

Humanities Seminars Program

Spring 2019

TRUE STORIES FROM THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE: MARGUERITE DE NAVARRE'S ENIGMATIC *HEPTAMÉRON*



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Tuesday 1-3 PM, Dorothy Rubel Room
January 22-April 2 (No class on March 5)

TEXT: Any translation is acceptable. Here are suggestions:

Paperback: Marguerite de Navarre, *The Heptameron*, trans. P.A. Chilton (London: Penguin, 1984; rpt. 2004). ISBN 978-0-14-044355-4.

Online: <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/navarre/heptameron/heptameron.html> (From Marguerite de Navarre, *The Heptameron of Margaret, Queen of Navarre*, trans. Walter K. Kelly [London: Published for the trade, 1867].)



ABOUT THE COURSE

This course explores the world of Marguerite de Navarre and the French Renaissance—not only the era’s sumptuous art, architecture, and poetry, fueled by the “new learning” of classical humanism, but also the period’s book burnings, religious strife, high mortality rates, and near-constant war. As the king’s sister, a princess of France, and queen of Navarre by marriage, Marguerite presided over lavish banquets, interacted with intellectuals and powerbrokers throughout Europe, was privy to landmark scientific and geographical discoveries, enjoyed immense wealth and luxury during the heyday of her brother’s reign, and was a key “mover and doer” in the transmission of Italian Renaissance art and literature to France. Nevertheless, she focuses less on the triumphs than on the “flip side” of the Renaissance in her *Heptaméron*, which contains not only light-hearted tales of tricked tricksters, doltish cuckolds, and guileful adulteresses, all staples of traditional Gallic humor, but also darker stories of clergy abuse, sexual assault, tragically dysfunctional families, and misdirected treachery, violence, and revenge. Most importantly, she vows to “tell the truth.”

Our first and primary goal in this course will be to enjoy the narratives of Marguerite de Navarre and to discuss them together, reflect on parallels and differences between early modern culture and our own world, and compare our differing responses to the text. Your instructor will provide background and enrichment information in the form of short lectures, media presentations, and online readings; but in keeping with Marguerite’s own frame discussions in the *Heptaméron*, where storytellers debate the merits of each nouvelle, the characters’ vices and virtues, and anything else that comes to mind, students in this Humanities Seminar are encouraged to participate freely and actively in our class discussions. One question we will ask ourselves is why Marguerite, a woman of great power and privilege, focuses more often on the problematic underside of her culture than on its luminous, mythically heroic exterior. Are her stories nothing more than conventional cautionary tales or “lessons for ladies,” as some of her rhetoric suggests? Or are they instead “frivolous bagatelles” devoid of deep meaning— a combination of vacuous court gossip, literary borrowings, and contemporary human-interest stories—that her husband and brother urged her to write to escape the opprobrium of Sorbonne censors, who considered her religious views quasi-heretical? Or, finally, is something far more serious afoot in her enigmatic narratives, such as a well-reasoned critique of patriarchy, hints of religious and sociopolitical dissidence, and reflections on ecclesiastical abuses and imbalances of power between Church and State—all veiled beneath the surface of a “coded” text? In addition to asking ourselves these questions, we will focus on themes and motifs in the *Heptaméron* including the following: the “truth project” described in Marguerite’s introduction; references to historical figures and events; images of seeing, viewing angles, and the shifting gaze; questions of gender and class; the battle of the sexes, and early modern love and marriage; political overtones, and representations of good and bad governance; and echoes of French Protestantism. I hope you will join me for what promises to be an entertaining and instructive semester!

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

January 22, 2019:

- ❖ **Introduction to the French Renaissance and the World of the *Heptaméron***
 - **Historical context:** France under Francis I, the “new learning,” religious/reformist turmoil, blossoming of the arts, near-constant war, economic problems, disease and mortality rates
 - **Literary antecedents:** the *exemplum*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, the *nouvelle* tradition
 - **Biographical background:** the king’s sister, possible assault victim, reformist leanings, political activities, religious writings, target of censorship
 - **The *Heptameron*:** how/when it was composed, structure and themes, frame discussions and discussants, reformist vocabulary, varying interpretations, “silly little stories” vs. serious reflections on the body politic, the Church, and patriarchy
 - **Some things to look for (not exhaustive):** perspectival shifts, images of seeing and the gaze, constructions of social class and gender, ambiguities, the theme of truth, religious and Reformation elements, political resonances, parallels with our own world (#MeToo movement, clergy abuse, etc.)
 - **A sample story** (time permitting): Nouvelle 5 (time permitting)

January 29, 2019:

- ❖ **Laughter in Times of Crisis—Marguerite de Navarre’s “Silly Little Stories”**
 - Introduction to the *Heptaméron*
 - Nouvelles 6, 11, 52, 65, 71

February 5, 2019:

- ❖ **True Stories and Shifting Perspectives—Gender, Class, and Sexual Violence in the *Heptaméron* and the French Renaissance**
 - Nouvelles 1-4, 14

February 12, 2019:

- ❖ **Tales for Valentine’s Day—The Things We Do for Love**
 - Nouvelles 9, 18, 19, 25, 26, 50

February 19, 2019:

- ❖ **Double Standards and Gendered Norms—Love, Marriage, and Adultery in a Changing World**
 - Nouvelles 8, 10, 15, 20, 60, 61

February 26, 2019:

- ❖ **Religion Revisited—Clergy Abuse and Ecclesiastical Corruption**
 - Nouvelles 22, 23, 29, 31, 33, 41, 46, 48, 56

March 12, 2019:

- ❖ **The Gendered Faces of Cruelty—Harsh Patriarchs vs. Courtly Love and *La belle dame sans merci***
 - Nouvelles 21, 27, 40, 24, 36, 43

March 19, 2019:

- ❖ **Politics, Family Dramas, and the Making of a Monarch: The “Do’s and Don’ts” of Good Governance**
 - Nouvelles 12, 17, 42, 51, 53

March 26, 2019:

- ❖ **“Stranger Things”— Incest, the Macabre, and a Dominatrix**
 - Nouvelles 30, 32, 37, 39, 49

April 2, 2019:

- ❖ **“Voilà Mes Dames”—Behavioral Models and Anti-Models in an Ambiguous World**
 - Nouvelles 38, 62, 67 (+ other stories we have read, such as *nouvelles* 2, 5, 24, 43, etc.)
 - Conclusion(s) to the course

