Gender, Power, and the Female Reader: Boccaccio's "Decameron" and Marguerite de Navarre's "Heptameron"

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Boccaccio addresses his Decameron to an audience of female readers, "graziosissime donne," stating that although men in love have outlets for their desires in various activities—hunting, riding, gambling, attending to business affairs—women in love sit in idleness, open to the invasions of melancholy. He suggests his stories offer diverting entertainment as well as useful advice for these ladies. Yet despite this dedication to female readers, and despite the fact that seven of his ten storytellers are women, his tales—even those told by the women—most often take the point of view of the male protagonists, and many of the stories victimize female characters in the process.

Most modern readers of the Decameron, however, have been reluctant to confront the misogyny of these tales, pointing to Boccaccio's extended courtly addresses to the female reader, particularly in the preface to day four. Moreover, a characteristic critical move works to explain away the misogyny in the tales by allegorizing it. For example, the seventh story of the eighth day, in which a scholar sadistically avenges himself on the widow—who kept him waiting in the snow—by abandoning her, naked, to be scorched by the sun and stung by gadflies, has been read as a critique of the scholar's misreading of the literature of courtly love. Such a reading treats the graphic and lengthy description of the widow's disfigurement as
merely the exposure of "the inadequacy of the antifeminist mode as a basis of literary creation." Although this reading may criticize the scholar's desire to attain mastery over the woman's body by disfiguring it, it nevertheless accepts his equation of the woman's body with a text, explaining away the woman's victimization in a "meta-literary way."?

As a female reader of Boccaccio's text, Marguerite de Navarre criticized such allegorizing mystifications by insisting upon the material conditions of women's lives in patriarchy. Her well-known precept to tell veritable histoire announces the project of the Heptameron as a corrective to allegory that allows male authors to fantasize about victimizing women while excusing such victimization as a literary device. Despite her position as sister to the king, Marguerite inscribes herself in the text as the female author who identifies with, rather than seeks to control, the female subject in patriarchy. In this essay I hope to make explicit Marguerite de Navarre's implicit critique of Boccaccio, as well as to show how the Heptameron articulates that critique by reference to specific stories in the Decameron.

I

Petrarch initiated the process of allegorizing Boccaccio in his reading of the story of patient Griselda, perhaps the best known tale in the Decameron; he interpreted Gualtieri's treatment of Griselda as God's trials of man's soul. More recent critics have followed Petrarch's lead in this process of allegorization, though the different readings variously identify Griselda as Job, Mary, or Christ, and Gualtieri as tester is at times identified with Satan.3 Such allegorizations, in explaining away the cruelty of Gualtieri's treatment of Griselda, occlude the relationship between the two in terms of class and gender: as marquis and shepherd's daughter, as husband and wife.

By analyzing the politics of gender in the story of Griselda and elsewhere in the Decameron, I hope to elucidate what I take to be the Decameron's paradigmatic narrative strategy: its juxtaposition of Boccaccio's female-directed discourse with stories such as that of Griselda that function to subjugate the female character to the will of the male protagonist.4 The woman—as character in the stories, as teller and audience in the frame, and as reader of the Decameron—becomes a figure, like the feminine Fortuna, that the male writer and the male protagonist seek to control.5

I would suggest that the story of Griselda can be read as a compelling
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fantasy of male omnipotence on the part of Dioneo and Boccaccio. Petrarck and many contemporary critics have remarked on the crucial placement of the tale: it is the tenth story of the tenth day, the last story of the collection. As Petrarck put it, it is “at the end of your book, where, according to the principles of rhetoric, the most effective part of the composition belongs.” It is told by Dioneo, an appropriate vehicle for such a fantasy in that only he has the special privilege of telling the last tale on each day and only he may choose to speak on any subject that he wishes, breaking the law otherwise set down by the ruler of the day. Many of his tales feature sexually insatiable and adulterous women: for example, his stories on days two, four, and five all center on women married to older husbands who turn to younger lovers. Other tales depict male protagonists using women for their own sexual satisfaction: in his story of the first day a young monk shares with his abbot the sexual favors of a farmhand’s daughter in return for his indulgence; in III, 10, another monk convinces the naive girl Alibech to serve God by putting the devil back in hell. In V, 10, Dioneo has an old bawd advise a younger woman,

Degli uomini non avviene così: essi nascono buoni a mille cose, non pure a questa . . . ma la femine a niuna altra cosa che a fare questo e figliuoli ci nascono, e per questo son tenute care. (497)

With men it is different; they are born with a thousand other talents apart from this . . . but women exist for no other purpose than to do this and to bear children, which is why they are cherished and admired.

Dioneo’s women are most often exceedingly naive or stupid: for example, Alibech and Pietro’s wife, who wants to be turned into a mare by Father Gianni. His story on the eighth day uniquely features an intelligent woman, though she turns out to be a duplicitous villainess who swindles her merchant lover. Dioneo’s representations of women consistently reveal that he considers their sexuality threatening. Dioneo appears to identify not with the old cuckolded husband, but with the young male lover who forms an alliance with the adulterous wife. However, this story of the young merchant reveals the defensiveness of Dioneo’s narrative strategy, because the shrewd woman has no older husband and works solely for her own interests.
Griselda, of course, resembles none of these women. And that is precisely the point: Dioneo all but erases her sexuality and makes her an embodied fantasy of a constant and obedient wife, whose absolute subjugation and humiliation allows Gualtieri (with whom Dioneo clearly identifies) to maintain total control and power. This fantasy involves the taming of the unruly woman; Griselda's repeated humiliation shows how great the threat of that unruly woman must be. The narrator's courtly addresses to the female reader, as well as Dioneo's introductory comments critical of Gualtieri's behavior (such as the phrase *matta bestialità*, "senseless brutality") serve as disclaimers that allow the fantasies to be expressed; they function as a superego does, so that in distancing the narrators from the fantasies, they make such fantasies socially acceptable.

Although Boccaccio repeatedly addresses female readers—as he does in the author's conclusion, which follows this culminating tale—we do not have access to these readers' reactions to or interpretations of the story, for few women during this period commented on texts in writing, or if they did, succeeded in circulating them among a public audience. By contrast, its reception history by male readers is very well documented: not only Petrarch and Chaucer, but also sixteenth-century English writers such as John Phillip and Thomas Dekker wrote their own versions of the story. In *Seniles* XVI, 3, addressed to Boccaccio, Petrarch praised the story for delighting and fascing him, so much so that, he relates, "I was seized with a desire to learn it by heart, so that I might have the pleasure of recalling it for my own benefit, and of relating it to my friends in conversation" (185). He reports that since his auditors were equally delighted, he undertook to translate it into Latin, in order that the story might gain an even wider public—of male readers (and in translating the story into Latin, Petrarch completely drops Boccaccio's pretense that the story is intended for female readers). Petrarch includes this translation, titled *De obedientia ac fide uxoria mythologia*, in his letter, in effect sending it back to Boccaccio; he also describes the reactions of the male readers among whom he circulated the story. Thus Petrarch's letter clearly documents the ways in which male writers (Boccaccio, Petrarch), and male readers (Petrarch, the auditors of his recital, and the readers of his translation) exchanged the story of Griselda among themselves, constructing homosocial alliances of the kind that Eve Sedgwick has described. In this instance the object of exchange is not an actual woman, but the story of an ideal woman, which makes the exchange even more satisfying; for an actual woman most certainly would not resemble Griselda in her
superhuman obedience (Petrarch says that Griselda is “beyond imitation” [186]). Petrarch’s letter reveals that Boccaccio’s and Dioneo’s fantasy is not idiosyncratic, but taps a fantasy shared by middle-class male *literati* in fourteenth-century Italy.

In her study of marriages in Renaissance Italy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has shown that the two instances in which Gualtieri has Griselda stripped of her clothes—when he marries her and as he turns her out of his house—have historical bases in the contemporaneous practice of the husband dressing the new bride in clothes bearing his crest. Upon the husband’s death, the widow had no claim to the ritual wardrobe of her wedding unless it was specifically willed to her.13 Wives were ritually appropriated by their husbands, who retained possession even of the symbols of such appropriation, the bridal clothes. Seen in this light, the stripping of Griselda down to her shift as she leaves Gualtieri’s house to return to her father’s—a detail which appears to contribute to the fairytale-like character of the story—turns out to be an only slightly exaggerated presentation of social fact. The actual social and legal practice that defines marital relations in Renaissance Florence is mystified as an unrealistic detail in the Griselda story, just as the courtly addresses to the female reader mystify the actual dominance of men over women. Thus Dioneo’s and Boccaccio’s fantasy of omnipotence and absolute control over potentially unruly women proves not to be subversive of the social order, but a fantasy expressing the values, the terms, and the judgments of the prevailing patriarchy. Put another way, the marital custom and the legal system that underwrites it, as described by Klapisch-Zuber, do not conflict with the fantasy articulated in the story of Griselda, but on the contrary, put the fantasy into social practice. It is worth remarking here that the Griselda story became one of the favorite subjects to adorn *cassoni*, wooden chests which were used to hold wedding gifts from a husband to his bride; these illustrations not only admonished the wife to imitate Griselda, they also served as reminders that the contents of the *cassoni* belonged to the husband, even though they were apparently being bestowed on the bride.14

The story of Griselda proves to be so compelling for male readers such as Petrarch and his friends because it allows them to participate in a shared fantasy. Yet they assuage their guilt over their enjoyment of the absolute power Gualtieri exercises by pitying and sobbing for Griselda, expressing emotions that offer yet another source of pleasure. Gualtieri functions as an ego-ideal for such guilty male readers, for he need not
adopt a mask of courtliness to disguise his unequal relationship with Griselda, thanks to the wide discrepancy between his high rank and Griselda's humble origins, as well as her unquestioning obedience. Through Gualtieri, Boccaccio strips off the courtly pretense mystifying patriarchal relations, which in fact accord husbands absolute power over their wives. As for the female readers, Boccaccio and to a somewhat lesser extent Dioneo attempt to humor and placate them in order to seduce them into accepting such misogynous tales: Boccaccio accomplishes this seduction by having the female audience in the frame laugh at these stories, rather than acknowledge women's victimization as such.

The female audience appears not to notice even the vulgar misogynous joke that concludes Griselda's story:

Al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d'essersi abbattuto a una che quando, fuori di casa, l'avesse fuori in camiscia cacciata, s'avesse st a un altro fatto scuotere il pilliccione che riuscito ne fosse una bella roba. (904)

For perhaps it would have served him right if he had chanced upon a wife, who, being driven from the house in her shift, had found some other man to shake her skin-coat for her, earning herself a fine new dress in the process. (824)

This closing comment by Dioneo violates the decorum of the story (and, we might add, that of all the stories of day ten, which are exemplary and idealizing, like the Griselda story); the fabliauxesque comment undermines the stated intention of the story, which was to praise Griselda's superhuman virtue. The misogynous joke becomes the site of an eruption of barely suppressed hostility toward women and their sexuality. Freud describes two types of tendentious jokes: the hostile, serving the purpose of aggression, satire, or defense, and the obscene, serving the purpose of exposure. Dioneo's joke partakes of both types: its hostility targets women by satirizing their sexuality, and it obscenely calls sexual facts and relations to our attention. Freud further observes:

Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness,
Through the joke, Dioneo aims to share with other men the pleasure of overcoming the obstacles and restrictions that stand in the way of satisfying their hostile impulses toward women; it also constitutes an act of verbal violence directed against women. Thus, although the joke appears to undercut the story by violating its decorum, it in fact functions with particular force by repeating and neatly encapsulating what the story has already performed. "In jokes," Freud says, "nonsense often replaces ridicule and criticism in the thoughts lying behind the joke (... the joke-work is doing the same thing as the dream-work)" (107).

The obverse of this fantasy of male omnipotence and female subjugation is dramatized repeatedly not only in Dioneo's other stories, but in the introduction to the fourth day and several of the stories told that day. In the Introduction to Book IV, which contains Boccaccio's famous address to his female readers, he repeatedly complains of being mutilated—"lacerato" (329), "molestato" (330)—because of his allegiance to the ladies. The language of violent disfiguration and dismemberment becomes literal in three of the stories of day four: in the first story, Tancred slays his daughter's lover and sends her his heart; in the fifth, Isabella's brothers murder her lover, whose head she places in a pot of basil; in the ninth, Guillaume de Roussillon causes his wife to eat the heart of her lover. All three stories dramatize the violent punishment visited upon a man who transgresses sexually with a woman belonging to another man. Instead of exchanging women and consolidating the bonds between themselves, these aristocratic men hoard their women and destroy the trespassers on their property. Yet the lovers in the three stories cannot even be said to steal these women; they are passive and shadowy presences in comparison to the independent and sexually aggressive women, who attain heroic stature through their tragic plights. In fact, the stories imply that the women are responsible for the destruction of their hapless lovers, and, in terms of the narrative economy, even participate in it by ingesting their hearts (in stories one and nine). In the fifth story, it is Isabella who actually decapitates her lover and make him a fetish as well as fertilizer for her pot of basil.

This recurrent narrative structure involving the male relative's refusal to exchange or circulate the woman, and the disastrous consequences of a man's transgression with the forbidden, yet sexually aggressive, woman
follows closely the story of Theseus-Phaedra-Hippolytus, a story to which Boccaccio turned repeatedly in his writings. In the *Genealogia deorum gentilium* Boccaccio likens the mutilation of ancient texts to the dismemberment of Hippolytus;\(^7\) and in the *De casibus virorum illustrium* he recounts the story of Theseus and Hippolytus. In Boccaccio's version, Theseus initially intends Phaedra as a wife for Hippolytus but decides to keep her for himself; the father's hoarding of Phaedra and her sexual aggression against Hippolytus result in his horrible dismemberment.\(^8\)

Like the three stories I have just discussed, and like the story of Hippolytus, the comic story of Filippo Balducci, which Boccaccio tells in the introduction to day four as a parable of man's natural attraction for women, fundamentally concerns an Oedipal interdiction of women. After the death of his wife, Filippo Balducci withdraws from the world with his son. When the son comes in contact with women for the first time, he is fascinated by them. Filippo tells his son that they are goslings—*papere* —and that they are evil—*mala cosa* (332). When the son insists that he wants to take one home and feed it, "io le darò beccare," the father replies, "tu non sai dove elle s'imbecciono" (333), you don't know where they feed, or as G. H. McWilliam translates it, "Their bills are not where you think" (330). The goslings may appear innocuous, especially in light of other versions of the tale which call women "devils who catch men," but these apparently domesticated birds nevertheless possess threatening, phallic beaks.\(^9\) This story, which Boccaccio introduces as being different from the tales told by his narrators because of its incompleteness—he uses the word "difetto" (276)—is incomplete in order to preempt the threats of mutilation or cannibalism, which are carried out in the stories about to be told.\(^10\) The story also deflects the Oedipal situation by displacing the mother with the goslings. It presents itself as a joke, rather than a tragedy, as the three stories themselves do; yet as in the case of Dioneo's joke about what Griselda could have done, joke-work, like dream-work, at once displaces and reveals the preoccupations of the unconscious—in this case the threat of castration accompanying the father's interdiction of the mother.

I am not claiming, however, that Boccaccio's preoccupation with the Oedipal situation is transhistorical. The historical determinant of these Oedipal triangles for Boccaccio is class; the noblemen represent the fathers, who destroy lower-class males for trespassing upon their upper-class women, identified with the mother.\(^21\) The importance of the superimposition of paradigms of class on the Oedipal paradigm can perhaps most
clearly be seen in a story that at once neatly deflects the disastrous consequences of the Oedipal triangle and fulfills the aspiring male’s desire to rise in class. In the third story of the second day, Alessandro, a young merchant who has been financially ruined, succeeds in becoming the King of Scotland by marrying the King of England’s daughter. This story expresses a powerful desire to overcome the historical determinants of class divisions through the appropriation of upper-class women with the acquiescence of benevolent, not castrating, fathers.

This importance of class for Boccaccio leads me to look beyond an overt wishful identification with the nobleman Gualtieri to a latent, uneasy cross-gender identification of Boccaccio with Griselda; for in terms of class, Boccaccio has more in common with the lower-class Griselda, especially in light of stories where he obsessively describes the lower-class male’s destruction at the hands of a nobleman. Like Griselda, Boccaccio has been humiliated by his lover’s rejection (a humiliation which figures in the story of the scholar and the widow as well as in Corbaccio). And since Griselda’s virtuous patience directly arises out of Gualtieri’s capricious rejection of her, Boccaccio is in a similar position—having now completed his one hundred tales as a result of his rejection by his lady. Boccaccio thus turns his humiliation, or his being rendered feminine, into a position of strength through his creation of the Decameron, just as he renders meek and patient Griselda glorious at the end of her trials. Hence the story succeeds in allowing Boccaccio to master even this seemingly threatening, if fleeting, identification with a lower-class woman. The misogyny of the story that I have been discussing derives from Boccaccio’s need to insist upon his difference from Griselda in terms of both gender and class, in order to avert this recognition of her as alter ego.

II

In the Prologue to the Heptameron Marguerite has Parlamente, a character as closely identified with her author as Dioneo was with his, say that she cannot be original, like the ancients who discovered the arts; instead she must follow closely in the footsteps of others, in particular of Boccaccio. From the very beginning, Marguerite defines her project by the parameters set by Boccaccio, whose Decameron had been recently translated into French and dedicated to her;22 yet she will diverge in an important respect from her predecessor: as Parlemente says, “sinon en une
chose differente de Bocace: c’est de n’escripre nulle nouvelle qui ne soit veritable histoire."

("There was to be one difference—that they should not write any story that was not truthful.")

Marguerite’s realism has received much critical attention, but the motive behind this insistence on veritable histoire, I believe, remains to be elucidated. In stating that her divergence from Boccaccio lies in her commitment to truth, Marguerite, I suggest, subtly criticizes Boccaccio’s stories as wish-fulfillment and fantasy. When she describes the locus amoenus, the most beautiful meadow ever seen, as a sight that only a Boccaccio could describe (“qui estoit si beau et plaisant qu’il avoit besoin d’un Bocace pour le depaindre à la vérité” [10]), she seems to allude pointedly to Boccaccio’s idealized Valle delle donne. Marguerite criticizes Boccaccio for remaking the actual according to his desires. In the course of her stories, it becomes clear that she proposes to give voice to truths perceived by female subjects who find themselves victimized by and in opposition to the patriarchal order, in contrast to Boccaccio’s consistent presentation of masculine drives and judgments, which largely accord with the dictates of patriarchy.

For example, in story twenty-one, Rolandine falls in love with a worthy and gallant young man, but since he is a bastard (albeit of a noble family), Rolandine’s father and the Queen prohibit the marriage. In important ways this story rewrites Boccaccio’s third story of the second day, which I have already mentioned; in Boccaccio’s story, Alessandro, “giovane assai, di persona e di viso bellissimo, e, quanto alcuno altro esser potesse, costumato e piacevole e di bella maniera” (108) (“very young, exceedingly good-looking and well-built, and the most well-mannered, agreeable and finely-spoken person you can imagine” [130]) succeeds in marrying the daughter of the King of England, who chooses

il quale voi qui appresso di me vedete, li cui costumi e il cui valore son degni di qualunque gran donna, quantunque forse la nobiltà del suo sangue non sia così chiara come è la reale. Lui ho adunque preso e lui voglio, né mai alcuno altro n’avrò, che che se ne debba parere al padre mio o a altrui. (111)

. . . [the one] whom you see standing here by my side. It may well be that he is less pure-blooded than a person of royal birth, but both in bearing and in character he is a worthy match for any great lady. He, therefore, is the man I have taken; it is him alone that I
want, and no matter what my father or anyone else may have to say on the subject, I will never accept any other. (134)

Despite the king’s initial objections, he eventually approves; he not only accepts Alessandro as a son-in-law but makes him the Earl of Cornwall. The tale concludes with the Earl, through his “senno e valore” (113) and with the help of his father-in-law, conquering Scotland and becoming her king. Although told by Pampinea, this story clearly takes Alessandro’s point of view; the king’s daughter serves only as an instrument for his phenomenal rise in class. It constitutes a fairy-tale success story, which claims that class divisions can be overcome by senno e valore that transcend them.

In Parlamente’s story of Rolandine, class divisions defeat the wishes of the female protagonist, who nevertheless expresses eloquently her criticism of them.\(^{25}\) If the setting and details serve as indices to whether a story intends to be veritable histoire, it is worth noting that Marguerite based the character of Rolandine on an actual woman, Anne de Rohan, and the unnamed Queen who persecutes Rolandine on Anne de Bretagne, who married first Charles VIII, then Louis XII, and who was related to Anne de Rohan through her mother, Marie de Bretagne.\(^{26}\) That the story is told from the woman’s perspective (unlike Boccaccio’s story of Alessandro) perhaps explains the shadowy identity of her bastard husband, for the story centers upon the two women, Rolandine and her antagonist, the Queen. Boccaccio’s story stresses the superlative qualities of Alessandro; Rolandine, unlike Alessandro, is unremarkable—neither particularly beautiful nor particularly ugly (“com’bien qu’elle ne fust des plus belles ny des laydes aussy” [158]). The bastard from a noble family whom she secretly marries is gallant and worthy, but poor and plain. In these details, Marguerite deliberately diverges from Boccaccio’s exaggerated idealism, which makes his female protagonists celestial beauties and his male heroes handsome and valiant, even though they may be low in rank. The relationship that grows between Rolandine and the noble bastard is based on a deep and lasting affection that arises out of mutual sympathy, as opposed to the instantaneous attraction for a desirable woman experienced by Boccaccio’s male characters.

Marguerite appears to be at pains to exonerate Rolandine from willful disobedience of her guardians who have neglected to contract a marriage for her: her father cares for his money more than he does for his daughter,
and her mistress, the Queen, does not favor her. Even so, Rolandine waits for two years before she decides to marry the bastard, preferring him to handsome, rich, and noble suitors, because her heart and mind accord with his. They exchange rings in token of the marriage, yet she insists that they not consummate the marriage until her father's death. Here Rolandine, while apparently defying her father's wishes, nevertheless acknowledges the almost omnipotent law of the father, whose claims upon her prove to be insurmountable. When the Queen discovers this marriage, she persecutes the couple, accusing Rolandine of dishonoring her father and the Queen herself. Significantly, Rolandine's father does not appear in the story at all. The Queen, though ill-disposed toward Rolandine's father, nevertheless acts as the agent of patriarchy, and it is in the Queen, not her father, that Rolandine confronts patriarchy's rights over her. It is also to the Queen that Rolandine asserts her right to give herself. In contrast with Boccaccio's story of Alessandro, which featured benevolent fathers who approve of Alessandro's rise—the Pope and the King of England—the pointed absence of Rolandine's father, together with the later appearance of her spiteful and abusive brother, shows Marguerite's awareness that patriarchy does not literally have to do with the father, but with a family's claim to the prerogative to use women as objects of exchange, or to withhold them from circulation—as it does in Rolandine's case. It is significant in this respect that Anne de Bretagne signed an agreement with Louise de Savoie, Marguerite de Navarre's mother, that their children, Claude (the daughter of Anne and Louis XII) and the future François I (Louise's son) would marry in order to ensure the unification of France and Brittany:

Nous Anne par la grace de Dieu Royne de France, duchesse de Bretaigne, auctorisée de mon seigneur le Roy . . . promettons et jurons a Dieu notre créateur . . . que nostres tres chere et tres amée fille, dame et cousine Claude de France sera venue en cage compaignt pour contracter mariage, que nous ferons et procuretons par effet que le mariage d'elle et de nostre tres cher et tres amé nepveu et filz le duc de Valoys, conte d'Angoulesme. . . .27

We, Anne, by the grace of God Queen of France, Duchess of Brittany, authorized by my lord the King . . . promise and swear to God our Creator . . . that when our very dear and beloved daugh-
ter, lady and cousin Claude of France will have attained marriageable age, we will make and conclude indeed the marriage between her and our very dear and beloved nephew and son the Duke of Valois, Count of Angoulême. . . .

(my translation)

The wording of the agreement makes clear that the contracting parties are the mothers, though Louis, the father and king, authorizes Anne to initiate the contract, and also signs the document.

Although her own mother was party to such an agreement, Marguerite's sympathies do not appear to lie with mothers and queens who contract their children's marriages for familial and dynastic considerations—or with Rolandine's queen who insists on her prerogative to deny her subject's choice of husband. When Rolandine speaks out against the Queen, she says she has decided to pursue her own happiness, and to follow her own inclinations,

non point pour satisfaire à la concupiscence des oeilz, car vous sçavez qu'il n'est pas beau, ny à celle de chair, car il n'y a pointe eu de consommation charnelle, ny à l'orgueil, ny à l'ambition de ceste vie, car il est pauvre et peu advance; mais j'ay regardé purement et simplement à la vertu qui est en luy, dont tout le monde est contrainct de luy donner louange; à la grande amour aussy qu'il m'a portée, qui me faict esperer de trouver avecq luy repos et bon traictement. (169)

not in order to satisfy the concupiscence of the eye, for as you know he is not handsome, nor to satisfy the lusts of the flesh, for there has been no carnal consummation, nor yet to satisfy pride and wordly ambition, for he is poor and has no prospects. No, my sole considerations were the virtue with which he is imbued, for which no one can deny him praise, and the deep love which he has borne me, a love which gives me hope that with him I will find kindness and contentment. (247)

Rolandine's speech echoes the speech of the English princess about Alessandro; the princess, of course, gets her way—as Rolandine does not—because Boccaccio wants the man she loves to succeed.
While acknowledging the Queen as “ma maistresse et la plus grande princesse de la chrestienté,” Rolandine nevertheless appeals to “la verité, laquelle moy seule je şcay” (169), setting it against the dictates of the social order which she indirectly criticizes as based not on truth, but on convention. In her passionate claim to truth, la verité, Rolandine here echoes her narrator in the Prologue. She sets her “père au ciel” against her earthly father and the Queen whom she accuses of preparing evils for her: “en luy seul j’ai ma parfaicte confiance” (170). Paula Sommers has shown that Marguerite’s devotional writing, such as Le Miroir de l’âme pécheresse, gives expression to Marguerite’s Biblical feminism; her faith in the absolute authority of Scripture leads her to maintain the spiritual equivalence of men and women.28 I would suggest, further, that Marguerite’s affirmation of a female reader’s interpretation of Scripture underwrites Rolandine’s feminist critique of the social text.

The Queen works in concert with the King to dissolve Rolandine’s marriage with the bastard; but even though the price of her constancy to her husband is imprisonment, Rolandine refuses to renounce him. Whereas Alessandro’s clandestine marriage with the King of England’s daughter was ratified without much opposition by the King himself, Rolandine’s resolve to remain true to her marriage is undercut not only by the Queen’s opposition but also by the bastard’s betrayal of her to marry a very wealthy woman. Rolandine finally agrees to marry a man who bears the same name and arms as her father. This detail stresses that patriarchy gets its way quite literally: Anne de Rohan, by marrying Pierre de Rohan, remains Anne de Rohan. When her father dies, her brother claims that her earlier disobedience justifies him in denying her any share in the inheritance. When, however, Rolandine inherits the estate upon her brother’s death, she appears to have been rewarded for her constancy and patience, as Griselda had been in Boccaccio’s story. But it is worth noting here that Rolandine’s inheritance of her brother’s estate is the only detail that Marguerite invented. Upon the death of her elder brother, Anne de Rohan appeared to inherit the family estate, but her inheritance was effectively contested by another brother.29 So although Marguerite fulfills to a great extent her promise to tell veritable histoire, the one invented detail produces an ironic turn of events that compensates Rolandine for her victimization in the name of her family by making her the head of it. Here the single element of fantasy reveals Marguerite’s perspective on Rolandine’s story; though she herself is a Queen, like the story’s unnamed
Queen, who is referred to only as "la Royne," her sympathies lie with Rolandine, who dared to challenge the Queen and her prerogatives. Yet Marguerite refrains from explicitly criticizing the Queen and the patriarchal order that she represents, by having the devisants discuss the story in terms of Rolandine's constancy and the bastard's inconstancy, thereby eliding the most explosive social criticism that the story contains. The story is not in fact about the bastard's betrayal of Rolandine, which is only a minor aspect of it, but about the conflict between Rolandine and the institution of the patriarchal family.

Indeed, Marguerite returns to this issue of patriarchy's control over women and their exchange in story forty, which features as heroine Rolandine's aunt; the repeated focus on this family emphasizes the extent to which the institution of the family becomes a major protagonist in both stories. In both cases, the family insists upon controlling its women as objects of exchange. The aunt, like Rolandine, becomes a victim of the patriarchal family, whose authority is exercised here by her brother. This story reveals the narcissism and incestuous tendencies that underlie patriarchy, where women are treated as extensions of fathers and brothers, to be exchanged or hoarded—as happens in the cases of both Rolandine and her aunt. The heroine's brother (who will later become Rolandine's father) imprisons the unnamed aunt in his own house for fear of losing her and his money. Consequently, and inevitably, she falls in love with a young gentlemen of the household, whom her brother repeatedly praises, wishing aloud that he were from a nobler family, so that he could have been his brother-in-law. The two marry secretly, but their marriage is inevitably discovered, and the brother has his sister's husband killed before her own eyes. The brother then imprisons her in a castle in the middle of the forest; she dies alone. The brother's family declines, so that in the end Rolandine becomes the heiress, according to story twenty-one, as we have seen. The ironic ending that relates the family's decline criticizes the brother's behavior for being at odds with the family's interests, which turn out to have been in accord with the desires of Rolandine's aunt. Here again, Marguerite appears to draw back from completely subverting the claims of the family in favor of those of the woman. By allowing Rolandine to inherit after all, she appears unwilling to assert that a woman should have the freedom to choose even if her interests were truly opposed to those of her family.

Whereas the story of Rolandine was more subversive than the rather
lame discussion that follows it, the story of Rolandine's aunt is followed by a more unsettling discussion that demystifies the institution of the family. Marguerite has Dagoucin say,

Pour ce... que pour entretenir la chose publicque en paix, l'on ne regarde que les degrez des maisons, les ages des personnes et les ordonnances des loix, sans peser l'amour et les vertuz des hommes, afin de ne confondre poinct la monarchye. (280)

in order to maintain peace in the state, consideration is given only to the rank of families, the seniority of individuals and the provisions of the law, and not to men's love and virtue, in order that the monarchy should not be undermined. (374)

Apparently unmarried himself, Dagoucin goes on to remark that marriages contracted between families tend to bring together ill-matched partners who make each other miserable.31 Despite her position as Queen, and sister of King François I, Marguerite does not affirm the sacrifice of individual desire for "la chose publicque," in order to safeguard the institutions of the family and the monarchy. As we already saw in Rolandine's impassioned critique of patriarchy and its conventions, Marguerite's position as a woman allows her to voice such criticism of social institutions, albeit through characters in her stories and devisants not identified with her.32

In addition to expressing sentiments which subvert the prevailing social order, Marguerite also includes the dominant, masculine point of view—sentiments Boccaccio would have voiced—and assigns them to her male storytellers. For example, Saffredant says,

je vous supplye croire que Fortune ayde aux audatieux, et qu'il n'y a homme, s'il est aymé d'une dame (mais qu'il le saiche poursuivre saigement et affectionnement), que à la fin n'en ayt du tout ce qu'il demande en partye; mais l'ignorance et la folle craincte font perdre aux hommes beaucoup de bonnes avantures, et fondent leur perte sur la vertu de leur amye, laquelle n'ont jamais experi-

... Fortune favours the bold. There was never a man, you know, who didn't in the end get what he wanted from any lady who really
loved him, so long as he went about wooing her ardentiy and astutely. But because of ignorance and some sort of stupid timidity there are men who miss many a good opportunity in love. Then they attribute their failures to their lady’s virtue, even though they never get anywhere near testing it. To put it another way, you’ve got to attack your fortress in the right way, and you can’t fail to take it in the end. (119)

Whereas Boccaccio co-opted his female narrators by having them tell stories from a clearly masculine perspective or by having them acquiesce to the telling of misogynist stories, Marguerite includes multiple points of view in the discussions that follow the stories. In fact, the opposing perspectives among Marguerite’s devisants at times divide along gender lines, as they do following Dagoucin’s story twelve:

Les dames disoient qu’il estoit bon frere et vertueux citoyen; les hommes, au contraire, qu’il estoit traistre et meschant serviteur; et faisoit fort bon oyr les raisons alléguées des deux costez. (95)

The ladies said that he was a good brother and a virtuous citizen. The men, taking the contrary view, insisted that he was a traitor and a bad servant. It was most interesting to hear the arguments that each side advanced. (163)

As this passage, and in particular the phrase “deux costez,” suggests, the Heptameron achieves a dialogism that resists the subsumption of female voices under male, patriarchal ones. Marguerite’s devisants carry on a more open-ended dialogue than did Boccaccio’s storytellers; she allows more play in the interpretive process that extends the narratives themselves.

Just as Marguerite began her Heptameron with references to Boccaccio, so the final story of the collection rewrites Dioneo’s story of the monk Rustico who convinced the naive girl Alibech to put the devil back into hell. Marguerite represents the monk’s seduction of the naive nun by exploiting his position of religious authority much more plausibly than Boccaccio did, by giving Rustico his infamous line. And in Marguerite’s story, unlike in Boccaccio’s, real and unfortunate consequences follow for the seduced woman: the nun becomes pregnant, but the abbot and the abbess, much more concerned about the interests of the institution, refuse
to act against the monk. The nun appeals to Marguerite herself, who almost miraculously appears as a character in the story to hear her claims; the nun finally sees justice served when Marguerite has the monk dismissed. Here again, institutional interests prevail over personal ones, especially the interests of the wronged woman; Marguerite rewrites Boccaccio’s pornographic joke, transforming it into a searching criticism of the repeated victimization of a woman by those possessing authority over her. Marguerite’s appearance as a character in the story, functioning as a dea ex machina to right the nun’s wrongs, emphasizes the absence of any institutional mechanism that would have rendered her justice.

After the completion of this story, the Heptameron breaks off, as one of the storytellers is about to begin another: “Or, escoutez le bien, s’il vous plaist” (428). Although editors and critics have assumed that this incompleteness results from the accident of posthumous publication, the very abruptness of the ending may signal Marguerite’s refusal to provide a definitive ending for her collection.35 If so, her withholding of closure again evinces her divergence from Boccaccio’s self-contained and autonomous vision, for his Decameron was conclusively framed by reaching its projected perfect number and by an author’s epilogue. Seen in this light, the open-endedness of the Heptameron, like Marguerite’s insistence on veritable histoire, can be read as a critique of Boccaccio’s masterful (and fantasy-driven) narrative. As Marguerite’s stories repeatedly insist, female experience in patriarchy cannot be one of mastery, and in foregoing authorial control she seeks to be true to the nature of that experience. This deliberate interrogation of narrative authority has ironically led to the suggestion that “perhaps . . . Marguerite was not the real author of the collection, or at least not the original author of all the tales and all the dialogues.”36 Assuming a masculine model of authorship and authority, patriarchal readings such as this one lead to questioning a woman writer’s “real” or “original” authorship because she fails to conform to that model.37 As a female writer and female reader of both Boccaccio and the social text, Marguerite de Navarre herself appears to have been more aware of the limiting constraints placed upon her—as a writer modelling herself after Boccaccio and as a female subject in patriarchy—than was Boccaccio, who affirms the effective enforcement of masculine will, in stories such as that of Griselda.38

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NOTES


2. Millicent Marcus, “Misogyny as Misreading: A Gloss on Decameron VIII, 7,” Stanford Italian Review 4 (1984): 27. Robert M. Durling also deflects the literal force of the physical violence done to the widow, by stating that “the tower on which [the widow] is exposed is metaphorical, in Rinieri’s intent, for existence in the body, her long day in the sun is a metaphor for the whole course of her life.” “A Long Day in the Sun: Decameron 8.7,” in Shakespeare’s Rough Magic: Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1985) 272. Durling, however, does go on to acknowledge the “closeness of Rinieri’s attitudes to the anti-feminist of the Corbaccio,” and wonders whether “such fantasies [of violence done to women] answer to deep motives within Boccaccio himself” (274). Wayne A. Rebhorn notes “the sadism of Rinieri’s behavior and the suffering of Elena, [which] exposes the sadistic impulse lying at the very heart of the beffa [confidence trick]”: Boccaccio challenges the reader to recognize his or her complicitous involvement with this sadistic impulse. “Redefining the Beffa: Boccaccio’s Challenge to the Reader in Decameron VIII, 7,” Forum Italianum 22 (1988): 217–19.


4. In her reading of the story of the scholar and the widow, Marcus exonerates Boccaccio from misogyny by citing “the three places where Boccaccio does speak in his own voice—in the Proem, the Introduction to Day IV, and the Conclusion—[where] he is free of antifeminist bias” (“Misogyny as Misreading” 26). But see Joy Hambuechen Potter, “Woman in the Decameron,” in Studies in the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Memory of Arnulf B. Ferrulo (Naples, 1985) who cautions: “We must be very careful before attempting to enshrine Boccaccio in the feminist pantheon” (88). See also Constance Jordan, Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), who describes an ambivalent doubleness in Boccaccio’s praise of Dido in De mulieribus claris: “The poet’s tribute to the widowed queen obscures what his history of her implies: woman’s rule is a political impossibility” (38).


7. Thomas G. Bergin, Boccaccio (New York: Viking, 1981) says that Dioneo “more than any of the others . . . seems to be a spokesman for the author” (294). He suggests, however, that the Griselda story may be a palinode on the part of Dioneo, “the narrator of so many risqué episodes” (324).

9. Aldo D. Scaglione, Nature and Love in the Middle Ages (Berkeley: U of California, 1963) maintains that Boccaccio's naturalism led him to "take [women] as they are. . . . They are real according to nature, not to a superimposed schema of man-made, mentally construed and idolized, supraworldly, superhuman, and supernatural perfection" (55). Cottino-Jones considers the Griselda story "the apotheosis of the perfect woman" (50)—to be a fitting culmination of an essentially feminist text. Shirley S. Allen, "The Griselda Tale and the Portrayal of Women in the Decameron," Philological Quarterly 56 (1977), interprets the Griselda story "as an ironic argument for women's liberation" (6). She considers Petrarch's version to be a misinterpretation.

10. Potter focuses on this phrase to conclude that the Griselda story is "a lesson in exaggeration," and therefore not to be taken at face value. Five Frames for the Decameron: Communication and Social Systems in the Cornice (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 150. For discussions of this phrase, see also Mazzotta 125, and Marcus, Allegory of Form 102.


15. Potter also notices "the change of theme and register [that] blows the noble frame of the tenth day stories wide open," but explains it as an instance of "frame ambiguity" (Five Frames 151). Mazzotta says of this "stylistic shift to a coarse egnovaticio"; "as he alludes to a different turn the story might have taken, [Dioneo] unmakes the story he has just told." Dioneo's comment also discloses the ending as a "contingent and purely formal closure" (128–30).


19. A. C. Lee, The Decameron: Its Sources and Analogues (London: David Nutt, 1909) gives an analogue in "Barlaam and Josaphat" by John of Damascus; the naive prince, brought up literally in the dark, is told that women are "devils who catch men" (111). Scaglione interprets Boccaccio's changes as pointing to the goodness of nature and its
strength against all interdictions (103–5). Potter suggests that the change from demons to geese serves to trivialize women in general ("Woman in the Decameron" 89).

20. Potter considers the Filippo Balducci story to be exemplary and also to thematise exemplarity: "not only does it teach us that stories teach, but it teaches us that to model oneself on the exempla to be found in Church sermons is absurd" (Five Frames 39–40).


25. John D. Lyons, Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) states that "Rolandine's crime is a crime of speech," and that the story is created out of her silencing (94). The transformation of Rolandine from a speaker to a character paradoxically makes her more dangerous and triumphant over the persecuting authorities (98). Colette H. Winn, "La Loi du non-parler dans l'Heptaméron de Marguerite de Navarre," Romance Quarterly 33 (1986): 157–168, discusses Rolandine as one who violates "la loi du non-parler," but only because she continues to speak to the bastard, not because she speaks out to the Queen (162–63). She concludes: "En refusant le parler, la femme gagnait le combat depuis si longtemps engagé: elle réussissait a se faire aimer, écouter et enfin respecter" (166).


27. "Accord conclu entre Anne de Bretagne et Louise de Savoie sur la promesse de mariage entre leurs enfants Claude de France et François, duc de Valois, comte d'Angoulême, futur François Ier; Blois, 31 mai 1505." Archives Nationales, 1951 no. 9 (AE II 546). Charles XII married Anne de Bretagne in order to unite France and Brittany; when Charles died without issue, Louis XIII then married Anne, repudiating his first wife in order to do so. Since Salic law prevented Louis and Anne's daughter Claude from inheriting the throne, it became necessary to have her marry François, Louis's nephew and heir presump-
vive, if France and Brittany were to remain united.

RITE DE NAVARRE's Heptameron (Lexington: French Forum, 1978) 190, points out that Oisille and Parlamente maintain the authority of Scripture over the institutional Church and the individual's right to interpret Scripture for herself. 


30. See Lyons 98–101 on the relationship between the two stories. 

31. Kinney calls Dagoucin "mystical" and a Neoplatonist (147, 164). See also Davis 33–34. During the discussion following the eighth story, answering Simontault's doubt that Dagoucin has ever been in love, Dagoucin says that he prefers to conceal his love from his lady in order to preserve its perfection (48, 112). 

32. Not all critics see Rolandine's story as an affirmation of her rebellion. Gelernt considers Rolandine's story to illustrate the dangers of "romantic fantasy," set against the "practical considerations that must operate in the running of a successful marriage" (115). Winn holds that the story criticizes Rolandine's "audacious disobedience and intended deceit of her father and the Queen, whom she should respect and obey," and punished for "refus[ing] to abide by the rules of the feminine ideal." "An Instance of Narrative Seduction: The Heptameron of Marguerite de Navarre," Symposium 39 (1985): 222. 


34. Davis points out that the Heptameron's frame narrative is far more highly developed than the Decameron's, and that Boccaccio often does not report what was said about a particular tale (12). Kinney argues that "the irresolution of the narrators and the divisiveness of their values and attitudes" leads to "questioning the very value of L'Heptameron itself" (167). Carla Freccero also observes that the "mixed audience . . . respond[s] to [the story] in predictably and significantly gender-marked fashions. This dialogic approach disarticulates the ideology of courtly love by opening up a space within it for feminine perspectives to be heard." "Rape's Disfiguring Figures: Marguerite de Navarre's Heptameron, Day 1: 10," in Rape and Representation, ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda Silver (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 229. 


37. In "The Case of Mary Carleton: Representing the Female Subject, 1663–73," forthcoming, Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, I discuss another example of a woman writer whose authorship of her works was cast in doubt, first by her husband, then by later generations of male critics. 

38. I would like to thank Constance Jordan for encouraging me to begin writing this essay for a 1990 MLA session, "Historical Determinations of Renaissance Texts," which she organized for the Division of Comparative Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Literature. Thanks also to Margaret Ferguson, Tassie Gwilliam, Arthur Kinney, and Maria Prendergast for helpful suggestions on earlier versions of this essay.