Voices of Subjection: Maternal Sovereignty and Filial Resistance in and around Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*

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What I am presenting here is part of a book-length project on the politics of maternal sovereignty in early modern France. The focus is on the staging of feminine voices in *The Heptameron* and their delineation of a political conflict between maternal authority on the one hand and daughterly resistance on the other, in an attempt to understand something about how the nation-state “interpellates” the female sovereign subject in early modern France. It is important, I think, not to suppose that a female self or the “woman’s voice” that gets constituted in the past is a necessarily “feminist” or oppositional one, and it is in that spirit that I undertake the present work.

I owe a great debt to the historicist impulse of literary biographers and literary historians who often gather the documents of a person’s life and read between the documents and “the fiction” to write a story about that person “as though you were there.” These scholars juxtapose the archives and the fiction and weave a narrative between them. They have always known that there is “fiction in the archives,” to use Natalie Zemon Davis’s term for the way fiction inhabits, if not constitutes, the texts of history. The impulse of these historians and biographers, however, seems to have been a reconstructive one in that they sutured fic-

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1. Interpellation is a term used by Louis Althusser to describe how ideology constitutes the subject in a given social formation. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” he offers these explanations: “I say: the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (171); and: “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” (174); see Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-86.

tional and archival fragments into something that could be called an identity, a personality perhaps, a person, a "self." In some ways, the feminist "recovery" of women's texts of the past participates in this kind of reconstruction as well, as though the term "woman" could supply the cosmetics necessary to make of a text (and by text I mean documents as well as literary works) a person, and a feminist one at that. There are some obvious problems with these moves. If one constructs a person, one must supply a whole set of psychological attributes not directly provided by texts. In this move, the subjective identification, desire, and interests of the reader often pass as interpretation. If the reconstruction is motivated by a political interest in "recovering" women of the past, the identification with the author and her enlistment in the cause of feminism will often be radically ahistorical. Feminists have learned the hard way about the perils of identity politics, that is, of assuming that because we are women we can construct a unified identity whose internal differences are incidental rather than constitutively aporetic. This is not to say that I do not recognize the importance of anachronism. The political motives or interests of historical interpretive endeavors are always anachronistic and must be, if we are feminists. But the anachronism that constructs a "like me" from the historical other is a colonizing gesture all too familiar in the annals of Western imperial history.

It is a sign of academic feminism's inheritance of bourgeois political philosophy that the recovery and celebration of individual women "artists" as heroines of history should be regarded as a feminist act. Thus some of the problems I have encountered in this move include an unproblematic celebration of women because they were female, regardless of whether they were ruthless aristocrats who exploited and murdered people, initiated wars, abused their children, or actively collaborated in the betrayal of women's interests for their own individual gain. For example, what am I supposed to think when Marguerite de Navarre's characters force many of their servants to drown and die (then sit around being "sick at heart" about it) so that they can all safely reach dry land and tell stories to each other? How can aristocracy or sovereignty (as in the case of Elizabeth I) be so unproblematically celebrated in any feminist analysis? Feminism's radical force as a politics and as a critique consists, at least in part, in designating collectivities as subjects of history and in applying its analysis and action to the transformation (or overthrow) of all systems of human domination.

This is where I have arrived after struggling with a text and an author that many feminist critics, like myself, wanted to "recover": Marguerite de Navarre. So I began to think instead, well why not tackle the problem of right-wing women? That is my anachronistic move. We do need to

know what it is that actively enlists the collaboration of individual women in political economies that work against the interests of women conceived of as a class or a collective, political economies that, for example, commodify women for exchange or subject them. In Althusser’s terms, how does ideology’s interpellation of individual women as subjects work? What do they hear when they are being hailed? What is the transaction that a woman makes, what does she gain? Does she feel a loss? How? I am thus also interested in how the “position” of women (as commodities) becomes a “subject position,” how human commodities articulate a “sense of self” in Natalie Davis’s formulation, and how that “self” may resist or claim control over its own commodification, thus creating conditions of possibility for change. Davis points out that in the sixteenth century, “a strategy for at least a thread of female autonomy may have been built precisely around this sense of being given away.”

In the case of Marguerite de Navarre, “being given away” becomes an arena of contestation in which both opposition to and collaboration with the state are articulated.

This kind of meditation runs parallel to another aspect of female subject-positioning that has begun to fascinate me, and here I owe a debt to Marianne Hirsch’s work on the notion of the maternal voice, and the way in which feminism, by speaking as a sister or a daughter, collaborates in the silencing of the mother’s voice; I was also inspired by Sara Ruddick’s work on maternal thinking that attempts to come up with a specific and generalizable philosophy of maternal praxis, its interests and its aims, its rationale. Why is it, I wondered, that mothers in so many cultures collaborate with male domination against the interests of their daughters? Why are mothers so often the conservative forces in daughter’s lives? Why do so many mothers teach us to be cooperative and obedient women, why do they bind feet, perform clitoral excisions, why do they so often take their husband’s side against their daughter when she says that he is raping her? Instead of silencing the mother and simply rejoicing in my condition as a rebellious daughter, I wanted to see if I could find a maternal voice, a maternal text, one that could explain itself to me. So yes, like every good reconstructionist feminist, I went in search of a mother in Marguerite, but not one who would necessarily nurture my feminist rebellion.

In attempting to analyze both a set of objective, material circumstances that constructed maternal sovereignty in sixteenth-century France and the subjectivities of individual women who could be said to

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occupy this position, a problem of method arises. Marxist and other historicist modes of analysis have traditionally focused on objective and empirical economic, political, and social relations that can be interpreted from historical documents. Psychoanalytic theories and methods, on the other hand, have provided a means of analyzing subjectivity, desire, and fantasy, although with little attention to the historical specificities of their formation. Literary texts, works of fiction, seem to provide greater density for analyzing this subjective domain of experience.

In her introduction to a special issue of *Genre* on "Literature as Women's History," Nancy Armstrong argues for a necessary transgression of genres when studying the cultural work of women. Although the advent of new historicism has brought literature and history together as a new genre of literary criticism, it has not sufficiently questioned the category of history itself as political history, which renders invisible the largely "private" sphere of women's production. In the case of early modern France this division of history into public and private spheres may be itself anachronistic in that it adopts a framework of social organization derived from post-industrial Europe and inherits eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideologies that served to maintain men and women in their separate spheres for economic and political purposes. Thus, in contradiction to the political separation of public (state) and private (individual) interests in the modern European state, Sarah Hanley argues that "early modern monarchies were characterized politically by intertwined private-public (family-state) relations."

The political marketplace for state and family in sixteenth-century France is marriage. It is the keystone of state building, along with conquest and expansion. Parental consent is the issue over which church and state contend for power throughout the sixteenth century, leading to a series of legislative measures, culminating in the Parlement of Paris's 1556 civil statute overruling canon law on the matter of parental consent. The enactment of such legislation and its accompanying corollaries—a lengthening of the age of minority, an increase in the number of required witnesses to marriage, provisions for disinheriting those who married without consent, the definition of such marriages as *rapt*, a capital offense punishable by death, requirements to officially declare all pregnancies—suggest that marriage was, and not surprisingly, a zone of contention, not only in the litigations of church and state, but also in family practices. While the state was consolidating parental control, there were people opposing and contesting such control in their actual behaviors.

8. Ibid., 56-57.
In focusing on the specific individual Marguerite de Navarre and her self-inscription in a political economy of "a familial state within a political state," I want to understand how the subject position "mother"—that genealogical building block of early modern state formation and the predominant northerwestern European biosocial instrument of the mode of reproduction—articulates itself in relation to the currency of a patriarchal sociopolitical order, other "women," or in this case, "daughters." Much work has been done on the use that kings made of marriages to consolidate state power, and thus on the interrelations of familial states from the point of view of masculine state-makers. This focus has reenacted the commodification of women by accepting their status as inert objects circulating among men. In practice, at least on the level of the "high politics of marriage," women could to a certain extent negotiate their own exchange and the exchange of other women to consolidate power in their interests as the wives and mothers of monarchs but also perhaps in other ways as well.

What I have found are fragments, and here I return to my cautionary tale about constructing persons out of texts. What I want to do that is different from nineteenth-century historicism, from the work of the historians and biographers, is unravel the fabric of personality that has been woven, expose the fragments, ask questions about them in the interstices, and practice some feminist historical materialism by situating these fragments in a tentative allegory of historical process. And, whereas I talked about the biographer's juxtaposition of archives and fiction and the weaving of narrative between them, what I want to do is ask questions about all the ghost narratives that might be constructed from a collection of texts that includes "archives" (letters, court documents, notarial documents, historical "records") and "fiction," in this case, the literary work of imagination called The Heptameron. And I want to read the collection of narratives in The Heptameron with a kind of suspicion about both its so-called "sociological" or "social interest" content and its imaginative or "literary" art. Marguerite's collection facilitates this process, since it is itself fragmentary, with bits of narratives, bits of dialogues, etc.

Documents in the form of letters (by and to Marguerite) and declarations (made by Jeanne, Marguerite's daughter), as well as a report from the secret agent of the Hapsburg Empire, Juan Martinez Descurra, sketch a series of events leading to the marriage of Jeanne to the duke of Clèves and its annulment four years later. Henri d'Albret (Marguerite's husband), seeking to recapture the part of Navarre that was under Hapsburg rule, entered into secret negotiations with the emperor Charles V for a marriage between his son and Jeanne d'Albret. Meanwhile, François I, Marguerite's brother, king of France, and Charles's enemy, sought

9. Ibid., 62.
to use Jeanne in cementing his own alliances with the Germanies in order to further undermine Hapsburg control of Europe. Appraised of Henri's plan, he had Jeanne put under a "house arrest" of sorts from age ten onwards. One of the primary sources for the intrigues and conflicts that ensued between 1538 and 1541 (the year of Jeanne's marriage) is a series of reports made by Charles's secret agent Descurra, who was responsible for negotiating the alliance between Charles and Henri.

Accounts of Jeanne's opposition to the arranged marriage between herself and the duke of Clèves are based upon a series of written declarations dated from the time of the marriage's annulment in 1545 (by which time Charles had taken over the duke's territory and forced him to renounce his alliance with France, thus necessitating the dissolution of his marriage). Although verb tenses suggest that the declarations antedate the annulment and the marriage itself, there is no direct evidence from Jeanne that, in 1541, she actively opposed the marriage. There are allusions to her opposition, most notably in a letter from Marguerite to François written in 1540:

But now, Monseigneur, having heard that my daughter, knowing neither the great honor that you conferred upon her by deigning to visit her, nor the obedience that she owes you, nor as well that a girl should never have a will of her own, has had the utterly foolish notion to tell you that she was begging not to be married to M. de Clèves... I/we cannot imagine whence proceeds her great audacity in this matter, about which she has never spoken to us. [Signed:] "Your very humble and very obedient subject and sister, Marguerite"11

In 1545, Jeanne d'Albret signs a declaration of the marriage's non-consummation and testifies to having written two earlier protests against the arranged marriage, stating that she did not consent to it. These other declarations are included in the 1545 document, prefaced by the royal notary's statement that "the said lady has presented two and a half sheets of paper, which she said were written and signed by her hand, and which contain the aforementioned declarations and protestations. . . ."12 Descurra (who, unbeknownst, presumably, to François, was relaying messages between Marguerite's husband and the emperor Charles) reports that Marguerite, having capitulated to the king's will, devised a means to prevent the marriage in 1541 and so to promote her husband's plan. According to his account, Marguerite writes the document that Jeanne then signs in order to fabricate non-consent and thus provide a basis for the marriage's annulment.

Neither Marguerite's letter nor Descurra's account, not to mention

12. Ibid., 291.
Jeanne d'Albret's declaration, can be read straightforwardly, given the interlocutors' positions as subjects of a monarch articulating their actions to or for that monarch. The actors in this drama are all political subjects. Literary historians and biographers, with the exception of Nancy Roelker, either assume that Jeanne's protests expressed her opposition to the contract at the time it was proposed (rather than having been retroactively reconstructed), and that Marguerite desired nothing but her brother's will, or they unproblematically accept Descurra's account and assume that Marguerite set Jeanne up to it. The latter supposition does not account for Descurra's access to such information (via Henri, who had an interest in representing the situation this way to the emperor) and includes the assumption that no twelve-year-old girl would be capable of mounting independent opposition to the king's will.

Marguerite, then, seems to be at the center of a three-way negotiation: between her husband's and her brother's genealogical lines and property interests (a conflict between kinship and marriage), indirectly between the political interests of two monarchs (François and Charles), and finally between her daughter and these conflicting claims. It is to the question of Marguerite's interests, and perhaps to the more elusive (because historically unreadable) interests of her daughter Jeanne, that I will now turn.

I, Jeanne de Navarre, . . . declare and protest against that the arranged marriage between myself and the duke of Clèves is against my will; that I have never and will never consent, and that anything I might do or say from here on in, of which one might say that I consented, will have been by force, against my pleasure and my will, and from fear of the King, of the king my father and the queen my mother, who menaced me and had me whipped by my governess, who several times urged me by commandment of the queen my mother, warning me that, if I did not agree to this marriage that the King wants, and if I did not consent, I would be beaten to death, and that I would be the cause of the loss and destruction of my father and mother and of their house; of which I am so greatly fearful, also for the destruction of my parents, that I do not know to whom to have recourse except to God, when I see that my father and mother have abandoned me, they who know well what I have told them, and that I will never love the duke of Clèves and do not want anything to do with him at all.

These fragments of a narrative of conflict, mediated as they are by their form and context (addresses to a patriarchal authority with executive power over the narrating subject), bear a structural, thematic, and

linguistic resemblance to more narratively coherent narratives of mother/daughter and monarch/subject conflicts in Marguerite’s text.

Marguerite de Navarre inscribes a mother-daughter relation into the prologue of *The Heptameron*, and stages that relation, narratively as well as dialogically, in several of her stories or novellas. She stages this conflict in a particular way, using both narrative and discursive techniques, so that each subject “speaks” its position within the fiction of her tales. Furthermore, she explicitly situates the mother/daughter conflict in its relation to matters of state. In other words, Marguerite de Navarre articulates conflicts between state and subjects as a matter of mother/daughter politics.

In *The Heptameron*, the maternal occupies the privileged subject position in the text. Authority is invested in the mother’s voice and actions, an authority confirmed both by narrative events and by the subsequent commentaries of the discussants. Insofar as the historical and political construction of maternal sovereignty is concerned, we might argue that *The Heptameron*, as a literary text, makes available an understanding of the ideological “interests” that inform this maternal authority or sovereignty.

“Interests,” as outlined in the above account and suggested by historical documentation, constitute the objective dimensions of this particular subject position. The literary text also makes readable desire and fantasy, the subjective dimensions of subject positioning, particularly, one might argue, insofar as *The Heptameron* was not published in the author’s lifetime and thus the question of to whom it is addressed (and so its self-censorship—which would so obviously constrain it) may be suspended. The feminine subjectivities constructed in this text operate explicitly within economic, political, and social spheres where feminine desires become the object of contention between subject and monarch and are circumscribed by patriarchal authority. In these spheres, the maternal figure speaks from the position of social authority, often in the service of a father, brother, or king, against the daughter’s wishes, while the daughter transgressively speaks “in her own voice,” a voice of resistance to that authority. Marguerite’s *Heptameron* is a maternal text to the extent that it enacts a praxis of mothering, construed as “legitimate” and privileging the daughter’s “voice” as well. I want to argue, then, that *The Heptameron* articulates a maternal fantasy, the maternal fantasy perhaps, rescripting the events of a maternal/filial conflict as a narrative of “successful” or “good” mothering (maternal praxis) that writes in rather than silences the daughter’s desire and harmonizes it with the interests of the maternal sovereign.

Sara Ruddick’s theory of maternal thinking provides a partial means of understanding the constitutive desires and constraints of what I call the maternal fantasy of this text, the simultaneous collaboration with and
subversion of the (given) structures of authority. Ruddick identifies three "interests" that govern maternal practice: preservation (ensuring the continued life of the child), growth (fostering the child's development), and acceptability (producing an adult who will be acceptable to her social group). In the mother–daughter relation, the conflict among these interests may be particularly acute, since mothering takes place within the context of a patriarchal society that does not exist to promote the interests of women. Thus a mother is seen as constrained by the requirements of patriarchy to produce a cooperative and obedient woman, one whose desires will not conflict with the structures that govern her (and her mother's) life (in the case of these tales, the economic, political, and social alliances between the king and other men).

Ruddick's description rationalizes a fantasy of maternal practice; it does not account for the potential conflict between the mother's and the child's interests or for the gap or décalage between interest and desire. In Marguerite's text, this vested interest is maternal authority, the power of social and political decision-making granted to the woman in exchange for her patriarchal collaboration, although it is never identified as such. Rather, interest is defined as constraint. Yet the daughter's desire returns, again and again, in scenes of confrontation.

One example is novella 21. Rolandine's story is one of the most well-known in The Heptameron. It bears a striking resemblance to the story of Marguerite and Jeanne, including the presence of a gouvernante through whom the royal mother mediates her commands. This story symmetrically reverses the historical situation: instead of withholding consent from an arranged union, Rolandine arranges a union for herself without parental and royal consent. The couple agree not to consummate their union (another parallel with Jeanne's situation) until Rolandine's father dies or lends his approval. The narrative details the queen's obsessive regulation of their actions and the eventual interception of a letter that reveals their marriage. At this point, the narrative is highly critical of the queen's behavior.

Rolandine's transgression of the social order constitutes a threat in that she has not obtained "parental" or monarchic consent: "[The Queen] . . . far from addressing her as 'cousin,' she told her repeatedly, her face contorted with rage, that she was a 'miserable wretch,' and accused her of bringing dishonor upon her father's house, upon her relatives, and upon her mistress, the Queen." The resemblance between this passage and what Jeanne says of her mother's reaction to her disobedience is striking. In one of the longest speeches in The Heptameron, Rolandine accuses the queen of injustice and claims the right to act

according to her own desires. She appeals to a higher authority to justify her actions, in legal language that echoes Jeanne’s declaration in a more assertive, and therefore subversive, fashion:

I have no advocate to speak in my defense. My only advocate is the truth, the truth which is known to me alone, and I am bound to declare it to you fearlessly . . . I am not afraid that any mortal creature should hear how I have conducted myself in the affair with which I am charged, since I know that there has been no offence either to God or to my honour.17

Rolandine’s claim is indeed outrageous (“audatieuse” is repeated twice in the text). In story 40, Rolandine’s aunt is condemned, both within the story and by the discussants, for the far more modest transgression of marrying someone whom she thought would meet with approval. At the end of that story, both Parlamente and Oisille, the senior women of the group, side with the social authorities: “Ladies, I pray God that you will take note of this example, and that none of you will wish to marry merely for your own pleasure, without the consent of those to whom you owe obedience.”18 Yet in novella 21 the narrative works to justify Rolandine’s claim. The state attempts to annul the union on grounds of non-consummation, while Rolandine appeals to scripture to uphold its validity. At the same time, the queen’s opposition is also justified.

In novella 21, the moral justifications for opposition to Rolandine’s choice mask the threat to the sociopolitical order represented by her claims, a threat mentioned by Dagoucin in the discussion of story 40: “in order to maintain peace in the state, consideration is given only to the rank of families, the seniority of individuals, and the provisions of the law, . . . in order that the monarchy should not be undermined.”19 The exigencies of the “state,” suggest these narratives, apply as much to the maternal sovereigns as they do to their daughters and subjects. Thus in story 10 the countess must marry off her daughter at the behest of the king—“Pressed by the King to agree to the marriage, the Countess, as a loyal subject, could not refuse his request. She was sure that her daughter, still so young in years, could have no other will than that of her mother . . .”20—while the queen in novella 21 serves the king and Rolandine’s father in separating Rolandine and the “bastard.” To the extent that they collaborate with or uphold the monarchy, these maternal sovereigns are invested with moral authority and the power to regulate the actions of less empowered feminine subjects, yet they do so, the narratives suggest, in the interests of those subjects.

While the maternal figure is a collaborator, mothering, argues The

17. Ibid., 248.
18. Ibid., 370.
19. Ibid., 374.
20. Ibid., 137.
*Heptameron,* is not based solely on political domination. A narrative such as novella 21 provides a model of resistance, a precedent for other "daughters" to whom *Heptameron* may be addressed, while it simultaneously provides a moral justification for the exercise of maternal authority. Mothering here is a praxis and a fantasy of mediation. In the uneasy open-endedness of its dialogic structure and the inconclusiveness of the discursive confrontations between collaborator and rebel, Marguerite's text mediates between feminine desires, navigating those desires through patriarchal territory. *Heptameron* mediates in the interests of preserving a precarious, female, place of authority, whether it be the authority of the monarch's mother (which Jeanne d'Albret will become), or that of the women who manipulate the possibilities of consent and non-consent in marriage contracts to further their own interests.

Natalie Davis suggests that some aristocratic women realized the economic and political importance of their bodies in contracting alliances and consolidating state power, and exploited that importance by "giving themselves away." She makes the point that "if women can think of giving themselves away, then they can also begin to think of having stronger ownership rights in their bodies,"21 rights for which many women today are still struggling. Marguerite's and her daughter's tales suggest some of the complexities involved in the concept of rights of ownership. Whom does it benefit when a woman accedes to the sort of power I have described as maternal authority, and how are we to understand that power? Did Jeanne refuse consent to her marriage to the duke of Clèves, or was non-consent created for the purposes of dissolving an unfortunate alliance? And, if Marguerite did indeed "set her up to it," in whose interests was she acting? If absolute resistance is self-defeating, what does successful negotiation produce: another queen, a wife and mother to a king, but also perhaps an ardent Protestant in Catholic France? What sort of empowerment did Jeanne d'Albret's second marriage bring her? And what if, instead of maternal authority based on the exchange of daughters as commodities in the service of the "familial state," Marguerite's maternal praxis had been that of a traitor or a revolutionary? Would France have become a powerful nation-state? These, it seems to me, are some of the questions raised by introducing maternal sovereignty into our accounts of nation-state formation, by introducing the literary into the historical and vice versa. They are also questions raised by co-articulating interests and desire, a critique of ideology and a psychoanalytic construction of subjectivity. They are, finally, some of the questions raised by critically reintroducing the maternal into reconstructive feminism in light of both scholarly and political goals.

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