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Gastronomy and Sexuality:  
"Table Language" in the Heptaméron* 

by 
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In his penetrating study on Marguerite de Navarre, Themes, Language and Structure, Marcel Tete! calls attention to the metaphoric usage of food in the Heptaméron. Critics, to date, have failed to pursue this line of inquiry. Readers accustomed to Rabelais’s elaborate gastronomic depictions may be disappointed by the extreme sobriety of corresponding scenes in the Heptaméron. Marguerite eschews the picturesque description of a generously laden table, the exuberance associated with this traditionally jovial event and the gigantism required by the Gargantuan legend in favor of briefer and often less colorful table encounters. Yet relegating these scenes to an accessory rôle because of their brevity and lack of color seems to reflect a misunderstanding of Marguerite’s narrative strategies. Since she frequently refers to these gatherings and since significance emerges from the repetitive process, the reader must acknowledge that these encounters serve a primary function.

Drawing on a code familiar to many cultures, Marguerite associates table encounters with verbal exchanges, which are clearly a major theme in the Heptaméron. In the novel, table encounters almost always precede “bed” encounters. Thus, table language frequently suggests a more intimate, physical exchange. By using metaphoric language which takes on its full significance from the associations between gastronomy and sexuality, the author can subtly suggest and yet not name explicitly. She challenges the reader’s imagination, invites him to fill in the gaps while she herself never crosses the boundaries of civilized good taste. In sum, the frequency of table encounters and the primary rôle they play in revealing man’s sexual and communicative behavior show that these scenes are far from gratuitous and, in fact, point up the author’s expertise in narrative techniques and her delicate attention to the wide range of human exchanges.

Marguerite is certainly no innovator in using the gastronomic sexual metaphor. She addresses an audience quite familiar with the often grotesque
intermingling of sexual discourse with food, as it frequently appeared in the continued tradition of the theater and the fabliaux in this first part of the sixteenth century. Even the Biblical tradition, which concretely describes man's limitations in terms of appetite (Eva's legend), provided Marguerite with additional narrative resources. In the Heptameron, she evokes passion and sexual drive in terms of cravings for food which at times become uncontrollable (story XXII), or in terms of a capricious appetite, which often leads to physical decline and expresses the perfect lover's withdrawal from or rejection of sexuality (story IX). Man's desires are expressed as a hardy voracity that continually draws him to "new objects," and makes him seek the pleasure that comes from a change of diet. That which he has not yet tasted excites his appetite or arouses his greed (story VIII). In Marguerite's world of desire, the coveted object appeals to the ever-growing needs of the Other—inexhaustible greed, hysterical appetite, insatiable curiosity.

In the Heptameron, the sexual coloration of table encounters depicts vividly the realities of love pursuit and the straightforwardness of the hunting game. In many stories, the feast stands as the meeting place for men and women. It often marks the beginning of the erotic pursuit, the undertaking of a new conquest, and the anticipation of more intimate exchanges. In story III, the festive table encounter stirs the king's irrepressible passion for the gentleman's lady. The appetizing and stimulating qualities of food appropriately suggest the awakening of sexual desire. Woman represents "le plat de résistance," a particular "chère" for which man has come. This code is thoroughly understood by both sexes. Thus, in story XVI, the lady from Milan, who foresees the undesirable development of a love affair, renews her pledge of chastity and vows never to go to another feast.

Let us now further examine Marguerite's particular usage of the gastronomic sexual metaphor in her exploration of human communicative behavior. She frequently exploits this rhetorical device to describe male communicative behavior in the patriarchal society of the novel, a society in which women are seen as the projection of and the receptacle for the male's desire. A few examples will suffice to show in interactions between men—i.e., male friendships—woman serves as an "exchange value," as "the possibility of mediation, transaction... between men and his fellow creatures." In story XXVI, the reader is led to believe that the Seigneur d'Avannes would very much like to see his foster father's generosity extend to the sharing of his cherished wife. As in the story of the two friends (XLVII), Dagoucin explains in the beginning: "ce n'estoit que un cueur, que une maison, ung lict, une table et une bource." This ironic comment hints at the outcome of the story. Because one is married and the other is single, the latter in the end will share the farmer's sexual "property" to punish the husband for his unjustified suspicions. Story XLVIII follows a similar pattern. A friar, excluded from the table, gains revenge by sharing the newlyweds' bed and nuptial pleasures. This association of gastronomy,
sexuality, and society, which presents woman as an instrument of revenge but also as "the valuable goods" which two friends willingly share, as in story VIII, may have socio-sexual implications but is primarily a clever way for the author to reinvigorate the traditional erotic triangle.

By expanding the metaphoric usage of gastronomy, Marguerite renews a common metaphor when she simultaneously mingles different traditions; to the aforementioned popular and Biblical, she adds the release of the word ("la venue à la parole") which comes from the classic symposium tradition. This tradition presents table encounters as favorable opportunities for verbal exchanges. The spoken word uttered on that occasion is directly connected to man's search for truth and often leads him closer to its discovery. When the associations of food and sexuality serve in the communicative process, they are transformed from a pure rhetorical device (a simple metaphor) into a true mode of expression which we shall call, for the sake of clarity, table language, including verbal as well as non-verbal exchanges.

In the story of Bernage (XXXII), the eating ritual, as strange as the mysterious scene of the Graal, reveals a sterile amorous relationship. Food has lost its power to appetize and excite as shown by the sobriety of the gastronomic description. The frugality of the lady's meal could imply a decline in her sexual desire. But we soon learn that the lady is being cruelly punished for betraying her husband. Her sexual desires are, in fact, repressed by a jealous spouse, determined to render justice. At meals, because she is forced to drink from the skull of her dead lover, horror will forever haunt her desire for food as well as for sex. The hand-washing ritual, suggesting an act of purification, reinforces her daily torment. In this story, table talk proves to be a non-verbal communication which bears a heavy significance. For those bonded by the marital contract, yet constrained in a common space without intimacy or mutual faith, the meal becomes the only means of exchange. Communication is totally unambiguous, with signals lucidly uttered and clearly received. At the table, the lady is chained to the daily repetition of her betrayal, making her incapable of escaping her guilt. The table encounter stands as the crime perpetually denounced, the wound repeatedly reopened. It functions, however, as a dynamic element in the narrative framework with Bernage's unexpected visit. The curiosity and concern of a third party will suddenly free the word and reopen "voiced communication" between the spouses. The husband's hospitality is rewarded by the rediscovery of happiness and the prosperity of the young couple.

Story XXXVIII exposes a more subtle aspect of table talk. In this story, gastronomic discourse functions as an attempt to establish communication, as an exchange indirectly carried out where direct verbal exchange would have failed. "S'ennuyant de manger bon pain" (270), the husband of a virtuous bourgeois woman from Tours decides to "change diet" and abandons his wife for his farmer's wife. The suspicious spouse soon discovers her husband's infidelity. She pretends to be concerned about the poverty and the uncleanliness
of the farm house and generously sends to her husband's mistress bourgeois luxuries (mostly expensive dishes and refined food) so as to render his stay away from home more enjoyable.

The reader cannot help questioning the neglected wife's true motivation. Why would she willfully scatter obvious signs of bourgeois culture, which clash with the rural decor? These out-of-place symbols, separated from their everyday environment, stand out as signs that should disturb the husband. Table talk shares here the oblique nature of seduction as it seeks out the receiver and yet escapes the realm of meaning, preserving its enigmatic attraction. In the narrative, the gastronomic elements acknowledge the social and marital status that the husband deceitfully denies. "La vaisselle honnête" (270) points to the moral attitude one would expect from the bourgeois class. Its inappropriateness in the tasteless rural decor underlines the wife's disapproval of her husband's sexual inappropriateness. By inserting the familiar world of deciphered signs into an unexpected environment, the neglected wife frees the decoded messages of their frozen meanings and imposes her "présence à table." This strategic device reopens the dialogue with her husband, compelling him to face his feelings of guilt. The husband finally figures out "l'honneste tour de sa femme" (271) and her subtle invitation to return home.

In these two stories, direct verbal communication, involving the characters' most intimate emotions, was bound to fail, because the addressee would probably strike back at the addressee. But when the addressee takes into account the feelings of the other, (s)he succeeds. Consequently, (s)he finds (her)himself obliged to rely on a more subtle discourse, a discourse efficiently manipulated to produce connoted meaning. Table language, in both cases, alludes to the sexual neglect and unfaithfulness of the one toward the other. It implies, or suggests, anger and strong disapprobation. Yet, it refuses to express these feelings in a straightforward manner. Table talk invites the cooperation of the addressee to be "complete" and comprehended fully.

Up to this point we have seen the suggestive power of table language and its efficient and effective usage by the characters in the stories. Marguerite has trained the reader in the code of table language and goes on to use the same mechanism in recounting the stories to the reader. However, the sexually connoted gastronomic discourse is exploited to such an extent that it strips the denoted gastronomic terminology of its primary meaning. In other words, the sexual connotations are so frequent that they affect all gastronomic references. Although literal meaning is not totally excluded, it loses its "first innocence" and is "robbed" of the full weight it once carried. As a result, Marguerite's table talk often sounds equivocal. It seems to force the reader to acknowledge its existence and the intentions which have motivated it. Although the reader senses a certain desire for ambivalence on the part of the author, he is often puzzled and cannot help letting himself be caught up in what seems to be the author's game. Marguerite's misleading table discourse is particularly successful when the reader
automatically chooses the connoted gastronomic language. From this equivocal discourse emerges the plural reading which Marguerite most certainly intended on several occasions. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this narrative strategy.

Story XXIII demonstrates Marguerite's expertise in renewing a well-known motif in the medieval tradition of the récit, that of generosity and hospitality. The table represents the setting of the conversation that marks the turning point in the narrative. While one eats without restraint, one speaks without reserve. The spoken word is freed of all constraints, and the most private topics can be discussed in the most candid way. A gentleman takes the opportunity to share the intimacy of his amorous relationship with his wife when he generously shares his meal with a casually passing friar.

While disclosing his sexual desires to the friar, the husband hopes to obtain his permission yet simultaneously arouses the same desire in the other, playing the rôle of the mediator as defined by René Girard in his well-known study, Desire, Deceit and the Novel. Girard offers the following argument: "If a desiring subject yields to the impulse which draws him toward the object, if he reveals his desire to others, then he creates new obstacles at every step of the way and strengthens already existing ones. The secret of success, in business as well as in love, is dissimulation" (107).

The reader, alerted to the gastronomic code, has the advantage over the protagonists and foresees what is to follow. In accepting to share his "bonne chère" with the friar, the husband actually consents to share his marital privileges with his guest. Although it seems at first that the friar is taking advantage of the husband's hospitality and generosity, a close reading of the story shows just the contrary. It is in fact the husband who wishes to profit from the friar's generosity by extorting from his guest the permission to sleep with his wife: "il espéroit bien que son beau père luy bailleroit congé" (187). The lesson to be drawn from the story is indeed "tel est pris qui croyait prendre" (it is doubly pleasant to deceive the deceiver). The dramatic irony results from the short-circuiting of the sexually coded message or from a deliberate misinterpretation of the concept of hospitality on the husband's part. There is indeed as much to the act of receiving as to the act of giving or, as Montaigne put it, "the receiver obliges the giver as much as the latter does the former." In fact, in Old French,
the term *hôte* applies to both host and guest. The act of sharing reveals the husband's bad faith. Sharing his sexual preoccupations is fine as long as it does not involve the sharing of the pleasures that result from the friar's permission.

Similarly, in story XXV the reader immediately senses the exceptional nature of the eating scene and its full significance in the story. A lawyer, greatly honored by a noble gentleman's visit, asks his wife to serve him the most delightful refreshments:

> il dist à sa femme qu'elle apprestast la collation des meilleurs fruictz et confitures qu'elle eut; ce qu'elle feit très volontiers et apporta la collation la plus honneste qu'il luy fut possible (204).

The irony of the passage surfaces when the unexpected guest, on the verge of becoming the lover of the lawyer's wife, encounters the husband and claims to have come to entrust him with some private business. The husband's message becomes equivocal and the situation quite ambiguous. How shall one read the husband's command to his wife to "generously serve" their guest? After all, he is quite flattered by his guest's visit. What would he not do for his social advancement? Is he the blind and deceived husband commonly portrayed in medieval and Renaissance texts, so blinded by his vanity that he does not comprehend the possible impact of his message? One cannot help smiling at the over-zealous obedience of the lady, knowing that she will respond *literally* to her husband's order by becoming their guest's lover that very same night.

The clever use of table language exemplifies what critics have often called Marguerite's techniques of dissimulation. In both stories, she alludes to the lovers' later "bed" encounters, yet will not describe explicitly a daring erotic scene which would have been judged tasteless. She provides the reader with subtle hints about the lovers' irrepressible desires and heights of passion, but lets him fill in the gaps. By allowing language its own free play, by letting it speak or "perform," she disappoints the reader's expectations of meaning, and instead, exposes him to a plurality of readings. Thus, she escapes the limiting role of the author as defined by Barthes in *Image-Music-Text*: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147).

Another example will stress this point. Marguerite frequently mentions the *devisants'* table encounters following the tale telling. She alludes to their frank and animated discussions around a bountiful table, and suggests that, in their continuous quest for truth and wisdom, they further pursue the debates originated earlier. These verbal exchanges recall the symposium tradition. Yet Marguerite remains very ambiguous when she refers to the *devisants'* quest for truth. As in Rabelaisian novels, the reader is not clear as to what message is being conveyed. Is Marguerite inviting him to find truth, "to break the bone and
reach the substantial marrow," as Rabelais put it? Is she engaging him to pursue for himself the devisants' inconclusive debates? Is the author playing with her audience's horizon of expectations, its urge to uncover hidden truth? Or is she merely seducing her reader by her refusal to "stipulate"? Is she conveying a message at all? Like Rabelais, Marguerite employs a deliberately unclear language and by so doing, restores to the text "l'inquietant langage de la fiction." 16

The particular usage Marguerite makes of a rather common association between gastronomy and sexuality demonstrates the author's expertise in manipulating traditional devices, in renewing topoi. But it also reveals her desire to explore further man's communicative behavior. By developing a communicative process that we have named table language, she underscores the suggestive power of language and exploits both the disconcerting effect and the entertaining value of ambiguity at the center of an exchange. Had she just shown this communicative process at work between characters in the stories, she would have led us only to witness and share the usual advantage of reader over character. But Marguerite proves to be a much more ambitious author; she incorporates the communicative process described here as table talk to the narrative process, directly involving the reader. In effect, by exploiting the gastronomic discourse, weaving the text from words with double meanings, she communicates to the reader the unpredictability and the uncertainty of the human code.

This desire to generate a certain indirection through the use of an ambiguous discourse—which in fact proves to be a common trait of sixteenth-century narratives—may be viewed as the author's refusal of closure or as her determination to force the reader into the world of Creation. 17 We regard it as Marguerite's clever means of forcing the reader into the equivocal world of Communication, into the endless game of exchanges, a game in which, the author willingly admits, all participants are equal:

AU JEU NOUS SOMMES TOUS ESGAULX (10).

NOTES

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Central Renaissance Conference in Lincoln, Nebraska in April 1984.
1. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1973), pp. 43–54; Professor Tettel particularly examines the use of food as an emblem of the sexual needs of the body. This use, he argues, betrays Marguerite's willful ambivalence as food terms frequently suggest spiritual needs as well.
2. We do not mean here that the author only treats "carnal love" in her work but that she recognizes the primary role of desire in love relationships. On the different types of love relationships in the Heptaméron, see Jules Gelernt's study, World of Many Loves: The Heptaméron of Marguerite de Navarre (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), pp. 66–125. See also Nicole Cazauran, L'Heptaméron de Marguerite de


6. On this particular motif, see Michel Olsen’s study, Les Transformations du triangle érotique (Copenhagen: Akademisk, 1976).

7. For a better understanding of the classic and popular traditions of the banquet and the close connection between table encounter and spoken word, see Michael Bakhtin’s remarkable study, Rabelais and his World (Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1965), pp. 278-308. This association between table encounter and verbal exchange appears quite strikingly in Marguerite’s following observation: “Vespres oyes, s’en allèrent soupper autant de parolles que de viandes” (326).

8. See Jean Baudrillard’s interesting discussion on “the seductive derivation of discourse” in De La Séduction (Paris: Galilée, 1979), pp. 77-85.

9. The distinction we are making between “connoted” (the figurative meaning) and “denoted” (the meaning in “a kind of Edenic state,” in its pure signifier state) can be compared to the distinction Roland Barthes makes between the “denoted image” and the “connotated image” in his essay “Rhetoric of the Image,” Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 32-51. See also Tom Conley’s article on Barthes’s essay: “A Message without a code?” in Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1981), 147-56.


l'un pouvoit donner à l'autre, ce seroit celuy qui recevroit le bien-fait qui obligeroit son compagnon." See also Rabelais's chapters III, IV and V on debts in *Le Tiers Livre*.


17. As Barthes argues in "Criticism as Language," *Times Literary Supplement* (September 27, 1963), 739-40: "A work of literature . . . is neither ever quite meaningless (mysterious or 'inspired') nor ever quite clear; it is, so to speak, suspended meaning; it offers itself to the reader as a declared system of significance, but as a signified object it eludes his grasp. This kind of dis-appointment or de-ception . . . inherent in the meaning explains how it is that a work of literature has such power to ask questions of the world . . . without, however, supplying any answers." Quoted by Frank Kermode, "The Use of the Codes" in *Approaches to Poetics*, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York and London: Columbia UP, 1973), p. 67.