

Title: The Dialectic of Marguerite de Navarre

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Abstract: In the mid-fourteenth century, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote a collection of one hundred tales called *The Decameron*. The tales were meant to entertain and advise women in the years immediately following the outbreak of the Black Death in Italy. One of the tales is about the lusty Madonna Filippa whose husband catches her in bed with her handsome young lover. As is his right, her husband hauls her before a magistrate to be tried and convicted and burned at the stake. Instead of remaining silent and thus assuring that she will be found innocent, Madonna Filippa defends herself with the skill of an orator. She is not only found innocent, but the magistrate changes the law so that adulterous wives are no longer executed.

Two hundred years later, Marguerite, Queen of Navarre, commissioned a French translation of *The Decameron*. Inspired by the popularity of the work among the members of the French court, she wrote her own collection of tales called *The Heptameron*. They were modeled after those of Boccaccio with one notable difference. Boccaccio's tales were fictitious. Marguerite's were true. In the boatwoman's tale and the wife's tale she tells of two women who defend themselves against the lustful intentions of men.

The proposed presentation will show how Marguerite de Navarre used her two tales as a dialectic to refute Boccaccio's idea of female virtue. Boccaccio found Madame Filippa virtuous, because she displayed the courage and verbal skills of a man. Marguerite asked her audience to decide if the boatwoman and wife are virtuous, because they display the courage and verbal skills of a woman. Through her use of the dialectical technique of exposition, she challenged the men of her audience to conclude that if these two women are virtuous, then all women can be virtuous.