Dora E. Polachek
Binghamton University (SUNY-Binghamton), NY

Is It True or Is It Real? The Dilemma of Staging Rape in Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron*

Written more than 400 years ago, Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron* remains a work that reflects issues that were hotly debated during the Renaissance, and that continue to be relevant today. By looking at the way rape is presented in novella two, this article will focus on the tensions that arise when the same signifier belongs to two different realms. It will examine what is at stake when a writer mobilizes rape in a scenario designed to satisfy the rhetorical constraints of the “true” on the one hand (realm of God’s word) and the “real” (realm of the material world) on the other.

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**The Context**

Virtually everyone who has worked with the prologue to the *Heptaméron* has noticed its obsessive insistence to “dire vrai,” (Tetel 455) revealed by the phrase “si ne dirai rien que pure vérité” (49)\(^1\) which will characterize the opening metanarrative remarks of the storytellers. Whereas we might read true and real as synonymous, for Marguerite these are antithetical terms, each a key signifier in competing spheres. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, for Marguerite to speak of the “true” is to invoke the logos of the sacred, and concomitantly to bear witness to the superiority of the spirit to the body (Polachek, “Narrating the Truth”). Telling the truth involves a retelling of a

\(^1\) All my references to the *Heptaméron* are from de Reyff’s edition. The most easily available English edition is P. A. Chilton’s *The Heptameron*. 
perfect, immutable story that has already been spoken and recorded in the Holy Scripture — the Sainte Écriture. The truth is “la bonne nouvelle” — the Gospel. Participating in the reenactment made possible by its retelling offers what the “real” cannot — that is, joy and health. The spokesperson for the “true” is l’ancienne dame Oisille, the surrogate mother of the group of ten storytellers who have had the good fortune to survive floods and who all find themselves assembled at the Abbey of Saint Serrance, waiting for the bridges to be rebuilt which will lead them back to the “real” world of the royal court. After praising God for having spared them from death, they turn to Oisille, in search of “quelque passetemps pour adoucir l’ennui que nous porterons durant notre longue demeure” (45). The need for finding a “plaisant exercice pour passer le temps” (45) and finding it fast is so crucial that otherwise “nous serions mortes le lendemain” (45). The state of disequilibrium to which each survivor gives voice is in direct contrast to the inner balance which Oisille has maintained throughout her ordeal. This tranquility is based on a lifetime of experience which has taught her the power of the only valid pastime in which to be engaged in order to avoid ennui, and which she proposes to the group. If she is “si joyeuse et si saine” (45) it is precisely because she knows the curative power of the “truth.” As she puts it:

Mes enfants [...] je n’en ai jamais trouvé qu’un [passe-temps] qui vous puisse délivrer de vos ennuis [...] qui est la lecture des saintes Lettres en laquelle se trouve la vraie et parfaite joie de l’esprit, dont procède le repos et la santé du corps. (45)

She invites them to engage in her preferred activity: “[...] je prends la Sainte Écriture et la lis. Et en voyant et contemplant la bonté de Dieu [...] je chante de cœur et prononce de bouche les beaux psaumes et cantiques que le Saint-Esprit a composés [...]” (46).

The solution proposed by Oisille — the reading and contemplation of Scriptures, the “true word” — must be rejected first of all, for artistically pragmatic reasons. Specifically, if the group were to follow Oisille’s suggestion, the collection of stories would never exist. Equally important, she must be outvoted for political reasons. What she opts for is direct contact with holy scriptures, a proposal which even in its articulation as a possibility would raise red flags in the time period during which Marguerite lived. This highly suspect practice of