Rape and Sociopolitical Positioning in the *Histoire tragique*

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From the medieval *pastourelle*, a lyric genre revolving around sexual encounters between knights and shepherdesses, to “heroic” images of rape prevalent in early modern painting in Italy and France, rape was often represented in a positive light. These genres typically effaced the violence of rape through the aestheticization and eroticization of the act and celebrated male virility through such “conquests.”¹ Notable exceptions to the rule are found in works by women writers, such as Christine de Pizan and Marguerite de Navarre, and by the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, all of whom condemned sexual violence towards women and represented this violence from the perspective of the women subjected to it.² A genre rarely approached from the perspectives of gender studies, the *histoire tragique*—known in England as “tragical histories”—represented another venue through which rape was criticized, but as I will demonstrate, only problematically so.³ Authors of *histoires tragiques* condemn rape at the same time that they provide alibis for rapists. They reveal that rape is about violence towards women at the same time that they ultimately conceal this violence by making rape about something else through its allegorization.

This study foregrounds how rape can be used to represent global and local tensions between men through the sublimation of the violated female body, which comes to serve as the “ground” for negotiating sociopolitical relations. It thus contributes to our understanding of the ways in which rape was conceptualized and strategically deployed as a figure in early modern societies, notably those of Italy, France, and England, whose intertwined literary and cultural histories coalesced in, among other sites,
the genre of the *histoire tragique*. Finally, it points to an important shift in the function of rape narratives. As the consolidation of power in the hands of princes in Italy and France was becoming fact, the figure of rape was no longer needed to celebrate new conquests, but rather, the act had to be condemned as a threat to the social, political, and religious order of the prince.

In order to keep in mind what is at stake in the complex representation of rape in the *histoire tragique*, I want to begin by citing one of the most explicit and violent rape scenes that I have come across in the genre. The scene is taken from a story by François de Belleforest. It involves the “group assault” of a married woman carried out by Protestant youth:

If you let a single word slip, you can be assured that your life likewise will slip away from you as soon as sound and breath come out of your mouth. With this word there wasn’t a man in the troupe who didn’t attack with their pecker the Lady who, vanquished and outraged with grief, no longer responded, no longer complained or cried out, seeing and feeling herself violated and forced by these gallant youths, more shameless than dogs and beasts without reason, abusing this woman without shame of each other, nor respect for the bloodlines that connected them, and in view of each other, and in the presence of those of their suite. What greater Barbarism could you imagine?

This is one of the few moments in the genre of the *histoire tragique* when the representation of rape unequivocally foregrounds the violence of the act, a form of “abuse” specifically targeting “this woman.” Despite the initial warning not to “let slip a single word,” the woman is depicted as exhausting herself in responses, complaints, and cries. There is no suggestion, at least at this point in the story, that the woman bears any responsibility whatsoever for her abuse. She has risked her life with her screams and, as readers, we get a sense of the horror she experiences from her point of view as she “sees and feels” herself being violated. At this moment in the narrative, rape is not about “theft” or “damaged goods,” as early modern law defined the act. Taken out of the context of the overall story and the author’s framing of the rape, the act here is simply about sexual violence against a defenseless yet courageous woman, even if the narrative almost immediately starts to slip into a discourse about sexual shame.
Although moments such as the one excerpted above do suggest that rape indeed is a form of sexual violence aimed at women, writers of *histoires tragiques* elide this aspect of the act to privilege a reading that conceives of rape primarily but not exclusively as a conflict *between men*. As we will see, the story about rape gets emptied of its immediate meaning or referent (i.e., an act of sexual violence against a woman) to be reinvested with another story about political, religious, class, or oedipal rivalry. Through rape, the female body becomes the site where national, religious, and class conflicts, as well as those concerning gender, get expressed and worked out, and such a representation necessarily denies female characters agency in negotiating such tensions. Yet despite efforts to repress their agency, female characters, as demonstrated in the excerpt above, nevertheless are repeatedly represented as resisting reduction to passivity. Opening this essay with an example of the violent act that eventually gets elided in each *histoire tragique* about rape will help us keep in mind what gets lost in this elision—namely, rape as a form of violence against women, and women’s efforts to resist such violence.8

The genre of the *histoire tragique* grew out of Pierre Boaistuau and François de Belleforest’s translations or, more precisely, adaptations of Matteo Bandello’s Italian novellas. Whereas Bandello’s collection alternated between comic and serious stories, Boaistuau and Belleforest chose to adapt only the serious ones, dubbing their so-called translations *Histoires tragiques, Extracted from the Italian Works of Bandello, and Put into the French Language* (1559–1578).9 Significantly, Boaistuau and Belleforest produced their six volumes of *histoires tragiques* during France’s Wars of Religion (1562–1598), which pitted Catholics against Protestants, and both authors reworked Bandello’s material to give it a clearly pro-Catholic slant.10 Those who followed in their wake, most notably François de Rosset and Jean-Pierre Camus, a Catholic bishop, penned their *histoires tragiques* within a similar sociopolitical context. They wrote during the period of military expeditions against the Huguenots (1620–1622; 1627–1629) and the buildup and final entry into the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). This period of political and religious instability and almost constant warfare was also characterized, according to Linda Timmermans, by “a climate of total misogyny,” manifest in the proliferation of anti-woman satires and pamphlets.11
In this period, both Italy and France were undergoing a process in which princes and monarchs were consolidating political power. By the early sixteenth century, with the exception of Venice, dukes and the Holy Roman Emperor controlled Italy's great city-states. In response to the turmoil of the Religious Wars, French political theorists such as Jean Bodin advocated absolute monarchy, which increasingly became a reality under Henri IV and Louis XIII. Within this political climate, a fashion emerged in both countries of incorporating “large-scale mythological rape scenes” into palace decor, which, according to Margaret Carroll, gave credence to princes' “own claims to absolute sovereignty.” As Diane Wolfthal has remarked, “heroic” rape scenes were understood allegorically: “forcing a woman to submit sexually was viewed as parallel to dominating one's subjects politically.” Not surprisingly, such representations also translated into validating male domination in marriage, exemplified in the Italian tradition of marital paintings depicting “heroic” rapes.

Glorification of rape in the “heroic” tradition legitimated the absolute sovereignty of increasingly powerful princes as well as paternal authority in the domain of the family. Authors of histoires tragiques, however, used rape as a figure for the vulnerability of paternal law and authority, with the same end in mind, that is, legitimating the absolute sovereignty of prince and father. They condemn the male aggression that leads to rape because, in the case of the histoire tragique, this aggression challenges the political, religious, or social stability of prince and father alike. In order to preserve the sanctity of male sovereignty, however, authors of histoires tragiques distressingly place the blame for this aggression on the beauty of female characters. Represented as both the target and the cause of male aggression, female characters serve as scapegoats for male violence, allowing to go unexamined a culture steeped in war, in which “properly channeled” male aggression was valorized.

In what follows, I will focus on histoires tragiques about rape by Belleforest and Camus. The first phase of this study traces the ways in which the beauty of female characters serves as an alibi for male aggression. It also considers how fetishized heroines are transformed into passive, silenced, empty signs that can then be reinvested with other meanings. The second phase of this study examines the ways in which the rape narrative
is reinvested with another story and redeployed to represent political, religious, and social conflict between men, with the ultimate purpose of reinforcing the authority of prince, father, and a Catholic god. As we will see, what gets lost in this semiotic slippage is the sense of rape as a form of violation and abuse of women.

**Scapegoating and Erasure**

Notwithstanding moments such as the one opening this essay, of which there are numerous examples in the genre, authors of *histoires tragiques* end up attributing the responsibility of rape to the beauty of rape victims, even though the victims consistently are depicted as making attempts to avoid rape. The beauty of the heroine sets off the series of events that lead to the rape, and it conceals the actual asymmetry underlining gender relations in the stories. Denied any form of agency or specific characteristics, female characters are reduced to being empty signs, a reduction that consequently allows their bodies to serve as the ground upon which figures for political, religious, and class conflict can be erected. However, this elision of female agency can never be complete, for authors, perhaps despite themselves, always hint at moments of feminine resistance.

In rape narratives by Belleforest and Camus, the victimized heroines are unequivocally beautiful. In Belleforest’s story, in which the noble favorite of Alexandre de Medicis rapes a miller’s daughter, the latter is described as “a superbly beautiful girl” who “shined with a certain heroic something that exceeded the blood and race from which she descended.” Belleforest’s lowborn Julia, raped by the valet of the bishop of Mantua, was “a singular and rare beauty, who surpassed all the girls of Gazuolo,” and in another story Magdaleine, raped by the abbot Gensualde, proved to be “among the most beautiful girls and gentle in manner that he [Gensualde] had yet contemplated in Naples.” We find similar descriptions of heroines in Camus. Portiane, who averts the rape of a duke, and Ménodore, who is raped by her husband’s best friend, are both irresistibly attractive. And if the beautiful adolescent Francine “would have had less exterior grace, she would not have served as the unfortunate snare for Cidon’s desires.”
Beauty is a necessary element in *histoires tragiques* about rape. However, legal depositions of the period only make mention of the age and status of women, without any detailed references to physical appearance. Beauty, then, is part and parcel of the *fiction* of rape. And within these fictions, it serves a particular purpose: it attributes more power to the victim than she indeed has. As such, beauty functions as a fetish, concealing the actual lack of power most women have. Beauty-as-fetish masks the true relation between the sexes, concealing their underlying asymmetry. Beauty (along with chastity) turns women into desired acquisitions on the marriage market, making them into objects coveted both licitly (through marriage) and illicitly (through rape or other forms of rapt). Although, as we will see, these chaste beauties appear to have a certain power of seduction, in fact, their very existence is predicated on male desire and need (desire for her possession, for power over her, and need for legitimate heirs).

Through their beauty, women and adolescent girls are represented as exerting an uncanny power over their victimizers, much in the tradition of the medieval Power of Women *topos*. Alexandre de Medicis’s favorite, we are told, “set his eyes on the beauty of this girl [the miller’s daughter], and surprisingly fell in love.” He is so “taken and enchained by the links of love” that he decides he will find a way to have her (*avoir jouyssance*). At the same time, she is the one “who had him in her power, and ruled over the best of him, that is, his heart and the most secret part of his thoughts.” Similarly, the bishop of Mantua’s valet, who is “ravished by this rare and exquisite beauty . . . became in one moment so in love, that without thinking of anything else, he decided to pursue her, and to have her.” While dancing with Julia, the valet tries to stamp out these flames, but to no avail, stating in frustration: “he had never wanted to subject his freedom to the service of any woman.” Even the eleven-year-old Francine’s beauty has the power to ravish the mind of Cidon, her adoptive father.

These narratives present many ironies. The male character is subjected to the heroine through his own gaze, which objectifies her and through which he is mesmerized by the object. Usually it is her beauty alone that incites the rape scenario, and usually she has no clue, at least initially, that she is even the object of the gaze of the rapist, whose existence she has up to that point ignored. While the heroine remains passive towards her
future rapist, her fetishized beauty is given an agency of its own. It acts
upon or exerts power over the hero independently of the heroine’s will or
knowledge. In order to escape subjection to the object, the hero seeks, iron-
ically, to “possess” the woman who supposedly possesses him. Significantly,
the term commonly used to refer to this possession is “jouissance,” which
connotes both a sense of ownership and of sexual enjoyment. “Ravir” or
“to ravish” is another recurrent term, which ends up equating the heroine’s
totally passive seduction and enslavement of the hero through her indif-
ferent beauty to the rapist’s ravishment of her body and of her chastity,
thus establishing a relation of symmetry between her power over him (she
“ravishes” his heart—without intending to) and his power over her (the
rape, the possession of her beauty/body).27

The story that best exemplifies the attitude that beauty plays a com-
plicit role in rape is Camus’s “Beautiful Death of a Beauty.” In the opening
frame of the story, the narrator condemns women’s attachment to their
beauty, which, he affirms, they value more than their life. The narrative
itself concerns Portiane, who has caught the eye of a duke who happens to
be her husband’s lord. The duke is so smitten with Portiane, who resists
time and time again his advances and material and professional bribes, that
“he decided to use force,” a common phrasing to express the act of rape.
Aware of the duke’s intentions, Portiane is convinced that the only way
to cure the duke of his passion and avoid being raped is “to destroy the
cause, and to lose this beauty.” In the tradition of Marguerite de Navarre’s
Floride, Camus has Portiane disfigure herself.28 She applies a powerful
acid that transforms her previously beautiful face into one resembling that
of a leper. Consequently cured of his passion and impressed by her great
virtue, the duke comes to believe that Portiane is a sacred vessel and temple
of the Lord. Her disfigurement serves as an example to all women who
carry out “unjust conquests” and who allow themselves “to serve as lures to
inconsiderate eyes.”29

The message—as is the message in many of these stories—is full of
contradictions. We know that Portiane is a virtuous woman and that her
beauty was not so precious to her. Yet despite herself, her beauty lured the
duke to attempt to seduce and nearly rape her. A split occurs between, on
the one hand, the heroine’s will or agency, and on the other, her beauty,
which has a will of its own. Male culpability in the act of rape is completely alleviated by placing the blame on the beauty of a woman who, for all intents and purposes, is completely innocent, pure, and chaste. This mitigation of male responsibility expresses itself most explicitly in Portiane’s act of literal self-effacement that quickly puts an end to the duke’s desire to rape her. Such actions, however, are no guarantee that the rapist will refrain from his act. Francine of Camus’s “Inviolable Heart” also becomes disfigured (this time, from disease: she resists all treatment so that her beauty is destroyed), but Cidon continues his abuse.

Whether by destroying their beauty or by confining themselves to closed spaces, women must find a way to “self-efface” or disappear before the male gaze in order to avoid any accusations of culpability. In the case of the lady’s gang rape by Protestant youths, the narrator, after having demonstrated that the lady was completely innocent, later goes on to blame husbands who, given the corruption of the century, fail to keep their women in “saintly solitude.” He also warns young ladies not to make any wrong moves:

May you learn, ladies, to measure your words, and fashion your gestures so carefully that there is nothing in you that would give occasion for men to judge you other than severely jealous of your reputation, and careful concerning the conservation of that which alone can give you justice and renown among men, given that neither the handling of arms, nor the administration of affairs, nor the government of the republic, nor the knowledge of the sciences can glorify you, who are (perhaps wrongly) exempt by nature (or if you like by custom) from such duties: given that it does not suffice for women to be good women, to not be corrupt or depraved at all, but must moreover be above suspicion . . . Assured that if this lady had contained herself within her home, and would not have been friendly or familiar (since she is courteous and properly affable) with this youth, such a scandal would have occurred only with great difficulty, unless the devil had guided these people by their own malice and perversity.

Women are made culpable in their own rapes even if they are only suspected of misconduct, even if they do nothing wrong at all (the lady was properly affable). Women must be constantly vigilant not to emit
any signs that might possibly be misconstrued, which basically means demanding their utter silence and passivity. In this morality, the discourse about rape clearly serves as a mechanism of control to maintain women in subordinate positions, to keep them interned so as to protect family lines and alliances from any impurity. This is only emphasized by the narrator’s gesture to completely remove women from any other type of action (military, administrative, academic) besides the protection of their chastity, effectively confining women to the realm of the private under threat of rape and dishonor.

What is particularly disturbing about these rape narratives is that even the girl held up as a paragon, a mirror of virtue, who does not make a single wrong move, still may be violated and even implicitly punished for her very purity of soul. In the story about Julia, who is raped by the bishop’s valet, the narrator holds her up as an example to all young women in the closing lines: “Flee, like Julia, the advances and avoid the words of he who loves in you your exterior beauty more than the beauty that makes your soul radiant, and which paints honor so vividly on your faces and engraves it so [in] your hearts that in life and in death this immortal renown makes the memory of your integrity live on.” Julia did everything right, rejecting unconditionally all proposals made and adhering wholeheartedly to her subordinate gender position, but this was not enough. She still is raped, and despite her innocence, Julia dresses in white sacrificial garb before throwing herself into the river to purify the stain on her virtue and the dishonor done to her family. This act of self-destruction, of self-erasure, again signals her innocence, but the gesture she made to cleanse herself was not good enough: she cannot be buried in hallowed ground.

The narration moves from glorifying Julia’s behavior to condemning her suicide, but the story ends with upholding Julia as a model for all women. For obvious religious reasons, both Belleforest and Camus express discomfort regarding the imperative to commit suicide in the tradition of Lucretia, whose story serves as one of the fundamental paradigms for any early modern narrative about rape. Camus resolves the dilemma of how to take care of this “impurity” by having his violated heroines finish out their lives in a convent, an acceptable model for purification that removes stained women from social circulation.
Julia’s story exemplifies the problem of blaming women for their own rapes. Women really cannot do anything about it, because no matter how virtuous or vigilant they might be, they nevertheless still will always have to face the danger of being violated. This story also exemplifies the “real” lack of power most women have. Beauty’s supposed power to seduce the active male, its power to impel him to action, does not translate into any positive form of power or agency for the female character. As these narratives would have it, beauty’s power resides in its ability to “enslave” the hero against his will to his own desire for the heroine, which moves him to rape. In other words, the power of women’s beauty translates into impelling men to rape them, against women’s own will, which gets elided by the agency attributed to their beauty. On all accounts, it is clear that the heroine is powerless, a powerlessness beauty conceals while providing an alibi for masculine behavior, which goes almost completely unexamined.

Implicating female characters in their own victimization forces them to “self-efface,” reducing them to utter silence and passivity. Authors turn female characters into empty signs by eliminating any of their particularities (such as beauty) or agency (they are reduced to passivity and silence). This process allows for the rape story to be transformed into a story not about violence carried out against women, but rather a story about something else. The effaced and passive female body can now be reinvested to become a figure for a duchy, the Catholic faith, or the law of the father. Rape as violence towards women can be redeployed to signify usurpation, heresy, or other forms of public or private transgression against prince, father, or God. At the same time that the victimized heroine is emptied of her signification as “violated woman,” the moral frames of the histoires tragiques function to further empty the rape story in order to relate another about political, religious, and class conflict between men.

**Rape as Political Figure**

One story by Belleforest is particularly striking in its figurative use of rape. The basic plot concerns a nobleman from the house of Alexandre de Medicis who abducts, kidnaps, and repeatedly rapes the daughter of a miller. Such violence is totally elided first and foremost by the story’s title:
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“Most Generous and Equitable Act of Alexandre de Medicis, first Duke of Florence, in the case of a young gentleman, his favorite, who, having raped the daughter of a poor Miller, had him take her as his wife, and provided a rich dowry.” This surprising title provides a framework within which the rape serves as a pretext to talk about the Duke’s “generous act”: rather than executing the gentleman in question, the duke has him marry his victim, marriage being a legitimate means in the early modern period of repairing the “damage” done by rape to the victim’s social value. In the introductory summary of the story, the narrator presents this generous act within the context of political wisdom, citing the measured justice of a Julius Caesar, who sought to gain the hearts of his enemies through clemency. He states: “we have a fresh example of a generous act, full of prudence and gentle severity, in a prince of our times.” Over the course of the narrative, this frame moves to the background, only to return to close the story, immediately after the marriage takes place between the gentleman and the miller’s daughter: “word of this act spread forthwith throughout almost all of Italy: and people praised this judgment no less than the sentence proclaimed by King Solomon over the dispute of the two crude women for the living child that each one repeated was hers.” A discourse on wisdom both opens and closes a narrative that largely concerns the stalking, kidnapping, and repeated rape of a young woman. Rape or the violated female body provides the ground for a narrative that foregrounds an exemplary story about the perfect prince.

After the moralizing prologue, the story’s introduction provides a second frame to the rape story that is also political. We discover that this “wise” duke in fact had invaded the fief of Florence with the support of the pope, “usurping at the same time the name, title, and prerogatives of Duke.” At first the Florentines were against this usurpation, and the Senators feared losing their sovereignty and power. But the duke “governed his principality so well that what was in the beginning called tyranny, came to be accepted as just domination, and that which people felt had been usurped by force, seemed to be his due, as if by legitimate succession.” What is particularly interesting about this second frame concerning the duke’s usurpation is that it does not appear in Bandello’s version of the story. Bandello merely states that the duke was the first to rule Florence with the backing of the
Church. Such a frame invites the reader to speculate that the gentleman who took this young girl by force and violated her (and who, it should be noted, is the duke’s favorite and a member of his household) may eventually make a wise and just husband.

The rape of the miller’s daughter and her subsequent marriage to her violator mirrors the duke’s “rape” of Florence followed by his legitimate rule. Rape as a figure for usurpation was not an uncommon one in the early modern period, and it is perhaps this connection between usurpation and rape that explains the duke’s leniency towards his favorite better than the duke’s wisdom. Reading against the story frame and against its explicit morality, this “generous act” reveals itself to be about the duke forgiving one who indeed is like himself, linked to him both by feudal bonds and by the usurpation of a possession that was not his legitimate succession, but that legitimately became his over time. Their “sameness” is further emphasized in their transgressive sexual tendencies: “he [the gentleman] knew very well that the Duke was a bawdy mate and . . . loved the wife of his neighbor as much as his own.” Thus the boundaries between usurpation and rape, between the duke and his gentleman, constantly get blurred. Moreover, the violent act of rape is played down, for usurpation and rape both eventually translate into legitimized forms of “possession.”

At the same time that rape serves as the figure for the (illegitimate) possession of a territory, it also signifies the violation of a vulnerable law. Alexandre de Medicis asks his favorite if he believes the laws have been “perverted” in such a way that this act would be permissible, and reassures his gentleman that indeed he will uphold the law, meaning that he will protect the girl. In order to reaffirm the legitimacy of his reign, Alexandre must uphold a law that he himself broke in order to usurp the duchy. In warfare, rape, like usurpation, is tolerated. However, with war’s end, stability depends on respecting the law, on respecting the chaste girl who says no.

In the same way that in certain periods and societies women have served as tokens of kinship and social relations, mediating relations between men, so the law serves as a sign of and mediates the relation between subjects (full subjects arguably only being male) and sovereign. The respect and protection of the subjects’ women by their sovereign
and his men become symbolic of the relation between ruler and ruled. It is their use as a representation of relations between men that allows for the slippage between women and law, and thus rape as a figure for the violation of the law. In the end, rape must be prevented not because of the harm it does to the female body, but because of the harm it does to the body politic, whose integrity depends upon non-aggressive relations between men, relations that manifest themselves in the legitimate exchange of—and respect for other men’s—women. Whereas the “heroic” tradition of rape functioned in such a way as to justify the absolute sovereignty of rising princes and kings, representations of rape in the histoire tragique sought to limit the scope of power of the prince’s potential rivals—both political and religious.

Rape as Religious Figure

Whereas political figures of rape center on violations of the order of the Prince, rape also functions as a religious trope, conveying the sense of a violation of God’s law or of the faith, represented by chaste, virginal girls. A chain of traditional Catholic associations intimately connected the figure of the Church with the image of virgins. Since the growth of Mariology in the twelfth century, cathedrals were viewed as allegories for the body of the Virgin Mary, the temple of the Lord. Drawing from the Gospels, Roman Catholicism envisioned the Church as the Spouse of Christ, and Catholic women who took up a religious vocation and the consequent oath of chastity also were—and still are—considered wives of Christ. The Virgin Mary and by extension the virgins modeled on her example all represent, in Jean-Pierre Camus’s words, God’s “living temples.” In a genre profoundly marked by Catholic Reformation ideals, it should come as no surprise that the rape of chaste girls could be deployed to represent attacks on the Catholic Church, the embodiment of God’s order on earth.

Such associations between God, His Church, and virginal girls come together in the anonymous histoire tragique about the serial rapist François de La Motte:
So it is that divine justice pursues all crimes, it is such that ravishment and rape are followed on their heels the most tirelessly. The cause of this . . . is that virginity, being the mirror in which the great God and the angels contemplate themselves, he who, by impulse of some force and violence, dishonors and stains such a beautiful mirror and portrait, incites and excites the great God and the angels to settle accounts for his offense. Not offense, but infamy, but horrible crime, but sacrilege, but parricide, but abominable execration, and execrable abomination.48

Here, rape is a crime not because it violates a woman, but because this virginal woman represents the divine through her purity and chastity, which is then “dishonored” and “stained” by the rapist. In the narrator’s enumeration characterizing the crime, it is quite telling that he views rape as a form of sacrilege and parricide. These words suggest that the act of rape transgresses God’s order, and as such poses a symbolic challenge to Our Father himself. Such a message becomes all the more powerful in stories in which Protestants are the perpetrators.

Belleforest’s “Cruel and detestable acts of some young citizens, on a Lady,” whose rape scene opens this essay, is a case in point.49 This multi-layered story begins by framing the act of rape within a religious discourse on idleness, and then moves into a second frame concerning the rape of the city by financiers, to conclude with rape as a trope for Protestant aberrations. The story develops a chain of consequences in which the immoral wealth of the city, figured as a rape of the people, leads to idleness due to lax parental authority, which leads to rape, which is a sign of corruption, the root cause of which is the Protestant faith. After describing the horrific group rape, the narrator moralizes, blaming Protestantism for instigating rebellions, seditions, sacrilege, theft, murder, and—related to the case at hand—the violation of the nuptial bed.50 In the beginning of the story, it is mentioned in passing that the main rapist was “Lutheran, or Huguenot by faith, and profession, or rather, not believing in anything at all.”51 Subsequently the rapist’s religious denomination falls to the wayside as the story moves on to the most brutal rape I have yet to come across in the genre: the lady in question is raped by a group of young men, then by their valets and servants, only to be taken to the executioner, who is also forced to rape her.
Although the adolescents are referred to as “these damned members of Satan,” it is not until the very end of the narrative that the theme of Protestantism returns in full swing. The narrator states: “Thus it is so, from which school has parricide issued in our times if not from the one that dispenses children from obeying their parents to give their oath to the Calvinist Apostasy? Who arms son against mother, and who prepares ambushes, massacring her accordingly, if not this beautiful and deformed reformation of the false Evangelists of our times?” The notion that the “Calvinist Apostasy” arms “son against mother” plays precisely on Catholic associations between the Mother of Mothers—the Virgin Mary—and the Catholic Church, here betrayed by her ungrateful Protestant sons. Such an image anticipates those found in polemical texts like Florimond de Raemond’s *L’Anti-Christ* (1595), in which Raemond accuses Protestants, who have forsaken the Church, of matricide. Given that this passage provides the final moral to the central rape story, Belleforest ultimately associates the rape of the lady with disobedience of parents—a violation of God’s fourth commandment—and with matricide, or the “murder” of the Church, of God’s pure temple, embodied by the chaste lady. Further emphasizing the connections between Protestantism and rape, Belleforest appends to his adaptation of Bandello’s story one purely of his own invention, in which a Protestant, married incestuously, violates a poor but chaste girl.

In several of his *histoires tragiques*, Camus approaches the question of the “Protestant heresy” in terms of seduction. In two stories in particular, Camus has Protestant women seduce Catholic priests into their heretical faith, and in both cases seduction gets conflated with conversion, with disastrous results. “The Inviolable Heart” also relates the story of an attempted “seduction” into Protestantism, but this time the attempt fails. The story concerns the beautiful adolescent Francine, who is repeatedly raped for months at a time. It becomes evident over the course of the story that rape (which Camus disturbingly conceives of in terms of sexual “temptation”) serves as a trope for Protestant violations of the Catholic Church.

The heroine is the most virtuous Francine, daughter of a Catholic mother and Protestant father. Upon her mother’s death, Francine is taken from her father and raised by a Catholic woman and her husband
Cidon, who develops an unbridled passion for the girl. In order to have his way with her, Cidon conspires with Francine’s Protestant father, who agrees to help him, only to have the chance to attract the child to his faith. The narrator declares: “Now see the lamb—both body and soul—in the wolves’ mouth.”56 This last remark is significant. While Cidon will repeatedly rape her body, this act is paralleled by her father’s desire to rape her soul by attempting to attract or convert her to Protestantism. That her purity remains intact despite multiple attempts to corrupt her is exemplified by her saintly entry into a monastery at the end of the story—all of which arguably serves as a figure for the besieged Catholic Church, which can withstand all attacks on her virtue (in other words, all challenges of Protestantism). Assaults on Francine’s virginal body are figured not in terms of violence towards women, but rather, as violent temptations hammering at the walls of virtue, which fail to crumble.

In all of these stories, what ends up getting raped is not women, but rather the people of Florence, the law and order of the Prince, the faith, and the Catholic Church. Basically, the story about the rape of a young woman is emptied of its immediate meaning or referent (i.e., an act of sexual violence perpetrated against a woman) to give way to figurative stories about usurpation and civil and religious strife. Female characters essentially embody relations between men, their bodies serving as sites upon which these relations are grounded and negotiated. Their intact but sublimated bodies serve as the contract that binds subjects to their Prince and believers to their God. When that contract is violated by either party (of course, God never breaches the contract), chaos threatens to ensue and endanger the body politic.57 These global tensions that get played out on the “ground” of the female body also manifest themselves at the local level, that is, in the articulation of relations between men, and between men and women within the body politic. Often rape plays itself out as oedipal challenges to father figures, expressing the hero’s will to position himself as sovereign. In each case, the rapist takes advantage of the weakness or absence of paternal authority to violate a lower-ranking girl as a way to reaffirm his social as well as his gender superiority.
Social Positioning and Challenging Paternal Authority

In Belleforest’s story about Alexandre de Medicis, political and oedipal scenarios complement each other to reinforce Medicis’s position as Prince and head of household. The gentleman who rapes the miller’s daughter implicitly challenges the duke’s patriarchal authority. This becomes all the more evident if we re-read the story in light of the substitution that takes place over the course of the story. Because the miller-father failed to protect his daughter from the duke’s favorite, who abducted the girl right before her father’s eyes, the duke must step in to play the role of surrogate father to the girl. Abducting the girl, then, can be read after the fact as a challenge specifically to the duke’s patriarchal authority as head of household, the chaste girl who says no symbolizing the castrating power of the father, temporarily put into check through her violation. The duke himself inscribes the girl within his own family, warning his favorite at the end of the story that he must treat the girl as if she were his own sister, and providing her with a dowry, just as a father would.

At the same time that we can understand the concluding marriage in terms of solidifying relations between the Medicis household and the people of Florence, we might also consider this scene in terms of repairing relations between father and son/son-in-law as the story moves from an illegitimate exchange of a woman (rape-as-theft) to the legitimate exchange that is marriage. Through the legitimate exchange of the girl, the law of the Father, the reputation of the girl, and the power relations between the duke and his favorite are all consequently restored. In the end, the favorite is forced back into his position of obedient and docile courtier and son/son-in-law within the system of relations at the ducal court.

Rape usually occurs within the context of weak paternal figures whose weakness stems from their fragile legitimacy (as in the case of the duke), from their inferior position within the social hierarchy, or from their Protestantism, which is construed by Catholic writers to be void of all moral authority. Lower and younger members of the nobility and those close to or affiliated with the nobility take advantage of their position within the social hierarchy to violate young women from modest families in an attempt to position themselves as more sovereign and powerful than
they indeed are. In one Belleforest story, the valet of the bishop of Mantua rapes a peasant girl; in another, the daughter of a goldsmith is nearly raped by the abbot Gensualde; and the gang rape discussed earlier is led by the son of the lady’s husband’s patron, who is a member of the class of financiers. Although socially superior to their victims, the perpetrators are not themselves lords or masters. Such rapes must be condemned, for only Fathers (and by extension, princes and legitimate authority figures) can lawfully enjoy the “absolute sovereignty” that rape came to represent in the period. As Jean-Louis Flandin has argued: “The authority of the father of the family and the authority of God not only legitimated each other: they also served to legitimate all other authorities: kings, lords, masters, and ecclesiastics all presented themselves as fathers and as representatives of God.”

Violating the authority of any father figure risks undermining the symbolic underpinnings of the increasingly absolutist and patriarchal society of early modern France.

Rape as a challenge to paternal authority in the *histoire tragique* presents an interesting contrast to Carla Freccero’s analysis of rape in the tenth story of the *Heptaméron*, in which attempted rape takes place between a lower-ranking man and a higher-ranking woman. Freccero looks at this instance of rape in terms of “oedipal rivalry between landless youth and noble lord” as well as “class revenge.” In the *histoire tragique*, rape instead reaffirms the class superiority of the perpetrator at the same time that it signifies a form of oedipal rivalry, not between landless youth and noble lord, however, but between father figures and privileged yet lower-ranking sons. With few exceptions, rape in the *histoire tragique* can be explained in terms of the temporary “usurpation” of a position of mastery in the face of weak paternal authority and the consequent demand for recognition of this superior position from the lowerclass victim. Rape results from the victim’s refusal to recognize the “absolute sovereignty” of the perpetrator, who then imposes his self-representation of (illegitimate) mastery on her.

A case in point: the young abbot Gensualde, from an important household, spends more time frequenting the members of the Neapolitan nobility, attending their balls and hunts, than reforming his own monks. We might safely assume that Gensualde is the younger son of an esteemed family, who was forced to take on a religious vocation, and who implicitly
rejects his role as he embraces the lifestyle of the secular nobility. Unable to get Magdaleine, the daughter of a goldsmith, to acquiesce to his desires, he ambushes her and her family while they are enjoying an outing in the woods. Again we have a situation in which a younger man of high rank takes advantage of the weakness of a lower-ranking father, who cannot protect his virtuous daughter. This weak authority figure gives way to the will to power of an abbot who, though theoretically master of his monks, nevertheless is not a high-ranking member of the clergy or the nobility and is effectively “castrated” by the institution to which he belongs. Rape effectively provides momentary mastery and recognition of his superior status.

Precisely because the rapist seeks social validation as master or lord, he construes the virtuous girl’s rejection as a class offense. For instance, the incensed valet to the bishop of Mantua declares to his future victim Julia: “That is enough abuse, it seems to me, of the honest affection I bear for you, Julia, without your continuing with a disdain unworthy of me, and not very becoming of a girl of your quality.” In the same vein, Alexandre de Medicis’s favorite is enraged that “the daughter of a Miller . . . can brag of having ridiculed a gentleman” and complains of “this rustic and stupid girl taking pride in the honor shown to her.” At such moments, the rapist expresses his anger over the failure of the lower-ranking girl to reflect back to him his own estimation of his superior social value, thus revealing his anxiety about class. In these cases, rape essentially functions to reaffirm through force the rapist’s social superiority by making the girl serve as the ground for his own self-representation.

While the breach in patriarchal authority that allows for a character to rape can occur due to the lower rank of the girl’s father, it also occurs in situations where God the Father is supposedly absent. In the story about the lady’s gang rape, we not only have an example of a young man attempting to assert an authority that is not his (before he rapes her, he threatens the lady and punishes her through his father’s treatment of her husband). We also have an example of lack of paternal control within the family, which mirrors the same lack of patriarchal authority the narrator attributes to the Protestant faith. Thanks to their fathers’ political connections, the young men manage to evade prosecution for their crime. However, they cannot evade divine justice and are subsequently punished.
by God: all of them die in their beds and their households fall. The narrator cautions: “Fathers, learn to punish your children well enough so that their perversion doesn’t lead to your ruin.” In this case, fathers are morally weak, and it is the great Catholic God who must step in to protect vulnerable and chaste women. The narrator insists that this weakness stems from the Protestant faith itself: “I told you at the beginning [of this story] that the first authors of this heroic act were so infected with the error of those who, evading the authority of the Church, by the same token shun all virtue and law serving society, which links men together.” Thus the text proposes that rape arises out of a complete lack of paternal authority, the initial impunity of the act signifying the utter violation of virtue and law that is Protestantism.

The desire for upper-class sons to enjoy social superiority over their lower-class victims cannot be separated, however, from their desire to enjoy gender superiority over them as well. Even when rape appears to be about oedipal rivalry and class positioning, the texts also reveal that rape indeed is about the will to dominate, to humiliate women. Interspersed in narratives that try to maintain a certain “courtliness” about them are quite blatantly misogynous remarks. When Alexandre de Medicis’s gentleman becomes frustrated in his attempts at seduction, his friends try to persuade him to renounce his pursuit of an unworthy peasant girl, stating: “But what purpose does it serve to torment yourself in this way for something of so little consequence? Is this the behavior of a noble spirit to denigrate yourself in the pursuit of a simple little woman? Don’t you know the malice of the sex, the ruses with which these serpents poison men?” The bishop’s valet remarks that women are “the subject of all imperfection” and that they are unworthy because they mock the martyrdom of men. In his defamatory remarks about the lady’s reputation, the young man who leads her gang rape targets her specifically: “we should play a trick on her, so as to cut down her pride, and reduce this glory that allows her to walk with her head held high before the most grand and honorable Ladies of this city, so that afterwards she will serve as an example to others like her.”

Such remarks add fuel to the fire of male aggression and legitimate, in the hero’s mind, the act of rape. Verbal denigration precedes and arguably prepares the act of rape in these stories. While rape serves as a
punishment for a class offense—the “uppity” peasant girl is punished for supposedly refusing to recognize the hero’s social superiority—this cannot be separated from the fact that rape is also about an “uppity” woman refusing to recognize the hero’s gender superiority. In the final analysis, rape repositions the heroine as the rapist’s social inferior and reiterates women’s inferior position with respect to men within early modern French society.

Overall the context for rape in the *histoire tragique* is one in which paternal authority appears vulnerable or absent, and in which usually younger men take advantage of this weakness to momentarily assert their superiority over a low-ranking girl or woman, who then serves as the ground for their self-representations as masters. This self-representation, however, would not be possible without the erasure of the heroine, who, as we have seen, is transformed over the course of the narrative into an empty sign. Rape in the *histoire tragique* is as much about challenging the Prince’s and God’s law as it is about young men of high rank who, out of their own frustrated ambition to be fully “sovereign,” reduce lower-ranking fathers and husbands to impotence through the violation of “their” women. But it also is about an underlying hostility towards the “other” sex, as male characters legitimate their ultimately narcissistic domination through misogynous conceptions of women as “imperfect,” “malicious,” and threatening to men.

The complex treatment of rape by authors of *histoires tragiques* is rich in what it reveals as well as in what it tries to conceal about the conception of the act in early modern France. Although the stories explicitly attempt to make the beautiful heroines complicit in their own violation, the narratives also implicitly point to the “real” causes of rape: younger men’s desire for power, male aggression rising out of a culture of war, and misogynistic conceptions of women. By attributing the cause of rape to the heroine’s beauty, writers can avoid dealing with issues related to male violence in a war-torn and politically unstable society, thus placing the blame of this violence on its victims. Emptying out the story about violence against women to make it signify something else allows the female body to serve as the ground for the patriarchal figures of realm, law, and faith, as well as the site where conflict between men gets negotiated. Rape becomes a demonstration of social superiority through the humiliation of fathers of lower rank, at the same time that it represents a challenge to (and in the case of
Protestants results from the absence of any patriarchal authority, whose law/women must be protected in order to attain stability (between men) within the body politic. Paradoxically, however, by showing how even the most virtuous woman can be raped and how time and time again heroines vehemently resist violation, the stories cannot avoid being about women and their bodies, even as they try to be about something else.

Notes


2. On Christine de Pizan’s position on the question of rape, see Wolfthal, 127–50; for the treatment of rape in Marguerite de Navarre, see Patricia Francis Cholakian, Rape and Writing in the Heptaméron of Marguerite de Navarre (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991); on Artemisia Gentileschi’s problematizing of traditional representations of sexual violence towards women in painting, see Mary D. Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

3. In an MLA search of the histoire tragique and its four main authors that I carried out in March 2009, I found a total of 129 results, out of which only six (two dissertations and four articles) dealt with gender in any depth, the earliest dating from 1994. While the genre primarily is a French one, “tragal histories” also existed in the early modern English tradition, inspired by the work of Boaistuau and his continuator, François de Belleforest. English writers who dabbled in the genre include Geoffrey Fenton, William Painter, George Whetstone, and George Tubervile; on the English tradition of “tragal histories,” see Peter Berek, “Tragedy and Title Pages: Nationalism, Protestantism, and Print,” Modern Philology 106, no. 1 (2008): 14–19.

4. In his seminal study of rape in Renaissance Venice, Guido Ruggiero remarks: “Group assault on women was not rare. At all social levels, it seems, men regularly banded together to victimize women”; see The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 98.

5. “S’il t’eschappe une seule parole, tu te peux asseurer que ta vie t’enverolera tout
6. “A ce mot n’y eut hõme de la troupe, qui ne donnast quelque atteinte de bec à la Damoselle, laquelle vaincue et outree de douleur, ne leur respondit plus un seul mot, non plus qu’elle ne se plaignist ou s’écra se voyant et sentant violee et forcee par tous ces galans, les plus ehonte que ne sont mesme les chiens et bestes sans raison, abusans de cette femme sans honte l’un de l’autre, ny respect de la consanguinité qui les lioit ensemble, et à la veüe de chacun, et en presence de ceux de leur suite. Quelle Barbarie plus grande sçauriez-vous imaginer?” (Belleforest, 6:237–8).

7. “In early jurisprudence, rape was defined as a crime against property, that is, theft,” and the raped woman was viewed as “damaged goods,” “a potential carrier of alien seed who could no longer be exchanged for political or economic gain” (Cholakian, 13).

8. As noted previously, legally rape was viewed as “property damage,” diminishing a woman’s value on the marriage market, and as a form of “theft” because women were viewed as the property of fathers and husbands. Such early modern definitions deny subjectivity to early modern women, but contemporary feminist theory provides a framework for rethinking early modern representations of rape. Underlying my approach to rape in the tragic story is Ann Cahill’s very basic definition of rape as the material violation of “the sexed body of a woman” and as an “attack [on] the integrity of her person”; see Rethinking Rape (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 14.

9. The title in French reads Histoires tragiques, Extraits des oeuvres Italiennes de Bandel, et mise en langue Françoise. Boaistuau began publishing his translations of Bandello in 1559, and Belleforest carried out the bulk of the work, collaborating on the first volume and producing five more volumes on his own from 1559 to 1578. Hervé Thomas Campagne has convincingly argued that both writers were indebted to Marguerite de Navarre and were inspired stylistically and thematically by her Heptaméron; see “Marguerite de Navarre and the Invention of the Histoire tragique,” in Approaches to Teaching Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptameron, ed. Colette H. Winn (New York: MLA, 2007), 91–96.


13. Carroll provides examples of mythological rape scenes in the palaces of Federigo Gonzaga, duke of Mantua; Cosimo de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany; and the French king Charles IX; see “The Erotics of Absolutism: Rubens and the Mystification of Sexual Violence,” in The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History, ed. Norma
14. See Wolfthal, 23.
15. On rape scenes in marital painting in Italy, see Wolfthal, 9–17.
16. For the notion of woman-as-ground, see Barbara Johnson, *Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 18–35.
18. Julia was “une singuliere et rare beauté, laquelle surpassoit toutes les filles de Gazuolo,” while Magdaleine was “une fille des plus belles, et de gentille contenance qu’il en eust encore contemplé dans Naples” (Belleforest, 2:346, 462).
22. According to Jean-Joseph Goux, in the economic domain, “a social relationship is concealed behind the apparent objectivity of value [or the fetish].” That is, the desired commodity, which is the result of asymmetrical relations of production, is valued (fetishized) in such a way as to obscure the real social relations supporting its symbolic value. Similarly, beauty serves to mask the asymmetrical relations of reproduction, the underlying structuring force of the early modern sex-gender system. See Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 157. On the concept of the sex-gender system, see Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1–30.
23. Susan L. Smith characterizes the medieval Power of Women *topos* as follows: “the representational practice of bringing together at least two, but usually more, well-known figures from the Bible, ancient history, or romance to exemplify a cluster of interrelated themes that include the wiles of women, the power of love, and the trials of marriage. This *topos* is just one among many manifestations of the medieval preoccupa-

24. The French reads: “[il] jetta son regard sur la beauté de cette fille, en devint estrangement amoureux” and is “prins et enchainé par les liens d’amour.” She is the one “qui le tenoit sous sa puissance, et regissoit le meilleur qu’il eut en luy, qui est le coeur, et le plus secret de la pensee”; see Belleforest, 1:480, 481, and 483.


27. On the problematic etymology of the term “ravishment,” see Gravdal, 5–6.

28. Camus’s story presents certain parallels and contrasts with Marguerite de Navarre’s tenth novella of the *Heptaméron*. First, in Navarre’s story about Amadour and Floride, a man of lower rank carries out the attempted rape; and second, the self-inflicted disfigurement of Floride does not prevent Amadour from attempting to rape her. See *L’Heptaméron* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), 94–125.

29. The quotations in French are as follows: “il se résolut d’en venir à la force”; “d’en ruiner la cause, et de perdre cette beauté”; “des injustes conquêtes”; “servir d’appât aux yeux des inconsidérés!” See Camus, *Amphithéâtre*, 345–46.

30. The French title is “Le Coeur inviolable.”

31. “Apprenez Damoiselles à mesurer vos propos, et façonnez vos gestes, si sagement qu’il n’y ait rien en vous, qui puisse donner occasion aux hommes de vous estimer autres que severement jalouses de vostre reputation, et soigneuses de la conservation de cela seul qui vous peut donner, et justice, et renom entre les hommes, veu que le manie-ment des armes, ny l’administration des affaires, ou gouvernement de la republique, ni le sçavoir és sciences peuvent vous glorifier, qui estes (ne sçay si à tort) dispensées par la nature, (ou si voulez par la coustume) de telles charges: veu qu’il ne suffit pas seulement à la femme pour estre femme de bien, de n’estre point corrompuë et vicieuse, ains encore faut que soit sans soupçon . . . M’asseurant que si ceste Damoiselle se fust contenuë en sa maison, et n’eust caressé familierement (comme elle est courtoise et honnestement affable) ceste jeunesse, à grand peine fust advenu ce scandale, si ce n’est que le diable eust advenu ce scandale, si ce n’est que le diable eust guidé ces gens de leur propre malice, et perversité” (Belleforest, 6:247–48).

32. There are two notable exceptions to this rule: Belleforest’s Magdaleine and Camus’s Marie, both of whom physically attack their attacker.

33. “Fuyez, comme Julia, les approches et evitez la parole de celuy qui aime plus en vous la beauté exterieure, que celle qui vous fait l’ame resplendissante, et qui paint l’honneur si vivement en vos faces, et l’engrave tellement [en] vos coeurs, qu’à la mort et à la vie ce immortel renom fait vivre la memoire de vostre integrite” (Belleforest, 2:376).

34. For an overview of the influence of the story of the rape of Lucretia on

35. The French title reads: “Acte fort genereux, et plus equitable d'Alexandre de Medicés, premier Duc de Florence, à l'endroit d'un jeune gentilhomme son favorit, lequel ayant violé la fille d'un pauvre Meusnier, la luy fit prendre pour espouse, et la doter richement.”


38. “[L]e bruit de cet acte fut incontinent divulgué presque par toute l’Italie: et loüoit on ce jugement non moins que la sentence que le Roy Salomon jetta jadis sur la controverse de deux paillardes, pour l'enfant vif, que chacune d'elle repetoit comme sien” (Belleforest, 1:511).


40. “[Il] se gouverna si bien en sa principauté, que ce qui au commencement fut appellé tyrannie, fut reçeu comme juste domination, et ce que l'on jugeoit avoir esté usurpé par force, sembla estre deu, comme par legitime succession” (Belleforest, 1:478).

41. In fact, Belleforest sews together two of Bandello’s stories here, the first about the rape (Book Two, Story 25), the second about the duke's act of justice (Book Two, Story 26), which has nothing to do with rape but rather the failure of one of the duke’s courtiers to repay a debt. Bandello does make mention of the duke taking over Florence in Story 26, but he significantly never uses the term “usupare.” See Matteo Bandello, *Tutte le opere di Matteo Bandello*, 2 vols. (Italy: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1952), 1:816–24.

42. “il [le gentilhomme] sçavoit fort bien que le Duc estoit assez bon compagnon, et . . . aymoit autant la femme de son voisin que la sienne propre”; Belleforest, 1:507.

43. Within early modern jurisprudence, rape in warfare was considered “admissible,” and its practice was widespread. In fact, Georges Vigarello notes that rape in warfare was so banal that when colonel Bénédict-Louis de Pontis forbid rape and pillage at the convent of Tourlement during the campaign of Flanders in 1635, his men actually turned in arms against him. See *Histoire du viol XVIe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 22.

44. Here I am drawing generally from Terry Eagleton’s analysis of *Clarissa* regarding the relation of the rape victim to the law. He states, “In Lacanian terms, Clarissa figures for Lovelace as the Law or Name-of-the-Father, the censorious, castrating agency which places a taboo on the very desire it provokes into being”; see *The Rape of Clarissa. Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 60.

163. At the same time that women certainly were subjects in early modern Italy and France, I would argue that often they were not “fully” subjects, for legally they were subordinate to parents and to husbands, who mediated their relationship to the laws of the land. Even as adults, women’s legal status resembled that of minors, with the notable exception of widows, who theoretically at least could be heads of households, meaning they were “legally entitled to manage their own property, make contracts alone, and remarry without the permission of their families,” which was not the case for all adult women; see Julie Hardwick, “Widowhood and Patriarchy in Seventeenth-Century France,”* Journal of Social History* 26, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 133. For a complex discussion about early modern Italian women’s agency and lack thereof with regard to the law, see Thomas Kuehn, “Understanding Gender Inequality in Renaissance Florence: Personhood and Gifts of Maternal Inheritance by Women,”* Journal of Women’s History* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 58–80.

46. Peter Fingensten notes that as early as Saint Ambrose, the Virgin Mary was likened to a temple for God, the vessel that ushered Christ into this world. Whereas cathedrals originally were understood as symbols of Christ, the rise of Marion worship “led to a reinterpretation of important elements of the cathedral. The door, a favorite symbol of Christ . . . became the virginal door of Mary”; see “Topographical and Anatomical Aspects of the Gothic Cathedral,”* The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1961): 16–17.


48. “Comme ainsi soit que tous crimes soient poursuivis de la vengeance divine, si est-ce que le ravissement et le viol en sont talonnés le plus indéfatigablement. La cause en est . . . qu’étant la virginité le miroir où le grand Dieu et les anges se mirent, celui qui, par le trait de quelque force et violence, déshonore et souille un si beau miroir et portrait, incite et excite le grand Dieu et les anges à prendre la raison de sa faute. Faute non, mais forfait, mais horrible crime, mais sacrilège, mais parricide, mais exécration abominable et abomination execrable”; see Maurice Lever, *Canards sanglants: Naissance du fait divers* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), 133.


50. The narrator states that Calvinism teaches its disciples to be “rebellious, seditious, sacrilegious, thieves, murderers, and violators of the nuptial bed of his fellow man” (“rebelles, seditieux, sacrilèges, voleurs, meurtriers, et violateurs de la couche nuptiale d’autrui”); Belleforest, 6:252.

51. “Lutherien, ou Huguenot de foy, et profession, ou plustost ne croyant rien du tout” (Belleforest, 6:209).
52. “Qu’il soit ainsi, de quelle escole est sorty le parricide de nostre temps, si ce n’est de celle, qui dispense les enfans de l’obeyssance de leurs parens pour faire le serment à l’Apostasie Calviniste? Qui arme le fils contre la mere, et luy fait dresser des embusches, la fait massacer selonnement, sinon ceste belle reformation difforme des faux Evangelistes de nostre temps?” (Belleforest, 6:250).


54. See Duggan, 135–37.

55. At the end of the story, Camus problematically applauds Francine, who considers her sexual violation to be “damnable abominations” instead of so many “delights” (Camus, Trente, 239).

56. “Voilà la brebis en la gorge des loups, et de corps et d’amé” (Camus, Trente, 227).

57. In a similar vein Marcia Welles argues that “the woman’s body becomes the object of exchange—between kings, with national and international consequences, or simply between men, with merely domestic repercussions.” She further remarks: “A virgin’s chastity, a husband’s possession of his wife’s body, cannot be transgressed without repercussions, not only to the individuals but to their societies, in much the same way that class and territorial boundaries cannot be transgressed with impunity”; see Persephone’s Girdle: Narratives of Rape in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 7–8.

58. Jean-Louis Flandrin emphasizes the rising importance of the fourth commandment in the early modern period, which also corresponded to the revival of Roman Law, all of which granted unprecedented power to fathers; see Familles, parenté, maison, sexualité dans l’ancienne société (Paris: Hachette, 1976), 119; 117–28.


60. In Bandello, no mention of “reform” is made in his version of the story, which points to the importance of Catholic Reformation ideology in Belleforest’s stories, expressed here in the concern for the reform of monasteries, as well as in Belleforest’s frame, which focuses on the problem of corruption within the Church. In the early modern period, younger sons often were forced to take up a religious vocation.

61. “C’est assez ce me semble Julia, abusé de l’hônest affection que je vous porte sans ainsi continuer une rigueur indigne de moy, et peu sortable à fille de vostre calibre” (Belleforest, 2:379–80).


63. Regarding rape in the twentieth century, Laura Tanner similarly has argued that “the forceful imposition of the assailter’s form on the victim may serve as a means of empowerment for the violator; the victim’s body acts as a blank text on which an insecure
individual’s worldview might be written”; see Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 4.

64. “Aprennez peres à chastier si bien vos enfans, que leur pervertissement ne soit cause de vostre ruine” (Belleforest, 6:245).

65. “[J]e vous ay dit dés le commencement [de cette histoire] que les premiers auteurs de cest acte si heroïc, estoient si infectez de l’erreur de ceux, qui se soustrayans de l’obeissance de l’Eglise, se dispensent par mesme moyen de toute vertu, et loy servant à la societé qui lie ensemble les hommes” (Belleforest, 6:243–44).

66. In his study of gang rape in fifteenth-century Dijon, Jacques Rossiaud identifies two primary motivations for the act. First, gang rape served as a ritual to “acquire the privilege of masculinity,” which entailed the humiliation of women as a means to affirm the superiority of men over woman—the cock over the hen. Second, it marked “a denial of social order,” destroying the social standing of the woman in question. See Rossiaud, Medieval Prostitution, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 21–22.

67. “Mais dequoy sert de se tourmenter ainsi, pour chose de si peu de consequence? Est-ce la façon de faire d’un esprit genereux, que de s’avelir ainsi à la poursuite d’une simple femmlette? Ne scavez vous pas la malice du sexe, et les ruses avec lesquelles ces serpens enveniment les hommes?” (Belleforest, 1:488).

68. The French reads: “le sujet de toute imperfection” (Belleforest, 2:475).

69. The French quotation reads: “il faut luy donner une trousse, afin de luy abatre son orgueil, et rabaisser ceste gloire qui la fit marcher ainsi la teste levee, devant les plus grandes et honorables Damoselles de cette ville, afin que cy apres elle serve d’exemple a autres ses semblables” (Belleforest, 6:230–31).