

23 "La quarte fille fu dame Marie, de qi est avaut dit qe se maria al haut roi de ciel, et en taunt est de li veritablement dit; "Optimam partem elegit sibi Maria, que non auferetur ab ea," qe fait taunt a dire; "La tres bone part s'en ad eslu Marie, qar cele part qe est Dieux meismes james ne lui tollet serra" (2.351). Trevet plays on Mary's name a bit here, praising her connection to two Biblical Marys: the mother of God who wed the king of Heaven, and Mary, the sister of Martha, who chose the contemplative life of listening to the words of Jesus, unlike Martha who cooked and prepared meals for the apostles.

## SCATOLOGY, SEXUALITY AND THE LOGIC OF LAUGHTER IN MARGUERITE DE NAVARRE'S *HEPTAMERON*

First published in 1558 under the title of *Histoires des amans fortunés*, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* has remained until recently a relatively unexplored masterpiece of the early modern period. The only separately published bibliography devoted to Marguerite de Navarre and her works appeared in 1983 and within this slim volume, the total number of *Heptaméron* studies comprises fewer than 200 entries (Clive entries 95–22 and 148–52). There is no doubt that the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marguerite de Navarre's birth in 1992 fueled a long-overdue revival of sustained critical attention to her collection of 72 novellas. And certainly, current interest in early modern women writers has also helped. Since 1993, for example, close to 100 critical works (articles, monographs) have appeared on the *Heptaméron*. Yes, we are moving in the right direction; but there still remains a remarkable imbalance favoring the tragic over the comic tales. Of the significant number of commemorative conferences, to my knowledge only the Five-College International Renaissance Colloquium, held in Amherst, Massachusetts, addressed this issue.

This article's goal is to explore further some of the directional paths suggested there and to look more methodically at laughter in the *Heptaméron*. I will begin by dealing with gender and genre in the early modern period as a way to explain the relative critical silence concerning Marguerite de Navarre's comic novellas. Then, in order to make a case for the need for more systematic studies, I will analyze novellas 11 and 49 and show the complex ways in which women's laughter functions. As my point of departure I challenge the following seductive yet misleading conclusion: "Le rire dominant, celui qui revient sans cesse dans l'*Heptaméron* . . . [c]'est un rire de joie simple, qui exprime spontanément l'accord des humains avec leur nature . . ." (Delègue 39) [The dominant laughter, the one that comes back repeatedly in the *Heptameron* . . . is a laughter of simple joy which expresses spontaneously the harmony between human beings and their nature; my translation]. Before we can arrive at any generalizations it is imperative to address some crucial questions. For instance, what differences can we observe that depend on who is doing the laughing? And what if it is a woman who laughs? My goal is to examine textually coded laughter, that is, moments where the word "rire" (laugh), or a variant of it, appears and is linked to the female protagonist's actions. I have chosen novellas 11 and 49 because they fall into the category of comic tales and share important structural similarities related to my project. Each involves scenes where men are initially the laughers. At the end of each laughter shifts to the mouth of the woman. I

shall be addressing two central questions: first, when does a woman laugh; and second, what is at stake when she does so? In other words, what would happen if she did not laugh; and concomitantly, what effect does her laughter have on the tale's denouement? Most particularly when I examine novella 49, I look at these questions in terms of how they contradict or conform to early modern notions—cultural, philosophical, physiological—of traits that characterize woman.

### The Case for the Comic

To believe that the comic is largely absent from the *Heptaméron* is to forget some important historical and textual facts. Its model, after all, is Boccaccio's *Decameron*, many of whose stories are intended to provoke laughter. In their search for a pastime that is both amusing and pleasant, Marguerite de Navarre's ten storytellers all concur that they cannot think of anything better than to tell tales that will produce a French *Decameron* to bring back to the court. The desired mix of tales is announced by the instructions one storyteller gives to another, in response to a tale just told by him or herself or by another member of the group of ten. For example, after the tragic tenth novella, *Parlemente*, in the prologue to the second day of storytelling, asks Nomerfide to become part of "les rancs de bien dire. Mais je vous prie, ne nous faictes point recommenancer nostre Journée par larmes" (87) [the ranks of the eloquent—but please don't make us cry right at the beginning of our second day (155)].<sup>1</sup> At other moments, besides reflecting upon the need to counteract the somber with the jovial, they indicate that some storytellers can always be counted upon to tell an amusing tale.

After recounting the tragic plight of the mule driver's wife, Oisille turns to Saffredent and says, "Si vous ne dictes quelque chose pour faire rire la compaignye, je ne sçay nulle d'entre vous qui peust rabiller à la faulte que j'ay faite de la faire pleurer. Parquoy je vous donne ma voix pour dire la tierce Nouvelle." (21-2) [If *you* don't tell us something to make us laugh, I don't think there's anyone here who can make up for what I've done in making you all weep! So it's you I choose to tell us the next story (82; emphasis mine)]. At other moments, the omniscient narrator of the *Heptaméron* indicates the amused reactions to a story, one example being after a scatological tale that causes its audience to "se[prendre] bien fort à rire" (89) [burst into peals of laughter (157)].

Comic tales appear in each of the seven days of storytelling, and the impossibility of ignoring them is foregrounded by the presence of three such tales in a row in day one. Historically, such *Heptaméron* stories figure not only in all compilations of *livres gaulois*, but those chosen to be translated into Italian were culled specifically for inclusion in anthologies of classics of laughter (Febvre 162). The popular appeal of such tales continues. In the 1930's an illustrated French edition appeared, entitled *Marguerite de Navarre: contes licencieux*, the majority being comic tales. In the preface, Jean Lescar seems to want both to reassure readers and to whet their appetite for other sixteenth-century works. He says that Marguerite stayed well within her time's accepted

bounds of literary expression. However, he continues, to judge these tales fairly we need to keep in mind that our forefathers did not flinch at racy words nor did they take offense at their coarseness (Lescar 8). Unlike high-priced editions which up to then had limited the work's readership, this inexpensive edition is intended to make the tales accessible to a broader audience. Lescar also expresses certainty that the reader will find nothing to complain about in the tales he has chosen to include here (10). The 1976 A. D. Hope edition, *Tales From the Heptameron of Marguerite de Navarre*, also focuses on the ribald dimensions of the work. Along with the twenty-eight playful and erotically-charged pen drawings by Australian author and illustrator Norman Lindsay, Hope offers an explanation for the choice of tales: "Norman Lindsay's personal taste dictated the selection, and though it may seem rather arbitrary from some points of view, he did take care to pick those tales which seemed to him the best, with a predilection for those he thought the funniest"(Hope 4).<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the centuries, entrepreneurs have capitalized on the demand for ribald tales, but not so critics of the *Heptaméron*. The relative silence concerning this type of tale is part of a long tradition of uncoupling the scabrous from anything associated with Marguerite de Navarre. It reflects the unease engendered by certain defining aspects of the early novella genre, particularly when practiced by a woman, as well as the high literary stakes involved in mythmaking and canon formation.

### Explaining the Silence

Less than twenty years after the publication of the *Heptaméron* in France, William Painter translated into English a selection of Marguerite de Navarre's tales to include in *The Palace of Pleasure*, a compendium of stories favoring the tragic, which would become a treasure trove for Elizabethan authors to plunder. The introduction to the 1890 edition characterizes the novella genre in a way that may further our understanding of why critics choose to focus on the "serious" stories: "The whole literature of the *Novella* has the attraction of graceful naughtiness. . . . At all times and for all time probably, similar tales, more broad than long, will form favorite talk or reading of adolescent males. They are, so to speak, pimples of the soul which synchronise with similar excrescences of the skin" (Jacobs xviii). The analogy may be uncannily apt, for it is precisely the body in all its messy materiality that comic novellas build upon, and Marguerite de Navarre's are no exception. In this respect the novella has striking affinities with the medieval fabliau tradition, and in one way or another, all critics have underscored the genre's "uniform coarseness" (Tilley 97).

To contextualize the critical silence further, one needs to remember Marguerite de Navarre's special status. No ordinary writer, she is both the sister of the king, as well as a queen in her own right. Word plays on her name result in epithets such as "the pearl of the Valois" ("marguerite" being the French name for both a pearl and a flower); the longstanding association between pearls and purity is implied. The disjunction between coarseness and queenliness is heightened by

the epithet nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet coins and others put into circulation. From Michelet onwards, Marguerite de Navarre becomes known as “la mère aimable de la Renaissance” [the amiable mother of the Renaissance (Michelet 459)]. Can coarseness and motherhood ever peacefully coexist? As if to guarantee the purity of the queen/mother metaphors, Tilley solves the problem in two ways, first with a pronouncement: “Of coarseness of language there is very little in the *Heptameron*;” and then with a caveat: “Of deliberate appeal to the grosser passions, such as we find in many modern novels, there is nothing at all, and anybody who takes up the *Heptameron* with the expectation of gratifying these instincts will be grievously disappointed” (Tilley 111). Whatever these “grosser passions” may be (Tilley does not elaborate), a reading of the *Heptaméron*, coupled with a knowledge of sixteenth-century France, will attest that such a perspective does more harm than service to the work. In the name of perpetuating the myth of the spirituality of both author and book, it denatures the text by making believe that the materiality of the body, and the comic situations that arise from it, are issues that exist only in the minds of prurient readers.

To situate further the *Heptaméron* and the issues raised here, I will make two more observations and then raise a question worthy of further exploration. As for how laughter was viewed in the early modern period, the most cited commonplace comes from the final portion of Rabelais’s liminal poem to the *Gargantua*: “Voyant le dueil qui vous mine et consomme:/Mieux est de ris que de larmes escrire,/Pour ce que rire est le propre de l’homme” [Seeing the grief that torments and consumes you,/It’s better to write of laughter than tears/ Because laughter is the property of man” (Rabelais 3; my translation)]. In reviewing the other French novella writers of the time (Nicolas de Cholières, Nicholas de Troyes, Noël de Fail, Bonaventure Des Périers, Guillaume Bouchet, Etienne Tabourot, to name only a few), it becomes strikingly clear that laughter is the domain of men. Marguerite de Navarre is the only woman to have contributed to the genre. In the early modern period, why is this genre so strictly masculine? This leads to the larger question: why has the domain of laughter always been such a no woman’s land? Even though these questions require extensive work before satisfactory answers can be offered, raising them helps us understand why studies on laughter in the *Heptaméron* are hard to come by, and that those that do exist are of recent vintage.<sup>3</sup>

### Scatology and the Laughing Woman

In the best of all possible worlds, laughter would exercise for the laugher the psychologically and socially restorative functions that we shall see it performing in novella 11, a tale that describes the dilemma of Madame de Roncex. During a visit to a Franciscan monastery, she finds herself in urgent need of going “au lieu où on ne peulst envoyer sa chamberiere”(88) [where you can’t send your servant for you (156)]. Because of her physical modesty, Madame de Roncex asks her attending maid to wait outside the privy. Its darkness prevents Madame de Roncex from seeing its filth, and in her haste she sits down on the dirtiest seat in

the house. She finds herself literally glued to the seat by the Franciscan excrement that covers it, with her clothes and legs in a comparably filthy state. Frozen in place by the fear of sullyng herself further if she moves, her only recourse is to call for help. But her heightened sense of verbal modesty prevents her from articulating in clear terms what has just happened. And so she cries out, “je suis perdue et deshonorée” (88) [I am undone, I am dishonored! (156)]. In the quid pro quo that ensues, the serving girl interprets the ambiguous words and the forceful screams not as a plea for an immediate cleanup but rather as the signal of an immanent rape by lascivious friars. The crowd of men summoned by the servant girl’s call for help rush to rescue Madame de Roncex. Instead of a rape in progress, they come upon “ce beau spectacle” (89) [the pretty sight] of a woman with her skirts up, rump in full view, “au pire estat que une femme se porroit monstrer” (89) [in the worst condition a woman could ever appear in! (156)]. The men’s resounding laughter is met with Madame de Roncex’s increasing shame. Mortified to see men looking at her in this unseemly state, she quickly drops her skirts and succeeds in soiling the little that had remained free of excrement. Before leaving the monastery, the modest Madame de Roncex has to be “despouiller toute nue” (89) [stripped naked (157)] and changed into a clean set of clothes.

Before we turn to the story’s conclusion, this may be a good moment to raise a question our students often ask when they are more bemused than amused by a graphic comic tale where bodily functions are highlighted. Namely, what makes such scenarios funny? As one study on Renaissance laughter puts it, modern readers are often unaware of “how many authors devoted their attention to the problem of laughter, its nature, origin, mechanics and moral implications, as well as to the subjects which ought—and which ought not—to arouse it” (Screech 166). Among the published theories, French physician Laurent Joubert’s *Treatise on Laughter* (composed in the 1570’s and published in 1579), explains well Marguerite de Navarre’s choice of scenario, and why Madame de Roncex’s plight inspires the protagonists’, storytellers’, and early modern readers’ hearty laughter. Basing many of his observations on Aristotle’s pronouncements in the *Poetics*, at the beginning of his work, Joubert outlines the typical situations that provoke laughter, as well as the necessary elements for something to be visually comical. First, the event must be unexpected. Then, provided we are not moved to compassion, seeing something that is “indessant, mal-seant, & peu convenable” (Joubert 16) [indecent, unfitting, and indecorous] will provoke our laughter (Joubert English edition 20). Among these unseemly sights, Joubert specifies catching a glimpse of someone’s naked bottom, or genitalia which he refers to as the “les parties honteuses” (16) [shameful parts (20)]. Seeing someone fall and get dirty becomes funnier the greater the incongruity between this action and the person to whom it is happening. Thus, unless we are personally connected to the person, “nous rirons sans comparaison plus, si un grand et notable personne . . . tombe soudain an un bourbier” (19) [we laugh incomparably more if a great and important personage . . . falls suddenly in a quagmire (20)].

Novella 11 conforms well to these criteria. Thwarted expectations characterize the situation of all the protagonists in the tale. Prepared to demonstrate their chivalric valor by doing serious battle against those violent marauders who are violating a lady's honor, the men are met instead by the ridiculous sight of a noblewoman's exposed and bemucked private parts. The reader's laughter is heightened by the fact that Madame de Roncex's heightened sense of propriety has brought about her unfortunate state. Had she allowed her maid to enter the privy with her, she could easily have avoided her predicament. Moreover had she not tried to cover up the reality of her situation with ennobling euphemistic terms referring to virtue and honor, her maid would never have summoned the men. Thus, by refusing to sully her lips with base words, she brings about her own undoing. It is as if the body and the bodily functions that she had attempted to veil (starting with her need "to go to where you can't send your servant for you") have their just revenge. Her audience sees her covered with what she has tried to cover up.

For Madame de Roncex, this visual violation has the potential of permanent humiliation. The haughty noblewoman is now a laughingstock. Given the nature of court society, things could get significantly worse for her, were it not for laughter. Before the story ends, Madame de Roncex's initial rancor toward her serving maid disappears once she discovers that the frightened girl thought something far worse than an encounter with Franciscan excrement was taking place in the privy. At that point of realization, Madame de Roncex "changea sa collerle à rire comme les autres" (89) [forgot her anger, and laughed with the rest (157)]. By her laughter the female protagonist triumphs over her shame in two ways. First, by laughing she moves away from a moment in which she was transfixed by her horror (glued permanently, as it were, to the scene of the public humiliation) to the point where her emotional distance enables her to recapture her agency, both psychologically and socially. As I have shown elsewhere (Polachek 167), Ernst Kris's research on laughter and the comic has yielded some important observations which one can readily apply to novella 11. If Madame de Roncex is able to see the humor in a previously humiliating situation, it is precisely because it no longer harbors any danger for her. Aware now of how the misunderstanding took place and her role in it, it is as if she can now discard her former self. This dissociative step enables her to enjoy an amusing tale where she was once the victim. Laughter has the power of reorienting anxiety by enabling the laugher to revel in the feeling of having triumphed over a former impediment. Thus Madame de Roncex can now take pleasure in looking back "at the harmlessness of what has once been dangerous" (Kris 210). Secondly, this change in affect that her laughter marks finally puts Madame de Roncex in the same camp as her former "humiliators." By adopting the perspective of her amused community, she can succeed in reintegrating her new self within that order and assume again her role in society.

## Sexuality and the Laughing Woman

It would, however, be a blind leap of faith to take this type of laughter and its optimistic outcome as the cornerstone of the *Heptaméron's* view on the subject. Early modern laughter is more complicated than that, particularly when one realizes that Laurent Joubert's work stands as just one of scores of Renaissance treatises on laughter. Also, the world vision that informs the *Heptaméron* is far from optimistic. Novella 49 provides a good idea of the complexity not only of the comic tale, but also of woman's laughter in the *Heptaméron*. Its story seems to be an exemplum of the typical adage which defines woman as "une bête imparfaite, sans foy, sans loy, sans craincte, sans constance"—an imperfect animal, faithless, lawless, fearless, inconstant (Davis 124). The topos of the laughing woman here takes the form of a married foreign countess whose sexual voraciousness places her in a class by herself. She is a perfect illustration of the then-current Galenic medical treatises where woman's womb is figured as possessing the qualities of a hungry animal. Deriving from Plato's *Timaeus*, this notion essentializes woman's disorderliness by grounding it in her physiology. When left hungry (by lack of sexual intercourse or pregnancy), the womb wanders through the woman's body, impedes her respiration, brings her "to extreme distress and causes all manner of disorders" (Plato 115; 91 c).

In sixteenth-century literary works, male anxiety about female sexuality manifests itself frequently (Kritzman 30). It is one of the major impediments in Panurge's marriage quest. Woman's sexual insatiability leaves him fearful of cuckoldry, and Rabelais' "ring-of-Hans-Carvel-solution" (Rabelais Book III, ch. 28, 525) seems to be the only way to assure that woman's "womb" will not lead her away from her partner. In his "Sur des vers de Virgile" [On some verses of Virgil] Montaigne recounts how the Roman empress Messalina "fournit reelement en une nuit à vint et cinq entreprinses, changeant de compaignie selon son besoing et goust" (Book III, ch.5, 854) [in one night was good for twenty-five encounters, changing company according to her need and liking (Frame edition 649-50)]. He continues by relating the famous decision by the queen of Aragon concerning the frequency of sexual intercourse necessary in a marriage: she decreed that it should be limited to "six par jour; relaçant et quitant beaucoup du besoing et desir de son sexe, pour establir, disoit-elle, une forme aysée et par consequent permanante et immuable" (855) [six a day, relinquishing and giving up much of the need and desire of her sex, in order, she said, to establish an easy and consequently permanent and immutable formula (650)]. In novella 49 the strength of the countess's libidinal drive is marked by her ongoing couplings not only with the king (who has conveniently sent her husband away on a mission) but with six of his courtiers. Each "serviteur" [servant] in his turn "feit pareille office" [went through the same ritual] until they all had taken part "à la doule prison" (519) [in this far from unpleasant captivity (418)]. Once they discover their common plight, each has the same story to tell: "Je demouray sept ou huit jours, et couchay en une garderobbe, où l'on ne me fit manger que restaurens et les meilleures viandes que je mengey jamais; et, au bout de huit jours, ceulx qui me tenoient me laisserent aller beaucoup plus foible que je n'estois arrivé" (320)

[I stayed about seven or eight days, I slept in a dressing-room, and I was given nothing but light, nourishing food to eat and other things to consume, the best I've ever tasted. When my week was up my gaoler let me go, and I left a good deal weaker than when I'd arrived! (419)]. The insatiable womb as metaphor for the castrating potential of female sexuality becomes clear through such extended allusions to eating. As in other early modern texts, gastronomy is used here as one of the prime sources of erotic metaphors. Previously each lover had gloated in the belief that he was the only one to enjoy the countess's food and favors and "Se mocquoit chascun de son compaignon" (519) [secretly laughed at the others (418)] for not achieving such success. Now they discover that the sumptuous tidbits each had been fed were meant less to satisfy their palates than to ripen them sufficiently for the countess's carnal delight. Through deceit, the countess has subverted the basic tenet of courtly love: the fidelity of the beloved to her chosen suitor. Here all six suitors have served the same "geoliere" [jailer] spent time in the same "prison." Vampire-like, the countess has dangerously sapped their potency. In her libidinal economy her profit can result only from their sexual and physical depletion. Perhaps this is why they must regularly be replaced.

Laughter helps each of the humiliated suitors unite with the others to punish the countess for her unforgivable audacious crime. Unable to contain his secret, each one boasts in general but pointed terms to the others of his good fortune and that "le Roy n'en a point de meilleures ne plus norrissantes" (320) [the King himself doesn't have anything better, nor anything more nourishing! (419)]. When one of the suitors realizes what the countess has concocted, he "laughed and said: "Nous sommes tous à ung maistre! Compaignons et amys dès nostre jeunesse; parquoy, si nous sommes compaignons d'une bonne fortune, nous avons occasion d'en rire" (320) [We all of us serve the same master. We've been friends and comrades since our youth. So if we are now comrades in this (mis)fortune, then we should find cause for laughter (419)]. As humor research shows, laughter serves as a way of consolidating a group and boosting their morale while simultaneously "sustaining or intensifying aggression toward outsiders" (Chapman 149–50). In an effort to regain the power that she has so arrogantly appropriated, the suitors agree to concretize the lyrical metaphors of the courtly love tradition—metaphors that the text has used throughout the novella. Prisons, chains, and captivity are the standard tropes of the male lover's expression of his love. When spoken seriously, they resemble the following stanza in thirteenth-century trouvère Thibaut de Champagne's "Ausi conme unicorne sui" [I am Like the Unicorn]: Dame, quant je devant vous fuis/et je vous vi premierement,/mes cuers aloit si tressaillant/que il remest quant je m'en mui./Lors fu menez sanz raençon/en la douce chartre en prison,/dont li pilier sont de talent,/et li huis sont de biau veoir,/et li anel de bon espoir." (102) [Lady, when I was before you for the first time/ And saw you,/ My heart leapt forth so speedily/ That it remained with you when I moved away./ Then it was led without ransom/ Into the sweet prison cell/ Whose pillars are of desire,/ And doors of beautiful sight,/ And chains of fair hope (103)].

Intending to publicly humiliate her, the former tools of pleasure unite to become a killing machine. They agree to appear together before the church the countess will be entering, each dressed in funereal black, each with a chain around his neck. As they stand ready to fire their first verbal salvo, the countess beats them to the punch. She “se print à rire” (321) [bursts out laughing] when she sees them (421). Ironically, even though they have orchestrated the spectacle, by making themselves the object of the countess’s gaze and ensuing laughter, they embed themselves more deeply into the powerless position of the non-subject, underscoring her hegemony. Equally important, the countess’s laughter introduces her only moment of direct discourse in the text. For the reader, what she says explains why she laughs. She opens with the interrogative, “Où vont ces gens si douloureux?” (321) [Where are these miserable-looking people off to? (421)]. By not addressing them directly, she further reduces their status and punctuates the distance that separates her from them. When they respond in terms of their being “pauvres esclaves prisonniers qui sont tenez à vous faire service” (321) [your humble prisoners, your slaves, duty-bound to serve you] she retorts, “Vous n’êtes point mes prisonniers, ne je n’entendz point que vous ayez occasion de me faire service plus que les autres” (321) [But you are not my prisoners, and I see no reason why you should serve me any more than any other men! (421)].

Far from being another example of the pointless prattle of women which, according to tradition, demands that man’s logic give it some semblance of direction, the countess’s laughter and words are ruthlessly on target. They aim at, and succeed, in destroying a linguistic code—that of chivalry—designed to contain and enclose her. In the courtly tradition male sexual pleasure is often displaced into the linguistic mastery that he displays: “The lover is in love with his own eloquent lucidity: by dominating the word, he gains a phallic power that contradicts his seemingly humble stance towards the lady” (Moi 24). By refusing to recognize the constitutive signs of the suitors’ speech (slaves, prisoners, service), the countess who laughs wipes out the male power that comes with language. If the countess sees clearly through the sham of submissive fidelity staged by the vindictive suitors, the reader is made acutely aware that in novella 49 both sides are playing with sincerity. The tale offers us a glimpse of a universe where the courtly tradition is still in circulation, but the emotions that need to inform it are bogus.

It becomes clear, then, what is at stake when the countess laughs. First, by her cunning sexual finesse she has, in a sense, physically emasculated these heroes. Now, by robbing them of the power of their linguistic system to signify and by extension to dominate, she has dealt them the final blow, rendering them linguistically impotent. In the process of formulating their scheme, the suitors’ desire for revenge was a matter of life and death. As one of them put it, “Et aymerois-je mieulx estre mort, qu’elle demorast sans pugnition!” (321) [I’d rather die than see her go unpunished (420)]. The countess has fulfilled their wish: without power, be it sexual or linguistic, they suffer a metaphorical death. Stunned by her unexpected reaction, “Ilz rapporterent en leur saing la honte

qu'ilz luy avoient voulu faire" (322) [the shame they had desired to bring down on her fell upon them and remained in their hearts (421)]. The story's denouement sees them beating a baffled retreat.

### **The Tales and Beyond**

Standing outside the linguistic system proper, laughter gives voice to the body and thus asserts the impossibility of ignoring the corporeality of humankind. In the case of Madame de Roncex, laughter makes clear what Montaigne formulated in these terms in "De l'expérience" [Of Experience]: "Et au plus eslevé throne du monde si ne sommes assis que sus nostre cul" (Book III, 13, 1115) [even on the highest throne, we all sit on our ass (857)]. In the case of novella 49's countess, laughter marks "the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact that they are merely occasions for it affording it pleasure" (Freud 217). Accepting the reality principle would force her to acknowledge her deceit and accept the concomitant disgrace. Instead, the suitors' carefully produced show of humility increases the countess's enjoyment of her triumph and her ability to continue to play her game with impunity.

In both tales 11 and 49, through her laughter the woman reverses a possibly permanent public humiliation into a personal triumph. But unlike the situation of Madame de Roncex, where laughter marked the woman's reinstatement into the social order, her re-incorporation into a sympathetic community, novella 49 posits a heroine who has found a method of profiting from the moral bankruptcy of her society. Going beyond merely challenging the patriarchal order, she succeeds in obliterating the power of the male discourse to control her. By playing the heartless game of courtly love better than her insincere male "superiors," her laughter asserts the destructive power of the female's will to pleasure and power.

My goal in this study has been to analyze how gender, genre, and laughter intersect. By examining closely novellas 11 and 49, I have proposed a methodology for looking systematically at the intricate ways laughter is mobilized in the long-overlooked comic tales of the *Heptaméron*. While much work remains to be done before we can arrive at productive generalizations, we can posit some tentative theories about woman's laughter. In all cases it seems to be a recuperative strategy. It affords her the chance to recover from a shame-inducing situation and regain a position of superiority. By allowing woman to reclaim her power, laughter has a therapeutic effect. But as in any power struggle, laughter is often linked to aggression. If anything is clear in this highly complex work, it is precisely that laughter and the comic express something far beyond "the harmony between human beings and their nature."

*Dora E. Polachek*  
*Binghamton University*

1 Throughout this essay I provide the French citations from the widely available Michel François edition (Paris: Bordas, 1991), a republication of the 1967 Garnier Frères edition, with an updated bibliography by Nicole Cazauran. The English translation will follow in brackets. Unless otherwise noted, it will be from the most easily available English translation of the *Heptaméron*, by P.A. Chilton (London: Penguin Books, 1984). For a French edition with modernized spelling, see Simone de Reyff, *Heptaméron* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1982).

2 Both the Lescar and Hope editions are rare and consequently difficult to find, the former because of the acidic paper used, the latter because it was limited to 1000 numbered copies. A crumbling copy of the Lescar edition exists in the collection of the New York Public Library. A copy of the Hope edition can be found in the Rare Books Collection of Columbia University.

3 The most recent work can be found in *Heroic Virtue, Comic Infidelity: Reassessing Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron*, the volume containing selected papers from the 1992 Five-College International Renaissance colloquium at Amherst, mentioned at the beginning of this paper; see in particular Cottrell, Kem, Ferguson, Sommers, Nash, and Polachek. See also Cazauran, Delègue and Winn. For other but relevant perspectives on the scatology of novella 11 see also Hendrix and Mathieu-Castellani.

### Works Cited

Cazauran, Nicole. *L'Heptaméron de Marguerite de Navarre*. Paris: Bordas, 1991.

Chapman, Anthony J. "Humor and Language in Social Interaction and Some Implications for Humor Research." *Handbook of Humor Research*. Ed. Paul E. Mc Ghee and Jeffrey Goldstein. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983. 135–57.

Clive, H. P. *Marguerite de Navarre. An Annotated Bibliography*. London: Grant & Cutler, 1983.

Cottrell, Robert D. "Spirit, Body, and Flesh in Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron." *Heroic Virtue, Comic Infidelity: Reassessing Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron*. Ed. Dora E. Polachek. Amherst, Mass.: Hestia Press, 1993. 23–35.

Davis, Natalie Z. "Women on Top." *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975. 125–51.

Delègue, Yves. "La signification du rire dans l'*Heptaméron*." *L'Heptaméron de Marguerite de Navarre*. Actes de la journée d'étude Marguerite de Navarre 19 octobre 1991. Ed. Simone Perrier. Paris: Cahiers Textuels 10, 1992. 35–49.

Febvre, Lucien. *Autour de l'Heptaméron. Amour sacré, amour profane*. Paris: Gallimard, 1944.

Ferguson, Gary. "Pedestrian Chivalry: Novella 50 and the Unsaddling of Courtly Tradition in the Heptaméron." *Heroic Virtue, Comic Infidelity: Reassessing Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron*. Ed. Dora E. Polachek. Amherst, Mass.: Hestia Press, 1993. 118–31.

Freud, Sigmund. "Humour." 1928. *Collected Papers. Miscellaneous Papers 1888-1938*. Ed. and Trans. James Strachey. Vol. 5. New York: Basic Books, 1959. 215-21.

Hendrix, Laurel. "Reclaiming the Ornament of Wit: Laughter and the Double Standard of Honor in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*." *Thalia* 18, nos. 1–2 (1998), 62–71.

Hope, A.D., ed. *The Heptameron of Marguerite de Navarre*. Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1976.

- Jacobs, Joseph, ed. *The Palace of Pleasure*. By William Painter. 1566. London: David Nutt, 1890.
- Joubert, Laurent. *Treatise on Laughter*. Trans. Gregory David de Rocher. 1579. Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980.
- Kem, Judy. "Sins of the Mother: Adultery, Lineage and Law in the Heptaméron." *Heroic Virtue, Comic Infidelity: Reassessing Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron*. Ed. Dora E. Polachek. Amherst, Mass.: Hestia Press, 1993. 51-9.
- Kris, Ernst. *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*. New York, N.Y.: International Universities Press, 1952.
- Kritzman, Lawrence D. *The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Lescar, Jean, ed. *Marguerite de Navarre. Contes licencieux*. Paris: France-Edition, n.d..
- Marguerite de Navarre. *L'Heptaméron*. Ed. M Francois. Paris: Bordas, 1991.
- . *The Heptameron*. Trans. P.A. Chilton. London & New York: Penguin, 1984.
- Michelet, Jules. *Renaissance. Histoire de France au seizième siècle*. Paris: Chamerot, 1857.
- Mathieu-Castellani, Gisèle. "Poétique de la scatographie: la 11e nouvelle de l'Heptaméron." *Poétique et narration: Mélanges offerts à Guy Demerson*. Ed. François Marotin and Jacques-Philippe Saint-Gérard. Paris: Champion, 1993. 359-69.
- Moi, Toril. "Desire in Language: Andreas Capellanus and the Controversy of Courtly Love." *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*. Ed. David Aers. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986. 11-33.
- Montaigne, Michel de. "On Some Verses of Virgil." *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. Donald M. Frame. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957. 638-85.
- . *Les Essais de Montaigne*. Ed. Pierre Villey. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965. Vol. 2. III, 5, / III, 13
- Nash, Jerry C. "The Male Butt of Comic Infidelity: Men Outwitting Men in Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron." *Heroic Virtue, Comic Infidelity: Reassessing Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron*. Ed. Dora E. Polachek. Amherst, Mass.: Hestia Press, 1993. 142-54.
- Plato. *Timaeus*. Trans. Francis M. Cornford. New York, N.Y.: Liberal Arts Press, 1959.
- Polachek, Dora E. "Save the Last Laugh for Me: Revamping the Script of Infidelity in Novella 69." *Heroic Virtue, Comic Infidelity: Reassessing Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron*. Ed. Dora E. Polachek. Amherst, Mass.: Hestia Press, 1993. 155-70.
- Rabelais, François. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Ed. Pierre Jourda. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962. Vol. I.
- Screech, M.A. and Calder, Ruth. "Some Renaissance Attitudes to Laughter." 1970. *Some Renaissance Studies: Selected Articles 1951-1991*. M.A. Screech. Geneva: Droz, 1992.

Sommers, Paula. "The Hand, the Glove, the Finger and the Heart: Comic Infidelity and Substitution in the *Heptaméron*." *Heroic Virtue, Comic Infidelity: Reassessing Marguerite de Navarre's Heptaméron*. Ed. Dora E. Polachek. Amherst, Mass.: Hestia Press, 1993. 132–41.

Thibaut de Champagne. *The Lyrics of Thibaut de Champagne*. Ed. and trans. Kathleen J. Brahney. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1989.

Tilley, Arthur. *The Literature of the French Renaissance*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1904.

Winn, Colette H. "Rire et Angoisse dans *L'Heptaméron*." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language & Literature* 4, nos 1–2 (1987). 51–64.

