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From *désert* to *patrie*:

## Marguerite de Navarre's Lessons from the New World

Carrie F. Klaus

Susan Amussen and Allyson Poska have contended that gender transcends imperial, religious, and cultural boundaries and that an analysis of gender makes possible a more detailed and comprehensive assessment of the impact that European societies had on the early modern Atlantic world than more traditional scholarship alone provides.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, they proposed that scholars could use an analysis of gender to gain a fuller understanding not only of Europe's effect on the Atlantic world, but also of the Atlantic world's effect on Europe. They asked, "How did New World encounters and Atlantic contacts have a gendered impact on European society?"<sup>2</sup> In addition to the new commodities (tobacco, sugar, chocolate) that made their way into early modern Europeans' everyday lives, an awareness of the New World's places and peoples shaped their imaginations. As one response to the question posed by Amussen and Poska, this article demonstrates that Marguerite de Navarre drew upon her knowledge of French colonial efforts in the New World to argue for expanded roles for women back in France, as wives, as educators, and in the Church.

The New World makes its appearance in the *Heptaméron*'s sixty-seventh novella, a tale related by "young cynical misogynist" Simontault.<sup>3</sup> In this novella, first published in 1558,<sup>4</sup> which has been called "le plus ancien récit littéraire situé en terre Canadienne" (Bideaux 10), Marguerite de Navarre writes of an expedition led in 1542 by Jacques Cartier and Jean-François de La Roque, Sieur de Roberval (Marguerite de Navarre

mentions only Roberval<sup>5</sup>) to what is now Canada. Cartier and Roberval had been commissioned by French King François I<sup>er</sup> to establish colonies if the climate proved suitable. Marguerite de Navarre's story begins with these words:

C'est que faisant le dict Robertval ung voiage sur la mer, duquel il estoit le chef par le comandement du Roy son maistre, en l'isle de Canadas; auquel lieu avoit deliberé, si l'air du païs eut esté commode, de domourer et faire villes et chasteaulx; en quoy il fit tel commencement, que chacun peut sçavoir.<sup>6</sup>

Marguerite de Navarre alludes to collective knowledge of the failure of this venture in the very first sentence of the novella: "en quoy il fit tel commencement, que chacun peut sçavoir." Her guarded language provides no indication that the project itself is desirable or that such an expedition is likely to yield more favorable results in the future.

Among the members of this expedition, Marguerite de Navarre tells her readers, were "toutes sortes d'artisans" (392), including a man who was so unhappy (or so unfortunate, *si malheureux*) that he plotted to betray Roberval and turn him over to the land's indigenous inhabitants, the "gens du pays" (392). Although she soundly condemns the man's treachery, Marguerite de Navarre also subtly conveys in her description of him her reservations about the French colonial project. In her first reference to the traitor, she does not call him *méchant* or *criminel*, but instead *malheureux*, implying that his ill-fated decision may arise from his own suffering, although she does not explain the source of his unhappiness. Whatever the reason for the man's misfortune, in relating this incident from one of France's earliest ventures in the New World, Marguerite de Navarre implies

that colonizing efforts may provide the necessary conditions for violence and sedition. Her assumption, moreover, that it would be dangerous for Roberval to be delivered to the land's native people indicates her understanding that France's efforts to "habituer le pays de chretiens" (392) are not likely to be welcomed by Amerindians.

Upon discovery of the man's intentions, Roberval has him seized and plans to kill him at once. Claude La Charité notes that, as lieutenant-general of the expedition, Roberval was invested with the powers of the king and that the punishment for *lèse-majesté* was to be drawn and quartered and have one's property confiscated.<sup>7</sup> In her description of Roberval's swift decision, Marguerite de Navarre no longer calls the man *malheureux*, but rather a *meschant traistre*, perhaps thinking now of Roberval as the representative of her brother the king, or else expressing Roberval's own view through her language. The key figure in the novella, however, is not the traitor but his wife, who is also on board the ship. Women of course participated in this colonizing expedition, of which the explicit goal, according to Marguerite de Navarre, was to "settle the country with Christians."

The unfortunate man's wife intervenes immediately on her husband's behalf. Marguerite de Navarre writes that the woman "avoit suivy son mary par les perilz de la mer; et ne le voulut habandonner à la mort" (392), drawing attention to her loyalty, courage, and compassion. The woman begs both captain and company for mercy, "tant pour la pitié d'icelle que pour le service qu'elle leur avoit faict" (392). It is the second half of this plea that is most striking. The woman asks her traveling companions for mercy not only out of pity for her, but also, and more pointedly, out of consideration for her service to them. Marguerite de Navarre does not specify the nature of this service.

The woman, for her part, clearly views her efforts as valuable to the expedition, and her request is granted.

Instead of executing the traitor, Roberval agrees to leave the man and his wife alone on a small island inhabited only by wild beasts. The couple takes with them a few essential items (namely, a Bible and a gun), and their sole recourse is God. Marguerite de Navarre provides no description of the man's spirituality. Of the woman, however, she writes that she placed firm hope (*ferme espoir*) and all consolation (*toute consolation*) in God, and that the Bible – more specifically the New Testament – which she read without ceasing, was her safety, nourishment, and comfort: “porta pour sa saulve garde, norriture et consolation, le Nouveau Testament, lequel elle lisoit incessament” (393). The woman is indisputably the spiritual leader of the duo, and she is, moreover, an equal partner with her husband in attending to the couple's material needs. Marguerite de Navarre writes,

Et, au demourant, avecq son mary, mectoit peine d'accoustrer ung petit logis le mieulx qu'il leur estoit possible; et, quant les lyons et aultres bestes en aprochoient pour les devorer, le mary avecq sa harquebuze, et elle, avecq des pierres, se defendoient si bien, que, non seulement les bestes ne les osoient approcher, mais bien souvent en tuerent de très bonnes à manger; ainsy, avecq telles chairs et les herbes du païs, vesquirent quelque temps. (393)

It is the woman, not her husband, who is the subject of the singular verb “*mectoit* peine d'accoustrer ung petit logis” (emphasis added), although she works “avecq son mary.”

Marguerite de Navarre underlines elsewhere the mutuality of the couple's efforts with verbs in the plural form: *tuerent* and *vesquirent*.

As shown in the above passage, the two survive for a while by hunting wild game and gathering herbs.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the man falls ill and dies. Unlike his resilient wife, he succumbs to the rigors of life in the wilderness. He is no longer able to tolerate the food that is available to them or the water that they drink: "Et quant le pain leur fut failly, à la longue, le mary ne peut porter telle norriture; et, à cause des eaues qu'ilz buvoient, devint si enflé, que en peu de temps il morut" (393). As before, Marguerite de Navarre's language reminds readers that both the man and his wife lack bread ("quant le pain *leur* fut failly") and that they both drink the water ("des eaux qu'*ilz buvoient*"). It is only the man, however, whose body fails. The woman proves herself superior to her husband not only morally and spiritually, but also physically.

The woman continues to take on critical roles as her husband nears death. Marguerite de Navarre writes that she acts as both physician and priest to him in his last moments: the man had neither "service ne consolation que de sa femme, laquelle le servoit de medecin et de confesseur" (393). Thanks to his wife's effective service, the man "passa joieusement de ce desert en la celeste patrie" (393), from this desolate wilderness to the heavenly homeland. Even after her husband's joyous passage to heaven, the woman, now alone on the island, defends what remains of his material body. She buries him as deeply in the ground as she can, and when wild beasts manage to catch his scent and come to devour his flesh, she fights them off with the rifle he has left her: "la pauvre femme, en sa petite maisonnette, de coups de harquebuze, defendoit que la chair de son mary n'eust tel sepulcre" (393). Thus she spends her days, combining the

aforementioned “vie bestiale” with a “vie angelicque” (393) that is devoted to reading, reflection, and prayer. Amid all these trials, Marguerite de Navarre tells her readers, the woman maintains “ung esperit joieux et content” enclosed within “ung corps emmaigry et demy mort” (393). She is an example held up for emulation by readers and by the devisants who listen to Simontault’s tale.

Indeed, despite her utter isolation, this admirable woman does not long remain unnoticed. She must, of course, be discovered in order for her story to become public. Thanks to the divine intervention of “Celluy qui n’habandonne jamais les siens” (393), one of Roberval’s ships passes near the island on its return voyage to France. Seeing smoke, members of the expedition sail up to the island, curious to learn what has become of the couple they had abandoned there. The woman notices the ship and goes to the shore where they will find her: “La pauvre femme, voiant approcher le navire, se tira au bort de la mer, auquel lieu la trouverent à leur arrivée” (393). Ever faithful, she first thanks God for their arrival, then takes the travelers to view her home and show them her way of life: “après en avoir rendu louange à Dieu, les mena en sa pauvre maisonnette, et leur monstra de quoy elle vivoit durant se demeure” (393-94). The members of the expedition attribute her survival to God, who “est puissant de nourrir en ung desert ses serviteurs, comme aux plus grands festins du monde” (394), then take the woman back to La Rochelle, where they make her faith and perseverance widely known.

Back in France, the woman’s influence becomes even wider and more long-lasting, as she devotes the rest of her life to girls’ education. The ladies of La Rochelle receive her with great honor and send their daughters to study with her: “luy baillèrent leurs filles pour apprendre à lire et à escrire” (394). Marguerite de Navarre thus reminds

readers of the importance of literacy for women, and she underlines the value of teaching, “cest honneste mestier-là” (394), by which the woman both supports herself and serves as a positive influence on women in France for years to come. She teaches always in the context of charity and faith, “n’ayant autre desir que d’exhorter ung chascun à l’amour et confiance de Nostre Seigneur” (394), bearing no rancor toward her husband or toward his punishers, but instead, presenting herself as an embodiment of the Lord’s mercy, “se proposant pour exemple par la grande misericorde dont il avoit usé envers elle” (394). This unnamed woman, identified by some as a near relative of Roberval himself, not only stands as one of the most admirable figures of the *Heptaméron*, but is also noteworthy as a woman who is liberated from marriage (by her husband’s death) and yet not confined to a convent, and who supports herself ably through meaningful and respected work.

This story, which may well be based on historical fact but of which no archival documentation exists, appears in three other texts from later in the sixteenth century: François de Belleforest’s *Histoires tragiques* (1572)<sup>9</sup> and André Thevet’s *Cosmographie universelle* (1575),<sup>10</sup> as well as Thevet’s unpublished manuscript *Description de plusieurs isles* (1588). Michel Bideaux has edited and annotated all four sixteenth-century versions of the tale, along with two additional versions from the early seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup> Particular elements of Marguerite de Navarre’s account include the fact that her heroine remains unnamed, that she is of “artisan” rather than aristocratic status, that the crime in question is her husband’s treason and not her own fornication, and that she does not give birth to an illegitimate child on the island.

Margaret W. Ferguson has argued that novella 67 must be read as Marguerite de Navarre’s alternative vision of empire, that is, as her desire for an empire in which men’s

ambitions and authority are kept in check.<sup>12</sup> Noting that Marguerite de Navarre was herself an imperial figure, both in France and in her own kingdom of Navarre, Ferguson clarifies that she does not critique empire *per se*, but instead seeks to convey the importance of “extending France’s empire for the sake of a God conspicuously served by women” (227). The version of empire that Marguerite de Navarre favored was thus distinct from the projects of her brother the king. The queen’s critique of French imperialistic policy appears already in the first sentence of her novella, quoted above, when she remarks that the expedition was led by Roberval alone, a statement that Ferguson interprets as “subtl[e] support of Roberval’s claim for authority (and fame) over those of Cartier” (237).

La Charité also interprets this tale as a critique of French imperial policy, pointing out that many of the men and women in Roberval’s (and Cartier’s) crew were convicted criminals from prisons in Paris, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Rouen, and Dijon – *malheureux*, indeed – who had been offered freedom as a reward for their participation.<sup>13</sup> La Charité reads the phrase “toutes sortes d’artisans” (392) as euphemistic and observes that Marguerite de Navarre knew that these artisans were “d’abord et avant tout des artisans de toutes sortes de crimes, peu qualifiés pour fonder une nouvelle société, encore moins pour propager ‘la sainte foy catholique et doctrine chrestienne’” (106).<sup>14</sup> Setting up colonies with convicted criminals, while generously offering them a second chance, may not have seemed, to Marguerite de Navarre, the best choice for extending a Christian kingdom. The theme of forgiveness, of course, runs through many tales in the *Heptaméron*. Forgiveness, however, does not necessarily mean handing over the proverbial keys to the kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

Ferguson suggests that Marguerite de Navarre's critique of French imperial tactics in this novella is connected to a call to reform marriage. The placement of the tale's heroine in La Rochelle at the end of the story is a strategy designed to catch the attention of Marguerite de Navarre's daughter, Jeanne d'Albret, who had been married against her will to Guillaume, Duke of Clèves, in that city in 1541 – perhaps not incidentally, the same year in which Cartier and Roberval had been commissioned for this expedition. (Jeanne d'Albret's marriage to the Duke of Clèves proved less expedient than initially projected and was annulled in 1545.) The representation of the strength and influence of the novella's key figure during the expedition, on the island, and then back in France – a figure who makes her first appearance simply as a devoted wife, “sa femme qui avoit suivy son mary” (392) – carries with it the implicit suggestion, Ferguson contends, that women should have greater power within and beyond marriage. To be sure, the capable wife in the story takes on numerous roles associated traditionally with men: she is, by turns, explorer/settler/colonist (Marguerite de Navarre remains vague about her service to the expedition), advocate, provider, physician, confessor and, most importantly, teacher. Moreover, Marguerite de Navarre minimizes connections between the novella's protagonist and roles associated traditionally with women. Unlike in versions of this story written by Belleforest and Thevet, the woman is not accused of a sexual crime and does not give birth to a child during her exile.

Frank Lestringant, by contrast, interprets novella 67 as primarily spiritual. He observes that although Marguerite de Navarre (or Simontault) presents the story as a report of real historical events, verifiable by members of Roberval's expedition and by women living in La Rochelle, there is a distinct lack of geographical detail in the text. He

notes “l’indifférence de Marguerite pour les *americana* comme pour toute autre forme d’exotisme géographique.”<sup>16</sup> The suppression of the tale’s exotic potential is striking. Apart from the “bêtes sauvages” and “lyons” that are necessary to the narrative as Marguerite de Navarre describes the dangers facing the marooned man and his wife, there is no local color, so to speak. The absence of geographical details leads Lestringant to read this stripped-down story as parable. The wild animals that surround the woman and her husband do not represent actual dangers in the Canadian wilderness, he argues, but instead threats that all humans experience in their lives and that prompt them to turn to God. Lestringant also points out that Marguerite de Navarre opts not to exploit the story’s rich potential as a narrative of travel. There is no description of navigation from France to the New World and back to distract from the central message about salvation.<sup>17</sup>

Lestringant argues against reading this novella as an apology for women. “[M]ême si l’homme est souvent plus bestial que la femme, il ne saurait être question pour autant d’affirmer la précellence du sexe féminin,” he writes; “dès lors qu’hommes et femmes sont pareillement soumis au péché, seule la grâce [peut] les sauver” (195). It is worth noting, however, that a call to recognize women’s potential to contribute in more meaningful ways does not necessarily amount to a claim of “précellence” but may simply be an appeal for something closer to equity – in line precisely with the equality before the Lord just described.

Along with Simontault, Lestringant argues that Marguerite de Navarre chooses to illustrate the glory of God by means of a woman precisely because women were believed to be weaker than men. The fact that a mere woman was able to accomplish these great things shows God’s grace to be all the more remarkable (195-96). “A ceste heure, mes

dames,” Simontault asks, “ne povez-vous pas dire que je ne loue bien les vertuz que Dieu a mises en vous, lesquelles se monstrent plus grandes que le subject est plus infirme?” (394) Leanna Bridge Rezvani has suggested that by not only ending but also beginning this story with the question of strength placed in a weaker vessel, Marguerite de Navarre asks readers to be attentive to this issue throughout the novella.<sup>18</sup> Even before he starts to tell this story, Simontault explains his goal in these terms: “Voyant en sexe fragile ce que la fragilité refuse, c’est l’occasion qui me fera raconter ce que j’ay ouy dire au cappitaine Robertval et à plusieurs de sa compaignye” (392). As the narration unfolds, Simontault’s listeners and Marguerite de Navarre’s readers are called to question whether women are actually a “sexe fragile.” This identification becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Rezvani remarks that, in addition to the protagonist of novella 67, many female figures in the *Heptaméron* – including, notably, Oisille, the storytellers’ steadfast spiritual leader, and Marguerite de Navarre herself, who serves as confessor in one tale – belie the notion of strong women’s exceptionality.

In response to Simontault, Oisille replies immediately that neither men nor women may take credit for work that is God’s alone, for “aussy peu favorise l’homme à l’ouvrage de Dieu, que la femme, car l’ung et l’autre, par son cueur et son vouloir, ne faict rien que planter, et Dieu seul donne l’accroissement” (394). Picking up on Oisille’s agricultural image, Saffredent then notes, with a reference to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians,<sup>19</sup> that Paul mentions his own work and that of Apollos (the early Christian evangelist) in “planting” for the Lord, but that the apostle says nothing of women: “Si vous avez bien veu l’Escripture,” he says, “sainct Pol dist que: ‘Apollo a planté, et qui’il a arrousé’; mais il ne parle point que les femmes ayent mis les mains à l’ouvraige de

Dieu” (394). Parlemeute calls Simontault out for selective reading of scripture and reminds him of another passage, presumably in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which explicitly mentions the work of women: “Vous voudriez suyvre [. . .] l’opinion des mauvais hommes qui prennent ung passage de l’Escripture pour eux et laissent celluy qui leur est contraire. Si vous avez leu saint Pol jusques au bout, vous trouverez qu’il se recommande aux dames, qui ont beaucoup labouré avecq luy en l’Évangille.”<sup>20</sup> The storytellers’ discussion of the meaning of novella 67 thus begins with the question of women’s fragility but ultimately centers on and then concludes with the notion of women’s significant labor.

A failed colonizing expedition in 1542 provided Marguerite de Navarre with an opportunity to make the powerful suggestion that the king’s initiatives might turn out differently if women were welcomed as full participants in them and to critique the imperial desire to people the New World with Europeans. Whether or not Marguerite de Navarre had her own daughter in mind as she crafted her depiction of a marriage between a heroic woman and a treacherous, or at least weak, man, she used this story to put forth a vision of a marriage in which a wife’s strength and agency were essential, first for the couple’s very survival, and then for her husband’s salvation. The theme of labor, which links Marguerite de Navarre’s critiques of French colonizing efforts and her vision of marriage, conveys to readers that there is real and important work to be done, but that the work to be done is not in the New World, but instead back in France. Women, Simontault’s tale implies, perhaps in spite of his own intentions but surely not in spite of Marguerite de Navarre’s, are ready to roll up their sleeves and do this work. This assertion of women’s capacity and willingness to labor makes a strong claim for

reevaluating women's status. It was the New World that offered Marguerite de Navarre a chance to make this claim, to think things differently, and to suggest new roles for women that might be worked out in a new place and then brought back to the homeland, from *désert* to *patrie*.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Amussen and Allyson Poska, "Restoring Miranda: Gender and the Limits of European Patriarchy in the Early Modern Atlantic World," *Journal of Global History*, 7 (2012): 342-63.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Amussen and Allyson Poska, "Shifting the Frame: Trans-Imperial Approaches to Gender in the Atlantic World" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Sixteenth-Century Society and Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico, October 24-27, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Corinne F. Wilson, "Characteristics of the *Devisants*," in *Approaches to Teaching Marguerite de Navarre's Heptameron*, Colette H. Winn, ed. (New York: MLA, 2007), 23.

<sup>4</sup> The novella was included in the *Histoire des Amans fortunez* published anonymously in 1558 (novella 56, but 54<sup>th</sup> in the table of contents) as well as in *L'Heptaméron des nouvelles*, published under Marguerite de Navarre's name in 1559 (novella 67). See Michel Bideaux, *Roberval, la damoiselle et le gentilhomme* (Paris: Garnier, 2009), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Ferguson discusses Marguerite de Navarre's curious omission of Cartier in *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 237.

<sup>6</sup> Marguerite de Navarre, *L'Heptaméron*, Michel François, ed. (Paris: Garnier, 1996), 392.

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<sup>7</sup> Claude La Charité, “Les questions laissées en suspens par le *Brief récit* (1545) de Jacques Cartier et les réponses de la nouvelle 67 de *L’Heptaméron* (1559) de Marguerite de Navarre,” *Oeuvres et Critiques*, 36:1 (2011): 98-99.

<sup>8</sup> Leanna Bridge Rezvani analyzes the themes of physical and spiritual sustenance in “Nature and Nourishment, Bodies and Beasts: The *Heptaméron*’s Portrayal of Marguerite de Roberval’s Marooning,” *Dalhousie French Studies*, 102 (2014): 5.

<sup>9</sup> François de Belleforest, *Le cinquiesme tome des Histoires tragiques, contenant un discours mémorable de plusieurs histoires, le succez et evenement esquelles est pour la plus part recueilly des choses advenues de nostre temps*, vol. V (Paris: Jean Hulpeau, 1572), 3 [69 v<sup>o</sup>].

<sup>10</sup> André Thevet, *La cosmographie universelle d’Andre Thevet, cosmographe du roy illustrée de diverses figures des choses plus remarquables veues par l’auteur, & incogneuës de noz anciens & modernes* (Paris: Guillaume Chandiere, 1575), book 23, ch. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Adrien de Bouffler, “D’une damoiselle normande” (Paris: 1608) and Simon Goulart, *Thresor des histoires admirables de nostre temps* (Geneva: 1614).

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, *Dido’s Daughters*.

<sup>13</sup> La Charité, 104-06. La Charité views novella 67 as a direct response to the narrative of Jacques Cartier’s second voyage, *Brief récit, et succincte narration, de la navigation faicte es ysles de Canada, Hochelage, et Saguenay* (Paris: 1545).

<sup>14</sup> Ferguson interprets the reference to “toutes sortes d’artisans” similarly as a sign of Marguerite de Navarre’s view “that something is rotten in the state of France and in its

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methods of appropriating new territory for God's empire through men of all rank who seem inclined to serve their own ambitions rather than their master's" (239).

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Chesney Zegura discusses the language of pardon and forgiveness in *Marguerite de Navarre's Shifting Gaze: Perspectives on Gender, Class, and Politics in the Heptameron* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 185-96.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Lestringant, "La demoiselle dans l'île: Prolégomènes à une lecture de la Nouvelle 67," in *Lire l'Heptaméron de Marguerite de Navarre*, Dominique Bertrand, ed. (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2005), 192.

<sup>17</sup> Bideaux also likewise the absence of geographical detail in Marguerite de Navarre's version of this narrative (61).

<sup>18</sup> Leanna Bridge Rezvani, "The *Heptaméron's* 67th Tale: Marguerite de Navarre's Humble Heroine Confronts the *Querelle des Femmes* and Catholic Tradition," *Romance Notes*, 52:1 (2012): 44.

<sup>19</sup> "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each." I Corinthians 3:6-8 (NRSV).

<sup>20</sup> "Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel" Philippians 1:4 (NRSV).