Modular narrative and the crisis of interpretation

JEANNOT, Michel

Michel Jeanneret

6. Modular Narrative and the Crisis of Interpretation

As a starting point, here are four elementary observations: (1) the Heptameron is in the form of short novellas rather than a long narrative; (2) the book gives many of these novellas and takes the form of a collection; (3) each story is followed by a commentary; (4) the storytellers' interpretations do not agree. While these observations apply specifically to the Heptameron, they are also valid and pertinent for a large part of French narrative literature in the sixteenth century. Hence, we can illuminate the Heptameron by other narratives and vice versa. I will study the narrative structure of the Heptameron as an example of major trends. A better understanding of these large-scale phenomena will allow us to return to the Heptameron with a better appreciation of the importance of the four characteristics I have mentioned.

Long Romances and Short Stories

The sixteenth century produced remarkably few long romances while collections of novellas proliferated. Translated, adapted, or newly invented, from previously written sources or from the oral tradition—often it is hard to make such distinctions—short narrative forms were fashionable. This phenomenon, as far as I know, has never been explained. It reveals, nonetheless, a meaningful choice, and deserves to be analyzed—first, through a general survey, then some hypotheses—especially because the Heptameron is directly concerned.

The absence of large narrative works is all the more curious in that it appears as an accident, an exception. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and even into the first decades of the sixteenth, the epic and romance cycles of the Middle Ages inspired many romances in prose—an immense
corpus of adventures that combined and grew in endless sequences. Late in the sixteenth century the abundance of long and complex romances returned with renewed vigor, and, as is well known, the first half of the seventeenth century reached unheard-of levels in terms of the number of new titles and the length of narratives. It is still more remarkable that long narratives declined in France during the Renaissance in view of what was happening elsewhere at the same time. While France devoted itself almost exclusively to the short narrative, Italy continued to elaborate, in various forms, large heroic and courtly works—for example, the works of Ariosto and Tasso.

This is the general tendency, to which there are some counterexamples, though nothing more than the exception to confirm the rule. Hélisenne de Cenam’s romance Les Angoisses dououreuses (1538) and Barthélemy Aneau’s Alector (1660) were not unimportant, but they were isolated cases. I recognize, of course, that the prose versions of epic material and adaptations of medieval romances were among the first texts to benefit from the discovery of the printing press. They perpetuated in the Renaissance the themes and systems of medieval narrative fiction. Yet creative activity in this domain slowed about 1550, and the rewriting of medieval romances appeared thereafter as an obsolete survival, even though several texts of this type continued to be reprinted.

Rabelais’s great romance series was inspired by the same principle of the sequel. From father to son, from quests to discoveries, it seems to present all the features of large and continuous narration. On closer inspection, it appears, though, that the journey from Gargantua to the Quart Livre (or to the Cinquième, if one prefers), is more complicated. It is clear that Rabelais begins by inscribing his project in the tradition of medieval cycles. He refers to the Grandes et inestimable chroniques du grand et inorue géant Gargantua, and thus creates a link both with the subject matter of chivalric literature and with its method of grafting onto existing work. In addition to this external support, he articulates the parts of Pantagruel as sequels designed to form a solid narrative syntax. Finally, his adoption of the biographical structure, in the first two narratives, underscores his will to provide continuity. But this ambitious plan for a novelistic masterpiece soon falls apart. Gaps in the plot’s logic appear right from the beginning. The Tiers and Quart Livres adopt a cumulative mode of composition having little to do with the chronological unfolding of the romance. Equivalent episodes—Panurge’s consultations, the stages in the sea voyage—pile up without linkage or progression; the narrative breaks into more or less independent units, in apparently random number and order. It seems as if Rabelais, at first faithful to the medieval tradition of sequence, surrendered, from the Tiers Livre on, to the new aesthetic. He broke the narrative succession, published romances which look like collections of short stories, and thus arrived, in his last works, at an arrangement very close to the modular structure of the Heptameron.

Another exception should be discussed: the romance cycle of Amadis de Gaule had a huge success and persisted through the whole of the sixteenth century, growing, diversifying, and spreading out through its family roots. Though chivalric romances were less fashionable, the Amadis series picked up where they left off and, in a new timbre, kept alive in the Renaissance reader’s imagination the “matière de Bretagne” and the heroic traditions of feudal epics. Gentlemen, ladies, and the whole cultivated elite found in Amadis the representation of an ideal that still held their interest. Yes, the Amadis books were a social phenomenon, a commercial event and, if there ever was one, a long romance. But one work, even a best-seller, is not enough to belie a trend. However, popular with the French, the Amadis books were, after all, a foreign product, since Nicolas Herberay des Essarts and his continuers translated, or adapted, Spanish and other sources. The French were the consumers, rather than the producers, of this long romance. And anyway, were the Amadis books any more than a relic, a survival from another age? Their recent editor has used the terms “archaic narrative form” and “a ‘fossil romance.’”

A general view must also include one last exception. In the great corpus of novellas which proliferated throughout the century, the predilection for the histoire tragique, imitated from Bandello, became pronounced from 1565 on. The plots, at first short, began at this point to become more complicated: the stories became longer, and we can see the beginning of the narrative scheme which heralded the rebirth of the romance during the seventeenth century. It seems as if the histoire tragique was getting ready to fill the gap created by the dearth of new long fiction between 1530 and 1590.

The scarcity of romances was not only contemporaneous with but probably related to another surprising deficiency, that of the heroic poem, another ghost haunting the sixteenth century, another proof—by absence—of the crisis which struck at that time the long narrative forms. For Sebillet, the situation was clear: “Of the kind of Poems which can be called the Great Work, as is, of Homer, the Iliad, of Vergil, the Aeneid, of Ovid, the Metamorphoses, you will find few or none attempted or completed by the Poets of our time.” Such a lacuna is all the more striking in that the epic
model enjoyed an exceptional prestige. The *Ars politiques* proclaimed its superiority and, to bring about the coming of the great work, handed out encouragements and advice. Peletier du Mans clearly established the relationship between the subject matter of medieval romances and that of the heroic poem: “I find our romances very creative. And I will say here in passing that in certain chosen cases, the heroic poet would be able to make use of them: as of the adventures of Knights, their loves, their travels, their enchantments, their combats, and such things, which Ariosto borrowed from us to transpose in his book.” Du Bellay also referred to the example of Ariosto, who had succeeded in constructing a vast romance edifice; in his turn the French poet should choose “one of those beautiful old French romances, like *Lancelot*, like *Tristan* or others: and from them revive for the world a marvelous *Iliad* and a well-wrought *Aeneid*. This exalted challenge appealed to Ronsard. The *Franciade* corresponds, in verse, to the lure of the romance: “this book is a Romance like the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*,” wrote Ronsard. 8

This great heroic and romantic project would not be completed. Such a failure is all the more significant in that it reveals the literary bankruptcy of poets unable to commit themselves to a monumental creation:

This deficiency of great and Heroic works is from want of subjects: or from the tendency of each of the Poets reputed for knowledge to prefer following the trail approved by so many ages and by so many sages by translating rather than to undertake a work of his own invention, thus opening a pathway for robbers to steal the honor due to any virtuous poet.9

It seems as if the period did not fit the ideological conditions for setting out, and carrying through, great projects, and as if the political instability, the crisis of beliefs, and the explosion of traditional culture deprived writers of the equilibrium necessary for a long-term endeavor. Perhaps it is revealing that in poetry, religious authors like d’Aubigné and Du Bartas were the only ones capable of building large and coherent systems. Was this because they had a global vision, a sustaining ideal, which gave their ventures that conviction, that goal which secular poets seemed to lack?

Yet a phenomenon of this type cannot be explained by a single factor. There are many causes, each of which would require a more detailed inquiry than I have laid out. I would like to develop in what follows two other hypotheses, which, I believe, concern important issues in the history of forms and the history of ideas in the sixteenth century. These considerations will bring us back to the *Hypnerotomachia*. 10

**Modules and Collections**

The success of short stories and the concomitant eclipse of the romance may have to do, first of all, with the Renaissance taste for short forms and with the widespread tendency to segment discourse, whether narrative or expository, into discrete and mobile units—what I will call modules. The sixteenth-century book rarely took the form of an organic unity, a homogeneous construction whose every part had a necessary place in the whole. It seems often a collection of sundry pieces, more or less independent, without a clear principle of selection and classification. Such a book was not conceived as a closed and definitive structure, but as the assembly, temporary and contingent, of movable pieces available for other uses.

Volumes of unmarred stories, anthologies, and collections were not a sixteenth-century invention. Various types of compilations were made in antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages. This phenomenon, however, became unusually important in the Renaissance, in books for exchange of knowledge as well as in books for recreation.

The distribution of narrative material in compact modules and the arrangement of such modules in more or less mixed volumes, like the *Hypnerotomachia*, had a crucial impact on the way fiction was distributed in the second half of the sixteenth century. Despite variations in the narrative structure and in the arrangement of the stories, the anthology principle was constant. Novella collections appeared by the dozen, and most merely retold, with small changes, stories already circulating.

In managing knowledge the Renaissance also took up the modular structure. The humanists published innumerable compilations; they loved lists and anthologies, and they heaped up knowledge in vast encyclopedias. Budé’s work and Erasmus’s immense collection of *Adages* and his *Collationes* give an idea of many others. The last decades of the century teemed with compendiums, memorandums, and handbooks. I could mention, more or less at random, the works of Etienne Pasquier, Pierre Messie, La Primau-daye, Boasruau, Béroalde de Verville, Vigeneré—outsized reservoirs of erudite fragments, spare parts of knowledge, available for any possible use.

At the crossroads of narrative collections and scholarly miscellanies were all kinds of "recueils bigarrés" which, in different proportions, mixed short stories and documentary materials, didactic excerpts and a variety of jokes. The protean genre, represented by the work of Du Fail, Bouchet, Cholières and many others, was, in the years from 1560 to 1580, an intellectual phenomenon of still unmeasured importance. In these texts the cumu-
lative modular principle reached an extreme. These books were stockpiles of anecdotes and scholarly notes, news items and moral examples, short stories and puns, doctrinal citations, and pieces of popular culture. They were storerooms of memorable facts and sayings, repertories of cultural goods which belonged to everyone and to no one, volumes of anonymous archives where consumers could pick up, as they wished, a unit of knowledge, a maxim, a narrative kernel. We know that Montaigne explored the resources and the aporias of this use of the book as a collection of examples and as the memory of other books.

Cutting knowledge and fiction into modules provided a mobility that the *Heptameron*’s readers utilized immediately. This is proven by the first edition, by Boaistuau (1558), as well as certain manuscripts, which give the tales in a different order. Some versions not only redistribute the material but truncate it. Here as elsewhere, then, the book was used as a repository for movable units. We can see how risky it would be, in these circumstances, to look for definitive cohesion in the order of the stories.

The advent of printing may be related to the trend toward modular structure. This correlation of printing and modular organization lets us better understand the *Heptameron*’s place in the shift, which was decisive for the humanist movement, from the epoch of the oral tradition to a culture transformed by the new possibilities of written records.

Oral communication is linear and moves within the temporal dimension. A story read out loud links successive moments in a flow from the beginning to the end, in an order that does not deviate. As a consequence the normal reception of a work, in a period of oral and oral transmission, is likely to fall along the syntagmatic axis. Each element has a fixed position within a logic based on continuity.

It is often said that written texts are also dominated by a linear flow, but this is false, or at least simplistic. We can read a book from cover to cover, but we can also use it as a space within which all parts are available simultaneously. The book offers itself as a synoptic system through which the reader moves freely forward and backward, in long sequences or in rapid snatches. The reader may open the book where he wishes, read at random, select a certain passage, go back, select and organize according to his desires this material transmitted without regard for time.

Printing, quite logically, in making books available to more people, utilized this resource: the spatial quality of this object which not only lifts a text out of the flow of time but also serves as a reserve of detachable pieces. The proliferation of anthologies and compilations, far from being an acci-dent, was the best possible use of the book’s characteristics. Thanks to the development of printing, each literate person now had at hand a treasure of knowledge, a virtually infinite mass of documents. The principle of the dictionary—perhaps prefigured in Rabelais’s famous lists—permeated cultural life. Narrative tradition would also benefit from this mode of storage.

This particular use of the book reveals the close bond between printing and the rise of humanism. From the moment when human memory could rely on the immense stock of information available on the shelves of a library, knowledge and thought advanced swiftly. However, rational use of such extensive, and often poorly organized, material required procedures for each retrieval: titles, tables of contents, indexes, summaries, internal cross-referencing—all marking the available units within collections. Humanist books were provisional gatherings of information, files which lent themselves to various uses, which distributed themselves in new contexts, and in many ways quickened the pace of intellectual life. The modular issue and circulation of information probably explains several aspects of Renaissance ideas and culture.

Scholars, however, were not the only ones to profit from this mode of distribution. As a reserve of documentation, books aided a new public, which aimed at attaining culture without belonging to the specialist milieu: nobles and bourgeois for whom culture was a means of social advancement. Published collections abounded as manuals of popularized knowledge which opened the gates of traditional knowledge to nonprofessionals, the new category of the *honnête homme*, which was to change the face of the social world. Packed with information and useful tips, books were treated as a commodity—or an investment—which the user could make productive. The book was a data bank which, when properly sorted out in functional units, would enhance the mind and beautify speech. Printers and booksellers did not fail to cash in on this market. Among producers of collections as among their clients, the printed book allowed people to store up on culture and make it profitable. The stress on quantity and mobility reflects the mind-set of property owners.

All of this must seem fairly far from the *Heptameron*. After all, Marguerite de Navarre did not publish her collection herself, and the model she followed, the *Decameron*, did not need the printing press to reach a wide public. Nevertheless the principle of the detachable and profitable unit may apply directly to novella collections. One of the priorities of polite society in the sixteenth century was to improve, vary, and refine conversation. In his *Courtier*, Castiglione defined the type of jokes and amusing talk that fit an
enjoyable discussion. He recommends “cheerful narratives” and even specifies, “it seems as if one were telling a novella.” In the general context described above, it would not be surprising if the *Heptameron* stories, told separately, had served to ornament a conversation, since the habit of picking up and recycling items from books was widespread at the time.

The printed transmission of cultural goods also encouraged individual consumption and, by fragmenting reception, increased chances that interpretive consensus might be lost. A reader who had direct and solitary access to information was no longer tied to an ideological community. Such a reader had a private relationship to his or her books and assumed personal responsibility for each reading. We are familiar with the decisive importance of the direct contact of the faithful with the Bible in the Reformed church. The *Heptameron* storytellers are not, of course, alone. Nonetheless, their reactions to the stories are personal, as if the idea of a common patrimony leading to a natural collective interpretation was beginning to be lost. Here we touch on the question of the commentaries, which call forth other considerations.

**Liberating Interpretation**

The romance’s disappearance in favor of narrative modules can be explained in light of another change, one that concerned ways of reading and corresponds to an important evolution in the interpretation of texts. The hermeneutic principles inherited from the Middle Ages were called into question, replaced by other expectations reshaping the perception of fiction. The short narrative has the advantage of allowing alternation with commentaries which dramatize the story’s reception and problematize it. Of course, continuous narrative form in the romance may also double back and include its own interpretation; but such interpretation, more or less implicit, is woven into the narrative fabric. The short narrative, on the other hand, provokes immediate and open reflection on significance, and functions as a laboratory where different reading styles can be tried out. The structure of a narrative on two levels, a device very much appreciated in the sixteenth century, allows such experimentation. After the story, preferably short, comes a metastory, which raises questions of method, or proposes hypotheses on the meaning of the events told. Dialogue invades the field of the story and gives reading a reflexive dimension. This structure, used in the *Heptameron*, may very well have accelerated the shift in the way fiction was treated. If we now consider the significance of this change, in the general context of humanist thought, we will also see better the historical importance of the *Heptameron*’s narrative structure.

Textual interpretation in the Middle Ages was a prominent activity, but it had to work within narrow limits. There is, after all, a single Truth—Revelation—which all human discourse, if inspired by the Spirit, must ultimately confirm. The vision of a unified and structured world, controlled by faith, gave an *a priori* definition of the work’s aim and saturated its meaning. Such a meaning might extend over several levels, according to the hierarchy taught by the church: first, knowledge of the world and its history, then a moral lesson, and finally a message about eschatology. This is the fourfold system of interpretation, a fixed grid with some variations subordinated to a strict program.

This method served both to reveal the hidden doctrines of the Bible and to provide a Christian interpretation of secular texts. Read as fables, the latter were subject to the totalizing process of allegory, which vouched for fiction’s adherence to church teaching—for example, the well-known series of *Ovide moralisé*. These were the confines within which the interpreter worked; his problem was not to find a new meaning but to demonstrate how each of the work’s details fitted into the familiar features of knowledge and faith. In such a restrictive hermeneutic system, the exegete vanished before a higher authority. The interpreter used his ingenuity to find ways to make it all fit; the finalities did not depend on him but derived from a Truth of which he was the mere spokesperson. Reading in the Middle Ages did not produce something new, did not seek something different, but recognized, in what was unknown, the already known.

Narrative literature, up to the beginning of the sixteenth century, conforms to this program. Legends, tales, novellas—the very material that Marguerite was to take up—were not always assigned a spiritual significance but were routinely given a moral meaning. However frivolous a story might seem, it illustrated a proverb or an edifying precept, it presented itself as an example, and it openly conformed to a didactic program. Antoine Vérand, who published in 1488 Laurent de Premierfait’s translation of the *Decameron*, added moralizing commentaries. Poggio’s *Facéties* and Gringoire’s *Fantasties* underwent the same treatment, and there are many other cases of such additions.

The humanists were to destroy this system and, consequently, cause a deep-seated change in reading habits. They were uneasy with the rigidity of allegory and rejected the notion that fiction should serve as mere example.
Opposed to the routine application of a teleological method, they tried to restore the individuality of each text. They gradually stopped Christianizing and moralizing ancient works, and it was no longer necessary to justify entertaining works by claiming instructional value. Moreover, in reading the Bible the humanists sought first of all to understand the literal meaning and the historical dimension. Philology would vouch for that first reading, which was supposed to be independent of dogmas. A significant change took place during the sixteenth century in the practice of commentaries: in place of the gloss, which laid out allegorical values, erudite annotations favored a more technical understanding and provided documentary materials without prejudging the deeper meaning of a book. No longer was a moral or instructive outlook to be imposed on readers; readers were instead to be given the means to undertake an interpretation for themselves. Historical and critical analysis replaced ideology; assimilation was followed by respect for difference.¹⁵

This did not mean that reading fiction was from now on simply a matter of determining the literal sense. The dismantling of the allegorical system did not lead the reader to give up the search for latent significance and hidden meanings. The crisis of the ancient exegetical methods and the evolution of philology led instead to a very acute awareness of the complexities and resources of interpretation. What was new was that people no longer believed that it was possible to systematize and to pin down, once and for all, the productiveness of a text. While humanists argued for a rigorous attention to the letter of a text, they remained ready to discover other readings, without, however, seeking to give them formal status.

Once the restrictions and the security offered by allegorical decoding had been given up, the initiative and the responsibility of the reader of fiction increased. To actualize the potential of a text, one had to trust one's intelligence and knowledge. The text called for the active and unprogrammable participation of a reader, who, freed from theological habits, would accept the challenge and the risks of interpretation. The authority which once belonged to the author alone was now shared with the reader, who was responsible for figuring out the meaning of a text. But this transfer changed the very nature of such authority; it had once been founded on a metaphysical guarantee, on the postulate—even through numerous relays—of a prestigious transcendental origin. Henceforth this authority could only claim the weight of human intuition and experience.¹⁶

The acting out of textual reception in numerous narratives like the 
*Hepameron,* and the sixteenth century's frequent thematization of the figure of the reader and the reader's activity testify to this shift. The use of short narrative modules with intervening interpretive dialogues is an illustration of this new balance. More generally, prose narratives and poetry frequently constructed representations of reading, as if fiction with its symbolic scenarios was the proper instrument for exploring such a problematic activity, resistant to rules and theories. When Erasmus, Rabelais, or Marguerite in their stories juxtapose a tale and its fictive reception, when they create characters who are also readers, they are building theoretical fictions, or imaginary hermeneutic models, which permit them to test other ways of reading. Love, death, and religion, reading is perceived as an opaque signified, which can only be approached through figural mediation. Interpretation does not claim to control fiction, but realizes that it participates in fiction's ambiguity. Discourse fuses with narrative: metadiegesis circles back onto diegesis.

What is shown in scenes of reading is more an action than a result, a work in progress, the dynamic interaction of a text which resists and of an individual or a group which wrestles with it. Rather than emphasizing the result of reading, reading itself is presented as a conquest. It supposes reading subjects who engage themselves, who challenge an active work, and who allow themselves to be challenged by it. Such reading is a confrontation, an ambiguous manifestation of submission and rebellion: it contrasts an ancient authority—a pattern of thought already organized—and a receiver who is seeking himself and becoming conscious of himself through ascent, controversy, or objection. This is the context in which the metaphor of imitation as digestion appears, the transformation and appropriation of the earlier work. We recall how the construction of the self, in Montaigne's work, is based on the critical reading of authors, how competition stimulates the mind, moves the pen, and helps form judgment. Here too a major shift has occurred: the moral profit of reading no longer corresponds to the acquired "material"—the static product of a finished process, a definitive meaning which would put an end to inquiry. The benefit of reading is to be found in the activity of questioning, in the exemplary performance of an individual who seeks truth. If there is an ethic to reading, this ethic is found less in the contents of the message than in the act of decoding. The ethic is not in thrall to the ideas but fulfills itself in a *praxis.*

These very general propositions call for much nuance and qualification. Biblical exegesis—the methods of which are much discussed—raises, of course, different problems from the interpretation of secular texts. Even when the Scriptures were freed from the fourfold interpretation, readers still sought a final Truth, the irrefutable evidence of Revelation. Humanist
theologians might invoke the mystery of the Word and the freedom of the Spirit, but in their commentaries they submitted to a very strict discipline and attempted above all to consolidate faith and doctrine. All that was said above applies to the genres which escaped from the direct control of the church—the field of history, for example, and of fiction—which could avail themselves of greater room to maneuver in refining new hermeneutic strategies. Just as sacred subjects postulated the oneness of the Word, so mankind’s immanent creations and discourse on human affairs left room for conjecture.

Among these, works written for entertainment and comic texts, because of their marginality, offered room for experiment which could be a research laboratory for new reading methods and aims. Such texts used their freedom to foil overly restrictive hermeneutic systems and, in guise of a game, to set forth in a hyperbolic way the difficulties of interpretation. We know how Rabelais both inscribes and demolishes the allegorical model, how he throws readers off track by inviting them to seek a hidden meaning while he blocks any possibility of semantic saturation. Bonaventure Des Périers, in the Cymbalum mundi, places himself at the ambiguous boundary between enigma and hoax, while he leaves his Nouvelles recreations to the reader’s acumen, without a commentary. Jocosity or substantifique mérite? Innocent pastimes or stories full of a higher meaning? The narratives of Erasmus, Rabelais, and many of their contemporaries, including Marguerite, raise the question while suggesting, at the same time, that it is badly framed. Their trick is to show that the opposition serious/nonserious does not work, that play and instruction, the pleasure of mankind’s immanent creations and discourse on human affairs left room for conjecture.

The Heptameron and the Problematization of Reading

Anyone who knows recent critical studies of the Heptameron—particularly the work of Philippe de Lajarte—will recognize, I hope, the relevance of the general framework that I have laid out. To make the connection clear we need only point out a few significant aspects of Marguerite’s book.

When Marguerite was composing her collection, the formula of alternating stories and dialogues was far from established. In France the tendency was rather the opposite: the Cent nouvelles nouvelles of Philippe de Vigneules (between 1505 and 1519), the Paragon de nouvelles hommestes et délectables (1511), the Grand paragon des nouvelles nouvelles of Nicolas de Troyes (1536), along with the Nouvelles recreations of Des Périers (1538) juxtapose novellas without commentary. The choice of Boccaccio’s model in the Heptameron is thus in keeping with a specific project. Yet the differences between the Heptameron and this model are just as significant. The storytellers’ discussions expand, to such a point sometimes that they are longer than the stories. And not only does the debate take more space, but it also fits itself closely to the story which precedes or follows. Two genres are placed side by side, interacting and forming an organic unity. Such basic observations are proof enough that Marguerite, far from having wanted only to store up a collection of stories, intended to raise the problem of interpretation itself, by exploiting the flexibility of the modules and the room available for the storytellers’ exchanges.

The link between narrative and discussion follows a fairly constant pattern. Before beginning the story, a narrator announces a project: to illustrate some typical form of conduct, to establish some truth about love. The narrator’s aim is demonstrative: “L’histoire que j’ay deliberé de vous racontier, c’est pour vous faire veoir comme amour ...” (88;337). These typical preliminary statements program the way the tale should be received; they have the same function as a preface that aims to control the reading of the text which follows. After telling the story, the narrator intervenes again and, in accordance with the initial project, draws the moral: “Voylà, mes dames, une histoire que voluntiers je vous monstre icy pour exemple, a fin que ...” (27;88). The narrator speaks to the assembled group, or directly to an individual, to get the greatest number to agree, and to try to guide the debate.

This technique is as simple as it is common: a supposedly true story is segmented in such a way as to serve as an example: an anecdote, treated as an allegory, serves as the basis of a didactic and edifying enterprise. An implicit postulate is at work here: the singular illustrates the general. Beyond the diversity of actions and characters, it is possible to detect laws valid for the whole of mankind. A typical story demonstrates a psychological or ethical truth which is so obvious and universal as to be irresistible to its hearers: “Je vous preuve, par cette histoire, que la finesse des hommes . . .” (42:106). New knowledge and moral improvement go hand in hand, since the event retold contains a lesson that applies to all: “Si à quelqu’une de
preponderance in the discussions. The rules of the game implicitly call for the players to ignore hierarchies and face opponents on an equal basis.

As a result no belief gets the better of the others, no synthesis settles the dispute. Working from the author's biography or from her poems, critics have often tried to reduce the Heptameron's comments about love to a Neoplatonic or Christian-platonic theory; ultimately this systematic interpretation proved untenable. Courtly love and ribald love, the law of honor or the law of pleasure, the mind's nobility in quest of sublimation and the body's vigor in search for satisfaction... all these conflicting theses—and many others—are set forth, and their disharmony remains unresolved. The friendly storytellers carefully distinguished the morning Bible-readings from the afternoon pastimes. Devotion, it may be supposed, unites them in a common act of faith; but the uncertain and contradictory human matters cannot be so easily settled.

Undecidability is not solely a result of the differences among the storytellers but is also inherent in the multiplicity of facts, the immense variety of phenomena. If one story doesn't convince the listeners, another one is told and then another, and each one illustrates a different truth; so that in place of complementing one another, the novels diverge and contradict one another. The storytellers raise endless questions about love, they circle around the same issue in order to construct a global view, but no coherent picture emerges. There are no constants on which to base laws. The individual event which should have found a place in the pattern turns out to be unclassifiable, neither typical nor irrefutable; it falls outside the categories of knowledge and morality: it is extraordinary.

The storytellers agreed to tell "nulle nouvelle qui ne soit veritable histoire" (9:68). They have habits from the traditional historiography. For them, data from experience, properly selected, have a typical value and contribute to building or to illustrating an ideology—Historia magistri vitae. Factuality and exemplarity should go hand in hand. This fit between reality and morality is exactly what the Heptameron works to deconstruct. Not only do the stories, for their hearers, prove nothing beyond themselves, but they can be multiplied to infinity—there are as many stories as there are individuals and events recorded in human memory. As a result, the system into which these stories should be inscribed finds itself submerged in the plurality and the heterogeneity of the known phenomena.
History and experience overwhelm the theories, upset the frameworks. The storytellers discover, without realizing it, a principle of skeptical thought that Montaigne makes explicit: no intellectual construction can, without mutilating it, account for the diversity of the real. The necessarily infinite number of situations or possible actions cannot be reduced to the necessarily finite number of moral laws. The programs of abiding by the "vérité de l’histoire" (9;69) and of constructing a philosophy of love appear incompatible.

An Aesthetic of Variety

The deconstruction of the inscribed model of exemplarity links the Heptameron to the current of skepticism and anti-scholasticism that runs through the sixteenth century. Mankind may accumulate individual truths but not reach Truth. Such a practice of doubt does not contradict Marguerite’s faith, because Mankind at the Fall in confessing its confusion and recognizing the disorder of human things only recognizes its weakness and the urgent need of Grace. A skeptical anthropology can be the basis for an even more radical belief.

Moreover, Renaissance skepticism, as expressed here, was not necessarily pessimistic. Out of distrust of the great systematic works of the Middle Ages, Renaissance skepticism renounced systems and demystified dogmatisms but did not give up an interest in the world. The suspension of doctrinal thought even favored the freedom of the human gaze. Even if it was vain to want to put everything in order and understand it, one could still admire the abundance of things, the ingenuity of mankind. It is more appropriate to speak of eclecticism than of skepticism. Faced with the astounding diversity of phenomena, the humanists tended to observe, to gather information and opinions without filtering them or striving for a synthesis. Whether moralists or naturalists, they let themselves be guided by a ceaseless curiosity. The storytellers, in the Heptameron, never stop tracing out the endless variations of love. They seem to compensate the failure of doctrine with the quantity and the peculiarity of documentation. If intelligence must recognize that it is incapable of absolute certainty, it can at least enjoy the stimulating spectacle of human inventiveness. The Heptameron is not so far away from the euphoric skepticism of the Apology for Raymond Sebond.

Hence the style of composition of many books of the period. They are long and profuse because they attempt to include—even to imitate—the proliferation of things. They proceed by accumulation and often remain unfinished, or open, because they do not aim at standardizing or summing up the multiplicity of their components. They are montages that stick together more or less well, pretty much heterogeneous compilations, which derive from a poetics of variety and mixture. The disparity of materials on both levels of the Heptameron text—multiplicity of opinions among the storytellers and variety of amorous behaviors in the novellas—comes from the same eclecticism.

So here we are back at the point of departure. The custom of collecting and building with modules not only permitted the enactment of the difficulties of interpretation but provided the proper form for expressing a composite and segmented view of the world. As soon as we take into account the breakdown of totalizing systems and the adoption of a philosophy of variety, the division of narrative material into discrete units appears as a considered choice. The fragment is the preferred format of skeptical or eclectic philosophy—essays, adages, or miscellaneous. These are tentative probes into a limited terrain, pinpointing for further consideration elements of empirical data. Lined up, these pieces assemble a series of limited truths, without pretending to lead to more than partial knowledge, in snatches and flashes. This epistemology is organized around the paradigmatic axis and declines to engage in syntagmatic construction.

This is how the Heptameron is: The storytellers can reason and moralize about love, about psychology, about the genders, and outline numerous appropriate and useful thoughts. But the picture is never finished. One never stops finding variations, exceptions, and the need for revised conclusions. The modular collection never uses up all the material and never settles the questions. It gathers up knowledge, stories, and ideas to turn over to the discernment of the readers. It is up to them, the readers, to make choices and, if they can, to construct some coherence. Books like the Heptameron are books in search of an author, do-it-yourself books.

Notes

This essay, written at Irvine, benefited from the advice of Richard Regosin, to whom I express my heartfelt thanks.

1. "According to the inventory established some time ago by Gustave Reynier, there are only two or three original works worthy of the appellation roman during the wars of religion" (Maurice Lever, Le Roman français au XVIIe siècle
The production started up again quickly and progressed constantly: 12 romans in 1589 to 1599 (Reynier); 118 from 1600 to 1610 (Lever); and the number "does not stop increasing in the following years" (Lever, p. 11).

2. The articles "Romans et fabliaux" in the analytical indexes of the Bibliothèques Françaises of La Croix du Maine and Du Verdier clearly show the preponderance of medieval romances among the works of fiction distributed in the sixteenth century.


