



Shame or Agency?

Perceptions of Modesty and the Female Body through Narratives
of Rape and Sexual Violence in Marguerite de Navarre's
Heptaméron

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Abstract

This article considers perceptions of the female body in Marguerite de Navarre's *L'Heptaméron*. In the early modern period, a woman's body was administered by a patriarchal system which used virtues of silence, chastity, and modesty to control women's sexuality. In Marguerite's novellas 2 and 62, I argue that she problematizes these virtues. Influenced by her courtly setting of debate and discussion, she examines the female condition through questions of agency, shame, and silence in stories of rape and sexual violence: Does a woman remain modest if she has been raped and discusses it? Can something positive come out of such a tragic situation? Marguerite creates a more nuanced understanding of the female body which highlights a woman's possible strengths and limitations in early modern society. She scrutinizes the cultural conditions which women experience.

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Shame or Agency?

Perceptions of Modesty and the Female Body through Narratives of Rape and Sexual Violence in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*

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Understandings of Modesty and the Female Body in Early Modern Society

Historically the female body has been an interesting site of contemplation in which social, cultural, and political ideals have intersected. In early modern Europe, a woman's body was perceived in a highly sexualized manner; it was an object of oppression, administered by a patriarchal system which sought to control women's sexuality. At the time we find male conduct manual writers such as Juan Luis Vives who, in his *De Institutione feminae Christianae*, stressed that chastity, modesty, and silence were qualities by which a woman must abide. Modesty, most notably, required a woman to be chaste and to feel shame towards her body.¹ Deriving from the Latin *pudor*, the concept was associated with *verecundia* or shame. In the eyes of Aristotle it was an emotion or passion which was revealed to others through blushing.² Later, early church father Thomas Aquinas took a more moralistic stance on modesty; he defined it in relation to the biblical Fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. After Eve ate the forbidden fruit, she and Adam lost their innocence and had to hide their "parties pudibundes".³ In the sixteenth century, modesty became known as a good shame, which bestowed a woman and her family with honour, and it became intimately connected with

¹ VIVES, *Livre de L'Institution*, 80-81.

² BRANCHER, *Équivoques de la pudeur*, 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 60, 65.

chastity.⁴ It was the dictates of modesty which placed women into two extreme categories: they were either virtuous in their shame or immodest. Those who were deemed deviant were vulnerable to having their reputations ruined. This, however, did not mean that modesty was a stable term; a significant debate was concentrated on its natural or artificial genesis. For instance, Jean de Léry's observations of indigenous people in Brazil highlighted the fact that nakedness could be seen as natural, thus contradicting writers such as Erasmus who declared that nature required the concealment of bodies, even in the privacy of the bedroom.⁵ Regardless, modesty's force on the body and female sexuality were prominent in society. It was a concept that was imposed on women by men which reinforced the understanding of the female body as symbolic of women's moral and physical weakness. However, whether or not women fully respected the virtue of modesty was another story.

Marguerite de Navarre's Depiction of The Female Body and Male Oppression in the *Heptaméron*

Despite modesty's governance over the lives and sexuality of women in the early modern period, in this article I provide an example of a woman who questioned, reconfigured, and undermined its significance in her literary text. Marguerite de Navarre is known for her roles as sister of the King of France, patroness, and writer of literary works, including poems and plays, religious and secular, as well as her posthumous *L'Heptaméron*. The latter has received much attention in scholarship, with studies focusing on themes related to societal matters, including love and gender issues.⁶ Nevertheless, not all scholars have agreed on Marguerite's particular stance towards the condition of women. For instance, Nancy Frelick has questioned how far Marguerite sought to reflect on the submissive role of women in *L'Heptaméron* which has been celebrated as a (proto-)feminist text.⁷

⁴ BROOMHALL, *Women and the Book Trade*, 158; KING, *Women of the Renaissance*, 30.

⁵ DE LERY, *Histoire d'un voyage*, 86; BRANCHER, *Équivoques de la pudeur*, 86.

⁶ For example, see FRECCERO, "Queer Nation", 29-48; KEM, "Marguerite de Navarre", 1-7; VIRTUE, "*Ce qui doit augmenter le cœur*", 67-79.

⁷ FRELICK, "Female Infidelity", 17.

My own intervention in scholarship is Marguerite's discussion of modesty and the female body through themes of rape and sexual violence in novellas 2 and 62. These novellas highlight important issues about the impact of rape on a woman's body, the female body's relationship with male conquest, and the consequences that this may have on her reputation. In these stories of female victimhood, questions of modesty and honour are raised in a courtly gathering within which debates and discussions take place between the *devisants*. By engaging with traditional patriarchal discourses, I argue that Marguerite draws attention to the harsh reality of misogynous discourses in sixteenth-century French society, with particularly emphasis on the relation between immodesty and speech. At times, striking moments of female agency puncture this, and question what, or more importantly, who has the power of interpretation of the female body. While a woman may lose her honour, she may also experience empowerment from this distressing situation. This strength, at times, comes from God who transforms the immodest female body into a divine vessel of faith; at other times, a victim's outspokenness may allow her to reconfigure rape as a reflection of male deviance and not female immodesty. I argue that Marguerite's theorizing reveals an effort to highlight female agency as well as the limits that modesty may impose on her body to restrict this very agency. The multiplicity of outcomes lays bare the different perspectives on a woman's modesty in the face of sexual violence, and it reveals an opportunity to alter its influence on how female victims and their bodies are perceived in society. Marguerite fundamentally problematizes the concept of modesty and comments on how the female body is valued according to certain cultural and patriarchal ideals.

Violation and Rape: The Presentation of the Female Body in Relation to Male Conquest in Novellas 2 and 62

The *Heptaméron* has been very well received; this collection of novellas has been perceived as one of Marguerite's greatest masterpieces. Produced between the estimated years of 1542 and 1546,⁸ it was initially edited and published posthumously in 1558 by a former valet, Pierre

⁸ FEBVRE, *Autour de l'Heptaméron*, 201.

Boaistuau, followed by a second edition by Claude Gruget in 1559.⁹ The plot consists of five noble men and women who have been stranded on an island, upon their return from a pilgrimage. A flood destroys the bridge which they need to cross in order to return home. With no immediate help, they seek refuge at the Abbey of Notre Dame de Serrance for seven days and amuse themselves by telling each other a total of seventy-two stories. Marguerite's readers become *voyeurs*; they are informed of the stories at the same time as the *devisants*. Each story leads to a discussion on an array of topics, including love, the human condition, gender, and other societal issues.

In novellas 2 and 62, Marguerite poses some key questions about modesty and the female body: how is a woman's body perceived in society? What happens to a woman's modesty when her body is violated? Does she lose her modesty? If so, can it be restored? Should a woman become dishonoured due to the sexual violence that has been inflicted on her? The *Heptaméron* provides numerous cases of female victims who have been unjustly violated at the hands of villainous men. This has been explored by Patricia Cholakian who has suggested that the depiction of rape, especially in novella 4, relates to Marguerite's own experience as a survivor of sexual assault.¹⁰ While this may be possible, to go as far as to say that the *Heptaméron* should be viewed as an autobiographical account, in which its author reveals a personal stake in her exploration of female victimization, is to reduce her exploration of modesty and the female body to experience. Moreover, it overlooks the various responses to rape and sexual assault across many of the novellas. These reveal a bigger concern, on Marguerite's part, to examine different perceptions of the female body and women's often inconsistent fates at the hands of violent men and society at large.

This examination is at the forefront of novellas 2 and 62, which combine the themes of rape, the female body, and modesty. The novellas tell the story of vulnerable women whom cunning men have targeted and raped. As we see in the discussions between the *devisants*, the women share similar experiences, but they face very different consequences. Their stories are presented by two of the female *devisants*. By giving

⁹ Ibid., 199-200.

¹⁰ CHOLAKIAN, *Rape and Writing*, 9-11.

women a platform to speak, Marguerite enables them to not only have a voice, but to introduce and participate in intellectual discussions. Novella 2 is recounted by Oisille and in novella 62, Longarine repeats the words of a noblewoman who recounts her own experience in front of a group of courtly figures. Of course, then, Marguerite presents these tales in written form in the *Heptaméron*. It is a complex *mise en abyme* which causes the work to be self-reflective and encourages the *devisants* and Marguerite's readers to deconstruct the stories that are relayed to them and participate in discussions and debates that consider multiple meanings and interpretations. In terms of modesty, this *mise en abyme* acts as an intricate web of disclosing and repeating in front of various audiences, which problematizes the concealing and revealing of the female body. The body is passed through the eyes and ears of the various listeners and readers who come into contact with it.

As we shall see, the discussions that are raised in the two novellas reflect courtly attitudes to modesty, namely the need for a victim's silence to preserve her reputation. Equally, the settings within which these accounts take place are grounded in or, at the very least, associated with the French court. In the beginning of novella 2 we find out that the lower-class mule-keeper and his wife live in Amboise and are linked to the Queen of Navarre herself; the husband works for her: "[Y] avoit ung mulletier qui servoit la roine de Navarre".¹¹ Novella 62 also includes the Queen, but this time she is as an active participant in courtly entertainment, listening to the woman who accidentally reveals herself to be the rape victim. The victim is herself a storyteller who takes part in a group discussion at court. She adheres to the courtly practise of telling a "beau compte"¹² to entertain her peers.

In novellas 2 and 62, Marguerite creates a sharp dichotomy between violent men and vulnerable women to demonstrate that the female body is positioned in relation to male conquest. She highlights the hypocrisy of men who require women to remain chaste as they try to ruin them. As Elizabeth Zegura points out, the *Heptaméron* is a very uncomfortable text to read for this reason; it is riddled with stories of violence, suffering, and injustice. A number of novellas portray men as the predominant

¹¹ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 377.

perpetrators of sexual oppression against vulnerable women.¹³ In novella 2, Oisille, the widely respected, elderly storyteller, presents the tale of a mule-keeper's wife who threatens a valet for his advances. She warns him that her husband will find out and beat him. Infuriated by her rejection, the perpetrator sets out to humiliate her. He rapes her and leaves her to die. Before the reader finds out about his horrendous acts, the narrator calls attention to his impulsiveness and his desire to have his way with his victim. Oisille presents the man in a negative light. Mirroring patriarchal discourses of masculinity of the time, he dedicates himself to the ideal of male honour as an expression of sexual conquest.¹⁴ He shares similarities with a storyteller, Hircan, who views women as sexual objects. Because women "ne sont faites que pour"¹⁵ for men's benefit, he deems it fair to use "finesses et forces"¹⁶ on them when necessary. Thus appears a semantic field of dissimulation to further reinforce the valet's malice: "[F]aire semblant [... Il] garda ce feu couvert en son cuer[.]"¹⁷ The "feu" that he hides is symbolic of carnal desire; he cannot control it and gives into it more easily than the mule-keeper's wife. Using evocative language, Oisille compares him to a predator hunting down his innocent, unknowing prey. The valet decides to take matters into his own hands and take revenge on the wife in her private quarters. When he thinks that she is alone, it is said that he tries to "[l']avoir par force".¹⁸ This act alone alludes to the female body's relationship with male domination. The valet's desire to rape the wife underpins the objectification of the female body; it is a means through which a man may assert his sexual and physical power over her and, in this case, humiliate her into submission. Unknowingly a girl, who was in bed with the wife, sees everything. She hides under the bed in fear. Her fright further reinforces the valet's villainous actions. Marguerite combines violence, animal imagery, and warfare terminology as a powerful trio to display the "guerre des sexes"¹⁹ between the male and

¹³ ZEGURA, *Marguerite de Navarre's Shifting Gaze*, 250.

¹⁴ FORD, "Neo-Platonic Themes", 100.

¹⁵ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹ DEFAUX, "Marguerite de Navarre", 141.

female protagonists and the fact that the female body is at the epicentre of this power struggle: “[Il] se montra plus bestial que les bestes [... elle] s’estoit defaict de luy [...et il] luy donna si grand coup d’espée[.]”.²⁰

In contrast to the valet, the defenceless victim is portrayed as “defaict de lui”.²¹ Like a wounded soldier in battle, she has been conquered by her rapist’s desire to “se venger”.²² Once violated her innocence has seemingly been taken away. The valet’s intense fury encourages him to physically impose himself on her very easily. Having ravished the wife, he then flees. Following a very explicit description of the rape, stabbing (“vingt cinq plaies mortelles”²³), and eventual murder of her, the audience becomes aware of the disposability of the victim’s violated body. The vague description that we have of the wife suggests that she represents all female victims of male sexual abuse. As she lays in pain, unable to move or speak, her intense suffering points to the submission of a woman to a man’s immoral desires. Here then, the female body, in its violation, is constructed in relation to a power struggle in which men can dominate women, and in this case, face no consequences for their horrific actions.

Similarly, in novella 62, the male antagonist is presented as the physically superior party who wishes to impose himself on a noblewoman at all costs. Longarine, another female storyteller, narrates this story which later leads to a discussion about the connection between speech and a woman’s immodesty. Unlike novella 2, this story incorporates an interesting metatheatrical dimension. After all, the victim recounts her own experience of rape to a group of courtly figures, which is then repeated by Longarine to a second audience, the other *devisants*. Without any care for the victim’s honour or reputation, the antagonist’s sexual desire takes precedence. His “chault”²⁴ (*chaleur*) matches the terms that Oisille uses to describe valet’s sexual desire in novella 2; he also takes his victim by force: “il la print par force”.²⁵ In comparison with the mule-keeper’s wife, the woman in question resists

²⁰ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 78.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 378.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

her admirer's advances who is said to have pestered her over a number of years: "[Il] la pressa par plusieurs années".²⁶ Like a true "femme de bien",²⁷ as she calls herself, she refuses to respond to his advances which further fuels his desire for her. Both women are presented as moral figures who do all that they can to remain virtuous. They are vulnerable to men who do not care for their fragile reputations. In this contrast between virtuous women and lustful men, Marguerite reverses a misogynistic assumption about women. The tendency for medical and theological writers to portray women as sexually deviant, as daughters of Eve,²⁸ fuelled concerns those women should not be left alone. Here, Marguerite shows that these female protagonists are alone, and it is not their penchant for sex which may cause their suffering. As we see in this story, male desire constantly places female honour in peril, it subjects the female body to immodesty.²⁹

Moreover, there is a double standard at play. Whilst women are obliged by men to retain their chastity, as a marker of their womanhood, it is these very same men who try to take it away from them. A response to modesty is located in the very graphic descriptions of violence on the female body. Marguerite presents the harsh realities that female rape victims face in society. In novella 2, the mule-keeper's wife is stabbed twenty-five times and is left to die in a pool of blood. While she tries to escape, the great loss of blood leads her to stagger in her steps and eventually collapse, later unable to speak because of the injuries that she has sustained. In novella 62, humiliation is at the forefront of the story. The noblewoman is emotionally blackmailed. Her rapist argues that if she reveals his advances to everyone, she will also be publicly exposed and depicted as welcoming it. In other words, she will lose her honour, and by association, her modesty. The social interpretation of the violated female body is one that is steeped in shame. No matter the circumstances in which a woman's body is violated and exposed, if it is mentioned, onus is placed on the woman to face the negative consequences. Thus for a female victim to be seen as modest and respectable in society, she must

²⁶ Ibid., 378.

²⁷ Ibid., 378.

²⁸ WIESNER, *Women and Gender*, 47.

²⁹ TELLE, *L'Œuvre de Marguerite*, 113.

inflict censorship on herself. When the perpetrator flees, he steals the bed sheet and leaves her naked in the bed. Other women arrive and see her exposed, which further adds to her embarrassment: “Après, arrivant quelques des chamberieres, se leva hastivement [...] et demeura la damoiselle toute nue sur son lict.”³⁰ In both cases, the immodest violation of the body is shocking to the readers. It suggests a loss of honour, but this is not as a result of the women’s actions. Using rape as a theme, Marguerite reveals modesty for what it truly is, an unachievable concept, designed by men who impose it on women as a requirement of their sex, and are equally quick to try and strip them of it. The female body is thus placed in an intense and impossible struggle, between female chastity and male conquest.

Marguerite further problematizes modesty by forging a link between objects, spatiality, and the female body. Sigmund Freud argued that narrow spaces and opening locked doors were common sex symbols which portrayed women as spaces to inhabit.³¹ In her study of feminine identities in the *Heptaméron*, Corinne Wilson locates this same connection. She identifies the female body as a reflection of intimate and confined spaces which have been penetrated by male perpetrators.³² In this case the restricted room becomes a personification of a vulnerable woman; her body becomes a prison in the same way that she is a prisoner in an interior space. Across the novellas we find numerous cases of openings, barriers, access to spaces and walls which reinforce this transformation of the female body into a physical space for men to infiltrate and dominate.³³ In novella 62, this is shown by the intimacy of the woman’s bedroom. When the victim recounts the events of her assault, she mentions her rapist’s entrance into her room. When she is alone in her bedroom, he enters her private space and alarmingly watches her “dormant en son lict”.³⁴ He penetrates her intimacy in the same way that he penetrates her body. Her bedroom, once a place of refuge, is transformed into a place of restriction, violence, and enslavement to her rapist’s desires. Her body metaphorically expands to

³⁰ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 378.

³¹ FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 408.

³² WILSON, “Paysages de corps”, 16.

³³ BAKER, “Rape, Attempted Rape, and Seduction”, 271.

³⁴ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 378.

encompass her private quarters; she herself reveals her own objectification. This imagery blurs the lines between modesty and immodesty; by referring to the penetration of the female body, Marguerite draws attention to the rapist's violence without fully exposing the woman, at least not yet. She sets up an erotic undertone, which draws attention to the act of sex without placing the woman in the firing line. But as the story progresses, she takes this further in another allusion to modesty: the art of *couverture*. The covering of the body is a requirement of modesty, but here the man exposes it. When the rapist enters the woman's room, he crucially forgets to close the door. This means that the woman's body is very much open to the public gaze; it is a symbol of the loss of her honour. This concept is bolstered by the man's escape. As he hears the woman's *chambrières* entering the bedroom, he flees, pulling off the bed sheet only to reveal the victim's naked body: "[Le] linceul de dessus, l'emporta tout entier: et demeura la damoiselle toute nue sur son lict."³⁵ Even if she did not expose herself, in the eyes of the public, she is still to blame.

In novella 2, the mule-keeper's wife suffers the same consequence of dishonour. Employing the same image of seclusion, penetrated by a male stranger, Marguerite emphasizes the valet's attempts to break into the bedroom. He creates an opening in one of the walls: "l'on ne pavoit veoir l'ouverture qu'il avoit faicte".³⁶ The term "rompit" and the household objects "rideau" and "lict",³⁷ point to an intimacy that has been brutally defiled. Particularly, the curtain and "l'espée nue"³⁸ become innuendoes, used to forebode the violent exposure of the woman's body to the valet's desires. Marguerite turns the female body into a wounded, beaten, and penetrated object. As we know from the requirements of modesty, a woman's honour rests on her ability to conceal her body, which allows her to maintain a good reputation. Marguerite underlines the problems in doing so when women lose control of their bodies. When men seize their autonomy over themselves, they suffer dire consequences. The storytellers reveal moments in which modesty does not account for the

³⁵ Ibid., 378.

³⁶ Ibid., 19.

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

³⁸ Ibid., 19.

injustices imposed on women. Marguerite draws attention to the culturally accepted subordination of a woman's body to male desire which modesty fundamentally and unjustly underpins.

The Question of Silence in Interpreting the Exposed Female Body

Bodies are significant as symbols of power dynamics; they can represent privilege on the one hand, and oppression and subordination on the other. For Marguerite, the female body is very much wrapped up in this power dynamic and a woman's silence. In novella 2, the mule-keeper's wife is so feeble that her body gives in to death itself. Before she reaches this point, her attempts to fight off her attacker are disrupted by her own physical limitations. The victim's eventual inability to speak after her rape highlights her own subordinate and vulnerable position. It recalls other literary examples of silence being imposed on rape victims, such as Ovid's Philomela and Arachne, and Lucretia. In one way or another, these victims were silenced or silenced themselves after being violated. Most notably, Philomela was raped by her brother-in-law; he cut out her tongue to stop her from revealing her rape, and eventually she was turned into a swallow.³⁹ Silence is a sign of male oppression, enforcing women into a subordinate position. Judging by the famous mythological cases of rape, silence is also a common feature of a rape victim's experience in the sixteenth century. In novella 2, the perpetrator has taken his victim's voice, her means of dictating her own experience, and thus she becomes a disposable body, moments away from death. This highly sympathetic scene feeds into Marguerite's commentary on double standards between men and women. The valet has been able to ruin the woman and face no consequences for doing so. In contrast, the woman of novella 62 maintains her voice and uses it to stress the physical weakness of her body, as a justification and perhaps even deflection of her immodesty. The rapist's ease in entering her room and in quickly slipping away suggests that he was able to impose himself on her without much difficulty. The woman herself states that she was "marrye"⁴⁰ by the incident and out of her fear of her reputation she chose to remain silent

³⁹ CHOLAKIAN, *Rape and Writing*, 11.

⁴⁰ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 378.

immediately after the incident. The irony of this statement lies in the fact that all along the victim has opened up about her experience. Her audience members do not know this because she distances herself from the story with the use of the third person singular pronoun. Since the victim's identity remains unknown to the group, sympathy is still awarded to her. If she were to talk about herself using the first-person pronoun, she would be linked to the story and her reputation would be tarnished. Behind this veil of secrecy, it is implied that the man's strength is enough to make the woman submit to him. Like his counterpart in novella 2, he also faces no penalties for his actions. In fact, in both cases the women are victims of male physical superiority. Due to their physical feebleness, these women cannot fight off their perpetrators and because of modesty, they can never actually speak openly of their violation. Modesty ensures that the women remain in silence. We see this in novella 2 when the women's voice is literally taken from her, leaving her to only communicate through her eyes and hands: "[E]lle languit encores une heure sans parler, faisant signe des œilz et des mains".⁴¹ Instead of using signs to reveal what happened to her, she only confirms to the priest "la foy en quoy elle mouroit [...] l'esperance de son salut par Jhesucrist seul".⁴² It is this attention to her faith rather than her violation which, as I will discuss later, Oisille uses to reinforce the victim's honour and, crucially, her chastity. Despite her sexual violation, in Oisille's eyes, her martyrlike behaviour has kept intact her chastity, and by association her modesty. In novella 62, silence is not only the key to retaining the woman's anonymity, and to restoring her honour, but also it also protects the veracity of her experience. As has already been established, the perpetrator uses her silence as a weapon, noting that if she ever uttered a word of her rape, he would tell everyone that she consented to his entrance in her room: "[Il] la print par force, luy disant que, si elle reveloit ceste affaire, il diroit à tout le monde qu'elle l'avoit envoyé querir".⁴³ The assumption here is that his credibility will not be challenged; his words will be believed over her actual experience. This reveals an extra layer of complexity behind a woman's silence. Not only must she remain silent

⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴³ Ibid., 378.

about her rape so as to not disclose her immodest violation, but also if she does discuss her experience, it will be called into question. The victim will be accused of enjoying and even welcoming the encounter, which leaves her at risk of being doubly dishonoured, and by association, perceived as doubly immodest.

Agency and Religious Salvation: Proposing an Alternative Perception of the Female Body in Novella 2

While these women may lack the physical strength to fight against their attackers, Marguerite creates an alternative theory of womanhood which places modesty under further scrutiny. She poses a question to her readers: can women's bodies be transformed into something more positive? In novella 2 she describes the woman's body by employing Christian references which offers the woman an opportunity to gain some agency. Marguerite does this by drawing attention to the virtues of the mule-keeper's wife and later reconfiguring the value that is ascribed to her female body. To the *devisants*, Oisille describes the wife as a "vraie femme de bien"⁴⁴ who never allows herself to give into her predator. While her body concedes, her mind always remains intact. This separation of the mind and body emphasizes the importance of the woman's morals over what has happened to her body. In fact, she is so morally virtuous, Oisille argues, that even when her attacker strikes her down, the woman tries her best to convert him to take up good morals. She provides him with a "les meilleurs propos qu'elle povoit",⁴⁵ with the hope that he may "congnoistre ses faultes".⁴⁶ This emotional and intellectual conviction implies that she is not defined solely by her violated body. She demonstrates that she still has a courageous and chaste heart. Her resistance becomes a weapon which allows her to find some empowerment from the situation. By stressing women's virtuous tendencies Marguerite's readers question whether society should view women in a new light, especially those who have had their modesty stripped of them through no fault of their own. The separation of the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20.

mind and body creates an alternative agency for women in which a woman's morals and resistance, is given greater importance in defining their honour. We see this in Oisille's final commentary; she admires the victim's determination to protect her chastity and morals through resistance. Her refusal of her attacker's advances, and, as a result, her succumbence to death, has made her virtuous in the eyes of God, regardless of her lower social status:

Voylà, mes dames, une histoire veritable qui doit bien augmenter le cueur à garder ceste belle vertu de chasteté. Et, nous, qui sommes de bonnes maisons, devrions morir de honte de sentir en nostre cueur la mondanité, pour laquelle eviter une pauvre mulletiere n'a point crainct une si cruelle mort. Et telle s'estime femme de bien, qui n'a pas encores sceu comme ceste cy resister jusques au sang. Parquoy se fault humilier, car les graces de Dieu ne se donnent point aux hommes pour leurs noblesses et richesses[.]⁴⁷

Equally, novella 2 proposes a way to reclaim the female body itself, traditionally rooted in the patriarchal order. Moving away from its interpretation as a means of male conquest, Marguerite reconfigures its value to encompass religious salvation. Indeed, she moves beyond the objectification of the body to relate it to her own theory of divine status. Transforming an appalling event of rape into a symbol of female spirituality, she constructs a theory of heroic holiness. The violated, suffering female body becomes a highly honourable site of faith. We witness this when Oisille evokes a glorious image of martyrdom:

[L]evant les œilz au ciel [...elle] rendit graces à son Dieu, lequel elle nommoit sa force, sa vertu, sa patience et sa chasteté [...elle] rendit ce chaste corps son ame à son Createur.⁴⁸

When the mule-keeper's wife believes herself to be on the verge of death, a mystical experience takes place. Before she loses her voice, she prays to the Lord to accept her blood which has been shed "en la reverence de

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

celluy de son Filz”⁴⁹ through whom she believes all her sins to be washed away. Her “chaste corps”⁵⁰ is restored to its original state. This allows her to leave her body on earth, while her soul is elevated to a higher state in heaven. Indeed, the “plusieurs coups”⁵¹ that she suffers forges a union between herself and Jesus Christ.⁵² Her body becomes a site of divine inspiration, one that represents salvation by Jesus Christ. This seems to be an opportunity for Marguerite to diffuse her Reformed thinking. Through the doctrine of “justification by faith alone”, Reformers believed that following man’s fall from grace, through Christ he was once again reconciled with God and automatically granted grace.⁵³ It was necessary for man to put his faith in Him. John Calvin went as far as to argue that justification was part of one’s union with Christ.⁵⁴ Jesus was a representative for his people and through his actions they were granted moral righteousness as a sign of forgiveness for original sin. Despite the sin that has been imposed on the mule-keeper’s wife, through Christ she has been redeemed. In fact, it is implied that she resembles Christ himself; her stab wounds reflect his own injuries on the cross. What is intriguing is that her exposed body has been bestowed with honour: “l’honneur que l’on faisoit à ce corps”.⁵⁵ Following her death, her tomb becomes a shrine for the local people of Amboise. Paired with Oisille’s description of the wife as a “martire de chasteté”⁵⁶ her final departure to heaven reiterates that no matter how hard a man may try to disgrace a woman, her natural virtue and faith in God will allow her to maintain her honour. Usually female rape victims were placed in the same category as adulteresses.⁵⁷ Here, Marguerite creates an alternative perspective. Marguerite explicitly goes against the values of modesty and gives the female body an importance away from a deeply rooted sexual politics that men prescribe to it. She awards it a religious value which gives

⁴⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵¹ Ibid., 20.

⁵² GIONET, *La Représentation de la vertu*, 38.

⁵³ DAVIDSON, *The Counter-Reformation*, 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁵ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 21.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁷ REZVANI, “Saint Sebastian and the Mule-driver’s Wife”, 48-49.

women authority over their own bodies. The female body is not *impudique*, but rather it is *héroïque*. Moreover, violence inflicted on a woman here is representative of not simply the exploitation of female bodies in patriarchal society, but also it is transformed into a reflection of woman's faith.⁵⁸ Violence is transformed here into a religious mortification in which the wife's suffering affords her a martyrdom which grants her access to God.

It is in this religious depiction that Leanna Rezvani finds similarities between the wife and the patron saint of soldiers, Saint Sebastian. The use of military vocabulary which Marguerite employs demonstrates the wife's moral victory, which is very similar to Saint Sebastian's life. Both are glorified figures and become examples for future men and women to emulate. We find this in Oisille's final words to the *devisants*. In her final message to her audience, she holds up the wife as an example of how to act in a similar situation: resist and uphold your moral values. At the end of the story, none of the *devisants* wish to launch a debate or discussion about this; they are all in agreement with Oisille, and the ladies cry: "Il n'y eut dame en la compaignye, qui n'eut la larme à l'œil pour la compassion de la piteuse et glorieuse mort de cette mulletiere."⁵⁹ Some scholars have argued that Oisille's storytelling skills are weak, for she fails to trigger a discussion and entertain the other *devisants*.⁶⁰ While this may be so, everyone agrees that the woman remains chaste and honourable. Despite the tragic end of the story, Marguerite introduces moments of agency in which different interpretation of a woman's body rises to the surface. The mule-keeper's wife, while she dies a silent victim, she may seize her honour in death from the misogynistic system that threatens to take it away from her and serve as an example to other women: "Chascune pensa en elle-mesme que, si la fortune leur advenoit pareille, mectroient peyne de l'ensuivre en son martire".⁶¹

⁵⁸ GIONET, *La Représentation de la vertu*, 38.

⁵⁹ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 21.

⁶⁰ VIRTUE, "*Ce qui doit augmenter le cœur*", 71.

⁶¹ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 21.

The Inconclusive Debate of Modesty in Novella 62: Scrutinising the Interpretation of the Violated Female Body

In novella 62, the noblewoman faces very different consequences to the mule-keeper's wife. She treads dangerously on the path of immodesty by attempting to tell her own story of rape without revealing who she is. She portrays herself as a witness to another woman's story of rape to distance herself from her personal experience and present the woman in a sympathetic light: "la damoiselle eut si grand paour, qu'elle n'osa crier".⁶² Before this shocking revelation, the audience's ignorance reveals that it is possible to retain an air of modesty without actually doing so behind closed doors. As long as the woman professes her virtue, from the so-called position of a witness, she is believed to be virtuous and modest in the eyes of the public. In this way, before accidentally exposing herself, she uses her platform to tell her own story, even if it is done so in a secretive way. The victim is able to define her experience of violation as a woman, away from the control and domination of men. Her discourse of victimhood concentrates on her virtue and innocence. It is a way for her to control her own self-fashioning and gain some level of agency in doing so.

Building on this agency, Marguerite introduces a discussion of the victim which places the public perception of the victim and her violation under scrutiny. Indeed, she presents different perspectives showing that there are contradictory ways of understanding the naked body and her supposed immodesty. Firstly, the reality of a woman's place in society is apparent when the woman reveals herself to be the rape victim. The only way of discovering her involvement in her story is when she suddenly slips into first person when she reveals that she was left naked and exposed in her bed: "Jamais femme ne fust si estonnée que moy, quant je me trouvay toute nue".⁶³ Her body is unveiled threefold: to her rapist, to her *chambrières'* gaze, when they enter the room to find her naked, and to her attentive audience, who act as secondary witnesses. According to the dictates of modesty, her body is therefore immodest in three ways. Suddenly, Longarine notes that the Queen of Navarre, who has been sat

⁶² Ibid., 378.

⁶³ Ibid., 378.

there listening to the story, bursts out laughing and so the woman's honour is instantly lost. Though she tries to regain her honour her witnesses believe that it is too late to recover it: '[S]on honneur [...] estoit vollé desjà si loing, qu'elle ne le pouvoit plus rappeler'.⁶⁴ The influence of Renaissance court culture is apparent. Firstly the noblewoman sets up her story within a courtly gathering. She also stages it within court practises: the art of recounting a "beau compte"⁶⁵ that is "très veritable"⁶⁶ is a form of entertainment in which courtly figures participated to "passer le temps",⁶⁷ as the *devisants* do. Inspired by Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, Marguerite's noblewoman is really a courtier; she is supposed to help pass the time at court by recounting an amusing narrative, which may reveal itself in the form of storytelling. It evokes the idea of *facezie* or jokes in which a narrator reveals him- or herself to be a mere witness.⁶⁸ It is a strategy of distancing which allows the courtier to retain his or her honour. In novella 62, the lady aims to protect herself further by asking for her audience to not repeat the tale. But when she tells Marguerite that her story is true, she has already sealed her own fate, before she reveals herself to be the victim, and even before her rapist unveils her naked body behind the bed sheet. Right from the beginning she has set herself up for scandal. It is this revelation which reveals the social understanding of modesty with regards to the female body. Here Marguerite demonstrates that the risk of immodesty is so great and damaging for a woman if her reputation is ruined in front of a public. It is the community that determines her shame. But what is interesting is that while the exposure of the woman's naked body in her private quarters suggests dishonour, it is the woman's own self-revelation in front of an audience which creates the biggest impact. The controversial eruption of the *devisants'* heated debate suggests this. It appears then that the discovery of the woman at court is more dangerous than her nakedness.⁶⁹ The constraints of modesty on the female body is therefore a matter of public perception. The victim's words unveil her naked body just like her rapist

⁶⁴ Ibid., 378.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 377.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 377.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 377.

⁶⁸ CORNILLAT/ LANGER, "Naked Narrator: *Heptaméron* 62", 124.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 128.

unveils her body in private. As Freud states, a joke has the ability to undress something, often this can be a woman's body. As it is the woman who reveals her own nakedness in verbal form, she becomes the unknowing accomplice in her own downfall, all because she decided to speak about her experience.⁷⁰ As we have learned previously, Marguerite suggests that modesty has been put in place to ensure a woman's chastity, but if a woman's nakedness is not revealed in public, then her modesty may still be retained. There is therefore a distinction between public and private life, between a woman's ability to remain chaste and her need to act chaste or make others believe that she is chaste. Despite what modesty entails, the revelation of a woman's body is not truly immodest until it is determined to be so by others. Modesty cannot be properly verified; it is a game of hiding, or *faire semblant*.

Marguerite extends her examination of immodesty and the female body by underlining the importance of speech. During the sixteenth century a woman's speech was seen to be just as immodest as exposing the female body. Here, a woman's speech is interpreted as being more dangerous than if she were to commit an act of sexual deviance. Speech exposes women to slander for it is perceived to be a symbol of moral weakness. In novella 62, this becomes more complicated for, as we know, there are two counts of immodesty: 1) unveiling the naked woman's body and 2) talking about this unveiling. In both cases, the woman's mouth leaves her open to criticism. She marks herself as the Other, as a woman who acts outside of gender norms. For this reason, she is even more exposed than before in her tale of rape. No longer is she a victim of rape, but she is now a laughingstock, whose words will be circulated by others through courtly gossip. Here Marguerite confirms that courtly values uphold the patriarchal discourses of modesty: to have a loose tongue would be to demonstrate loose morals in the public's eyes. The noblewoman's desire to maintain her own anonymity collapses. In her discussion of modesty, Marguerite presents the reality of a woman's situation; for she who decides to speak out about the violation of her body through their sexual assault, unfortunately, society may not award her any sympathy.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 130.

Yet even after the noblewoman has supposedly lost her honour in public, Marguerite reveals inconsistencies in reactions between the *devisants* who contemplate her story. In doing so, she debates the stability of modesty and questions how one must interpret the female body, and who has the power to interpret it in the first place. In novella 62, it is not so clear if the woman should be viewed as immodest after all. We find this when the *devisants* launch themselves into a discussion about her honour. Parlamente is perhaps the most outspoken storyteller. Like her fellow female storyteller, Ennasuite, she agrees that the noblewoman behaved very stupidly; if she was really a victim then she would have wanted to erase her experience from her memory instead of speaking about it: “l'on en prent aussi à la memoire”.⁷¹ She echoes patriarchal discourses of the time: because the noblewoman spoke of her crime, which resulted in making others laugh at her expense, she is the sinful, immodest one. Parlamente here implies that the woman was perhaps not as averse to her experience as she liked to admit. She forges a connection between speech and seduction, arguing that to voice an experience of rape is to consent to it and enjoy it. She problematizes a woman's voice and points to the sacredness of a woman's secrecy.⁷² Regardless of whether the woman is unjustly violated or not, she ought to protect herself and not entertain others with her scandalous event. In society, scandal is more damaging than a rapist's act of violation.

However, this is not to say that her opinion is wholly agreed upon. Nomerfide concludes the woman to be virtuous for repeatedly refusing her perpetrator's advances. Another *devisant*, Geburon, also comes to the woman's defence. He boldly questions Parlamente and concludes that the others should not reproach the victim for it is the rapist who committed a sin. Here, the story of Lucretia, the Roman noblewoman, is mentioned for she was also threatened with shame and death: “[Q]uel peché avoit-elle fait? Elle estoit endormye en son lict; il la menassoit de mort et de honte: Lucesse, qui estoit tant louée, en fait bien aultant.”⁷³ Traditionally, Lucretia's story ends in suicide. Having been raped by emperor Tarquin, she decides to remain silent about her ordeal and takes her own life. In

⁷¹ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 379.

⁷² CORNILLAT/ LANGER, “Naked Narrator”, 130.

⁷³ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 379.

doing so she retains her honour and sparks the downfall of the Roman empire. In Livy's account Lucretia therefore remains modest: "[E]go me etsi peccato absolvo, supplicio non libero; nec ulla deinde impudica Lucretiae exemplo vivet".⁷⁴

It is a powerful story which was known to Renaissance men and women; William Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* famously treated this very same question of female honour.⁷⁵ During this time she acted as an example to women of virtue. In some ways the noblewoman of novella 62 is similar to Lucretia; she gives into her attacker out of the fear of being exposed. But their final decisions are evidently very different. Parlamente uses Lucretia as an example for female rape victims: to remain silent is the best path to take ("l'on en prent aussi à la memoire, pour laquelle effacer Lucesse se tua"⁷⁶). Yet Geburon argues that in this situation sin is committed by the man. The problem lies in the fact that, as Parlamente implies, it is impossible for an outsider to know whether the noblewoman enjoyed her sexual encounter or not. Moreover, the fact that she has disclosed this as a story for listeners to be entertained by suggests that the woman sought to make others laugh, reducing her experience of sexual violence into For this reason, even if she is truly innocent, she is still open to scandal, owing to the framework of disclosing through storytelling. What is important to note that neither viewpoint is pronounced as the winning verdict. By simply presenting different sides of the argument, she underlines the uncertainty behind the treatment of women and their bodies: what if the noblewoman is not immodest after all? Should we reassess how we view women like her? She calls attention to the fact that modesty is itself a social construct that is fashioned by the patriarchal order which dominates women's bodies. The shame imposed on a woman's body, is dictated by men; it is not an inherent value that is ascribed to the female body by nature.

In the case of novella 62, Marguerite leaves it to the readers to decide how they should judge the woman. Without a conclusion for how the victim should be understood, at the very least, the discussion opens up the possibility for a rape victim to negotiate her place in society. While

⁷⁴ LIVY, *Book 1*, 75.

⁷⁵ See MACDONALD, "Speech, Silence, and History", 77-103.

⁷⁶ DE NAVARRE, *Heptaméron*, 379.

her confession does eventually lead to scandal, the very act of disclosing her experience, at the very least, gives her a chance to fashion her own identity and reclaim the narrative of her story of rape, even if momentarily. By awarding herself the power to recount the exposure of her own body, she makes herself both a subject and an object of male conquest. She finds her own voice in a tale of violence and silence and governs the circulation of this story by telling it herself. Her original self-portrayal as a virtuous woman allows her to control the narrative and present herself as a dignified woman, which in itself is a sign of agency.

Conclusion: What Happens When a Woman Interprets the Female Body?

This article considers how Marguerite de Navarre examines the dictates of modesty in sixteenth-century French society. In novellas 2 and 62 of her *Heptaméron*, we find stories of rape and violence in which a woman's (im)modesty is explored through themes of male conquest, nakedness, silence, reputation, and agency. Within a framework of debate and discussion, Marguerite's *devisants* raise questions about society's understanding of women and their bodies. The stories of violence unveil and critique the deeply embedded sexual politics that enables men to dominate women's bodies. But beyond portraying the body as a symbol of mere power dynamics, moments of agency propose alternative perceptions of women's experiences with their own bodies. Indeed, as we find in both novellas, a woman's relationship with God as well as the importance of her own voice may allow for a different fashioning of the female body that is perceived in a more positive light. In novella 2, the victim's transformation into a martyr completely reshapes the meaning behind the violence that is inflicted on her. Moreover, the discussions that underpin novella 62 not only reveal the instability of modesty, but also beg the question of what happens when a woman interprets her own body in her personal account of rape. Here, Marguerite, as the author of the *Heptaméron*, also exposes an opportunity for a woman writer to insert herself in a discussion that is traditionally reserved for men. Within the realm of literature, she provides more complicated understandings of the female body that account for multiple viewpoints.

Certainly, Marguerite is not the only sixteenth-century French woman writer who is preoccupied with modesty. Across the century, we locate writers who reveal an important stake in the depiction and understanding of the female body. For instance, we find Louise Labé and Pernette du Guillet, members of the *École lyonnaise*, who discuss themes of voice, desire, and chastity, and Catherine des Roches in Poitiers who seizes her body back from the poetic *blason* tradition in her flea poem, *La Puce de Madame des Roches*. Equally, Gabrielle de Coignard's posthumously printed spiritual sonnets offer an erotic interaction with the female body in a strictly religious context. These women demonstrate the power that early modern women writers have in engaging with, reconfiguring, and, at times, undermining the male-defined concept of modesty, just as Marguerite herself achieved in the *Heptaméron*. For this reason, we should further explore literary responses to modesty across the early modern period, offering more space for women writers to exhibit a variety of creative interpretations of the female body.

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