

DEFENDING CHASTITY THROUGH PERFORMANCE AND PROXY: FEMALE AGENCY AND THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION IN THE HEPTAMERON

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Abstract: This essay examines how women in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* protect and negotiate their reputations in response to experiences of personal adversity, arguing that female agency in the collection operates through two strategies: performative self-fashioning and agency by proxy. Close readings of Stories two, four, twenty two, and sixty two show that a woman's honor depends on how her behavior is interpreted rather than on the facts of the assault. The princess of Story four survives by controlling her words, her conduct, and even the appearance of her thoughts, while the noblewoman of Story sixty two demonstrates how a single slip can undo years of such control. The muleteer's wife of Story two secures an unquestioned reputation only through martyrdom, and Marie Héroët of Story twenty two is believed only after her testimony passes to a brother and a queen whose authority society already trusts. The essay concludes that reputation in the *Heptameron* is produced through interpretation, and that women's agency lies in navigating that process rather than in escaping it.

Keywords: Marguerite de Navarre; *Heptameron*; Female agency; Chastity and honor; Reputation and interpretation; Early modern gender

1 INTRODUCTION

Marguerite de Navarre wrote the *Heptameron* from a position almost no other woman of the sixteenth century occupied. Born in 1492, she was the sister of King Francis I of France and later became Queen of Navarre through her marriage to Henri d'Albret. As one of the most influential women of the French Renaissance, she was a patron of humanist scholars and reformers and an accomplished writer in her own right. Her religious poem *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* was condemned by the Sorbonne in 1533, reflecting both the boldness of her ideas and the influence of her writing. Near the end of her life, she turned to prose fiction and began composing the *Heptameron*, a collection inspired by Boccaccio's *Decameron*. She died before completing the work in 1549, leaving seventy-two stories instead of the one hundred she originally planned [1].

The *Heptameron* is framed as a series of stories told by ten noble travelers, five women and five men, who are stranded by floods at an abbey in the Pyrenees. To pass the time, they agree to tell stories that they claim are all true. What makes the collection distinctive is not only the stories themselves but also the discussions that follow them. After every tale, the storytellers debate what the events mean and whether the people involved acted rightly or wrongly. Women are therefore judged twice: first within the story itself and then again by the storytellers who interpret it. Some of the strongest judgments come not from the male narrators but from women such as Oisille who defend other women's chastity and honor in front of men's interpretation and accusation. Rather than simply telling stories about women, Marguerite also shows how women's reputations are created through discussion, interpretation, and judgement [2]. This structure also places the collection inside the wider early modern controversy over the nature and worth of women known as the *querelle des femmes* [3].

This process becomes particularly evident in the stories concerning women's experiences of personal harm and social judgment, which form the focus of this essay. This paper examines four stories—two, four, twenty-two, and sixty-two. Story two presents the experience of a muleteer's wife who resists an unwanted advance and is subsequently commemorated for her chastity. Story four follows a princess who responds to an attempted violation through silence and careful management of her public conduct. Story twenty-two recounts how Marie Héroët, a young nun whose personal reputation is questioned, restores her social standing with the support of her family and the Queen of Navarre. Story sixty-two describes a noblewoman whose disclosure of a deeply distressing personal experience leads to intense social scrutiny and reveals differences in how women and men are evaluated.

Drawing on close readings of these four stories alongside historical scholarship, this essay argues that women in the *Heptameron* respond to experiences of personal adversity and protect their reputations through two forms of agency. The first is performative self-fashioning, in which women attempt to protect their honor by carefully managing how they appear to others. This performance can take different forms, from the public performance of martyrdom in Story two to the private performance of silence and innocence in Stories four and sixty two. The second is agency by proxy, in which women rely on other people to speak and act on their behalf when their own testimony carries little authority, as Marie Héroët does in Story twenty two. These two strategies appear very different, but both respond to the same problem. Throughout the *Heptameron*, a woman's reputation depends less on what actually happened than on how her

actions are interpreted by the people around her. Female agency therefore lies not simply in controlling events, but in navigating the social processes through which reputation is formed and evaluated.

2 PERFORMING INNOCENCE AS A DEFENSE AGAINST THE PRESUMPTION OF FEMALE COMPLICITY

In Story four, a princess is attacked at night by a gentleman who breaks into her bedroom. She fights back so fiercely that he escapes bleeding, leaving his nightshirt with “more streaks of blood in it than it had gold thread”. After the attack, she wants to tell her brother what happened and bring the man to justice. Surprisingly, however, her lady-in-waiting advises her not to speak about the assault at all. Instead of encouraging the princess to expose the attacker, she argues that doing so would only damage the princess’ own reputation.

The lady-in-waiting’s advice reveals an important assumption about how women’s personal experiences were evaluated in Renaissance society. She warns that people would “argue that it’s not very easy to accept that a man can carry out an act, unless he has been given a certain amount of encouragement by the lady concerned”. In other words, the public would not begin by examining the man’s conduct. Instead, they would first consider what the woman herself might have done to contribute to the situation. Her resistance, regardless of its intensity or visibility, would not necessarily be sufficient to establish her innocence. Rather, people would look for signs that she had encouraged the encounter through flirtation, excessive familiarity, or behavior considered inappropriate by contemporary standards. The burden of explanation therefore falls disproportionately on the woman. Instead of focusing primarily on the circumstances of the encounter, society evaluates the woman’s character and reputation. Such assumptions reflected broader legal and social expectations in early modern Europe, where female virtue was closely associated with household honor and women were often expected to demonstrate modesty, obedience, and self-restraint in both conduct and reputation [4].

Because of this, the lady-in-waiting does not focus on justice but rather on reputation. Her advice is about preventing other people from interpreting the assault in a way that harms the princess’s honor. She first tells the princess to “never allude in any way to what has happened”. She then adds that even if the gentleman mentions the assault himself, the princess should “pretend not to understand what he is talking about”. Pretending not to understand means acting as though the assault never happened at all. The princess must not show surprise, fear, anger, or even recognition. If she reacts in any way, she risks suggesting that the event still occupies her thoughts. The safest strategy, therefore, is to behave as though there is nothing to remember.

The lady-in-waiting’s advice also shows that protecting a woman’s reputation requires controlling not only her public behavior but also the appearance of her thoughts. She warns the princess about “the danger that you might enjoy being reminded of the pleasures of the flesh,” explaining that “even the most chaste of women have a hard time preventing some spark of pleasure being aroused by such things”. Her concern is not that the princess actually enjoyed the assault. Rather, she fears that other people may interpret any sign of memory or emotion as evidence that she did. Simply remembering the attack could be taken as proof of hidden desire. If the princess appears to understand an allusion to the assault or shows any emotional reaction, observers may conclude that she secretly welcomed the experience instead of suffering from it. To protect her reputation, she must therefore behave as though the assault has left no trace, not only in her actions but also in her mind.

Cholakian argues that “in order to prove that she was raped, the victim is obliged to prove that she did not want to be raped” [5]. The difficulty is that there is no direct way to prove what a woman wanted or felt. The princess cannot demonstrate her innocence simply by explaining herself, because her words are unlikely to be believed. Instead, she must make sure that nothing in her behavior can be interpreted as evidence against her. This explains why the lady-in-waiting also tells her to “gradually stop seeing so much of him”, withdrawing “gently, and little by little... but not so gently that he was able to appreciate what she was doing”. If she suddenly avoided him, other people might notice the change and begin asking why. If she continued seeing him as before, they might think she welcomed his attention. Even the speed at which she distances herself becomes something that must be carefully managed. Her reputation depends not only on what she does, but also on how other people interpret every action she takes.

The princess ultimately succeeds because no one is given a reason to reopen the case. She does not prove that the assault happened. She does not convince the public that the attacker is guilty. Instead, she prevents the public from questioning her at all. Her innocence is preserved because she carefully performs a version of herself that leaves nothing available for suspicion. The princess cannot control over the circumstances surrounding her, nor can she control how society judges women. What she can control is her own performance. By carefully managing her words, her behavior, and even the appearance of her thoughts, she limits what other people are able to interpret. Her agency therefore lies not in changing the rules of judgment, but in learning how to survive within them.

3 A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE AND ITS INEVITABLE COLLAPSE

If Story four shows that performing innocence can protect a woman’s reputation, Story sixty two shows the limits of that strategy. A woman may carefully hide her experience for years, yet her reputation can still collapse in a single moment. The problem is that she never controls how other people interpret her actions. As soon as the assault becomes known, the audience begins judging her rather than the man who assaulted her.

In Story sixty two, a lady of royal blood who enjoys telling stories recounts a rape as though it had happened to someone else. She tells the story in the third person, successfully hiding that she herself was the victim. However, as

she becomes absorbed in the story, she accidentally switches into the first person and describes finding herself naked. With that single mistake, everyone realizes that the story is about her. The narrator immediately comments that “The poor woman did her best to try to retrieve her honor—but too late, the bird had flown and there was no calling it back.” It shows that her honor disappeared not because anyone discovers new evidence about the assault, but simply because she reveals that she was the woman involved. Once her experience becomes public, her reputation is treated as something that can never be fully restored.

The discussion that follows shows how quickly the audience shifts its attention away from the assault itself. Instead of asking whether the man committed a wrong, the narrators begin examining the woman’s own thoughts and feelings. One narrator argues that if “this kind of act had been distasteful to her, she would have wanted to erase it completely from her memory”. This is an extreme accusation suggesting that simply remembering the assault is evidence that she secretly enjoyed it. Instead of treating memory as a natural response to trauma, the narrator treats memory itself as proof of desire. The woman’s experience is therefore judged not according to what happened to her, but according to whether her behavior matches society’s expectations of the “perfect victim.”

Not everyone in the discussion agrees with this judgement. Nomerfide, one of the narrators in this story defends the woman by pointing out that “the man had several times made overtures to which she had never once succumbed—indeed, she was so firm that the man had to resort to deception and violence”. She reminds the audience that the woman repeatedly rejected the man and that he ultimately resorted to force. These are concrete actions that clearly show resistance. However, another narrator Parlamente immediately dismisses this evidence. She argues that women sometimes reject men only to make themselves more “ardently loved and admired,” and that a woman can only be considered virtuous if she continues resisting until the very end. Importantly, Parlamente offers no evidence for this claim. She simply assumes that the woman’s behavior may have been a kind of seduction, concealing her desire beneath resistance; for Parlamente, therefore, the narrator’s “No!” was actually a “Yes!” Once that assumption is introduced, the woman’s own actions no longer matter. Even clear evidence of resistance can always be reinterpreted as evidence of temptation. Recent scholarship has shown that the collection keeps several competing accounts of assault in circulation at once, so that the same episode can be presented as force, as seduction, or as excessive passion depending on who recounts it [6].

This is exactly the problem that Cholakian identifies when she argues that “in order to prove that she was raped, the victim is obliged to prove that she did not want to be raped”. The difficulty is that there is no objective way to prove what a woman wanted or felt. No one can directly observe desire or the absence of desire. As a result, there is no clear standard for deciding what counts as innocence. The audience is therefore free to interpret almost any behavior as suspicious. Remembering the assault, talking about it, showing emotion, or even speaking in the wrong tone can all be taken as evidence against her. Because the standard is never clearly defined, it can always be changed to fit the audience’s expectations.

Story sixty two therefore reveals why the strategy used in Story four can never fully protect a woman’s reputation. The princess succeeds only because she never allows anyone to question her. The noblewoman in Story sixty two is not so fortunate. She maintains the performance for years, but one accidental slip is enough to reopen the entire case. From that moment on, every part of her behavior becomes evidence to be examined. Her words, her memories, her emotions, and even the way she tells her story are all interpreted as signs of either innocence or guilt. Her reputation collapses because the audience is finally given an opportunity to judge her.

Taken together, Stories four and sixty two reveal the limits of performative self-fashioning as a strategy for protecting female reputation. Performing innocence may delay judgement, but it cannot prevent it. As long as a woman’s reputation depends on other people’s interpretations rather than on the facts of the assault itself, no performance can ever be completely secure. A woman must continue performing throughout her life, because the moment the performance ends, the scrutiny begins again.

4 THE ONLY ROLE THAT GUARANTEES INNOCENCE: MARTYRDOM AND PUBLIC PERFORMANCE

Story two offers a striking contrast to the previous two stories. Unlike the princess in Story four or the noblewoman in Story sixty two, the muleteer’s wife is the only woman whose reputation is never questioned. Her innocence is accepted by everyone, and no one debates whether she secretly desired the assault. This raises an important question: what makes her case different?

The story begins in Amboise, where a muleteer’s wife is left alone while her husband is away collecting his wages. A servant who has long desired her forces his way into her room and attempts to rape her. She fights him throughout the house, continuing to resist even after he repeatedly stabs her. As she lies dying, she kneels, prays, and commends her soul to God. Only after she is no longer able to move does the attacker rape her and flee. She survives for about an hour with twenty-five wounds, answering a priest’s questions about her faith through gestures before she dies. The town later buries her at Saint-Florentin as a martyr of chastity, and the storytellers end the tale by promising to follow her example.

Among the four stories discussed in this paper, this is the only story in which a woman’s reputation is completely secure. What makes this remarkable is that her body has not remained untouched. The muleteer’s wife is raped after she loses the strength to continue resisting, when the attacker “took the poor defenseless creature by force”. Her physical chastity has therefore been violated. Nevertheless, the town celebrates her as a martyr of chastity. This suggests that, in the

Heptameron, a woman's reputation depends less on whether her body remains intact than on whether she can prove that she never willingly surrendered.

The way she dies plays an important role in creating that proof. As she is dying, she raises her eyes, folds her hands, and prays that God receive the blood she has shed "in veneration of the blood of His son". She ends her prayer with "Into thy hands I commend my spirit", the words Christ speaks on the cross. Through these prayers, she changes the meaning of what has happened to her. Instead of presenting herself simply as a victim of personal adversity, she presents herself as someone who suffers for her faith. The assault is no longer remembered only as a rape. It becomes a story of religious martyrdom. Her prayers provide later readers with a way to understand her death as evidence of unwavering virtue rather than personal disgrace. Recent scholarship on the collection's engagement with hagiography has shown how consistently Marguerite places her female characters in relation to the saints in order to strengthen both their social standing and her own authority as a writer [7].

Equally important is what she chooses not to do. She never names the man who attacked her. She never asks for justice or calls on other people to punish him. Instead, she speaks only to God. Unlike the princess in Story four, who must carefully manage how other people see her, the muleteer's wife abandons the role of a legal victim altogether. She accepts the role of a martyr instead. This is precisely the response that the town later praises. As Cholakian argues, a woman must "prove that she did not want to be raped" before anyone accepts that she was raped at all. The twenty-five stab wounds counted by the surgeons provide exactly that proof. She satisfies this impossible demand only because she continues resisting until she is dying.

Even then, the process of proving herself is not over. During the hour before she dies, she loses the ability to speak and "could only reply by signs". Nevertheless, a priest questions her about her faith and expects her to demonstrate that she remains a true Christian. Although she can no longer answer with words, the text emphasizes that her gestures communicate clearly enough to satisfy him. This moment shows that suffering alone is never enough. Even after being stabbed twenty-five times and raped, she is still expected to provide visible evidence of both her faith and her virtue. Her body has already become the evidence of her innocence, yet she must continue proving herself until the moment she dies.

Only after her death is the final judgement delivered. The neighbors, the surgeons, the priest, her husband, and the women of the town all examine what has happened and reach the same conclusion: she is a martyr whose chastity remains unquestioned. The storytellers reinforce this judgment. Every woman declares that, if placed in the same situation, she would "follow this martyr's example". Oisille goes even further by asking whether any woman can truly be considered virtuous unless she has, "like this woman, resisted till the last". The muleteer's wife is therefore remembered not simply as an individual but as the ideal against which other women are measured.

This story establishes a standard that shapes the rest of the *Heptameron*. To be regarded as innocent after a deeply distressing experience, a woman must not only demonstrate resistance but also provide convincing evidence of her conduct. The story suggests that the woman who most fully conforms to this demanding standard is the one whose experience ultimately defines her social reputation.

Taken together, Stories two, four, and sixty two trace the possibilities and the limits of performative self-fashioning. Story two presents the only performance that receives complete public approval, but it is a performance that ends in death. Story four shows how a living woman attempts to protect her reputation by carefully controlling her words, her behavior, and even the appearance of her thoughts. Story sixty two reveals how fragile that strategy really is. One accidental slip is enough to bring years of careful self-control to an end. As Cholakian observes, "the very act of talking about rape implies that she has enjoyed it," and the reactions of the storytellers "confirm the heroine's decision not to tell about the rape attempt at the end of 4". The princess succeeds only because no one ever questions her. The noblewoman fails because she is questioned once. Neither outcome depends on what actually happened during the assault. Instead, both depend on how later audiences choose to interpret the woman's behavior.

Read together, these three stories suggest that performance can never fully secure a living woman's reputation. As long as she remains alive, she remains vulnerable to new interpretations and renewed suspicion. Only the woman who has already died is allowed to stop performing, because only she can no longer be questioned. Silence, therefore, does not bring safety. It merely postpones judgement.

5 PROXY: WINNING BY CEASING TO SPEAK

If Stories two, four, and sixty two all show women trying to protect their own reputations through performance, Story twenty two presents a different strategy. Marie in Story twenty two no longer tries to defend herself in public. Instead, other people, in particular men, speak on her behalf. Her story suggests that a living woman can preserve her reputation only when her testimony is separated from her own body and carried by people whose authority society is willing to trust.

In Story twenty two, the Prior of Saint Martin, a churchman famous for his strict religious life, becomes obsessed with Marie Héroët, a young nun at the convent of Gif. After persuasion, bribery, and an attempted assault all fail, he removes Marie's aunt from her position as abbess and replaces her with a woman who will obey him. He then publicly accuses Marie of unchastity before the convent while refusing to let her confront the person making the accusation. Marie is sentenced to harsh penance and forbidden to communicate with her family. Only when her mother notices that all news from her daughter has suddenly stopped does the case begin to change. Marie's brother secretly learns what happened

through the convent grille and reports everything to the Queen of Navarre. The Queen intervenes, the Prior is exposed, and Marie's reputation is publicly restored.

The story shows that Marie's own voice has almost no power. The Prior, protected by his reputation as "the father of true monasticism" and by his authority as the official visitor of the convent, publicly accuses her of pretending to be chaste while secretly living the opposite life. Marie responds in the most reasonable way possible. She asks to confront her accuser and insists that the accusation should be tested in her presence. The Prior refuses immediately, claiming that the confessor's testimony is already enough to prove her guilt. She is defeated because her evidence is never allowed in the first place. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person's words are dismissed because of who the speaker is rather than because of what is said [8]. Similarly, in early modern Europe, women's legal and social authority was often mediated through fathers, husbands, male relatives, or other institutional figures, making it difficult for women to establish credibility through their own testimony alone [4]. Marie's testimony is rejected before anyone even considers whether it might be true.

The Prior then makes sure that Marie has no opportunity to defend herself elsewhere. Before accusing her, he has already arranged for her aunt to be transferred and replaces her with an abbess "who would bow to his wishes". Once he controls the convent, he orders Marie to perform public penance, forbids her from speaking with visiting relatives, and prevents her from sending any letters that have not been approved by the convent. These punishments do more than humiliate her. They cut off every possible way for her to tell her own story. This silence is very different from the silence chosen by the princess in Story four. The princess remains silent to protect her reputation. Marie is forced into silence so that the man accusing her can protect his own.

Ironically, it is this enforced silence that finally attracts attention. Marie's mother notices that the letters have stopped arriving and begins to fear that her daughter may have died. She still knows nothing about the accusation or the attempted assault. What she notices is simply the absence of communication. That absence becomes the first sign that something is wrong. Marie's silence therefore begins to speak for her. It does not reveal the truth directly, but it convinces someone who already loves and trusts her to start asking questions.

The case changes completely once Marie's story begins to pass through other people. Her mother sends her son, described as "a man of wisdom and honor," to visit the convent. Speaking through the grille, Marie tells him what has happened. At this point, she no longer tries to persuade the church officials who have already condemned her. Instead, she places her story in the hands of someone whose testimony will carry greater authority. Her brother takes the "piteous account" of her treatment to the Queen of Navarre, transforming the case from the complaint of an accused nun into the exposure of misconduct by a senior churchman [9]. The focus shifts away from Marie's chastity and toward the Prior's misuse of his office.

This is the exact opposite of what happens in Story sixty two. There, the noblewoman accidentally reveals that she herself was the victim, and the audience immediately begins judging her character and questioning her desire. Marie's case goes in the opposite direction. The further her story travels away from her own voice, the more credible it becomes. By the time it reaches the Queen, it is no longer heard as the testimony of a woman defending her own chastity. It has become the report of a respected gentleman exposing the misconduct of a senior churchman. Marie has not persuaded society by performing innocence more successfully than the other women. She succeeds because the burden of speaking no longer rests on her. Her reputation is restored only after her testimony has been detached from her own body and carried by people whose authority society is prepared to trust.

6 WHY THE PROXIES SUCCEED

Marie's rescue succeeds because each person who carries her story possesses authority that she herself does not. The case moves from mother, to brother, to Queen, and each step gives the story greater credibility. Her mother is the first person to notice that something is wrong. Her brother, unlike Marie, is free to travel, speak publicly, and be heard. The Queen possesses the standing to challenge a senior church official. By the time the case reaches the royal court, Marie's own testimony is no longer the center of attention. Instead, the focus has shifted to the Prior's misuse of his office and the disorder he has created within the convent.

The Queen's involvement completely changes the balance of power. The text explains that she had previously placed great trust in the Prior, making his betrayal all the more shocking. Once she learns what has happened, she intervenes immediately, and a papal legate is summoned to investigate the case. The Prior is publicly disgraced, Marie is declared "the very pearl of honor and virginity," and the Prior retreats to his monastery, where he dies the following year. Justice is finally achieved, but not because Marie successfully defended herself. It is achieved because people with greater social and institutional authority chose to defend her.

This is the only story among the four stories in which a living woman keeps both her life and her reputation. Yet even this success comes at a cost. During the moment when her honor is finally restored, Marie herself remains almost absent from the process. Other people investigate the case, argue on her behalf, and persuade those in power. She does not publicly defend herself, nor is she asked to do so. Her reputation is restored, but her own voice never becomes the reason people believe her.

Cholakian makes a similar observation about the *Heptameron*. She argues that women who speak openly about deeply personal experiences often become the objects of suspicion themselves, making silence the safest course of action available to them. Story twenty two pushes this idea one step further. Marie is not believed because she tells her own

story more convincingly than the women in Stories four or sixty two. She is believed because other people tell the story for her. The further the testimony moves away from the violated woman herself, the more authority it gains.

7 WHY THIS STRATEGY CANNOT BE UNIVERSAL

Although Story twenty two offers a second form of female agency, it is not available to every woman. Marie succeeds because she possesses resources that the other women do not. She has a mother who notices her silence, a respected brother who is able to travel and speak on her behalf, and a family whose connections allow them to reach the Queen of Navarre. These relationships make proxy possible. Scholarship on the collection's treatment of class has emphasised how differently the narrators regard women depending on their social rank [10].

The muleteer's wife in Story two has none of these advantages. Her husband is only a servant who is away collecting his wages, and no influential family member appears who can challenge the wrong done to her. No one can carry her testimony to a higher authority. As a result, the only evidence she can offer is her own wounded body. The twenty-five stab wounds become her witnesses, and her death becomes her final testimony. She does not choose martyrdom because it is morally superior to mediation. She dies because mediation is never available to her.

Read together, Stories two and twenty two show that access to justice depends not only on a woman's own actions but also on the social position of the people around her. Performance and proxy are not equally available strategies. A woman can only rely on proxy if she already belongs to a network of influential relatives and well-placed allies who are willing and able to speak for her. Without those connections, she is left with the impossible standard represented by the muleteer's wife: proving her innocence through complete resistance, even at the cost of her own life.

These four stories therefore reveal that female agency in the *Heptameron* is always constrained by societal structures that women themselves cannot fully control. A woman may carefully perform innocence, as the princess does in Story four. She may maintain that performance for years, as the noblewoman does in Story sixty two. Or she may rely on powerful allies, as Marie does in Story twenty two. Yet in every case, her reputation is ultimately determined not by her own intentions or actions alone, but by the people who possess the authority to judge, interpret, and speak for her. Recent work on early modern women has argued that agency of this kind is best understood as action taken within constraint rather than as freedom from it [11].

8 CONCLUSION

The four stories examined in this paper reveal two different ways in which women seek to protect their reputations in response to deeply personal and challenging experiences. The first is performance. Women try to convince others of their innocence through their behavior, their silence, and even the appearance of their thoughts. The second is proxy. Instead of speaking for themselves, they rely on other people to carry their stories and defend their honor. Although these strategies look very different, they ultimately respond to the same problem: women cannot rely on the facts of the assault alone to secure their reputations.

Throughout the *Heptameron*, what determines a woman's reputation is not whether she remained physically chaste, resisted the assault, or told the truth. Instead, it is how other people interpret her actions. The muleteer's wife in Story two is raped, yet she is celebrated as a martyr of chastity because the community interprets her wounds and her prayers as proof that she never willingly surrendered. Marie Héroët in Story twenty two fails to persuade anyone when she speaks for herself, but she is believed once her brother and the Queen of Navarre speak on her behalf. The noblewoman in Story sixty two carefully hides her experience for years, yet a single accidental confession causes her entire past to be reinterpreted. In each case, reputation is produced not by the assault itself but by the people who judge it.

The *Heptameron* also makes clear who those judges are. Again and again, women become the people who enforce these standards. Oisille praises the muleteer's wife as the model of perfect chastity in Story two, while Parlamente questions the noblewoman's innocence in Story sixty two. More broadly, every story in the frame narrative ends in discussion, with the storytellers debating what the woman's behavior means. Marguerite de Navarre therefore does more than present stories of personal adversity. She also explores how reputation is constructed and maintained. Women's actions are observed, interpreted, discussed, and ultimately evaluated by audiences that already hold expectations about how a virtuous woman should behave. By placing female storytellers among these evaluators, Marguerite further suggests that women themselves can participate in shaping and reinforcing these social expectations.

At the same time, the four stories suggest that female agency has not disappeared altogether. Women continue to make choices, but those choices are limited by rules they did not create. The princess in Story four chooses to perform complete innocence. The muleteer's wife in Story two chooses to resist until death. Marie in Story twenty two chooses to entrust her story to people who possess greater authority than she does. Yet none of these women can decide how their actions will be interpreted. Their agency lies in choosing how to respond to the system, not in controlling the system itself.

Ultimately, the *Heptameron* presents a reputation as something produced through interpretation rather than truth. Whether a woman is believed depends less on what happened than on whether her behavior fits the expectations of those watching her. Performance may delay suspicion, and proxy may redirect judgment, but neither changes the rules by which women are judged. The only woman whose innocence can never be questioned again is the woman who has already died. In the world of the *Heptameron*, death is not simply the end of suffering. It is the only moment at which interpretation finally comes to an end.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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