Challenging Gallicism: The Role of Hircan’s Anti-feminist Rhetoric in Marguerite’s Heptaméron (VII & XLIX)

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Ouy, dist Hircan, le plaisir et la folie, qui sont deux grands advocatz pour les dames. – Si nous n’avions d’autres advocatz, dist Parlamente, que eulx avecq vous, nostre cause seroit mal soutenue ; mais celles qui sont vaincues en plaisir ne se doibvent plus nommer femmes, mais hommes, desquelz la fureur et la concupiscence augmente leur honneur ; car ung homme qui se venge de son ennemy et le tue pour ung desmentir en est estimé plus gentil compagnon ; aussy est-il quant il en ayme une douzaine avecq sa femme. Mais l’honneur des femmes a autre fondement : c’est douceur, patience et chasteté. (Nouvelle XLIII: 301)

[Parlamente:] Hircan, peult estre celle que vous pensez qui en deboit estre la plus marrye auroit bien de quoy se recompenser s’il luy plaisoit. (Prologue: 8-9)

Introduction

With a combination of onomastics and attention to historical detail, much debate in the study of Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptaméron over the past 80 years (Jourda, Krailsheimer, Palermo, Cazauran, Frank, Vulcan, Chilton, etc.) has gone into attempting to identify the authentic sources behind the ten devisants that populate Marguerite’s coterie of stranded storytellers.1 While such study has its merits, what is more crucial to understand is that each of the ten figures represents a literary/philosophical type; and, regardless of any apparent similarities with Marguerite’s contemporaries, each is ultimately the literary/rhetorical invention of a writer with a definite literary agenda. Embodying various sixteenth-century ideologies into distinct fictional personalities, Marguerite-as-creator synergistically meshes competing ideas into what has been termed “a polyphony of voices” which allow for the attainment of an eventual overarching unity through diversity. What is this collective message? Above all else, it is of course, tapping into Marguerite’s evangelical leanings, one that seeks to redress hypocrisy and impropriety in religious worship (particularly amongst men of the cloth) and, perhaps more importantly, it attempts—entering into the querelle des femmes, of which Marguerite was a contemporary—to confront (as indicated in the first epigraph above) the accepted disparity between the sexes in Renaissance France. The current study will deal with the latter of these concerns, as it examines the role of the anti-feminist rhetoric of Marguerite’s most brazenly Gallic character, Hircan. While it is anachronistic, procrustean, and even improper to label

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1 Corinne F. Wilson, in the “Classroom Tools” section of Colette Winn’s MLA Approaches to Teaching Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptameron (2007), includes a very useful and thorough chart, which refers to Jourda, Krailsheimer, and Palermo, as it lists possible historical identities alongside social and symbolic roles for each devisant.
Marguerite a “feminist” or “protofeminist,” she is, as asserted by respected Marguerite scholar Rouben Cholakian, “one of the earliest to proclaim a space for the woman writer” (2) as well as being one who “never misses an opportunity to point an accusatory finger at abusive and disloyal husbands and lustful men of the cloth” (2). What’s more, Marguerite confronts head-on the accepted early-modern male ideologies used to justify or excuse manly misconduct, arming her feminine public with an antidote to masculine social entitlement. Written by a woman for her female contemporaries (Kathleen Llewelyn cites Cathleen Bauschatz, who “points out [that] the phrase ‘Voylà, mes dames,’ frequently repeated by the devisants in both the stories and the accompanying discussions, ‘implies that women are the primary audience intended by the storytellers’” (52)), Marguerite’s Heptaméron is decidedly meant to empower and instruct its female readership, emphasizing qualities unique to their gender (douceur, patience, chasteté) while insisting upon a woman’s abilities to intellectually manifest herself as man’s equal: having “bien de quoy se recompenser s’il luy plaisoit.”

Both epigraphs chosen to introduce this study, the reader will notice, are rebukes from Parlamente (usually identified as Marguerite’s alter ego) directed towards her abusive and disloyal husband Hircan, who cannot help but perpetuate medieval attitudes concerning women, insisting upon the inconstancy (givenness to plaisir) and folly (folie) commonly attributed to the “weak and imbecile (sex)” (Davis, Society and Culture 65). Manifesting the same bon gaulois spirit as that demonstrated by Gargantua’s troupe of jovial travellers from Rabelais’ literary world, Hircan is an unambiguous representation of the medieval Gallic ideology. Coarse, crude, and outspoken in approach and demeanor, the Gallic Hircan gregariously praises masculine prowess (in the arts of war, sport, and seduction) and laughs loudly in mockery of all that goes against (or attempts to undermine) his phallogocentric credo—especially virtuous women. Sallies, such as those exchanged between spouses above, beg the question that prepares the thesis of our current study: What is the literary role of Hircan, the archi-mysogynist and champion of Gallic codes of masculinity and chivalry, within a text written by a woman for women and, furthermore, to what should we attribute his exaggerated and unabashed misogyny? In other words, why would Marguerite (besides for a desire for realism—a commitment to “dire vrai”—through polyphony) invent a literary character that so brazenly speaks out and seems to arm the opposition against the very feminine virtues she extols? To put forward a response to this question, we argue that Hircan’s anti-feminist voice is an effective rhetorical tool for Marguerite for multiple reasons: 1) his Gallic approach is so grotesquely conveyed and reprehensible that the

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2 In her fine essay “Afin Que Vous Connaissiez, Mesdames”: The Heptameron and Conduct Literature for Women” (Winn volume, pp. 52-56), Kathleen Llewelyn presents Marguerite’s collection as having the clear didactic objective of teaching her young female readership the importance of virtuous behavior and honorable conduct—a point with which we fully agree.

3 In the sixteenth century, a fascination with France’s past as Gaul is particularly prevalent. In opposition to the stern war-like demeanor of their Roman conquerors, the colonized fair Gallic race was noted (even by Julius Caesar himself) for its indomitable pride, the coarseness of its humor, and the qualities of the convivial bon vivant it espoused. (See C.-G. Dubois. Celtes et Gaulois au XVIe siècle. Paris: Vrin, 1972.)

4 It is also of note, appealing to the aforementioned onomastics, that the presumed identity of Hircan (a supposed anagram of Hanric or Henri) is that of Marguerite’s second husband, Henri II d’Albret, roi de Navarre (P. Cholakian 34; Wilson 23), which could raise important questions as to the happiness and equality within her own marriage. Still, for our concerns, we find it important to maintain that Hircan is a literary type meant to embody the Gallic, phallogocentric ideologies of 16th-century France.

5 For an analysis of Marguerite’s use of polyphony to expose social realities, see Deborah N. Losse’s “Narrating Feminine Consciousness in the Age of Reform.”
reader immediately finds herself at odds with him; 2) the point-counterpoint banter between Hircan and Parlamente allow Marguerite to establish a dialectical equality between the two that subsequently allows Oisille, the authoritative female figure, to intervene and shift the balance towards feminine virtue; and finally, 3) in the very tales that Hircan uses to illustrate female inconstancy and folly, as will be demonstrated through textual analysis, he subverts his own position in proving women more than capable of outwitting their male counterparts—subsequently, yet again allowing Marguerite and Oisille to quickly rise in support to balm bruised feminine virtue. In short, Marguerite represents offensive Gallic rhetoric and ideologies through Hircan in order to challenge, discount, and ultimately dismiss them.

According to the greatly lamented Patricia Cholakian, author of the ground-breaking Rape and Writing in the Heptameron, Marguerite’s male devisants are almost always stock characters of late medieval (or, as we would say, Gallic) contempt for women: “Hircan, Saffredent, and Simontault are all misogynists, preoccupied with denigrating and deflowering women” (34). Notably, she excludes the elderly Geburon, who is hinted at more than once as being beyond his sexual peak, and the Neoplatonist Dagoucin, who subscribes to fashionable Italian “Renaissance” theories that actually support Marguerite’s ideals of feminine virtue and honor. Far removed from Castiglione’s ideal Italian courtier, the Gallic champion of carnality only demonstrates a brutish and crude form of feigned sprezzatura (as we shall see in our analysis of Nouvelle VII) insofar as it will allow him to attain his sexual conquests. Moreover, while Gallic boys were allowed to be boys, early-modern Frenchwomen were still expected to protect their virtue and reputation. Echoing Cholakian, Philip Ford also points to the inequities Marguerite highlights with her choice of male stock characters:

The attitudes of the male devisants such as Hircan, Saffredent, and Simontaut certainly give credence to the notion that male honor simply resides in the seduction of women, whereas female honor requires the avoidance of the slightest hint of sexual scandal, as undeserved as it may be. (70)

Given Marguerite’s mise-en-scène of such social double standards, one is lead to wonder how these Gallic codes of masculinity might have personally affected our writer. As the classically educated, polyglot sister of a king, Marguerite still more often than not found herself reduced to either the target of masculine conquests or a simple politico-financial bargaining chip. Keenly

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6 Geburon’s apparent sexual impotency in his old age is an implicit reference for the chief misogynists Hircan and Saffredent any time the former takes the side of women on matters of virtue and honor (cf. Nouvelle XII).

7 Florentine Neoplatonism, besides being in vogue in Marguerite’s court, also presents the ideal masculine counterpart to Hircan’s Gallicism. It should come to no surprise that the one male devisant that successfully catches Parlemente’s eye is none other than Dagoucin. While Il libro del Cortegiano was a best-seller in France and was, as stated above, a favorite in Marguerite’s Valois court, few French noblemen were willing to abandon their own masculine ideals to put Castiglione’s theories into practice. Dagoucin represents a notable exception.

8 While See Jean-Claude Carron’s exploration of the Renaissance tendency to equate female honor with chastity: “Les Noms de l’honneur féminin à la Renaissance.”

9 The historical work of Natalie Zemon Davis, Kirs Stjerna, and Margaret King provide fine analyses of the education available to women and the plight of even the most dignified and elite of women in the early modern period and the Reformation (see bibliography). Carla Freccero’s article explains how this unfortunate tradition passed down even to Marguerite’s daughter Jeanne d’Albret, whom her uncle King Francis I practically sold for a political alliance.
aware of the injustices levelled at her by a society dominated by greatly biased ideals of Gallic masculine chivalry, Marguerite would certainly have needed an outlet for her frustrations. Writing, as stated above, certainly served a didactic purpose for Marguerite; but, at the same time, her *douce escription* was equally a means by which she responded to and “quietly challenged the norms of male-dominated society” (Frecceo 147, our italics). As Patricia Cholakian suggests, the *Heptaméron* uses misogyny to “deconstruct the analogues on which [the stories] are based and to argue for women’s rights to speak out against the structures that oppress them” (78). A standard-bearer for early-modern women, Marguerite’s pen was also her sword.

Yet, encoded in the bedrock of Marguerite’s didactic and antidotal writing, we find Hircan, the subject of our study, a character that singularly, fully, and blatantly embodies the phallogocentric point of view of women as subservient to men. According to his Gallic codes of chivalry, women are created merely and expressly for the benefit of men. In one textual example of his Gallic pro-male/anti-female ideology, at the conclusion of the Neoplatonist idealist Dagoucin’s tale (Nouvelle IX) of a nobleman’s perfect love for a woman, guarding the secret of which causes his death, Hircan retorts (while the women still have fresh tears in their eyes):

> Voylà le plus grand fol dont je ouys jamais parler ! Est-il raisonnable, par vostre foy, que nous morions pour les femmes, qui ne sont faictes que pour nous, et que nous craignions leur demander ce que Dieu leur commande de nous donner ? (53, our italics)

Hircan’s Gallic chivalry prepares him to die a noble death for patria, honor, and creed; albeit, for the love of a woman, a creature he esteems created for his pleasure and service, death is but a pointless folly. All the same, in a shrewd rhetorical gesture, Hircan is *never* afforded the final word in Marguerite’s fictional cosmos. Emerging from the polyphony of voices in the *Heptaméron* is a feminist dialectic intended to allow Renaissance women to subvert masculine codes of chivalry, of which Hircan is the representative type.

**Grotesque Gallicism and Feminist Dialectic: Subverting Masculine Dominance through Rhetorical Equality**

One need not read far into the *Heptaméron* to encounter Hircan’s condescending views of women, as Marguerite introduces them as early as her Prologue, which acts as the outermost frame—or *cornice*—to the 72 *nouvelles*. As the ten characters who will become our *devisants* find themselves stranded at the Serrance Abbey high in the Pyrenees, having been brought together after surviving a perilous and unprecedented flood, they debate a suitable pastime to occupy the ten days it will take to reconstruct a washed-out bridge. With a fair dose of verisimilitude written into her character, Parlamente first defers to her husband, Hircan, then asks Lady Oisille, a woman with “tant d’expérience,” to come up with a way for them to amuse themselves in the interim. When the long response of the elderly advocate of Evangelism concludes with the decision that their days should be spent in personal scripture study and prayer, true to Gallic form, Hircan is the first to speak up in favor of corporal exercise, suggesting that mornings be spent in prayer and evenings devoted to something more physical and pleasurable. As a compliant Oisille expresses her wishes to respect “la pluralité d’opinions” and heeds that of Hircan, in fitting haste, the Gallic knight reveals his colors:
Quant à moy, dist-il, si je pensois que le passetemps que je vouldrois choisir fust aussi 
agréable à quelcun de la compagnie comme à moy, mon opinion seroit bientost dicte ;
dont pour ceste heure je me tairay et en croiray ce que les aultres diront. (8)

Despite his ill-fated attempts at subtlety, Hircan’s publicly stated desire to pass the afternoons in 
love-making not only makes Parlamente blush, it also leads her to quickly intervene and take the 
floor, in a prototype gesture for others to follow. Prior to Parlamente’s announcing her decisive 
idea to engage the entire company in a sort of imitation of Boccaccio, with each recounting 
stories (with the marked exception of these being “true”), Marguerite includes a revealing 
exchange between Parlamente and Hircan —opposing “social and sexual intercourse” (P. 
Cholakian 36, her italics). When the wife blushes, the omniscient narrator, who has already at 
this point described Hircan as “incontinant” (wavering, unfaithful), tellingly suggests something 
more of the husband’s crude nature when she reveals that the wife blushed “pensant qu’il parlast 
pour elle” (our italics): the gerundive clause strongly hints at the possibility that Hircan may well 
have been thinking of another of the company. Parlamente’s retort, however, allows her an 
equalizing response to her husband’s boorish uncouthness: “Hircan, peult estre celle que vous 
pensez qui en debvoit estre la plus marrye auroit bien de quoy se recompenser s’il luy plaisoit [
[…]]” (8-9). In asserting herself, speaking as a woman, as one capable of enacting revenge 
if she so desired, Parlamente takes the upper hand and the rebuffed Hircan glibly accepts her rejection 
of “ung passetemps particulier” and agrees to adopt her opinion as his own. As revealed in this 
early banter, in which characters are introduced and the work is framed, Marguerite has 
delicately crafted a negative image of Hircan as a crass, disrespectful philanderer while at the 
same time positioning Parlamente as quite capable of using her wit to take an intellectual 
advantage over him. Additionally, in the end, Parlamente’s social proposal wins out over 
Hircan’s sexual one; and, at the same time, her equalizing dialectic is rendered even more 
effective in canceling out Hircan’s Gallic voice when the revered Oisille intervenes in support of 
Parlamente as the authoritative voice.11

In the all-important polyphonic discussion of devisants between nouvelles, this 2-
females-against-1-male dialectic manifests itself each time Hircan puts forward a brash comment 
to offend the women of the party. In such instances, Parlamente (or another female devisant) 
speaks up in defense of womanhood and female virtue, allowing Oisille (or at times Parlamente) 
to team against him and intervene as ultimate judge, effectively condemning Hircan’s negative 
opinion of and outright disrespect for femininity. For example, at the conclusion of Nouvelle 
XVII, without as much as dignifying Hircan’s provocative comments with a response, Oisille 
directly draws attention to the fact that his opinion need not be heeded as he, an adherent to 
Gallic tradition, is merely “accoustumé de dire mal des femmes” (137). In another fine example 
of such intervention, in Nouvelle LIX, Hircan appears exceptionally reprehensible, reflecting the

11 In charting the ten devisants, we notice that the 5 male / 5 female division establishes numerical equality of voice 
from the outset; however, if we rank each member of the party by order of the importance and clout of the voice of 
each, it becomes clear that the women are, on the whole, more wise and dignified than the men. This is, perhaps, 
not the case at the bottom echelons, where Nomerfide and Ennasuite are certainly less laudatory characters (and are, 
more often than not, there simply there to support or to provide comic relief); however, Oisille and Parlamente both 
surpass Hircan in dignity and clout, and the opinions of Longarine are, at the very least, as important as those of the 
next male character in line (Gebrun or Dagoucin). Despite numerical equality, the hierarchy of wisdom in the 
Heptameron decidedly favors the women thus allowing Marguerite to develop her points on feminine virtue through 
polyphony. See also, Chilton, p. 13 and P. Cholakian, p. 35.
worst of his society’s attitude towards women, when, at the conclusion of Longarine’s story of a cunning wife duping her husband, Hircan audaciously justifies rape, saying that “ung homme fort et hardy ne crainct point d’en assaillir deux foibles, et ne fault point d’en venir à bout” (364). Not only does he condone this revolting act, he even suggests that in the place of the husband: “J’eusse embrassé ma femme, dist Hircan, et l’eusse emportée dehors; et puis, eusse faict de sa chamberiere ce qu’il m’eust pleu par amour ou par force” (364, our italics). Naturally, his uttered, subjective disregard for feminine virtue—and intellect—does not rest well with Parlamente, who responds without hesitation to this crude bravado. In this instance, where Hircan barbarically and animalistically uses sexual dominance as a means of revenge and asserting empire over the weaker sex, Parlamente dryly devalues his comment under the guise that “il suffit assez que vous sçachiez faire mal” (364). Her retort immediately sends Hircan into a recoil, from which position he disingenuously claims to wish neither to scandalize nor to “soustenir ung mauvais faict” (365) and attempts to defend his love for his wife before the company. Far from buying into his backpedalling, Parlamente assumes a higher road: “Vous en direz ce qu’il vous plaira, […] mais j’ay occasion de me contanter de ce que j’ay veu et congnue de vous; et de ce que je n’ay point sceu, n’en ay-je point voulu doubter ny encore moins m’en enquerir” (365). The savvy wife claims herself content to base her opinion of her husband upon empirical observation rather than accepting his vain proclamations, making it clear to Hircan that what she already knows—without inquiring elsewhere—is enough to condemn him as a reprehensible man. Working within the dialectical structure detailed above, Oisille adds insult to injury when she takes the discussion to an even more elevated level in making this a matter of honor: “Si est-il aucunes foys necessaires, dist Oisille, de s’enquerir des choses qui peuvent toucher l’honneur d’une maison pour y donner ordre […]” (365). With both women citing the very chivalrous ideals of love and honor to which Hircan supposedly adheres as a proponent of Gallic chivalry, we see one of many instances where a combination of Parlamente and Oisille team together to combat the offensive misogyny of Hircan’s irreverent commentary. At the conclusion of Nouvelle X, the famous story of Florida’s resistance to the sexual advances of the noble chevalier Amadour (another medieval Gallic Hircan type), we see more of the same. When Hircan suggests that “une femme ne peult faire moindre resistance que de crier […] et si Amadour eut esté plus amoureux que crainctif, il n’eust pas laissé pour si peu son entreprinse [having only] feit une partie de son devoir” (83), Oisille questions both Hircan’s logic and his perverse sense of duty (devoir) when she replies “Quel devoir? […] Appellez-vous faire son devoir à ung serviteur qui veult avoir par force sa maistresse, à laquelle il doibt toute reverence et obeissance?” Unmoved and employing simple and direct rejoinder, Parlamente and Oisille are able to silence Hircan’s most elaborate defenses of his monstrous brand of “chivalry”.

Still, Hircan’s crass commentary and misogynistic barbs are not limited to these one or two tales; rather, they are peppered throughout the collection, never allowing the reader to forget that—in spite of his charisma and gallantry that might render him attractive to some—Hircan is a grotesque example of the worst of early-modern society. In multiple other instances, he continues to defend rape as a male right.\(^{12}\) In the discussion following one of Patricia

\(^{12}\) Rape, and its avoidance, as demonstrated by Patricia Cholakian in *Rape and Writing*, is a key motif throughout the *Heptaméron*. Not only is this the ultimate act of violation, as we bear witness through the Hircan, common practice and a major indicator of woman’s value in society, many read Nouvelle IV as an autobiographical account of Marguerite’s near rape as an adolescent at the hand of a family friend, rendering this theme even more personal and reprehensible: “It is our considered conviction that Marguerite’s early traumatic experience or experiences against
Cholakian’s key examples of avoided rape and the defense of feminine virtue, Ennasuite’s Nouvelle IV, where a lady-in-waiting comes to rescue her mistress, a potential rape victim, ultimately scaring away the assailant as his would-be prey viciously frees herself from his grasp, Hircan is lead to resentfully suggest:

Il me semble, ce dist Hircan que le grand gentil homme, dont vous avez parlé, estoit si despourveu de cueur, qu’il n’estoit digne d’être ramentu ; car, ayant une telle occasion, ne debvoit, ne pour vielle ne pour jeune, laisser son entreprinse. Et fault bien dire que son cueur n’estoit pas tout plain d’amour, veu que la craintce de mort et de honte y trouva encores place. [...] Il devoit tuer la vieille, dist Hircan ; et quant la jeune se feut veue sans secours, eust esté demy vaincue. [...] Si j’en estois jusques là, dist Hircan, je me tiendrois pour deshonoré si je ne venois à fin de mon intention. (34)

This early apology by Hircan in favor of male empire over female virtue—for which his above comments following Nouvelle X are but a refrain—establishes a tenor for his character that clearly illustrates his unrelenting and utter lack of respect for women. Such brazen and unbridled masculinity is Hircan’s *modus operandi*; and, still firmly embracing Gallic codes of honor, he continues unrepentantly laughing, mocking, and boasting—demonstrating his bravura at every possible occasion. Additionally, while he finds it perfectly normal that he brag of his own sexual exploits, “Je n’en parle pour moy ne pour tous les mariez; car j’ay autant ou plus de femmes qu’il m’en fault” (IX: 53), without regards to who may be aware (“Il me semble, mes dames, que, si tous ceulx qui ont faict de pareilles offences à leurs femmes estoient pugniz de pareille pugnition, Hircan et Saffredent devroit avoir belle paour” (Longarine, following Nouvelle VIII: 47)), he holds his wife to an unequal double standard: “Je suis bien ayse, dist Hircan, d’avoir une femme qui n’est point scandaleuse” (XXV: 220). Once again, we must insist upon the fact that Hircan is a stock character, an exaggerated example of the type of “disloyal and abusive husband” who adheres to Gallic codes of chivalry that he believes imparted to him a supposed superiority over women. Inasmuch as this is true, Marguerite’s reasons for creating Hircan in such an overtly distasteful way may very well be to level him and the ideologies he represents as a rhetorical straw man. In depicting him as an unabashed misogynist, the narrator subverts him. Consistently losing in battles of wit with his wife and Oisille, stronger female characters within the work subvert Hircan. To quote Patricia Cholakian, “Marguerite de Navarre’s representations of how men construct feminine desire [she singles out Hircan] conceal a subversive project that ultimately opens up a space for female power” (153). Finally, as we shall demonstrate with the remainder of our study in focusing on individual tales, in two of his own stories that unwittingly praise women for their intellectual capacities and forthrightness, Hircan—as Marguerite’s literary invention—subverts himself.

**In Praise of Folly? Analyzing Hircan’s Tales of Female Ingenuity (VII, XLIX)**

Of all ten *devisants*, the lowest rung of totemic importance is unquestionably occupied by Nomerfide, the simple-minded servant whose contributions, to quote Wilson, are intended only
to provide “comic relief” (23). In fact, her story on the first day, Nouvelle VI, of a one-eyed man whose attempts to catch his wife in adultery backfire on him due to her craftiness, is merely “meant to amuse the company” (P. Cholakian 68). All the same, when she relates the moral of her story in terms of female astuteness, Hircan, impelled by a perceived sense of masculine necessity, has to contest her conclusions when she suggests that “Par cecy, voyez-vous, mes dames, combien est prompte et subtile une femme à eschapper d’un dangier. Et, si, pour couvrir ung mal, son esprit a promtement trouvé remede” (40). His response, which is delivered in the subsequent story (Nouvelle VII), is intended to turn the tables and demonstrate “la finesse d’un homme” (42), as he recounts the tale of a Parisian merchant whose wit saves the honor of his much younger neighbor who he has successfully seduced. Notwithstanding, in these attempts to prove man to be a woman’s equal in the realm of cleverness (finesse), Hircan does little more than level the playing field and deconstruct man’s supposed intellectual superiority. In the words of Patricia Cholakian, “The entire tale is carefully constructed to betray Hircan’s contempt for women” (69).

Furthermore still, Hircan’s rhetoric does more than simply calibrate the gender divide: While the cunning wife in Nomerfide’s tale uses quick thinking to outwit her husband, the “hero” of Hircan’s story has no other choice than to resort to, yet again, rape.

For a closer look at Nouvelle VII, when the sly merchant and his infatuated young mistress, whose mother has forbidden her to see him again, are denounced by a chambermaid and find themselves on the verge of being discovered by the mother, something that would lead to the young girl’s being sent to a convent, Hircan’s “gallant” hero (a “friend” of his), ever nonchalant (“d’un tel cas ne fut poinct estonné” (41)), adroitly responds to the situation. Upon the mother’s entering the room, he passionately grabs the older woman, throws her onto a nearby couch, and turns his sexual fury on her. Simultaneously shocked and pleased, the old woman is unsure how to react to the man’s sexual assertions:

Et n’eust esté qu’elle crya si fort que ses varletz et chamberieres vindrent à son secours, elle eust passé le chemyn qu’elle craingnoit que sa fille marchast. Parquoy, à force de bras, osterent ceste pauvre vieille d’entre les mains du marchant, sans que jamais elle peust sçavoir l’occasion pourquoy il l’avoit ainsy tormentée. (42, our italics)

Obviously answering to Nomerfide’s comical tale with one of his own—“The doubtful humor in Hircan’s story is based on the assumption that sex with an old lady is funny” (P. Cholakian 70)—his address to women (“Voyez-vous, mes dames…”) could not be more maladroit. Once again backtracking, Hircan attempts to redefine himself as gallant and explain that due to male finesse (in a comical-as-pathetic bastardization of Castiglione), women can confidently have relationships with such men when the latter are committed to preserving their ladies’ honor. Neither Longarine nor Parlamente—in a model feminine dialect—is wont to bite on Hircan’s explanation, seeing through it as a desperate attempt to justify his own misdeeds in the sexual arena. In sum, in this nouvelle, Marguerite allows Hircan to unwittingly undermine his own

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13 In her reading, Cholakian also draws upon social class and milieu, citing the bourgeois merchant’s defense of his actions residing in the fact that the young girl being taken advantage of is but another bourgeoisie. Reading beyond this, she suggests that perhaps the merchant “friend” is little but a noble, like Hircan, who is justifying his own dalliances and opportunistically suggesting—as he does after his tale—that it is perfectly acceptable for a man to seduce a woman (or for a woman to allow herself to be seduced) as long as that man promises to defend her honor/reputation. (See pages 68-71.)
debasing views by inadvertently demonstrating equality between men and women; and, if this is not enough, not only is his story counterproductive to his attempts to glorify male cleverness, his rationalizations are exposed as disingenuous and his approach is grotesquely conveyed. As a retrospective *bilan* of Nouvelle VI and Nouvelle VII (even the entire first day, if we include the aforementioned tales IV, IX, and X), especially when considering the discussion of the *devisants*, women claim a significant victory over Hircan’s pretentious Gallicism in which his kind and he, as an unfaithful spouse, are vilified for their unrepentant incontinence and unbridled masculinity.

For the Gallic Hircan, being bested by women neither silences him nor slows him down. Rather, the female affront renders him increasingly crass in his desire to reclaim the presupposed male upper-hand. Four days later, in Nouvelle XLIX, our second textual example of Marguerite’s undermining codes of masculinity, Hircan appears to have upped the ante and readjusted his approach to asserting male dominance and exemplifying feminine folly and pleasure-seeking as he spins a tale of a highly immoral countess and her three simultaneous lovers. On a day specifically devoted to female uprightness, where “on devise de la vertu des filles et femmes qui ont eu leur honneur en plus grande recommandation que leur plaisir” (282), following Ennasuite’s story of a debauched grey friar who violated a newly-wedded bride, Hircan seeks to demonstrate that women can prove themselves just as debased as men. Once again establishing grounds of gender equality—albeit this time in sin and vice—Hircan feels compelled to preface his tale with a request for permission and, in so doing, prepares the party (and the reader) for scandal:

> Si vous me voullez promectre, dist Hircan, de ne vous courroucer point à moy, je vous en racompteray ung d’une grande dame si infame, que vous excuserez le pauvre Cordelier d’avoir prins sa necessité où il l’a peu trouver, veu que celle qui avoit assez à manger cherchoit sa friandise trop meschantement. (48: 317, our italics)

Clearly unable to relate a positive tale regarding feminine virtue, Hircan resorts to the worst example of women—focusing on female *folie* and *plaisir*—to draw parallels between male and female incontinence. As is now her established method, Marguerite, once again, allows her misogynistic character his say before negating his argument and turning it on its head.

A careful reading of Nouvelle XLIX reveals, quite early, Marguerite’s hand in undermining Hircan. In fact, from the opening sentence of the tale, uttered by Hircan, she effectively distances his negative example from decent, acceptable French feminine *moeurs*: “En la cour du Roy Charles, je ne diray poinct le quantiesme pour l’honneur de celle dont je veulx parler, laquelle je ne veulx nommer par son nom propre, y avoit une Contesse de fort bonne maison, mais estrangiere” (318, our italics). While the offensive countess is still held to a higher standard as a noblewoman, in making her “a foreigner,” Marguerite removes any association between the scandalous woman, herself, and her French court. As Hircan continues his tale, we learn that his foreign countess, by means of her graceful manners and rare beauty, successfully seduces three men consecutively, allowing each to believe he is her only lover. In the absence of her husband, the countess’ malevolent game consists of inviting male conquests to her court for a number of days and upon a rebuffing of the initial advances of each, she locks him into a room, where he will be treated royally while his sexual tension builds. Eventually, she gives in and the act is consummated—only to abruptly dismiss the satisfied lover to make room for the next.
According to Hircan, “Ceste vie dura assez longuement, et conduite si finement, que les uns ne scavoient rien des aultres” (319, our italics)—he underlines, this time, the woman’s finesse. As the three young noblemen, who we later learn have been friends from youth, meet up at a banquet and are recounting their exploits in war and captivity in prison, one begins to boast of his recent experience in a doulse prison. Obviously, as the details unfold, they discover that not only were they seduced by the same countess but that their amorous adventures were one after the next! Outraged, they confront the woman at mass with chains on their necks as a symbol of their “imprisonment,” presenting themselves as her “pauvres esclaves prisonniers” (321). Her response, however, completely disarms them. Hircan relates that the Countess,

qui aVOIT perdu l’honneur et la conscience, ne vouloit poinct recepvoir la honte qu’ilz lui cuydoient faire ; mais, comme elle qui preferoit son plaisir à tout l’honneur du monde, ne leur en feit pire visage, ny n’en changea de contenance : dont ilz furent tant estonnez, qu’ilz rapporterent en leur saing la honte qu’ilz luy avoient voulu faire. (321-22)

In this tale, Hircan has effectively inverted courtly male and female gender roles in representing the woman as a remorseless seeker of pleasure and the men as the spurned victims of her voracious sexual appetite. Concluding his tale, Hircan attempts to drive home his point:

Si vous ne trovez, mes dames, ce compte digne de faire congoistre les femmes aussi mauvaises que les hommes, j’en chercheray d’aultres pour vous compter ; toutesfois, il me semble que cestuy-la suffise pour vous montrer que une femme qui a perdu la honte est cent foys plus hardye à faire mal que n’est ung homme. (322)

Having failed to demonstrate male cleverness as surpassing that of women, here Hircan adopts a rhetoric that is diametrically opposed to that of his earlier example, as he reverts to medieval viewpoints concerning female promiscuity all the while virtually ignoring the accepted sexual license afforded his male characters.

Resisting Hircan’s bait and averting the trap of his “equal-in-lasciviousness” rhetoric, the female devisants are instead appalled by Hircan’s licentious tale. Marguerite’s narrator informs us that “Il n’y eut femme en la compaignye, oiant racompter ceste histoire, qui ne fist tant de signes de croix, qu’il semblloit qu’elles voyoient tous les diables d’enfer devant leurs oeilz” (322). Rather than offer him the pleasure of a response, they reject his tale as an exception to social norms. Oisille is particularly dismissive of this singular example of female debauchery and once again opts for higher ground, channeling her disgust into a moment of reflection and suggesting that the women humble themselves and pray that none of their souls should ever become so depraved. Ennasuite and Longarine, nevertheless, prove even more astute in reading into the male double standard of Hircan’s story. The former suggests that: “Quoy que ait faict

14 In 16th-century France, as Natalie Zemon Davis makes us aware, there were various stigmas attached to female sexuality—mostly dealing with abhorrent desire: “Her womb was like a hungry animal; when not amply fed by sexual intercourse or reproduction, it was likely to wander about her body, overpowering her speech and senses. [...] The male might suffer from retained sexual juices, too, but (as Doctor Francois Rabelais pointed out) he had the wit and will to control his fiery urges by work, wine, or study. The female just became hysterical” (Davis 125). However, Hircan’s referencing the woman’s finesse would go against any claims of hysterics, thus, once again, rendering his rhetoric faulty.
cest ce pauvre dame, dist Ennasuite, si ne scaurois-je louer ceulx qui se vantent de leur prison‖ (322). In spite of Hircan’s attempts to scandalize the female party, they turn his tale of a bestial foreigner, “destituée de l’esprit de Dieu” (to quote Oisille 322), into an opportunity to guard themselves from vice and to denounce the inequities proposed by men. While Hircan sought to make them equals in the diabolical arts of seduction, ruse, and depravity—appealing to an inordinate love for pleasure and folly, Marguerite’s coterie of female devisants demonstrate themselves far superior in the praiseworthy realms of doulceur, patience et chasteté.

Conclusion

With feminine virtue and honor at stake before the self-serving claims of folly and pleasure-seeking levied by a Gallic, anti-feminist antagonist, Marguerite admirably confronts one of the most negative ideologies of her day. Of course, Hircan tells another half-dozen misogynistic tales and makes scores of other crude and offensive remarks between tales, scattered across the pages of the Heptaméron; however, never does he do so without being promptly chided and/or corrected by virtuous females and having his Gallic position challenged. Each of Hircan’s attempts to forward repressive Gallic patriarchal ideals is thwarted by female virtue and rhetorical savvy. Pitting feminine intellect against already antiquated masculine codes of chivalry, Marguerite is able to reveal—through exaggeration, dialectical synthesis, and crafty rhetoric—the flaws of such ideologies and allow the female voice to arise in the wake of such debate. In other words, Hircan is but a straw man, a bogeyman who represents the worst of early-modern French society and becomes an easily dismissible caricature of it.

Having already experienced ecclesiastical censure with her 1531 Miroir de l’âme pécheresse (Cholakian & Cholakian 175), Marguerite never entirely finished or published her posthumously-titled Heptaméron. Regardless of her ultimate literary intentions, the carefully crafted suite of 72 existing stories, with their complex narrative structure and synthetic effect of polyphony, created a fictional microcosm that allowed her female voice in support of feminine virtue to be heard when they were published in 1558-59. In all her subtlety, Marguerite created the Gallic Hircan, her most discordant voice and a sworn enemy of feminine doulceur, patience et chasteté; however, in so doing she addresses her readership—those noble female readers who merit the title mes dames—to highlight the very virtues she espoused and hoped to relate to them.

Bibliography


