary."[9]

In dramatic irony in the *Heptaméron*, however, the element of destiny seems to have been replaced by the concept of evil in man, which in its multiplicity provides the reliable force which the innocent characters often seem unable to recognize, but of which the reader is constantly aware. Through this dissimulating narrative tactic, Marguerite hides information from the personages she creates, just as she suppresses facts *vis à vis* her readers to produce suspense. Dramatic irony exists in most *nouvelles* in the *Heptaméron* to a limited degree, as a result of structure based on dissimulation. If one character is going to trick another the reader can be either aware or unaware of what is going to occur. In the first case dramatic irony is present; in the second suspense is brought about. The most interesting examples of this technique of dissimulation occur in certain *nouvelles* which are entirely based on dramatic irony. Different from situations in which the reader shares some bit of information with at least one character, in this case only the reader can properly interpret the confused communication between characters. Bornet (VIII), for example, believes that he is seducing his chambermaid. His wife, who has substituted herself for the maid, simply wants to teach her husband a lesson, and has no reason to suspect that the second man who lies down with her is no longer her

husband, but his friend. Only the reader is privy to all the information. Similarly, the tale of the _Cordeliers_ from Grip (XXXIV) is a study in ambiguity which derives its humor from the device of dramatic irony. In this _nouvelle_, two _Cordeliers_ spend the night at the home of a butcher. Curious about the discussion between the butcher and his wife, thay put their ears to the wall, only to hear about killing the _Cordeliers_: "Et combien qu'il entendoit de ses pourseaulx, lesquelz il appeloit cordeliers, si est-ce que les deux pauvres freres, qui oyoient ceste conjuration, se tindrent tout asseurez que c'estoit pour eulx . . . ." (XXXIV, 251). Marguerite's talent is evident in that she does not simply end the tale here with the resolution of the misunderstanding, but places the butcher in an ironic position also. One of the _religieux_ has injured himself in an attempted flight, and seeks refuge in the pig pen. The reader receives great satisfaction in being able to construct the climax properly. For when the butcher arrives the next morning to slaughter his "_Cordeliers_," he cries out "ô miracle" upon finding a _religieux_, believing that Saint Francis has punished him.

Irony, then exists in its many different forms in the _Heptaméron_. Marguerite's use of dramatic irony as a narrative and structural technique and of Socratic irony and disguise of ideas as rhetorical techniques points again to the importance of dissimulation, _eironeia_, in her style and thought.

MARTHA PERRIGAUD
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

NOTES

[1]Vladimir Rossman, _Perspectives of Irony in Medieval French Literature_ (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 14.

[2]_Ibid._, p. 14.

[3]Pierre Larousse, _Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle_ (Paris: Larousse et Boyer, 1866-70), IX, p. 793.

[4]Marguerite de Navarre, _L'Heptaméron_ (Paris: Garnier, 1967). All references refer to this edition.

[5]A.J. Krailsheimer, "The _Heptaméron_ Reconsidered," _The French Renaissance and Its Heritage_ (London: Methuen and Co., 1968), p. 85.

[6]Rossman, p. 20.

[7]Jonathan Raban, _The Technique of Modern Fiction_ (London: E. Arnold, 1968), p. 180.

[8]_Ibid._, p. 180.

[9]C.G. Sedgewick, "Dramatic Irony: Studies in Its History, Its Definition and Its Use Especially in Shakespeare and Sophocles," Diss. Harvard, 1913, pp. 214-15.