Objects of Desire: Reading the Material World Metaphysically in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*

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Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.
But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where moth and rust do not destroy,
and where thieves do not break in and steal.
For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
(Matthew 6:19–21)

Until Gary Ferguson's groundbreaking study *Mirroring Belief: Marguerite de Navarre's Devotional Poetry*, Marguerite de Navarre's evangelical theology was viewed as more Catholic than Protestant. However, Ferguson definitively shows an evolution away from traditional Catholicism toward a pronounced Protestant perspective. He demonstrates that, even in her early works, “Marguerite employs many of the ideas and images emphasised by the Reformers and in particular by Luther.”¹ If Marguerite does not always

¹Gary Ferguson, *Mirroring Belief: Marguerite de Navarre's Devotional Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 41. Such borrowing is especially apparent in discussions of the problem of sin and “when it comes to articulating ideas about the state of fallen man deprived of grace.”
criticize Catholic practice directly, her views are certainly “contrary to the prevailing ideological climate within the University of Paris at the time [she] was writing.” In addition, she occasionally uses a Reformed vocabulary, as in the expression vive foy. Ferguson examines only Marguerite’s devotional poetry to trace her trajectory, regarding the Heptameron as primarily a secular work. However, I believe that this transformation also had a direct impact on her crafting of the Heptameron, which shows a more developed and programmatic pro-Protestant perspective than many of her other writings and could stand as a theological document in its own right. Indeed, as Gérard Defaux’s recent work attests, Marguerite intends the nouvelles of her œuvre to be vehicles for the Bonne Nouvelle, the

2Ferguson, Mirroring Belief, 63. Particularly as concerned the issue of justification—whether by faith (Calvin’s and Luther’s perspective: sola fide) or through works (the Catholic stance)—Marguerite took some time to move from the customary reliance on saints, intercession, and works of charity to the Protestant position of reliance on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as atonement for all sins and proof of salvation. Nonetheless, shift she eventually did.

3Ferguson, Mirroring Belief, 153. “[Vive foy] is [an expression] associated primarily with the evangelicals, and though not eschewed by certain Catholics, it yet comes to be linked more and more firmly with Protestant writers.” Marguerite’s change of position reveals itself sometimes more through an awareness of absences than through deliberate and overt lexically coded stance-taking; such omissions as the refusal to include any portrayal or discussion of sacraments, for instance, during a fraught time-period in which the Catholic church was insisting on their affirmation, cannot fail to signal a turning-away from a thoroughly orthodox position. The mention of sacraments is conspicuously lacking from the Heptameron, although priests—many portrayed in all their depravity and corruption—are not.

4“I have been constrained to exclude almost entirely Marguerite’s great prose work, the Heptameron. Although this work does not contain religious comment, it is governed by a set of generic conventions which are wholly different from those I propose to examine here and its literary ancestry lies elsewhere” (Ferguson, Mirroring Belief, xviii–xix).
Once we recognize the metaphysical orientation of the Heptaméron, the elements of terrestrial experience in and through which the spiritual dimension moves become significant in a new way. Given that Marguerite penned narratives deeply embedded in the material culture of her time, the nouvelles also say something important about how her metaphysical awareness works itself out in relation explicitly to the things of the world. Finally, the Heptaméron maintains a tension between body and soul, physical world and metaphysical realm. Textual materialism, an object-laden mode of writing of which Marguerite developed her own version in response to innovations in contemporaneous painting, translates between the two realms.

The vibrant artistic panoply of the court of François I also was formative for Marguerite’s literary project. François compiled a cabinet of curiosities in 1527, to which he added throughout his life, a treasure trove of medals, silverplate, figurines, “de petites pièces curieuses & une infinité de petites gentillesses.” The curiosity cabinet reinforced innovations in contemporaneous media, especially that of genre painting. This richly materialist school of painting, collected by François I, constituted, in my view, the second most significant influence on the Heptaméron after that of theology. Marguerite’s metaphysical perspective led her to interpret the gorgeous world of the genre painters as desirable yet fallen. She perceived both the lure, and the trap, of

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5See his article “De la Bonne Nouvelle aux nouvelles: Remarques sur la structure de Heptaméron,” to appear in French Forum. I had not had the opportunity to read this compelling essay prior to receiving proofs of my own article but want to acknowledge Gérard Defaux’s significant contribution—and felicitous accord with my thesis here.


7Schnapper, 180.

8Le Père Dan (speaking in 1642), cited in Schnapper, 182.
earthly treasures. “The man enlightened by grace and regenerate in Christ sees in the whole of the creation nothing but the hand of God, while the worldly see only a series of superficial distractions, a shiny surface of diverting images from which they seek only pleasure and profit. Yet the more they enjoy the more they seek, and the more they seek the more what they enjoy falls short of their desires, so that for them the creation is a source of ultimate frustration.”

As Marguerite drafted the nouvelles, her eyes met the exterior display of sumptuous robes meant to proclaim a courtier, the thick curtains and wall-hangings of a wealthy man’s chambers; books bound in leather and gilded, more for show than for use. The Heptameron’s own glittering materiality thus functions both as deception and disguise as well as its own metaphysical indictment. Nouvelle after nouvelle seem intentionally structured around things, objects that both define and damn. Her selection of material objects as vehicle for her criticism of the illusion of terrestrial self-sufficiency is distinctly Protestant. While she focuses on images and things, their meaning is

9Ferguson, Mirroring Belief, 68–69.
10Jean Clouet’s painting of the reformer Guillaume Budé is a case in point. Budé’s introspective expression complements his careful penmanship in the book in which he is writing. He has slightly turned the book so that the viewer may read from it. The book is presented as a precious object, with gilded edges and a pink cover, stacked on top of another book (Provenance: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession number 46.68).
12Such a textual approach is consonant with the description of otherworldliness that contemporaries have provided of Marguerite: “He saw in the Queen’s eyes, even from a distance, that fervent spirit and the light which God has given her, so clear that it can lead one to the blessedness of eternal life, without being detained in the impediments of immorality” (Pier Paolo Vergerio, cited in Karen Pinkus, Picturing Silence: Emblem, Language, Counter-Reformation Materiality [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996], emphasis added).
Illustration from the *Heptaméron*
only in their narrative role; no immanence inheres in their physical presence. She uses images dually: to describe a material attitude and to offer a metaphysical corrective to the problems of that perspective. Earthly treasures compose both the obstruction of, and the arrow to, metaphysical understanding. Similarly,

An unexpected effect of this object-based treatment is that the gender issues that are usually so problematic for Renaissance culture can be resolved, in a transsumptive way, by Marguerite’s text: men and women possess gender differences, it is true; yet ultimately their significance lies in their personhood as it is, or is not, oriented metaphysically. Objects paradoxically enable troubling issues of subjectivity to be pushed into the background, once the focus on God is made clear. This is certainly not the customary view of most Marguerite scholars. Patricia Cholakian, in Rape and Writing in the Heptaméron of Marguerite de Navarre (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), emphasizes the dynamics of rape and scopic violence, stressing the embeddedness of gender issues. But I believe that a larger perspective, and design, can be discerned in this text. Natalie Zemon Davis remarks in her Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) that “in the sexual adventures that are the subject of many a tale, Marguerite treats men and women with symmetry, cutting through the topoi of insatiable female appetite and modesty. Both sexes can be chaste, resisting unwanted sexual overtures; both sexes initiate love affairs and deceive their mates” (106). The explanation for such a disregard may be precisely the metaphysical perspective, which Davis does not examine.

In this way, Marguerite’s textual materialism is “essentially paradoxical, since its ultimate objective is to proclaim the obsoleteness of literature in the face of the absolute Non-Being” (Jan Miernowski, “Literature and Metaphysics,” Etudes rabelaisiennes 35 [1998]: 131-51).

Miernowski, 149. Miernowski makes this point in reference to Marguerite’s third book of Les Prisons. He describes the scenario as a movement through, then an elimination of, things become dross: “Blinded by la libido scienti, Ami locks himself in a library embracing all the disciplines of learning. After years spent in the illusion of knowledge and self-importance, he hears a word, a voice, a ‘parolle vive’: ‘Je suis qui suys,’ the fundamental assertion of God’s Being which opens to him the understanding of the letter of the texts he had been reading without ever fully understanding them (3, 459 and sq.). This sudden illumination burns down his prison of books and makes him see the ‘word,’ ‘Je suys.’”
Protestant thought sees history as “impressed” and “defined” by “the creator’s own stamp.” The investment of [aspects of] nature [and culture] with unprecedented spiritual [weight] could be undertaken with piety because God was understood to have accomplished his most intimate internalization of the spirit within these apparently profane realms of the phenomenal.16

A discussion of quotidian objects accords well with Reformed doctrine. While Protestant theologians did not bring secular knowledge to bear on their interpretation of Scripture, in their expository techniques, the application of Scripture to daily life, secular and material objects were not only permissible, but widely referred to.17 Just so, in the *Heptameron*, Marguerite uses artifactual witness to create a theological depth that reorients traditional narrative.18 Genre painting selects and situates objects within the frame of a private room or domestic space to create a narrative about those objects, their possessor, and the meaning of life. Genre painters use things in a new way; moving away from the stylized universe of late medieval art, where things are used


17Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 42. This materialist dimension was typical of the age, and particularly of Protestant historiography. Protestant Bible scholars tended to concentrate on excavating the material culture of antiquity. “While the largest number of entries in Renaissance biblical commentaries discuss philological matters, antiquities form the second-most popular category; miniature essays on such topics as Mary’s alabaster box, the nature of hyssop . . . Pilate’s atrium . . . a scholarly fascination with the materials culture of antiquity: the detailed explanations of clothing, pots and pans, burial customs, coinage, table manners, and other such ephemera” (290).

18In so doing, Marguerite avoids the pitfall that Protestant theologians (particularly the Puritans, later) worried about: that of art as an end in itself (something that would never have concerned a Renaissance artist). She set art, and objects, to do the Lord’s work.
symbolically, they now use objects ironically: things of the world voice a criticism of the world. This stance of cynicism may encourage the viewer to look away from earthly objects and desires, to focus on a metaphysical ideal.

Marguerite began to draw on the genre painters' techniques for treating objects, applying their approach textually. She used words in the way that they used images, deriving from their thing-studded paintings a new form of textual materiality: the stuff of earthly existence, at one and the same time the world's very substance, and the dross hindering its salvation. Marguerite's strategy constitutes a theorizing of the use of material culture and its translation to a textual domain, with a spiritual reorientation. Her innovation performs an interdisciplinary collusion among visual arts, literature, and theology and shows how new strides in different cultural and intellectual domains were integrated and reapplied in creative ways in other venues.

An example of illustrated books that Marguerite collected may demonstrate the influence of her artistic milieu, as well as show the marriage of art and theology in the new treatment of word and image. The *Initiaitoire instruction en la Religion chrétienne pour les enfants*, a Lutheran children's catechism produced for and dedicated to Marguerite, was probably brought into France by refugees from persecution in Strasbourg and possibly penned by the Württemberg reformer

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19 Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 251. “In a society adjusting to literacy, print was not just print, but was incorporated into daily life by allaying itself with other methods of communication—be it the tactile language of gloves and garters, or the oral activities of prayer, proverb and song.”

20 Richard W. F. Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 39. While these interests and foci are distinctively Marguerite's, it should be noted that it was not unusual during this time period to find literature functioning as a sort of laboratory within which to experiment with social or cultural issues. “Literary genre [is treated by the time period] as ... an experimental space within [which] to test wider discursive issues.”
Johannes Breu, whose work Marguerite studied. The Initiatore shows a transitional artistic moment between the Limbourg frères style of ornate, cerulean blue background illumination and the genre painting style that features an imbricated series of enclosures, boxes, classical arches as in this image's frame, pavilions, gateways, checkerboard patterns and increasingly confined, interior, domestic spaces—consonant with the Reformed emphasis on the significance of the inner man and the disposition of the heart. This painting begins to use detail and objects much as do genre painters: encrusting with material objects the worldliness of the subject as a statement about the nature of life and the afterlife. The figure's sword, his jewelry, the bystanders' luxurious garments, the gilded statue in the background, the book one woman holds—all combine in a tactile, sensual, seemingly very real space into which the viewer enters.\textsuperscript{21}

A glance at a few paintings from the period sketches an etiology of the evolution of this new perspective on material objects and situates Marguerite within that approach. In Girl Making a Garland, by Hans Suess von Kulmbach, German, ca. 1508, a young woman plaits a crown of forget-me-nots to send to her lover.\textsuperscript{22} The forget-me-nots function only as the symbols of remembrance; they send the message to the absent young man not to forget his mistress. Things lack heft and substance; they are the ephemeral media of communication.

In a roughly contemporaneous painting, however, things already begin to assume a material presence and convey cultural critique.

\textsuperscript{21}The provenance is the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 5069, folios A\textsuperscript{r}-r. The image is also reproduced in Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie, ed., Creating French Culture: Treasures from the Bibliothèque national de France (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 195, illus. 71. Along with her coat of arms to the left, Marguerite herself has been identified in the features of one of the women to the right, and Henri d'Albret holds a daisy, or marguerite, a signature of subjectivity that stylistically seems to prefigure the introspective, thoughtful features of Van Eyck or Holbein's subjects somewhat later.

\textsuperscript{22}Provenance is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, accession number 17.190.21.
Girl Making a Garland, by Hans Suess von Kulmbach, ca, 1508
In *Saint Eligius*, by Petrus Christus, ca. 1449, religious objects and relics arrayed on the shelf in a shop symbolize aspects of the saint’s existence, retaining the symbolic function noted in the previous painting. However, a mirror in the bottom right corner introduces a problematic, unclear dimension. Within the shop a young pair consults the jeweler; outside the shop, another pair peers in, the juxtaposition of the two couples forcing a comparison and an assessment of their possible interrelationships. Is the viewpoint exaggerated? Commentary? Criticism? Does it reflect privileged knowledge or foreknowledge on the part of the saint? Twinned with the dangling scale—a jeweler’s scale, in daily life, but, read theologically, a Last Judgment motif—the mirror suggests a judgment rendered on one or both of the pairs. A window for cultural commentary opens: things both signify in and of themselves, possess traditional symbolic valences, and also revise themselves, in a critical or even cynical perspective on earthly pleasures. Marguerite’s application of visual technique to a literary medium situates itself at this juncture between sheer sensual description of materiality and the incorporation of metaphysical critique, through techniques such as the canny narrative arrangement and juxtaposition of objects, as in this painting.  

Provenance is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, accession number 1975.1.110.  
Marguerite already knew that an assemblage of objects could compose a narrative. She also recognized what John Locke later phrased so well: that objects are incredibly useful in making concrete the viewer’s perspective and in eliciting a mood or a response; they act as visual shorthand: “Well-chosen similes, metaphors, and allegories being taken from objects already known, and familiar to the understanding are conceived as fast as spoken; and the correspondence being concluded, the thing they are brought to explain and elucidate is thought to be understood too” (*Of the Conduct of the Understanding* [1706], cited in Kroll, 275). Marguerite’s technique of translating material treasures to the textual realm confers a three-dimensionality and a quotidian, lived quality, rendering her thesis even more compelling. Her innovation was to shape stories, through the medium of earthly things, in a parable-like way, adding a metaphysical message.
Saint Eligius, by Petrus Christus, 1449
Pieter Boel, the Flemish master of *An Allegory of Worldly Vanity*, ca. 1640, makes this hermeneutic innovation explicit; his title clearly conveys the notion that earthly objects are inadequate, deceitful receptacles unfit for human trust. This painter weds his theology to his art, decrying Catholic reliance on things, images and emblems of worldly status; a bishop's mitre perches near the top of a heap of worldly goods and treasures that, contrary to their possessor's belief, retain no intrinsic value. The painter's palette bravely but futilely flourishes bright colors near the lower right-hand corner of the painting, instructing us that even his artwork will go the way of all flesh.

If genre painting already seems to display a proto-Protestant or even explicitly Protestant perspective, this may derive from the movement of the locus of piety during this period from the church to the home—culminating in the Protestant paterfamilias and family devotional practice. In response to this shift, Protestants had to come to terms with a desacralized world, a world in which the former clear compartments between holy objects and worldly things are blurred, and decide what to do with its bits and pieces of material detritus. By reinfusing these with a metaphysical role, Marguerite offers earthly treasures a brief moment in the spotlight before interrogating and jettisoning them.

Finally, around 1660, Gerard ter Borch, a Dutch genre painter, flattens out critical perspective; now things not only do not have worth in themselves but are incapable of focusing our eyes on a redemptive horizon beyond them; the pen, desk, dog, and inkwell serve only as props to describe yet another mundane event: the painting represents "Curiosity" and aims no higher than that. Significantly, the elaborate chandelier dangles from the ceiling, but sheds no light. This secularized viewpoint indirectly conveys an early modern theology of despair, suggesting that human experience will not—can not—be redeemed.

Provenance is the Musée des beaux-arts, Lille, France.
Provenance is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, accession number 49.7.38.
Curiosity, by Gerard ter Borch, ca. 1660
During the era of the Counter-Reformation, we also find a phenomenon that runs counter to that just described: a resurgence of value accorded to worldly things and sensuality, as the Catholic church seeks to counteract the effectiveness of Calvinist preaching, oriented toward the exposition of the word—sola scriptura—alone. A quintessentially Catholic treatment of objects, wherein relics are believed in an almost magical way to possess sacred capacities, this focus is very different from Marguerite's, and the second stage we have described, in that things are lifted up as effective material markers of metaphysical transcendence in a naive and triumphalist way.

Marguerite's textual treatment is innovative and makes a great contribution to the literary shift from the allegorical understanding of the world typical of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance to a more modern, individual-focused treatment typical of the proto-existential crisis of the Reformers. In allegory, things stand as elements in a semantic structure and must be deciphered in relation to each other so that the message's significance is revealed. With Marguerite, however, the juxtaposition and relationships among things does not grant value to those things; they possess merit only in and as they are surpassed, worked through, as iconic markers to a higher significance that, unlike allegory, is not limited to their designated roles as cryptograms in a sentence to be decoded. The message is not found in earth; it signifies hierarchically, from Word to word, from Logos to Marguerite's reflection of it in her narratives. Allegory is a self-contained symbolization technique; contrarily, Marguerite's earthly treasures shimmer with the deceptive luster of apparent self-containment but are soon emptied out.

Jesuit emblem books of this later period, developed through Ignation response to Calvinism in France, display a very different treatment and interpretation of objects from that of Marguerite de Navarre. The *Imago primisae-culti societatis Jesu a Provincia Flando-Belgica*, Antwerp, 1640, housed in the Newberry Library in Chicago, for instance, used objects as sacral repositories. A contrastive study between Protestant and Catholic emblem books would offer considerable documentation about how different theologies influence the use of material culture.
Glass baubles, silk gloves, embroidered stockings, flagons of beer and casks of wine, mullioned windowpanes and convex mirrors, lapdogs, velvety fabrics and leather-bound books—these form the stuff and substance of the genre painting, as well as the texture of Marguerite’s text. “Dutch still life paintings . . . not only reflect but [also] reflect on wealth by a society transformed through a rising tide of capital. They remind their owners of the transitory nature of earthly pleasures and the vanity of their own newly acquired riches . . . in a visual language that [is] itself a tour de force of sensuousness . . . that intensifies the very appeal of the objects they warn against.”

Textual materialist criticism, which is instructive in studying the *Heptaméron*, examines the presence of objects within texts by scrutinizing their relationships. This school of thought proclaims the need “for studies that will reveal to us the ways in which the mass consumption of objects of commerce and high culture meet . . . the specific psychological and cultural needs of dynamic social groups . . . providing them with a sense of identity.” Spiritual considerations lie beyond psychological and cultural factors, visually informing them. The *Heptaméron*’s textual treasure trove functions this way: through a movement from object to subject, Marguerite limns a material map in the direction of metaphysical salvation. Such an itinerary, through text, transmutes materiality into metaphor as things become valuable through the new spiritual message with which they are infused. Earthly treasures become the transitory storehouse of the soul.

The textual materialist interpretation of the collection of objects views them as textual nodal points. Marguerite’s spiritually oriented, thing-studded narrative finds a concrete manifestation in the

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29 Bermingham and Brewer, eds., 4.
predominantly Protestant phenomenon\(^\text{30}\) of the \textit{Wunderkammer}\(^\text{31}\) or collector's cabinet, constructed as a "résumé du monde."\(^\text{32}\) A spatial and materialist representation of the Protestant ramification of knowledge, the collector's cabinet aptly employs a Protestant approach to Scripture: an ordering approach involving the collection of scriptural \textit{loci} (construed concretely as space or place). Calvin's systematic theology discerned through pattern the significance of worldly things in God's plan for history: a metaphysical treatment of terrestrial objects that fits well with Marguerite's textual technique. Antoine Schnapper, specialist on the practice of collecting, observes that the role of such objects,\(^\text{33}\) dependent on their arrangement,\(^\text{34}\) was to act as what he calls "sémiophores,"\(^\text{35}\) referring to the invisible reality of which they are signs. Protestants like the consummate collector Bernard Palissy sought to confer order on the chaos and fragmentation of the postlapsarian world through his collections. For him, shells, fossils, odd rock

\(^{30}\)Schnapper, 220. “Notons aussi que, comme bon nombre de leurs confrères, ils sont protestants: on a souvent observé que la curiosité scientifique était plus répandue et plus active chez les protestants, plus libres vis-à-vis de la tradition religieuse.” He cites such noted Protestants as Jules-Raymond de Solier (d. 1594), François Gaverol (1636–94), Pierre Borel (b. 1615).

\(^{31}\)“WUNDERKAMMER: a wonder-cabinet: a form of collection peculiar to the late Renaissance, characterized primarily by its encyclopedic appetite for the marvelous, or the strange, and by an exceptionally brief historical career. For perhaps 100 years such collections flourished, but by the middle of the seventeenth century they were rapidly vanishing” (Stephen Mullaney, “Strange Things,” in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., \textit{Representing the English Renaissance} [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 65).

\(^{32}\)Mullaney, 8.

\(^{33}\)Schnapper states that the project of theorizing the collector's cabinet has yet to be undertaken; he constructs a historical perspective.

\(^{34}\)Mullaney, 67. “The objects thus displayed [are] maintained as ‘extraneous,’ in the Latin sense of the word, lodg[ed] beyond the bounds of cultural hierarchies or definitions, at least for the time being. No system determines the organization of the objects on display.”

\(^{35}\)Schnapper, 7.
formations documented God’s plan for humanity. For instance, on a lead-glazed earthenware dish from his workshop in Paris, ca. 1565, Palissy invented ceramic *rustiques figulines*, his neologism for the assemblage of miniature animals, shells, snakes, lizards, ferns—elements of the natural world rendered in the creation colors of green, gray, brown, and blue—which he encrusted in collage fashion over all available surface, with the result that he returned nature to the original state of chaos, a second chance for a fallen world.36

As with Calvin and Palissy, things provided Marguerite with a way to reorder the universe and to align it with metaphysical mandates. Protestant curiosity cabinets, then, differ from those of other Renaissance humanists in that they not only aimed to summarize the world and its treasures, but also to go beyond the world, to seek a hidden significance in a higher sphere unconfined by the box, desk, or room of the curiosity collector. Marguerite’s particular contribution thus theorizes a new genre, a sort of textual *Wunderkammer*, in which the narrative is both built upon and contains earthly treasures but interrogates those to undermine the self-sufficiency of that trove, to turn elsewhere for meaning. Her exhibit of these objects has a self-consuming end.

Similar to genre painters, she weaves a textual fabric so sensual as to approximate the concrete and tactile through the proliferation of material objects in the *nouvelles*: silken hose and beaded gloves, heavy coffers and mahogany placards, pieces of bone, golden goblets, mislaid letters, crowns and cuckold’s horns, tapestries and canopies. The extraordinary wealth and emphasis on things as tools for cultural display, reinforcement of social difference and hierarchy that characterizes the court of François I, offer an alluring field of possibilities for Marguerite’s revision of the role of objects.37 A contemporary observer

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36 The provenance is the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, accession number 53.225.52.

37 John Brewer, “Attitudes towards Culture as a Commodity, 1600–1800,” in Bermingham and Brewer, eds., 346. "This cultural site was characterized by an emphasis upon social display: cultural sites were places of self-presentation
described the court environment as being “like a store, in which our tongues shop for a quantity of beautiful expressions.” This accumulative attitude, the jumbling of things without an interpretive schema, leaves a signifying void from which a narrative may arise organically from the juxtaposition and contrast of disparate objects. For unlike Montaigne in “Des cannibales,” in which exotic objects and references, as Debora Shuger has shown, strew the text with an encyclopedic but unrelated heap, Marguerite does wield narrative tools of selection, discrimination, and analysis. She chooses each thing deliberately to convey a particular aspect of her evangelical perspective, of her relationship to God and to the world and, at the diegetical level, to express their possessor’s relationship and their recipient’s terrestrial standing and metaphysical orientation. Marguerite uses her writing ideologically rather than as sheer representation, compelling “a significant shift [that] occurs in representational codes from the early humanist ethics as practical reason to a highly spiritualized faith.”

She rehearses the compendium of earthly things in order to rid them of their dross so that materiality may be rehabilitated as the paradoxical marker of its metaphysical origin. For this reason, objects crop up in her nouvelles as an evangelical polemic against relics. “The in which audiences made publicly visible their wealth, status, social and sexual charms. This was a culture steeped in hedonism and sexual intrigue.”

Claude de Vaugelas, Remarques sur la langue française (1647), preface to II, cited in Fragonard, La plume et l’épée, 105. My translation of “Il est certain que la Cour est comme un magazin, d’où nostre langue tire quantité de beaux termes pour exprimer nos pensées.”

Shuger, 50. “Montaigne fashions a litany of the variety and strangeness of things found in culture. The methodology is aggregative and paratactic, an encyclopedic ‘heaping’ of unrelated exotic details. This pack-rat accumulation of curiosities and broken pieces of knowledge characterizes empirical and humanistic studies throughout the sixteenth century. It is endemic to the topical organization recommended in Renaissance rhetoric.”

Pinkus, 176.
symbol [in Lutheran thought] was perceived as a materialization, a reification of spirituality, the death of faith itself. Sacral presence does not in-dwell things, but rather resides beyond, in some transformed sphere of which they are scantily reminiscent. Through her reading of Luther, Marguerite learned to decipher the world in Pauline terms. St. Paul called worldly things, the things of the earth, sarks, a Greek term meaning flesh in all its fallenness, flesh as prey to sin—as distinct from a neutral evocation of the skin that covers our bones. In Galatians 5:16–26, Paul explains the dichotomy yet intertwinedness of fallen flesh and unsullied spirit which the Heptameron programmatically illustrates: “The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”

For Marguerite, textual material presence provides a witnessing function: objects are témoins to a truth that surpasses them. In quintessential Protestant formulation, objects ultimately are mere images, while the text is word, aiming at the transcendent truth-value of the Logos.

For Marguerite, ultimate truth always inhabits the word, the human word that testifies to the divine Word ("verbum tuum veritas est"). Unlike Catholics who, in their understanding of relics, believe that they can perceive some small evidence of the divine within the human—the veneration of a saint’s bone, for instance, as capable of effecting miracles by the believer’s pilgrimage to, and contact with, the holy object, works this way—and seek to find the divine within things, evangelicals move closer to Protestants who feel that things may recall, or designate, the divine, but may never contain (and thereby limit) it. In this, they follow St. Paul, who instructed the faithful to put on the whole armor of God, referring not to literal armor, but

"Pinkus, 45."
to spiritual weapons, yet mentioning in detail all the components of military garb—breastplate, buckler, helmet—so as first to display them in their materiality. The Protestant evocation and surpassing of things also recalls Augustine’s instruction to put on saintliness like a cape or cloak. He uses the simile, constructed through the reference to the object, to point to a higher, abstract concept: one’s ability to reconfigure one’s spiritual being in accordance with God’s will, to vest appropriately for such a metaphysical investment. Still Catholic, yet informed by evangelical teaching, Marguerite can incorporate this variety of perspectives on objects, while affirming and illustrating 1 Peter: 18–19: “You were not saved by corruptible things, but by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.” Marguerite offers her nouvelles not only as stories, but also as reflections of the Good News, the gospel. Objects in her narrative witness textually to their own transformation and redemption. The proliferation of objects in Marguerite’s narrative, then, suggests that we, as creatures of God, have moved away from him, have ourselves become objectified, that we need to work through and beyond those things, emblems of our own obtuseness and lust for the world, to experience a conversion, a turning toward Christ, a redemption through the resumption of subjectivity. We need, Marguerite tells us, to fight the culture of commodity, which includes the Catholic notion of containment in things, for objects obstruct spirituality.42

Marguerite’s storytellers would never have had the opportunity to construct their collection of stories had it not been for the destruction of an object at the very beginning of the storytelling process. The reason the travelers change their destination to that of the Abbey is that the bridge that had formerly spanned the river leading to their original destination has washed away in a flood:

42Bermingham and Brewer, eds., 3. “Consumption [can be] figured as the exchange of money for luxury goods but [also] as an occasion for the psychological dynamics of fantasy and narcissistic self-absorption.”
And when they were about to cross the Gave Bearnouy, which when they'd first crossed it, had only been about two feet deep. Now, they found that the river was so big and so wild that they turned away from it in search of a bridge which, having been made only of wood, had been washed away by the force of the water.43

This "pont" acts as mise-en-abyme for the goal of Marguerite's narrative project: through the elimination of its material presence, it forms the metrophic bridge between man and God. Indeed, emblematizing the significance of her text as the site where objects mutate into subjects and materiality metamorphoses into redemptive spirituality, Marguerite's devisants decide that their stories will perform the same purpose:

Each person will tell a story that s/he has either personally seen, or one told by a reliable source. We'll make a present of these stories when we return from this trip, instead of bringing back images or mass cards.44

Their book—Word, text, and spirit—will supplant images, rosaries, material things. The disappearance of the bridge, a human construction, is necessary in a symbolic way, too, for it shows what consequences ensue if Christ is not accepted as the bridge between man and God, heaven and earth. By suggesting that the stories that her devisants tell will now act as intermediaries between tellers and hearers, as the gospel

43Marguerite de Navarre, l'Heptameron. Ed. M.-François (Paris: Garnier, 1967), i prologue, r. "Et, quant se vint à passer le Gave Bearnouys qui, en allant, n'avoit poinct deux piedz de profondeur, le trouverent tant grand et impetueux qu'ilz se destourneront pour sercher les pontz, lesquels, pour n'estre que de boys, furent emportez par la vehemence de l'eaue."

44de Navarre 1, i, 10. "dira chacun quelque histoire qu'il aura veue ou bien oy dire à quelque homme digne de foy nous leur en ferons present au retour de ce voiage, en lieu d'ymaiges ou de patenostres."
does, Marguerite accepts that, while not all have “ears to hear” or eyes to read the Logos, her texts may be able to perform, in however limited a capacity, a proselytizing function.

Other objects disappear, are destroyed, or are otherwise discredited in the first nouvelle. Here, a lovely woman of loose morals and bad character sleeps with three men: her husband, a bishop (the character most explicitly linked to materiality: the woman allows him to touch her for “avarice [rather] than out of love in order to make a profit”), and a young lover, du Mesnil, to whom she also commodifies: she sleeps with him “for [her own] pleasure.”

While the husband is away, du Mesnil arrives at the woman’s house for an assignation. However, a servant discloses to him that his place is already taken by the bishop. Furious, du Mesnil later tells his lover that he is unworthy of her favors, since he knows she’s been touching choses sacrées (the episcopal phallus) and that her cas [a sixteenth-century slang word for vagina] is now exposed [descouvert]. Effectively, du Mesnil reveals the value he had assigned to the woman’s body as unwarranted, a salacious criticism of the veneration of relics, which also makes Marguerite’s point that both men and women are treated as things in a spurious sexual economy of exchange.

Fearing that du Mesnil will vilify her, the woman and her husband hire an assassin, kill the young man, grind his bones, and incorporate them into the mortar of their house. They also suborn the two witnesses to the crime. The text nevertheless discloses their deed. Here again, Marguerite uses the text to surpass its objects: du Mesnil’s bones, a structuring conceit that both uses yet also changes objects into new relationships, as does narrative. The authorities eventually learn of the

45 de Navarre, 1, i, 12. “avarice [plutôt] que par amour pour son profict.”
46 de Navarre, 1, i, 12. “Pour plaisir.”
47 de Navarre, 1, i, 15. “Et, pour celer son meurdre, feit brusler le corps du pauvre trespasse. Les os qui ne furent pas consommez par le feu, les feit mettre dans du mortier là où il faisoit bastir sa maison.”
48 de Navarre, 1, i, 15. “Le plus seur tesmoin.”
crime because of the fragments of bone extruding from the foundations, just as shoals of objects rise out of Marguerite's text to signal her intentions. Her new textual materialism uses things to represent beyond themselves, so that the text itself becomes the effective material presence. Absolute materiality is an unreliable witness, because of its impermanence and perishability; only the word remains. And yet how material, paradoxically, the murder has become: it surrounds the murderers in their house, the mortar being made from their victim's bones. Marguerite uses this form of materiality to point to the consequences of sin, how it haunts us with damning evidence ever present before the eyes of the guilty. By anchoring the guilty in the material consequences and productions of their crime, Marguerite denies to them the transcendent, redemptive metaphysical capacities that her nouvelles elsewhere offer.

In the story of the mule-driver's wife, Marguerite refers to two objects, both of which functionally surpass their description. A virtuous wife, pursued by her husband's lustful servant, refuses to surrender to his desire, and is raped and killed. In this nouvelle, as in the first, clues to the perpetrator of the crime seem absent from the scene: the rapist flees, taking with him his sword, and there were no witnesses. Only the woman's body remains. The way in which the crime is solved transforms the woman's body from object of the servant's desire—to which he denied the status of subjectivity by ignoring her pleas for mercy—to text, one that signifies and tells the truth about what has transpired. The body on the ground gapes with twenty-five wounds; the woman, near death, no longer can speak. Nevertheless, using hand gestures and eye movements as well as indicating her wounds, constituting an alphabet of agony on the parchment of her flesh, she succeeds in miming the rape, her resistance, and the mortal blow. There are twenty-six letters in the alphabet; the woman's painstakingly enumerated twenty-five wounds signify that the last letter will be the Omega: God's version of what has happened.

They found that she had 25 mortal wounds on her body, and they did what they could for her, but all efforts were in vain.
Nevertheless, she hung on for yet another hour without speaking, making signs with her eyes and hands, through which she showed that she had not yet lost her senses. Being queried, by a man of the church, concerning her faith as she lay dying, and of her hope in salvation through Jesus Christ only, she answered with signs so clear that words could not have better communicated her intentions; and thus, with a joyful mien, eyes raised to heaven, this chaste body gave its soul up to its creator such a martyr of chastity [was she].

The body's message is an explicitly evangelical credal statement: "son salut par Jhesucrist seul," a watchword of the Reformed faith, not a customary formulation of the Catholic understanding of ecclesiology and doctrine. Marguerite surpasses the understanding of saint's body as an image of holiness by creating a hieroglyphic text, a layering of wound on word, more closely consonant with Protestant martyrologies in which the recollection of the martyr's verbal testimony predominates over the graphic effects of torture. One of the devisants underscores the point: objects cannot be construed as ends in themselves, but only as they fit with God's soteric purposes. Marguerite states that "for God's grace is not granted to humanity for its nobility or riches, but because it so pleases God in His goodness to do so and

"Marguerite de Navarre, l'Heptameron, r, ii, 20–21. All translations are mine; emphasis added: "trouverent qu'elle avoit vingt-cinq plaies mortelles sur son corps, et feirent ce qu'ilz peurent pour luy, mais il leur fut impossible. Toutefois, elle languit encore une heure sans parler, faisant signe des oeilz et des mains; en quoi elle monstroit n'avoir perdu l'entendement. Estant interrogé par ung homme d'esglise de la foy en quoy elle mouroit, de l'esperance de son salut par Jhesucrist seul, respondoit par signes si evidens, que la parole n'eut sceu mieux montrer son intention; et ainsy, avecq un visage joyeux, les oeilz eslevez au ciel, rendit ce chaste corps son ame à son creator · · · cette martire de chasteté."

he often chooses lowly things, to confound those things that the world may esteem as superior or worthy."\(^{51}\)

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world... we were by nature objects of wrath.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead with transgressions—by grace you have been saved...

and God raised us up that he might show the incomparable riches of his grace.

(Ephesians 2:1–7; emphasis added)

Earthly treasures, objects of terrestrial desire, stand in this text as markers of their own undoing. Their capacity to signify is bounded by their impermanence: in order to convey their message, they must be erased to make way for true significance. Marguerite’s metaphysical “elsewhere” constitutes the originating point, the textual pivot, as well as the destination of her narrative project: a new, textual “genre painting” that gives flesh to the illusory nature of this earthly existence, the deceptive and evanescent sarks of the evangelical, Pauline perspective. In many cases in Marguerite’s narratives, while some things are destroyed, others come to stand in their stead. But those things destroyed are invariably the fabrications of human hands and viewed as such exclusively, even reductively, while replacement objects always have a deeper, thoroughly symbolic function. The things of the spirit supplant the things of the flesh, elevating the what-may-be-saved from the terrestrial realm to the celestial sphere.

\(^{51}\) de Navarre, 1, ii, 21. “car les graces de Dieu ne se donnent point aux hommes pour leurs noblesses et richesses, mais selon qu’il plaist à sa bonté et souvent eslit les choses basses, pour confondre celles que le monde estime hautes et honorables.”
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