

Bryana Woodson

November 2017

### **The Heptameron: Story 8**

Infidelity has taken different meanings in society through the years. There was a time when it was normal for a man to have at least one mistress in addition to his wife, although this was not the case for women. In *The Heptameron: Story 8*, Marguerite de Navarre criticizes not only the husband's adultery, but also the double standard applied to women and men who are unfaithful, revealing the superficiality of marriage. She does this by paying close attention to the aftermath of the husband, Bornet's, mistake and his wife's then-ruined reputation.

The narrative begins when the main characters, "Oiselle, Hircan, and Parlamente - gather once more to tell stories," (Heptameron Information Society, "The Heptameron - Day 8"). There were originally supposed to be 100 stories once the narrative was complete, but Marguerite died before she could finish them, therefore, there are only 72 stories out of the intended 100 in existence, ("The Heptameron - Day 8"). According to Penguin Unearthed on Wordpress, "the stories and discussions of the Heptameron depict confrontations based on, among other elements, gender," ("Travelling Feminist: Marguerite De Navarre"). The narrative focuses heavily on Bornet's dominance in the relationship through the fact that his entire plan is put together without his wife's knowledge. She is seen as an afterthought, a secondary love interest easily discarded in comparison to the chambermaid whom he wants. The story also deals heavily with the husband's actual act of infidelity involving said chambermaid, yet he claims that his wife is

“a very decent and respectable woman,” (*Heptameron: Story 8*, p. 276). If this were the case, why would he feel the need to go outside of his marriage, or desire anything more? There is a double standard present in the relationship because he would not have consequences that come with his adultery, whereas his wife would.

An imbalance of power is also shown in that men can decide on a whim that they wish to take a lover, and the wife has no authority to object, even if they know of their husband’s wishes. Bornet’s wife has good social standing and is devoted to him; it says a lot about his character and greed that he would jeopardize that union in any way just because he is seemingly unsatisfied. His plan to sleep with the chambermaid and then allow his neighbor in on it shows that he is careless as well; it is crazy that he does not think about or perhaps even care about the fact that the chambermaid and his wife talk on a regular basis.

For the author, the *Heptameron*, “served as a psychological aid enabling her to question, judge, and expose transgressive behaviors of those around her, both at court and in her society,” (Bradley, “A Transgenerational, Cryptonymy, and Sociometric Analysis of Marguerite De Navarre's *Heptameron*,” 59). At the time, Marguerite was living at French Court and she used writing the *Heptameron* as a jab at their behavior and the differences in gender, as well as how power was distributed among genders. Bornet’s adultery is imperative to the story because it sets up Marguerite’s entire argument that men are obviously held to different standards than women at the time.

The hypocrisy that surrounds the events of the husband’s infidelity is alarming because he can do whatever he wants with whoever he wants and people do not think twice about it, nor do men have to hide their unfaithfulness like a woman would have to. And yet, Bornet tries to

because he does not want to hurt his wife. He still cares about her, just not enough to remain faithful to her alone. When women participated in adultery by choice, they would lose the respect of their peers and would be viewed in a position as low as prostitution. So the fact that men would have mistresses, and some would flaunt them around solely because they could, is what Marguerite is trying to illustrate when she denounces Bornet's infidelity through his embarrassment at his mistake. Carol Thysell viciously demeans Bornet and other men in her novel *The Pleasure of Discernment: Marguerite de Navarre as Theologian*, saying, "All your [men's] pleasure is derived from dishonoring women, and your honor depends on killing other men in war," (Thysell, *The Pleasure of Discernment Marguerite De Navarre as Theologian*). The harshness of this statement could not be more necessary because, whether the husband flaunts his unfaithfulness or not, Bornet does take pleasure from having more than one woman, or at least thinking he does.

However, he does show compassion for his wife once he realizes what he did; he tries to keep his mistake hushed in order to save her reputation, but this is proven impossible: "He told his friend not to breathe a word to anybody, but secrets of this sort nearly always end up being proclaimed from the [roof-tops]," (*Heptameron: Story 8*, p. 278). If it had been the husband who would have lost his good standing, he and his friend would have done everything in their power to cover it up. Although, while the husband wants to keep his wife's mistaken adultery under the radar, a woman's indiscretion is viewed as less important and the news gets out.

After this happens, Longarine, a young widow in town, rebukes the image of husbands who cheat on their wives saying, "Your wives are so good, and they love you so much, that even if you gave them horns like a stag's, they'd still convince themselves, and everybody else, that

they were garlands of roses!” (*Heptameron: Story 8*, p. 279). What Longarine is trying to say is that husbands who cheat on their wives are rarely served consequences as Bornet was. Their wives aren’t given the authority to do anything else but accept their husband’s love and affection when the husband chooses to give it; they are not supposed to demand it. Marguerite is aiming to show that this double standard is absolutely ridiculous and sexist, and succeeds.

At the time Marguerite is writing the *Heptameron*, many families exist in companionship with adultery, and French court is certainly no exception. Women had very few rights of their own in the 1550s; and legally their rights were almost nonexistent, their fathers and husbands “rightfully owned” them. The *Heptameron*, “abounds in examples of the all-pervasive masculine power struggle,” including the struggle between Bornet’s desires outside of his marriage and how his wife felt undesired herself, and that’s why she hijacked his plan (Bernard, "Feminist Rhetoric for the Renaissance Woman in Marguerite De Navarre's Heptameron" 73).

The men of the time were seen to be the powerhouses of society. They exercised that freedom to the umpteenth degree, while there was only one way for women to exercise their limited freedom: “In only one way can women preserve their integrity in a masculine oriented society - by being virtuous. Women who share their sexual favors indiscriminately lose all respect and become as if it were public domain,” (Bernard, "Feminist Rhetoric for the Renaissance Woman in Marguerite De Navarre's Heptameron" 73). This is what happened to Bornet’s wife in the *Heptameron*; they tried to keep the mistake a secret, but as soon as word started spreading that his wife had slept with their neighbor, her reputation was ruined, even though it was Bornet’s mistake and she did not know it wasn’t her husband in the first place.

The author also alludes to the superficiality of their marriage in the fact that the couple do not realize that who they are sleeping with is not who they originally thought. When you are married, you know the other person so well, you should be able to tell if it was not them in bed beside you. Even speaking from a strictly biological standpoint, people have different tendencies in bed, so the fact that they do not realize their mistake until afterward argues that their relationship cannot be that intimate in reality. Also, there has to be a reason the husband wants to go outside the marriage in the first place. He must not be getting everything that he wants out of the relationship because, if he was, there'd be no reason for adultery. Before they even sleep with different people, the whole reason his wife is in the bed is because she wants to trick him. She thinks he will realize after a minute that it's her. How much can a marriage truly mean if all you are trying to do is oneup the other person? There is no telling whether the marriage was arranged and that that was the reason for their unfamiliarity with each other, but one thing is for sure: they are not in an intimate relationship devoted solely to one another. Marriages at the time could be seen as stiff and impersonal, which is what Marguerite chooses to criticize here. Marriage should be more intimate than the union Bornet and his wife share.

Bornet's wife does not put up with his antics for long, though. After Bornet realizes that it was his wife he slept with and not the chambermaid, his wife, "upsets the balance of power between husband and wife," (Cholakian, *Rape and Writing in the Heptameron of Marguerite De Navarre* 73-74). The wife has some power in that she is smart and cunning in her plot to trick her husband into sleeping with her and she upsets the power struggle because she now has the upperhand. As Cholakian sums it up perfectly, "Quick to seize this advantage, she lays down an ultimatum. He must change his ways and 'recognize' her for what she is, a wife who is not only

virtuous but desirable,” (Cholakian, *Rape and Writing in the Heptameron of Marguerite De Navarre* 73-74). The wife takes her opportunity to demand what she wants from her husband because he’s now in a position of submission due to his mistake. She does not know the full repercussions of the situation until it gets around town that she slept with the neighbor, but the husband is trying to make up for his mistake by agreeing to her terms:

“It there was ever a man who was dumbfounded and despairing, it was this poor husband. There was his wife, looking so pretty, and yet so sensible and so chaste, and he had gone and left her for a girl who did not love him. What was worse, he had had the misfortune to have gone and made her do something wicked without her even realizing what was happening.” (*Heptameron: Story 8*, p. 278)

It takes the wife’s trickery for the husband to fully devote himself to her, as well as seeing that she is indeed desirable.

Through the husband’s infidelity, the cost of his wife’s reputation because of his mistake, and the double standard, Marguerite argues against the superficiality some marriages had at the time the story was written. The imbalanced cultural standards and consequences of those standards encroaches on the sacredness and meaning of marriage while also sabotaging the intimacy of the union.

## Works Cited

- Bernard, Robert W. "Feminist Rhetoric for the Renaissance Woman in Marguerite De Navarre's Heptameron." *Chimères*, vol. 15, no. 2, Jan. 1982, p. 73.,  
doi:10.17161/chimeres.v15i2.6011.
- Bradley, Kathleen M. *A Transgenerational, Cryptonymy, and Sociometric Analysis of Marguerite De Navarre's Heptameron*. University of Arizona, pp. 59–59, *A Transgenerational, Cryptonymy, and Sociometric Analysis of Marguerite De Navarre's Heptameron*.
- Cholakian, Patricia Francis. "Rape and Writing in the Heptameron of Marguerite De Navarre." *Rape and Writing in the Heptameron of Marguerite De Navarre*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, pp. 73–74.
- "The Heptameron - Day 8." *Complete Text of the Heptameron plus Plot Summary and Analysis*., Heptameron Information Society, [www.heptameron.info/day8.html](http://www.heptameron.info/day8.html).
- Navarre, Marguerite de. "The Heptameron: Story 8." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Third Edition ed., C, W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 276–280.
- Thysell, Carol. *The Pleasure of Discernment Marguerite De Navarre as Theologian*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- "Travelling Feminist: Marguerite De Navarre." *Penguin Unearthed*, 8 July 2011,  
[penguinunearthed.wordpress.com/2011/07/09/travelling-feminist-marguerite-de-navarre/](http://penguinunearthed.wordpress.com/2011/07/09/travelling-feminist-marguerite-de-navarre/).

