

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## ***Heptameron*** (1558)

Marguerite de Navarre. (1492-1549)

### OVERVIEW

No less a writer than Francois Rabelais (1494-1553) dedicates the third book of his *Gargantua* to the Spirit of the Queen of Navarre, Marguerite, and he may as well have the first word here. Who better than he could have valued the saucy spirituality that marks Marguerite's work, and that instructs us by a cunning blend of spirituality with pornography? His dedicatory poem is as follows.

Abstracted spirit, rapt in ecstasy  
Who while you haunt the skies, your origin,  
Have left your servant host as you roam free,  
Your well-matched body—quick to discipline,  
Heeding you for this pilgrim's life we're in  
Sans sentiment, and to emotions slow;  
Wouldn't you care for just a while to go  
Out of the heavenly manor where you dwell  
To see in their third section here below  
The joyous deeds of good Pantagruel?

Older sister of King Francis 1 of France, Marguerite is invited to earth, the home from which she has departed for the heavens, true, as Rabelais sees it, to her mystical temperament, her salvational drive which led her, throughout her royal life, to act as a patron of the persecuted, of young writers, and of freedom of thought? Yet had we only the *Heptameron* to guide us, in interpreting this jolly poem of Rabelais', we might wonder whether the poem writer had correctly spotted the figure of Marguerite in the heavenly skies. Marguerite was a crafty writer, with many apparitions onto the literary scene, and a wink in her eye, which reminds us of the free spiritedness of religious sensibilities even in the fifteenth century.

Of a mystical turn, all her life devoted to Church Reform and to the lives of the Saints, Marguerite was known as a protector of young writers, of all who are persecuted. She left behind a body of work which included deep religious poems, secular dramas dealing with religious and moral issues, and the tales composing the *Heptameron*, verbal pastimes for ten stranded friends, who contributed seventy two tales to a pastiche of stories roughly inspired by Boccaccio's *Decameron*. (While Boccaccio left us one hundred stories covering ten days, Marguerite completed, by the time of her death, only the second story of the eighth day.) We will look closely at the way Marguerite's creative mindset develops as it plays out into the first three tales. Then we will move to a summary survey of the remaining Tales themselves.

*The Prologue to the Heptameron* The prologue to the present collection is as old and tried as the literary text that follows it, and has everything to do with our confidence that we are in a trustworthy setting. (Should the prologue be deceptive or self-contradictory, we know that we must be watching our step. Such attention to 'our step' is essentially 'modern,' depends on our having called our perceptions into question, and yet Marguerite is privy to the tricks of the literary trade. Marguerite has no desire to go postmodern, and yet she does open to us a religious vision, in the person of Osile, from which she herself can be imagined, later in the tale, looking down on a number of the accounts that pretend to fill the entertainment needs of the younger visitors to the Abbey.)

*Tale-telling plans* The narrative material of the present prologue has one job, to transport a group of pilgrims, who have gone to take the baths, to an ultimate shrine destination, at which they can cleanse

their souls; and do so against the challenge of a raging river which has made it impossible for them to access their shrine. This narrative challenge is overcome by eventual arrival, at the spot where the bridge will be built, and the crossing will be made possible. Thanks to a sheltering abbey, and its wise old sister, Osile, plans are laid for ten days of story telling, which will carry the pilgrims to the completion of the bridge. The pilgrims—ten men, ten women-- settle down as though he or she were to be the creators and auditors of a vast epic sequence. At the same time that Marguerite de Navarre lays out before us the rich interwoven tales which the pilgrims recount in the next ten days, she also includes the pilgrim-tale tellers as part of her own narrative. The result is that we hear from Marguerite not only the tales of the *Heptameron*, which follow below, but also the commentary of the pilgrims on the tales they create and hear.

The frame story thus created includes Marguerite the author, who hovers over the entire text, but also the ten pilgrims she has aligned to tell her tales, and thus, ultimately, also the many topical ideas that emerge from the pilgrims themselves, as they discuss issues of the time—theological, military, moral, sexual (especially), and social as they are generated by the tales of the *Heptameron*. What follows will indicate the nature of the pilgrims' sequence of tales, the core of Marguerite's narrative. We can indicate here the themes that pervade the tales, but must leave it to our reader to recreate personally the larger perspective which boils through the seventy two tales completed by Marguerite before her death.

## THEMES

The themes of Marguerite's *Heptameron* are such as would speak to the audience of midlife pilgrims of the fifteenth century. We have to presume a middle class background here—after all, we are talking about people with leisure for pilgrimage—and we have to imagine an appetite for attention grabbing tales; after all the tale tellers are forming opinions and discussing issues throughout the afternoons of narration. Perhaps their readiness for the nitty gritty of life will have been enhanced by the mornings the group has spent, in prayer and reflection on Scripture.

*Erotica* The mishaps of eros, sex drive fall outs, provide the most coherent group of sub themes. It is as though the world-ruling libido that Lucretius puts at the center of *De Rerum Natura*, or the congenital imbecility of humans, as Erasmus nails it in *In Praise of Folly*, were to have become free of their reins, and to have started committing havoc throughout the universe.

*Marriage*, one central symbol of the ordering of our eros lives, is subject to constant abuse in the *Heptameron*. *Adultery* abounds, leaving us amazed in the two or three instances when fidelity, good spirits, or good housekeeping save a marriage and crown it with a refreshed love. For the most part it seems habitual, even the norm, for a dignitary or sometimes a fine lady simply to take a fancy to the opposite sex, and without concern leave its own foundations in tatters. (Roughly half of the tales turn around this kind of impulse 'falling in love.' 'Days of our Lives' or 'The Women of Beverley Hills' would have to stretch to rival this level of promiscuity.)

The ambience in which this adulterous infection thrives is one in which increasingly impulsive sexual disorder expresses itself. Rape, sequestration, sodomy (within the setting of monastic life), assault, sexual jealousy, indecent handling: all these uncontrolled libidinous movements make for that engaged titillation which keeps audiences like Marguerite's together.

*Impiety* Marguerite's milieu, like that of Rabelais, her near contemporary, was deeply imbued with the presence of the Church, its priests, canons, nuns, and monastic friars. While it is said that Marguerite de Navarre was herself a thinker of high spirituality and more than usual generosity, her pictures of ecclesiastical life are rarely inspiring. Friars regularly grope women, make lustful advances in the confessional, collude with men of power to arrange rendez vous with women. Nor are monks portrayed as variably nobler than in these impious actions. Monastic environments are portrayed as filthy and their residents as disreputable.

*Trickery* Trickery abounds among the episodes of erotic adventure, for the name of the game, in the courtly and religious milieu, from which Marguerite draws her examples, is dissimulation in order to satisfy

some private appetite: to insert yourself into so and so's bed, while she thinks it is somebody else, to fool one's mate into thinking you are reading, when you are making out with the servant girl, to drive your masters out of the house by pretending it is infested with ghosts. There is no standard of reliable behavior. A mom, in conjunction with her serving maid, will contrive to deceive her own son into sleeping with her, thereby impregnating her with his own child. A pursued woman, eager to get rid of a suitor, lures him onto the stairs leading to her bedroom, then screams THIEF so loudly that the entire neighborhood can hear.

*Cruelty* A country gentleman, married to a gorgeous court lady, catches her in bed with another man. He takes cruel revenge. He murders the lady's lover, then locks her up in a small room with the skeleton of her former lover. He keeps her there for years. Then the intervention of a well-intentioned friend softens the country gentleman's heart, and he relents. The lady is once again the lady of the house, and the marriage continues successfully. A brute bursts into a house where his friend lives, when the man is away, and rapes, strips, and shears his wife. His abduction is ultimately thwarted, but she is humiliated for life.

*Gentleness* A subtheme of gentleness filters through certain of Marguerite's tales. A courtier and a high born lady are unable to marry—too deep a discrepancy in class—though he is in love with her. He begs for a solution. The lady agrees that she will give into him in ten years, if in the meantime he remains distant from her and out of communication. After ten years, during which she has remained true to her contract, she receives a long poem from her lover, and a letter saying that he will never be able to see her again. In another, and characteristic, example we read about a couple poignantly in love at court, but separated by class level and wealth disparity. The man, though relatively impoverished and from a simple family, remains true to his love, even while he dwindles away, from frustration and sadness. She is destined by history for a high nobleman, but to the end remains painfully faithful to her losing lover, who only through death can be separated from her.

## THE TALES OF THE HEPTAMERON

### DAY ONE

#### Tale 1

Simontould is chosen to tell the first tale—the pilgrims will at every tale-change appoint one of their own to deal with the following day—which he does with gusto, blending violence, hatred, lust, Biblical undertones, and voodoo in a breakneck torrent of narrative details. Having been assigned the lead position. In what is to be a ten day marathon the teller pulls out all the stops in his effort to assure audience attention. The enrichment of our own overall argument, concerning the Renaissance discovery of the human, should be enhanced by a starting point like the present tale, in which we are confronted with, as it were, initial raw materials of early modern man in search of a personal self-account.

*Sin and gender conflict* The characters destined to make Simontould's point, about the ills done to one another by both men and women, are boldly carved, like figures in a mediaeval morality play—or in a particularly sordid version of *Dateline*, in which a decent husband or wife, victimized by a partner's adultery, ends up slaying the other woman (or man) and burning the body in a trashcan. We are on our way to Tale #3, where structural finesse trumps foul morals, but in the first tale we have not yet pushed Marguerite's talent to that kind of limit. She will instead be contenting herself with a frame plot, in which easily seduced characters hightail it to one another's beds, and then do what they can to bring higher powers to forgive them.

*Sex, Marriage, and Sin* Lady X, to make Tale one short, marries the Proctor (an ecclesiastical administrator) at St. Aignan, a nearby larger community. Not long after the marriage, the Bishop of Sees meets and takes a strong fancy to the lady. The lady's husband, for a long time unaware of the affair taking place behind his back, is just finding his anger when the lady, who is insatiable, casts her eyes on a lusty young village lad, and for some time has things as she wants them: the Bishop was there for her profit, the young village boy for her pleasure. Inevitably the crowd of juggled balls begins to tumble. One day the

village youth goes to his lady's house, but is told to leave, by the milkmaid. The reason, according to the milkmaid, is that the lady is upstairs in bed with the Bishop. The infuriated young man breaks into the bedroom where he finds the Bishop, but discovers that he the youngster has a further obstacle to his lust—the ingenuity of the young lady, who, caught between a rock and a hard place, invents the explanation that she has been assaulted by the young man, and needs protection from him. Barely slipping away from her fate, the young lady returns quickly to her husband, with whom she moves to another province.

*The tenacity of evil* Marguerite de Navarre uses her almost endless ingenuity to keep regenerating her plot from its own ashes. Just as the not very virtuous young lady begins to catch her breath, she realizes that Dumesnil, who has been following her to another town, is the individual kneeling beside her in church. It is clearly time to be rid of him, certain as he is to regenerate the nest of misadventures in which the girl has so recently been trapped. Action oriented as always, the lady lures the young man to her house, where she sees to it that her husband has the young man murdered, and his body burned. Enough has been made clear, by this point, to prove woman's genius at wreaking havoc; the proof of man's viciousness is amply proven by the subsequent efforts to dispose of the young man's body. The miserable husband is condemned to death, fails in several efforts to buy a pardon, and eventually turns to sorcery, to attempt clearing the world of his enemies. In the end even the effort with sorcery fails, though the episode with Gallery, the sorcerer, leaves us with a curious insight into Marguerite de Navarre. She is no foreigner to the dark arts.

*The 'spirituality' of Marguerite de Navarre.* Can we back off from conventional senses of spirituality, and return to the words of Rabelais, with which he dedicated the third book of *Gargantua*? 'Abstracted spirit, wrapped in ecstasy' arguably aligns with the person Marguerite puts before us here, playing with the deadly frivolity proposed by a terrified husband, who is playing every card in an effort to trick the gallows. And is not the humor, which restrains the endless perversity of the 'lady,' an element in the exaggeration which builds defenses for honor, against imminent loss.

## Tale 2

Violence, lust, sadism all play roles in Marguerite's piety, drawing to themselves the stout Christian belief that exquisite pain is after all the pathway to our salvation. The messages of the first two tales align around the themes of our suffering and of God's tolerance, even joy at the resourcefulness suffering extracts from good women. Marguerite clearly derives that joy from her recounting of instances of female endurance and Osile is a fine tempered spokesperson for the perspective.

*Attack* The second tale opens with innocence oppressed, then savagely ground away. A muleteer's wife has given birth and is recuperating while the muleteer himself has gone off, to collect his pay some distance away at the castle. While he is away, the new mother must deal with the adoration of a suitor who has long ago 'sought' her favors, and whom she, in the outrage of her virtue, savagely rejected, threatening to have him beaten and dismissed. The rejected suitor buries his longing quietly, awaiting some more tangible way to express his desire. He feels he has found the way, when he learns of the muleteer's absence, and he contrives to assault her, when she is dropping off to sleep. Although she counter attacks him and makes every possible effort to flee, she becomes a deathly victim, in the end, to the intruder's fury, superior strength, and violence. After he has given up hope of winning her, and she has been stabbed into submission, she turns her loving face to god, and praises the goodness of the Creator. The tale ends with a broad aura of praise for the creation, and for the lowly in it, especially those loved by God. The humility of our Savior, carved out of pain, gives the muleteer's wife the joy sadly missing to all the other characters in the first three tales.

*Marguerite's theology of original sinfulness* Osile, the senior abbess shepherding the storytellers, speaking for Marguerite, and sharing the challenge of amusing a younger audience, leads to an exaggerated interplay of lust with compassion for the lowly. Like the disaster prone lady of Tale one, the muleteer's wife appears doomed to succumb to the vicious downfall implanted in us by our forefathers' original sinfulness. It is not until the third tale that we see the range of artistry Marguerite is capable of bringing to bear, on the anatomizing of human evil at work. The women in the pilgrim audience find

themselves, at this point, overcome by weeping for their dishonored sister, and loudly determined to preserve their own purity intact.

### Tale 3

Having apologized for the second tale, in which she has generated weeping instead of the laughter which makes us happy, Osile requests Saffredent to undertake the third tale. This speaker, who has given us Tale one, reluctantly agrees, after conceding that he had 'probably better just get it over.' The fact is, though, that he steps up to the bat and performs his finest entertainment to date. He steals the show and sets a new standard for it.

*King cuckold: theme of the tale* King Alfonso V, monarch of Spain, pays a visit to one of his most distinguished subjects, and while visiting finds himself attracted to the gentleman's lovely wife. Having some indication, from her part, that she reciprocates his feelings, he proposes to arrange some quality time with her. He sends the lady's husband on a three week mission to the Holy See, and takes advantage of the man's absence to visit and sleep with the man's wife. This goes on. It becomes a pattern. Before long the victimized husband catches on, and finds himself deliberating on the best move to make. This is the moment of key interest in the tale, for if the husband had acted out in anger, he would simply have played his role in the vicious battle of the sexes, which grinds to painful halts in the first two tales.

*Queen implicated* Instead of taking the path of power, the husband pays a visit to the Queen, wins her loving attention over the course of a few visits, and sets up an arrangement with Alfonso's consort, whereby he will in future visit her on the occasions when the King chooses to visit his subject's wife. A kind of erotic perpetual motion is thereby established, to which the expected emotions provide constant fuel. The queen's jealousy grows into desire, so that she too is put into desire's perpetual motion machine, like her husband. The story closes on the inevitability of a narrative unravelling, but with a sense of the perfection of deceit, in the revelation of which the promises of evil are swallowed up temporarily into the ideals of geometry.

*The artistic range of Marguerite de Navarre.* The author is reaching out into the undefined wide world of narrative, in order to entertainment pathways, for mollifying ten junior pilgrims, who are awaiting the construction of a bridge. That Marguerite de Navarre is uncommonly liberal can be felt in all her work, but especially in the seventy-two remaining tales of the *Heptameron*, whose concern for lust, sadism, jealousy, and vengeance displays both her openness to the human experience, and her readiness to recognize its dark side. She is at her finest when, as in the third Tale, she eschews action and lets the space of thought fill her page. In the third Tale she allows such thought, and its consequences, to create her story for her, rather than explicating or evaluating the events.

### Tale 4

*Reciprocities of cuckolding* The husband who becomes the Queen's lover is a picture of care, as he allows the Queen to absorb the news that the King's infidelity (with that she was familiar) was settling onto the wife of the courtier who was standing before her. This took absorbing, as did the fact that the Queen was juggling perspectives, in responding to her situation. We can feel that she felt she should foremost be angry with her husband, yet that on palpable second thought she felt that she should play out a slow vengeance, by permitting her husband to embed himself in ever deepening discomfort. The courtier before her carefully arouses the Queen's desire for vengeance, knowing that that is the most effective path to his own satisfaction, which he soon begins to harvest—in her bed. A narrative panel further on, we observe the King, in the bedroom of the husband's wife—the husband is visiting the Queen—eyeing the stag-horns' ornamented placque hanging over the bedstead he temporarily shares with his courtier's wife. Chuckling to himself—but here especially we must sub-auscult his unwritten words—the King thinks, 'this man I replace, in this bed, has aptly defined himself, by displaying over his bedstead the horns that describe his situation.' Omitted from the chuckle is the unrealized observation that the King himself is the cuckolded one, at just the moment when he is cuckolding.

Lust, shame, and dishonor intersect regularly in Marguerite's imagination. In Tale three, as we have seen, a kind of sexual humiliation is ritualized, seeming to satisfy maximally, but in fact shaming all parties. In Tale four humiliation and shame are the only victors. The same anonymous courtier type, which was of high prominence in the courts of Europe, is only too conscious of his charms, and lets his wandering eye fall on a widow, the sister of his court superior. He makes no secret of his affection, and is for some time encouraged by the lady. The situation gets out of hand, however, when the young man one night takes advantage of a structural anomaly, in the architecture of the palace, to crawl into the lady's bed just as she is dropping off to sleep. She, who has previously made it clear that she no longer welcomes the affections of the young man, fights back like a tiger, not only driving the young man away from her bed, but scratching him viciously over face and body. His dilemma is simple: he escapes unidentified, but as soon as he returns to his own room, he realizes he is walking visual evidence of his crime. He conceals his wounds as well as he crime, but in the end he suffers the most painful wound. His victim, and her lady in waiting, have decided to 'press no charges' but simply to let the young man fall deeply out of attention, be ignored, and disappear from the figures that count, at court.

#### Tale 5

While some of Marguerite's tales are brief, others, like Tale ten (ahead), come on as brief novels, fifteen written pages, many hours of narration. The fifth tale is brief and semi comical. A boatwoman is used to ferrying passengers back and forth across a considerable river. One day she is approached by a couple of Grey Friars, who attack her in mid-course, demanding sexual favors. She assures them she will comply, then proposes a plan, which will enable her to deal out her favors to one man at a time—no voyeurism. She leaves one monk to wait on a small island, while she services the first one. In the course of readying herself for monk number one she pushes that monk into the water, then rows off, leaving the second monk stranded on his Island.

#### Tale 6

A trick. A one eyed married man distrusts his wife. He follows her to another town, to check on her activities. He pounds of the door, of the house where she is visiting. No response. He pounds again. Smartly, she cries out that she is being assaulted, and that she needs her husband to help her. She thus buys time to get her lover out the back door, before cumbrously letting her husband in the front.

#### Tale 7

A young lady falls for a handsome merchant, whom she follows to another town, rather than staying with her mother. The mother discovers the treachery, and threatens the merchant. He solves the problem by returning with the girl, to the house where her mother lives, and passionately embracing Mom, who is overwhelmed and abandons her complaints against the man. He drags the woman away, and with his brutality, and the fuss he makes, he quiets her complaints.

#### Tale 8

A man makes an arrangement with his friend. The friend agrees to set the man up with his maidservant, whom he loves. However the friend is in love with the first man's wife, with whom the friend in fact sets the first man up. Both the first man and his friend have the pleasure of sleeping with the first man's wife.

#### Tale 9

A sad tale, lacking the Rabelaisian boisterousness of so many of Marguerite's stories of entertainment. A suitor is poor, but otherwise has all the virtues. He falls in love with a lovely lady from a distinguished family, but is unable to share the lifestyle of the family, which gradually determines to see the last of the suitor, and to accede to their daughter's resignation to another man. So it happens, and yet the daughter is beset both by love and pity for her first suitor, who is in the meantime dwindling away from inanition and depression. The closure is inevitable. The young lady visits the first suitor on his deathbed, and shares a lasting embrace with him.

## Tale 10

The longest, most convoluted and complex, of the first day's tales, Tale ten presses to the max the theme of thwarted but therefore all the more exquisite love. (There is much love, much frustration, much suffering, but precious little longing in these tales, which do their story telling work and dissolve, like good entertainment.) Amadou falls hopelessly in love with Florida, the daughter of his old friend, the King. Florida reciprocates the love, but hesitates to mention it to her parents, instead speaking of Amadou only to her best friend. Amadou, deeply in love, is called home by War.

## DAY TWO

## Tale 11

Marguerite gives free rein, now and then, to her mediaeval scorn for the monastic life. While that life was fertile and spiritual, at its finest, it appears to have been, at its worst, a seedbed of many vices, ranging richly from lust to sodomy and filthiness.

## Tale 12

Be it remarked, as we survey the tales of the Heptameron, that among the tales are interspersed jocular, vivid, saucy comments from the audience, Marguerite's creation, as part of the tales' narratives. We restrict ourselves to the tales, but without forgetting that the whole creation, of the Heptameron, is a unique kind of comic opera, which cuts deep into its culture.

Tale 12 is a brutal story, as have been many of Marguerite's inventions. A distinguished Duke has married a young girl, then shortly after fallen in love with the sister of his best friend. The Duke threatens to kill his best friend, unless the friend makes it possible for the Duke to sleep with the sister. The best friend, who owes everything he has to the Duke, is in a bitter quandary, and decides on a trick. He says yes to the Duke, sets up a rendez vous between Duke and Sister, but arrives at rendez vous armed to kill. Just that he does. Fleeing the country, with his sister, he heads to Turkey and freedom. Is he a good man?

## Tale 13

An old man and a young woman, married, live in perfect harmony, as she has built her life around serving him. Their dream goal is to make a trip to the Holy Land, and fortuitously a sea captain enters their lives, who plies the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, and guarantees he will be able to take them to Jerusalem. By a series of mishaps, the Captain, who has fallen deeply in love with the young wife, dies on the high seas, leaving behind a love message, and a precious diamond, to be sent to his young beloved. As it transpires, however, the packet in question is sent to the Captain's wife, who reads everything between the lines, and sends the packet to the young woman with whom the story opens. Taking the diamond as a gift from her husband, her love for the senior is rekindled, and the couple flourish into an even richer symbiosis.

## Tale 14

Tale 14 introduces us to a French rascal lover, who competes with an Italian knave for the bed of a gorgeous lady. While she had been awaiting the Italian, the Frenchman introduces himself into her bed, in which she is awaiting the Italian. He gives her top pleasure, and when the Italian arrives, later in the evening, he finds the lady indifferent, ill, and unable to take interest in further sex.

## Tale 15

A poor man, endowed with great charms and looks, and favored by the King, falls in love with a beautiful young lady of the court. Unfortunately, though, he pays little attention to her, cares little for her. Quite

naturally, she frets over this abandon, and in time, seeking revenge, turns to a new lover, who reciprocates the feeling, but is informed by the King that he should stay away from the abandoned woman—it all goes back to the King's fidelity to the poor man initially in question. At this point nature turns things around: the husband's jealousy, at the intervention of a princely lover, the one told to back off, is too much for him, and he begins to shower her with the attention she has long lacked.

#### Tale 16

A lovely Milanese lady, widowed, vows to have nothing more to do with marriage. However she is swept off her feet by a handsome courtier, who follows her high and low, after three years gathering the courage to declare his love to her—even as she is taking communion. She turns viciously on him, but with great tenacity he follows her soon after to her very house. She lets him in, but puts him to a test—pretending that her angry brothers are coming to the door, to dispatch the suitor. Rather than take her advice, to hide under her bed, the lover stands firm, flings open the door, and finds two servant maids holding swords. The testing lady is impressed by her lover's courage, and throws herself in his arms.

#### Tale 17

The handsome German Count William was taken graciously into the household of King Francis. Shortly after he had joined the household, letters were received at court, which indicated that William had been sent with funds which would enable him to effect King Francis' death. The King tested William, encountering him man to man in the forest, and giving him ample opportunity to express enmity. William expressed none, but evidently he felt it, for the next day, in all courtesy, he departed.

#### Tale 18

A student of noble birth fell heavily in love, but with a stringent woman, who was in no hurry to find a partner.

#### Tale 19

Pauline and her lover were poor, though rich in love for another; unfortunately neither of them received any encouragement from friends or family. They decided that both of them should join monastic houses. They did, amidst ample weeping, of the sort outpoured in Tale

#### Tale 20

Tragic mutual deaths of Lord Riant and the widow he loves. She is the kind to set severe conditions, and he vows to meet any demands she makes, before she will yield to him. Many temptations rise up, to block his path to her. She slowly accedes to his suit, but not without torturing him all the way. She tries to tempt him with a servant girl of exquisite beauty, splayed out naked on his bed. He resists. He is true. Nothing will break his resolve.

### DAY THREE

#### Tale 21

A court lady of modest beauty and modest mind, and a court gentleman of the same traits share a common problem—though not the usual one—that they cannot find interested mates. Equally frustrated, but not knowing one another well, the two feel mutually attracted, and in the slow course of disclosures, they discover one another and fall in love. Since the master figures of the court are opposed to the couple's romantic relation, they naturally do all they can to discourage the growing attention of our lovers to one another. Love, however, finds a way, and that is precisely the case in the present story, for the loving couple find, come hell or high water, that they can find ways to communicate with one another, and to develop a fond relationship. Although the queen becomes privy to the couple's marriage plans, and



staunchly opposes them, having it all out in powerful arguments with her subject, she fails to prevail. Love maintains itself, the bride to be rejects even the intercessions of the King, and true love stands firm.

#### Tale 22

A certain monk, in Paris, remains a model of trim and chaste until around his fiftieth year, when he starts abandoning his disciplined lifestyle. He becomes fat and heavy, eyes the ladies, and chooses one special favorite, Marie Heroet, for confessions. As it happens this ugly religious hits up on Mme. Heroet, touching her breasts and feeling her up under her habit. In the end the sister has the better of him, remaining true to her virtue, and justifying herself fully after the monk has tried pretending, that he had felt her up only in an effort to cure her of a dreadful disease.

#### Tale 23

A certain friar—ah yes, this is becoming a refrain, no?—counsels a lay friend, saying that it is permissible to make love to your wife shortly after she has given birth. He has a hidden desire of his own, to sleep with the lady, and on the evening appointed for his friend, to sleep with his own wife, the friar slips into her bed and makes out with her, silently vanishing before her husband arrives. This clever strategy goes on for some time, until the lady becomes aware of the trick being played, and is horrified by the humiliation. In the aftershock of this discovery she hangs herself.

#### Tale 24

A charming and handsome courtier is known at court for his coldness toward all women. When asked by the Queen whether he loved some secret woman, he replies that he can not tell her, but that he can show her, if she will accompany him on a ride into the forest. The Queen rides into the forest with Elsor, and at a proper moment asks him to clarify his love. Elsor pulls out a mirror, shows it silently to the queen, and assumes that she understands what his lifelong passion is. Once again home in the court, the Queen elicits from Elsor the exact meaning of his visual, and he inquires whether his love stands a chance. The Queen replies in the affirmative, but declares that he must accept one condition. He agrees. He is to remain in a remote place, far from her and the court, unknown to all his friends—for seven years; at which time, she implies, he will have won her love. They break a ring in half, sharing it, and for seven years they wait. One days an ancient hermit brings her a message, bearing a long and passionate love song from Elsor, and his half of the ring. Never, declares Elsor, never will we meet again.

#### Tale 25.

A wealthy advocate is unable to have a child, by a first wife, so he tries another, younger. A young prince falls in love with this second wife, and woos her away from the advocate. A secret tryst joins the two adulterous lovers. But the prince is not happy with his badly won union. The prince expresses his love in prayer, and through that love opens his heart to the advocate, to whom he effectually returns the girl. Happiness is restored through the love that threatened happiness.

#### Tale 26

A certain distinguished Lord shelters a handsome young man, whom the gentleman finds charming and attractive, adopting him into his family. The young man falls in love with the gentleman's wife, and without acknowledging this love the young man requests the leisure to go on pilgrimage. The gentleman of the house accords this freedom, and during his absence the young man takes the opportunity to sleep secretly with his master's wife. However the secret comes out, the woman is humiliated, and takes the only possible recourse, killing herself.

#### Tale 27

The servant in a large household allows a very ugly servant friend to lodge with him briefly. The ugly friend falls for the master's wife. She tricks him. She tries luring him up the stairs, into an attic, but she

makes him go first, and then, from below on the ladder, shouts so all can hear, 'Is it alright if I tell my husband where I am?' The secret is out. Ugly man is driven away.

#### Tale 28

A trick identity tale, in which a merchant of Bayonne palms off a hard wooden shoe, packaging it up so that it resembles the famed Bayonne ham. The party recipients, who have been lured on succulent promises, take nothing home from their hunger except sore teeth.

#### Tale 29

The tale of a woman who cannot give birth with her husband. Naturally enough—in this tale world—the woman goes to the church and is impregnated by the pastor.

#### Tale 30

Many tales in this third Book reduce to riddle, aphorism, or folk tale level. The present word object lies in the midst of the discomfort humans are so skilled at creating for themselves. A widow has a young son, who, upon getting into his early teen years, begins to look around at the girls. He makes bold to ask his mother for help, in arranging a trick which will enable him to sleep with the serving maid. The mother takes advantage of the trick to position herself instead of the serving maid, in the appointed bed at the appointed time. The result, the mother's impregnation by her own son, leads to an investment in a happy and unaware family.

#### Tale 31

Unredeemed violence and brutality lurk in the corners of Marguerite's entertainment universe.

A helpful man cared for a Prior Confessor in the next door Greyfriars monastery, but while the Confessor was visiting the helper man he fell in love with the man's wife. (How routine and undisciplined is this falling in love, throughout the tales, and how casually it is introduced into what affect to be pious settings). In order to have his way with this woman, stripped to her petticoat, hair shorn, horse-bound, the Confessor awaits the two day absence of the husband, manages to murder two serving girls in the master's house, then rides away with the bound girl, into the blue. At just the moment of the Confessor's departure, the master of the house returns, and with the help of committed friends saves his wife, and rids the world of the Confessor.

Can we say that Marguerite, whom Rabelais commends for her spirituality, and who calls God to her aid throughout her tales, insists on uplifting finales to her tales? Is the present tale self-justifying, in the sense that evil eventually destroys itself?

#### Tale 32

King Charles sends a high ranking aid on a mission. His trip is difficult. When he arrives at the house of his host to be, he sees a gorgeous woman, seated at a table in the middle of the room. She soon leaves the room, without having said a word. Later the host explains. The woman has been unfaithful, and the host has imposed a harsh penalty on her. Instead of killing her he has locked her in the room where she had been found with her lover. She lives in that room surrounded by her lover's bones and skull---from which she eats. A living hell. Release from this hell opens when the narrator within the tale, the official, begs his host to reconsider his punishment of his wife. He does so. The host and his wife fall in love again and have beautiful children.

## DAY FOUR

## Tale 33

In a small village, a young woman is about to give birth. She insists that she has never 'known a man,' and yet the village believes she is an offshoot of the Virgin Mary. In the end it turns out that the woman has been lying, while the progenitor of her child is the priest. Upon discovery of the lie the child is burned to death.

## Tale 34

A grotesque snapshot. Two Greyfriars monks are on a mission, and lodge with a farm couple. The friars--one of them exceedingly fat--sleep in a bedroom adjoining the bedroom of the couple, and wake to hear their hosts' conversation, through the wall. Their talk is of 'slaughtering the fat one in the morning,' which seems to the obese friar to be aimed at him. In terror, both friars flee the house at first day break, but only the obese friar is impeded--due to his weight--and manages to flee no farther than the pigsty, where the master of the house discovers him. All is explained and peace restored.

## Tale 35

A lovely lady goes regularly to mass, where gradually she falls in love with the handsome priest, who has no idea of her feelings. She proceeds to write voluminously to the priest, about her passion, and the letters get into the wrong hands. Her husband develops a heavy suspicion of her. He tricks her into confession. They rediscover one another.

## Tale 36

A youngish woman, finding that her husband is growing old, falls in love with a robust young man. Following the guidance of his servant, the husband discovers the wife in bed with the young gent. The husband feigns forgiveness, but shortly after prepares a poisoned salad for his wife, and she dies.

## Tale 37

A wife discovers that her husband is losing interest in her. One day she finds him asleep in a corner of their house, snoring in the dirt beside a filthy servant woman. She decides on a positive solution to her problem, straightens and beautifies their marital home, and before long realizes that it is her own foul housekeeping that has driven her husband away. All is made well.

## Tale 38

As in Tale 37 we go upbeat, and look at versions of marriage-improvement,

There is a certain great feast, until the wife begins to suspect that the husband is no longer interested in her. He is hanging out elsewhere. The wife discovers the wretched hovel where her husband is sleeping around, and pities him. She lures him home by a thorough housecleaning and sprucing up. The feast is a success. He returns home.

## Tale 39

After many years abroad, a man returns to his country estate, to find that his wife has moved out, to a nearby house; in fear she has fled the ghosts that are invading the marital home. The man of the house totally disbelieves the story about the ghosts. He notes that the purported ghost is calling out his own grandmother's name, which adds to his suspicion. Suddenly the man grasps a hand, and finds it is that of his serving maid, who, he proceeds to discover, is trying to burn down the entire building for herself and her lover. He bans the seditious couple, cleanses his house, and is reunited with his wife.

## Tale 40

A pious countess calls on her Greyfriars monk to confess her. He gives her a strange penance, that she should wear his robe chord around her naked body to keep her in mind of our Savior's sacrifice. (A variant on the hairshirt of the time). Then he adds a detail. He himself must affix the cord to her body.) She is upset by the oddity of his request. She reports to her husband, and the friar is beaten.

## DAY FIVE

## Tale 41

A brother and sister, who love one another, live at home together. One day, inevitably, a friend manages to spend the night in bed with the brother's sister. The brother is enraged and murders his sister's friend. The brother and master of the castle lock the girl up in a tower, and pursue looking for a husband for her.

## Tale 42

A handsome, well born count attends church to watch the ladies, and is struck by one exceptional beauty. She considers herself of too low birth even to discourse with the count, and only by the help of his butler can he bring her to exchange a word with him. She makes it clear that she can not live in his company; her birth is too humble. In the end, the passionate gentleman gives up, defeated.

## Tale 43

A high born lady- in- waiting dominates the palace. She is haughty and arrogant, and has no tolerance for men or passion, although she is beautiful. There is, however, one young man in the court whom she falls for, although she is careful not to enter into a relation with him. She spots him in the palace garden, covers herself with veils, and has her servant invite the lad onto the palace terrace. He is himself covered head to neck, in a traditional page's outfit, while she is undiscoverable under her cloths. A silent love affair, with a daily set rendez-vous, is established between the two, until one day they actually meet in the garden, and upon the lad's pronouncement of his love of the lady, she angrily drives him from the palace. for good. Their love could only flourish under uniquely romantic circumstances.

## Tale 44

The honesty of a Greyfriars monk-confessor wins out, and holds the court together. Into the bargain, the friar is given two pigs, instead of just one, by the Lord of Sedan.

## Tale 45

On the day of the Holy Innocents, men have extreme license over their wives and children—and girlfriends. This is a time when the male can make the female dance in the rain, play silly games in the snow, generally free herself from the reign of decorum—and all without being scorned for it, just as the male is at the same time being absolved of criticism. It was a godsent break time for young guys, and, if all works, for their lovers.

## Tale 46

Another demeaning tale about monastic life. A friar falls for the wife of his friend. He follows her upstairs, but she kicks him downstairs. He follows the trail of pussy into the quarters of another lord's daughter. He screws her and flees. Where is Rabelais, to put the stamp of gross on this melancholy tale?

## Tale 47

Two young courtiers had a perfect relationship. From youth on they had shared everything together, and now that they were older it seemed fitting that the one who married should share his bed with his friend,

as well as with as with his wife. So this happens. At a certain point, however, the married friend, even though he slept in the middle of the bed, began to feel suspicious of his friend. He soon accuses him of messing with his wife. Jealousy tears them all apart from one another.

#### Tale 48

Greyfriars monks stop by at Inn where a marriage is taking place. By a trick one of the friars hops into the marital bed while the groom is still absorbed by the wedding dances. The friar has his fill, and escapes before punishment catches up with him.

#### Tale 49

A certain lady at the court of King Charles entertained successive courtiers in her chambers, though she was able to keep the chain of secret assignations private; no one of the men knew about the others. At a male get together, later, the courtiers who had been involved in this sequential fun gradually realized with a trick had been played on them. They were not amused.

#### Tale 50

A courtier for a long time wooed the same lady, but always in vain. So despondent was he that his life begins to slip away .He tried going away on a vacation, but this only made things worse. At this point the lady decides to accord him the one favor, the absence of which is taking his life away. But the granting of this favor only hastened the man's death. Upon learning that the poor man had died, the lady in the tale hanged herself.

#### DAY SIX

#### Tale 51

The Duke of Urbino was exceptionally eager to secure a good marriage for his son, and was very upset by the news he received, concerning his son's plan to take his marriage into his own hands. That plan involved passing on notes to his true love—not, in fact, his father's favorite—and doing so with the assistance of a serving maid who was acquainted with the lad's beloved. Unfortunately the Duke got wind of these secret notes, and was so furious that he had the intermediary, the message-carrying servant girl, put to death. The Duchess, who befriended the servant girl, was horrified, and condemned the behavior of her husband.

#### Tale 52

Margaret's tolerance for the gross is at its clearest here. It is a cold day. A man in need asks for breakfast, at an apothecary shop, and in the course of discussion falls out with the varlet who works for the apothecary. Ugly words are exchanged. The varlet finds a frozen turd on the road, wraps it attractively, and serves it to the man for breakfast. When the 'breakfast roll' begins to thaw, and the sun to shed its rays, the pungent odor of the turd sickens the needy man, whose fury leads him to further revenge antics with the same turd.

#### Tale 53.

A prince was blessed with a great wife, but, as often in these tales, falls in love with a high born beauty, who was sought by all the men at court. The ensuing closet drama—which reminds us of a great succession of French domestic studies—*La Princesse de Cleves*, the interplay texts of Choderlos de Laclos—studies the ins and outs of jealousy, intrigue, and faithlessness in the upper class scenario of French society.

#### Tale 54.

A very rich man has intense pain around the roots of his hair, and is advised that the remedy may be to cease sleeping with his wife. He agrees to the solution, and he and his wife come to an agreement. They will sleep in separate beds, and at oblique angles to one another, so that they cannot see one another. Their new custom will be this: a handmaid will stand beside the bed of each partner, and will hold a candle over the partner, who will thus be able to read in quiet. As it happens, the shadow cast by the husband, and which the wife can read in the shadow movements of her spouse, indicates that the husband is making out with the candle-holding maid. She calls him on it. The shadow movements disappear.

#### Tale 55

Near death, and eager to reconcile himself with God, a husband leaves his wife final instructions. Upon his death, he wants her to sell a fine horse, which he has recently purchased, and to share the money with the poor. The clever wife sells the horse, and at sufficient profit to beef up the needy mouths of her growing family.

#### Tale 56

A woman seeks a confessor to advise her husband on how to arrange a good marriage for her daughter. A Greyfriars Brother takes the matter under advisement, then manipulates the social setting so that his fellow friar can inherit the role of mate for the woman's daughter.

#### Tale 57

The charming and adroit Lord Montmorency—refer Castiglione *The Courtier*, for such a profile —has had the pleasure of pressing a beautiful lady's hand to his lips. For the remainder of his stay in England, he is unwilling to remove her glove from his hand.

#### Tale 58

A lady of wit is an appreciator of men in general, but at last her eye falls on a singular favorite. However, a bitter quarrel breaks out between the two of them, and she decides to take revenge on him. She ascends toward her upstairs sleeping room, and bids him to follow her, but when he has gotten half way up the stairs she cries THIEF so loudly that she arouses the attention of the whole household, in fact the whole neighborhood.

#### Tale 59

A husband tires of his wife's spending, and retires far into the countryside. She plans for a serving girl to lure her husband to a remote cottage, then tracks her husband to the assignation, and 'discovers' him there, giving him the expected tongue-lashing. The man sees the whole fabric of his marriage, in a flash, accepts the pain he is causing his wife, and forgives her.

#### Tale 60

A woman falls in love with a court singer, and abandons her husband. Her sisters embrace her, submit her to a fake conversion, so that in new guise she is returned to her husband and her marriage is freshly restored.

### DAY SEVEN

#### Tale 61

A lovely husband and wife enjoy a marriage as attractive as themselves. The canon of a nearby church falls in love with the lady. The woman longs to be with the canon, but her husband conceals her from him. The canon gains control of her, and keeps her sequestered for a year. The wife is relieved when her

husband agrees to take her back. However she cannot forget the canon, and once again she returns to him, with whom she lives for another fifteen years.

#### Tale 62

A lady is a wit and a storyteller. Here's a story. It is about her. A lover comes to take her in her bed. He is in a hurry. He is in boots and spurs. When he rises from the bed, Satisfied, he is still wearing boots and spurs. His spurs catch on her bedsheets, And tear it open, so that she is exposed, naked.

#### Tale 63

Four girls are together in Paris. A distinguished provost in Paris brings them together. A handsome young man longs to join the group. He asks his wife's permission. Then the King himself plunges into the group, a buddy to the 'handsome young man.' In the end the effective duo is the handsome young man and the king.

#### Tale 64

A man and his woman were much in love. They wanted to get married. However he was deeply disappointed, because her family rejected him as a marriage partner for their daughter. He went into isolation. The lady continued loving the man, and wrote him an extensive love poem, indicating that her love is eternal.

In a return message he declares to the lady that his love is dead. He has retired to a monastery. She visits him there, but immediately gives up her hope of union with him. He is hopeless, and renders her hopeless.

#### Tale 65

In the Church of Saint John there was a very dark chapel, into which a soldier had wandered to pray, and had fallen asleep. Just then a lady entered the chapel with her own intention to pray. But as she started to kneel she saw a flickering candle pass across her view as the wakened soldier rose and left the chapel. Miracle! Cried the worshipping lady, assured that she had seen a long awaited apparition from on high. A candle held by no one, Risen from the tombs!

#### Tale 66

After their wedding, a just married couple falls asleep. A cleaning woman finds them and berates them harshly for their cavalier behavior as just marrieds—they are, after all, dead asleep and exhausted from dancing. Others come to observe them, and die laughing.

The Duke arrives asking severely why the cleaning woman berated the newly married couple.

#### Tale 67

A moral tale, reflecting the new merchant Explorer-theme of the times.

A certain captain sailed to the Canadas, on a mission to populate and settle the area. Unfortunately there was, along on the mission, An evil man of contemptible morals. He ate the fruit of his miserable life, And was abandoned alone On the island With his wife.

#### Tale 68

An apothecary married a beautiful wife. Other women came to him inquiring what they could do To arouse their husbands to greater affection. Was it not a dog that poisoned The apothecary's wife?

## Tale 69

A married lady discovers her husband dressed in the garb of a cleaning lady, disguised and hiding out waiting for an assignation with his girl friend. *Fou rire*, crazy laughter breaks out from madame, as she ridicules her husband's garb and deflates his libido.

## Tale 70

The Duke of Burgundy had a beautiful wife, with an evil interior, which he was reluctant to recognize. This wife fell in love with the Duke's best friend. She made unsuccessful efforts to seduce the Duke's friend. Then the woman decided to tell the Duke's friend of her powerful love for him. The Duke's friend declared that he had not nor would ever have intimacy at court except with his friend the Duke. He rejects the come-on of the Duke's wife. The wanton woman spreads slanderous gossip about the Duke's friend.

## DAY EIGHT

## Tale 71

The saddler to the Queen of Navarre is a bit of a drunkard. Tragically, his fastidious wife grows ill and is on the point of death. The saddler takes advantage of this tragedy, to attempt to make out with the servant maid of his wife. His wife, though on her death bed, observes this damnable liaison, and damns her contemptible husband.

## Tale 72

We are in a hospital administered by nuns. A man has died, and only one nun and a prior are left to bury the body. The wicked monk-prior takes advantage of the situation, to put the make on the nun. The nun is shocked when she realizes she has lost her virginity, and is already again being put to the test. After a *second instance of intercourse with the monk, the nun feels profound shame. She flees, to seek the Pope's blessing*, but on the way she is comforted and consoled by a loving sister, who frees her from gullt, and sends her home to the hospital from which she came.

## WHAT IS THE HEPTAMERON?

We are all brought up on stories, and absorb them as parts of life; neural pathways that absorb us, and along which we ease into pictures of what the world has been and may be like. At an early age we may be enchanted by these stories, and feel as though we are there first truly ourselves. Once a particular story pattern is lodged with us, we are uncomfortable to listen to a revised version of it: of a new way to retail Snow White or From the Tables Down at Morey's, the Yale poem for the cosmos. The Heptameron is a text carved out of need and boredom, and inserted where ten young pilgrims await the subsiding of a raging river, on the far side of which is the Virgin shrine to which they are heading.

The tales on which the patience of these youngsters is fed is story, tales from the imagination of Marguerite de Navarre. Although individual tales share something of the narrative of early fiction, even the novel, they are of diverse ancestry and present fixed worlds that are already of a long lived mediaeval past. They are little developed, except in the mind that reads them. But these proto novels are just one of the entertainment panels blocked out by Marguerite's pilgrims. There are chunks of folklore, small closet dramas, aphorisms and even haiku-ish bits. (To see how these diverse genres could provide sufficient entertainment for the waiting pilgrims we must go back to the dialogues among those pilgrims—evidence of the topicality of the specific offerings. Not only can the tales of the Heptameron be parceled out into groups, but so can the themes, which are as varied as their genres.

The themes of the *Heptameron*, as noted in the beginning, are as much the talk of their moment as the themes of our daily conversation today, in an age when the digital has rendered everyone an instant news consumer. Marguerite's pilgrims debate crime, ultimate moral values, issues of sexual and social



morality, and true love. We could not hope for a more vivid picture of ordinary and extraordinary life at the brink of the modern era.

*Study guide*

Born in the year of Columbus' journey to the West, Marguerite de Navre was destined to be a complex figure, known for her genuine piety, her care for striving younger people and especially those with a desire to write, plus a gift for tales—as well as for their displays of erotic interactions and acts of voluptuous holiness. Give some thought, please, to the character of this woman, think her back into her position as a queen, and see if she coheres with other unexpected female images from the early modern period in Western civilization. She is, after all, the only woman in the small anthology we collect in this book. Does she remind you of any similarly multiple women in world literature? Has she anything in common with Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, with Cressida in Troilus and Cressida, or with Gertrude Stein, in 'real life.' (It's a hard question, no?) Is there, by the way, any good explanation for the paucity of well sketched women in Early Modern Literature? Should we attribute this lack to social prejudice and lack of money in female pocket books?

