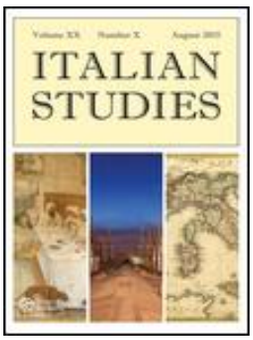

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Marfisa and Gender Performance in the *Orlando Furioso*

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MARFISA AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN THE *ORLANDO FURIOSO*

This essay argues against the traditional perception of the character of Marfisa in the Orlando furioso *as a straightforward symbol of women's agency and as a pro-woman gesture in the contemporary* querelle des femmes. *It looks first at the success of her performance of masculinity in the romance epic and then at the way this is undermined by Ariosto's comical reminder of her anatomical difference/lack. This characteristic narrative ambivalence, I argue, complicates the apparent simplicity both of Marfisa's portrayal and of the poem's contribution to the debate about women. In fact, through Marfisa, the* Furioso *opens up the comparatively un-nuanced contemporary discussion to more complex reflections on female agency, gender typecasting, and questions of gendered identity. Through a close reading of the seemingly discordant discourses underpinning her character, this essay elaborates a richer understanding of the* Furioso*'s configurations of gender.*

Before Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, women warriors of the Italian chivalric romance tradition tended to become knights for a specific purpose. Their aim was usually to escape danger, to aid or follow a lover, to save personal honour or, simply, to provide comic relief to the reader.[1] Invariably they made acclaimed fighters, overcoming skilled adversaries and holding their own alongside male counterparts — until, that is, they were, in one way or another, subjugated to male dominance. Most frequently they were married off to men, killed by men, or magically transformed into men.[2] The *Furioso*'s Marfisa breaks the mould of the chivalric romance woman warrior in that she is one of the first bona fide female knights whose chivalric identity is not just a temporary masquerade.[3] Unlike her literary predecessors, Marfisa dresses up and acts like a knight because, the text suggests, that is how she sees herself and that is how she wishes to be seen.[4] She never succumbs to male domination and at the end of the *Furioso* she is undefeated, uncompromising, and unmarried. Moreover, she succeeds in her quest of making a name for herself, and Charlemagne welcomes her into his army as one of his most prized champions.[5]

[1] Pio Rajna, *Le fonti dell'Orlando furioso*, 2nd edn (Florence: Sansoni, 1900) provides the most comprehensive study of the literary genealogy of the *Furioso*'s warrior women.

[2] The closest literary forebear of the *Furioso*'s women warriors, for example, is Marfisa's mother, Galaciella. In *L'Aspramonte* she is first married off to Ruggiero II, the only knight capable of chastening her by military defeat. Once pregnant (with Marfisa and her twin, Ruggiero), she is exiled by her husband's brothers and dies giving birth. See Andrea da Barberino, *L'Aspramonte* (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1951).

[3] I use the term 'masquerade' in the literal sense of disguise or outward show, as opposed to the more psychoanalytically charged usage of Valeria Finucci. See *The Lady Vanishes: Subjectivity and Representation in Castiglione and Ariosto* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), especially her discussion of the 'female masquerade' on pp. 201–25.

[4] See below for her exchange with Mandricardo when she resists identification as a 'lady', averring her knightliness by force. In Canto XXXVII, as well, she explains to Charlemagne that her sole purpose is to prove herself a superior adversary to his champions. On no occasion does she accept a conventional 'female' identity or destiny.

[5] My approach to Marfisa, I should make clear, is not as a psychologically coherent character but as a 'narrative complex', to borrow Maggie Günsberg's term. While I disagree with Günsberg's argument that

(Reference 5 continued overleaf)

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Her success has led, understandably, to Marfisa's adoption over the years as an exemplary model of women's agency, or an 'index of emancipation', as Margaret Tomalin puts it in the title of her study of the warrior heroine.[6] The subversiveness of her European campaign, the extent of her autonomy, and her status by the end of the poem have led feminist readers to view her as an emblem of the *Furioso*'s liberal position in the *querelle des femmes* and even as a testament to the increased social power and freedom of contemporary women. Pamela Benson, for example, reads the deeds of Marfisa and Bradamante as markers of Ariosto's belief that 'women should be judged according to what they can do rather than what society has always said they are'.[7] She reads the Marganorre canto, in particular, as a sign of the poet's promotion of female agency and of his pro-woman bias. Tomalin argues that the increased popularity of independent female roles in literature, such as Marfisa's, reflected the appearance of active, militant women in Renaissance public life, when, she says, 'women of the upper classes at least, do appear to have enjoyed greater freedom and there is a growing awareness of a change in their status'.[8] For her, Marfisa (and Bradamante) are 'two closely allied types of women: types which must have been keenly observed by Ariosto himself'.[9] Although fundamentally different, both readings share a vision of Marfisa as an unequivocally positive portrayal of the empowered female.

In my view, however, there is more at stake in Ariosto's Marfisa than a straightforward symbol of Renaissance women's agency, as Tomalin suggests; and she is more than a pro-woman gesture to the contemporary *querelle des femmes*, as Benson claims.[10] This essay argues that Ariosto's Marfisa goes beyond what Constance Jordan calls 'the praise/blame discourse of the *querelle*' and that, through the figure of Marfisa, Ariosto opens up the *debate* to ampler reflections on female agency, gender

(Reference 5 continued)
'the concept "character" […] is fundamentally limiting as an analytical tool', I recognize the usefulness of her term 'narrative complex' in distinguishing between the modern *Bildungsroman* notion of 'character' that corresponds directly to a 'real' person and the type of 'character' seen in the *Furioso* whose psychology is protean, capable of changing according to its surroundings. See Maggie Günsberg, '"Donna liberata"? The Portrayal of Women in the Italian Renaissance Epic', *The Italianist*, 7 (1987), 7–35.

[6] Margaret Tomalin, *The Fortunes of the Warrior Heroine in Italian Literature: An Index of Emancipation* (Ravenna: Longo, 1982).

[7] Pamela Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 131 and pp. 138–58.

[8] Tomalin, p. 73. Such literal readings have, of course, been contested and dismantled repeatedly, perhaps most famously in Joan Kelly's 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?', in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), pp. 137–64, reprinted in *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[9] Tomalin, p. 17

[10] 'In the poem as a whole, Ariosto attempts to replace the romance conception of love and sexual relations with a model founded on the notions of women developed by the defenders of womankind' and 'the *Orlando Furioso* attempts to reform the reader's misogynist notion of woman or confirm his philogyny by demonstrating the excellence of womankind […] . The poem is an active participant in the controversy' (Benson, pp. 90–91).

typecasting, and questions of gendered identity.[11] It shows, first of all, how the ostensible success of Marfisa's performance of masculinity is stealthily undercut by the narrative's comical reminders of her female anatomy and how the text's apparent pro-feminism in one octave becomes scarcely concealed anti-feminism in the next. This might suggest a *querelle*-like conflict where one argument cancels the other out; however, I suggest that the game of opposites embedded in the discourse surrounding Marfisa is more usefully read as a forum affording a relatively extensive airing of seemingly discordant views but offering no resolution. Viewed thus, the *Furioso*'s famous narrative ambivalence complicates the comparatively un-nuanced *querelle* dialogue and attempts a richer figuration of gender. By remaining both sensitive to the text's dynamic and receptive to its protean characterization of Marfisa, this study brings into relief the lines of demarcation between the *Furioso*'s seemingly discordant discourses, allowing a more elaborate reading of its configurations of gender to emerge.

Marfisa is not, of course, Ariosto's invention. She appears nominally in earlier chivalric romances but makes her first appearance as a truly independent warrior in Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* which communicates her vow to Mohammet never to rest until she has killed three Christian kings in battle:

> Marfisa la donzella è nominata,
> Questo ch'io dico; e fo cotanto fiera,
> Che ben cinque anni sempre stette armata
> Da il sol nascente al tramontar di sera,
> Perché al suo dio Macon se era avotata
> Con sacramento, la persona altiera,
> Mai non spogliarse sbergo, piastre e maglia,
> Sin che tre re non prenda per battaglia.[12]

The octave presents Boiardo's Marfisa as she remains throughout the poem: proficient, single-minded, and chivalrous — to the point of comic excess. Knights take her seriously, fear her and admire her; but her campaign in Europe is humorously over the top. Her allegiance to Mohammet, for example, means she has not disarmed for five years, a detail reiterated twice in these eight lines implying, perhaps, that she is not only fierce and loyal but unwashed and malodorous as well. By the end of the poem she is still independent and relatively undefeated — but her final scenes are a farcical chase of Brunello who has stolen her sword. After tiring out her horse, she pursues him on foot, stripping herself of her armour for ease of movement. During fifteen days' running she becomes increasingly bedraggled, ever more ridiculous, and a source of comedy for readers and characters alike. Finally she unchivalrously tricks Brandimarte out of his armour, horse, and sword, and rides off into the sunset.

Ariosto transforms this figure into the Marfisa who, to my mind, leads his deliberate enquiry into gendered identity. First, he downplays the ridiculous element

[11] Constance Jordan, 'Writing beyond the *Querelle*: Gender and History in *Orlando Furioso*', in *Renaissance Transactions: Ariosto and Tasso*, ed. by Valeria Finucci (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 295–315 (p. 295). Jordan also identifies Ariosto's polemical transactions with the *querelle*, reading Bradamante as a 'socially revisionary vision of gender' (p. 312).

[12] Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando innamorato*, ed. by Riccardo Bruscagli, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), I, Canto XVII, 29.

of her character, as her hyperbolic pride and religious zeal become more moderate.[13] The introductory octave deliberately echoes Boiardo's:

> La vergine Marfisa si nomava,
> di tal valor, che con la spada in mano
> fece piú volte al gran signor di Brava
> sudar la fronte e a quel di Montalbano;
> e 'l dí e la notte armata sempre andava
> di qua di là cercando in monte e in piano
> con cavallieri erranti riscontrarsi,
> et immortale e glorïosa farsi.[14]

Like the *Innamorato*, the *Furioso* announces her name, declares her martial skill, and compliments her single-mindedness and professional commitment. Her 'fierezza', however, which was, in Boiardo, the dubious virtue of never disarming, is now qualified by her capacity to exercise even Orlando and Rinaldo in battle. Ariosto does refer to her insistence on being armed; but his impassive ''l dí e la notte armata sempre andava' perceptibly downplays Boiardo's emphatic 'ben cinque anni sempre stette armata | da sol nascente al tramontar di sera' and again 'mai non spogliarse sbergo, piastre e maglia, | sin che tre re non prenda per battaglia'. Also, while a fervent religious devotion places Boiardo's Marfisa firmly on the wrong side of the Carolingian wars, Ariosto's version is not such a glaring threat to Christianity. Although a 'pagan', she is driven by personal ambition first and foremost, competing against Charlemagne's individual knights for honour and fame. In Canto XXXVIII, she converts to Christianity quickly and painlessly, without any of the procrastination or persuasion surrounding her brother's baptism. In fact, her easy conversion serves to emphasize by antithesis Ruggiero's reluctance to be christened.[15] At the same time, however, it confirms that religious identity is not the defining feature of Marfisa's character. Unlike many of her predecessors, she can not be relegated to the lists of over-the-top 'pagan' villains. She draws attention, instead, for other aspects of her characterization. Marfisa's singularity, compared with Boiardo's version, lies in Ariosto's shift of narrative emphasis from her hyperbolic skill, excessive anger, and zealous religious loyalty to her more temperate characterization and, more importantly, her more nuanced gender identity.[16]

[13] Valeria Finucci disagrees: 'But Marfisa pays heavily for reveling in a male-related course of action, for she is characterised as unfeminine and placed only in comic situations' (*The Lady Vanishes*, p. 230). Marfisa is certainly involved in comic situations — but no more than any other *Furioso* character, and certainly no more, or less than Bradamante. What is significant here is the fact that her funnier side is tempered with a dose of serious narrative usefulness, especially in comparison with Boiardo's Marfisa.

[14] Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso: e Cinque canti*, ed. by R. Ceserani and S. Zatti, 2nd edn (Turin: UTET, 1997), XVIII, 99.

[15] Marfisa chides her twin for his shameful delay in converting and avenging their father on the pagans: 'Fratel mio | (salva tua grazia), avuto hai troppo torto | a non ti vendicar del padre morto. | […] Perché vivendo tu, vive Agramante? | Questa è una macchia che mai non ti levi | dal viso […] Io fo ben voto a Dio (ch'adorar voglio | Cristo Dio vero, ch'adorò mio padre)' (XXXVI, 76–78).

[16] It is this Marfisa that was adopted as a model of female agency for subsequent chivalric romances. As early as 1535 she reappears, for example, in Antonio Legname's *Le prodezze di Rodomontino, figliuolo di Rodomonte* where her triumphal re-entry to Tauris eclipses Ruggiero and Bradamante's feats in the final canto. Margaret Tomalin counts no less than fourteen romances celebrating Marfisa (and Bradamante) published in Venice, Padua, and Florence in the twenty years after Ariosto's death (*The Fortunes*, pp. 126–45).

In his painstaking study of the *Furioso*'s literary genealogy, Pio Rajna laments the evolution of Marfisa under Ariosto's pen as a puzzling and displeasing complication:

> L'Ariosto modera alquanto quella sua indomita superbia e tracotanza; arriva perfino a fare un giorno s'induca per compiacenza a indossare vesti femminili (XXVI, 69). Di ciò non saprei dargli lode. Le tinte mezzane stanno bene quando si ritraggono oggetti reali; ma nel mondo della pura fantasia ci voglion per solito colori vividi, linee ardite [...] ridotta a queste proporzioni, non si saprebbe più perché sola resti inaccessibile a sentimenti eroici. Qui non ci sarebbe ragione alcuna di meravigliarsi se un cavaliere s'accostasse a lei e le facesse una dichiarazione d'amore. (pp. 53–54)

What Rajna sees as a reprehensible hybridization of literary types is, however, precisely what makes Marfisa (and Bradamante) so interesting to late twentieth and twenty-first century readers. In the first place, the 'tinte mezzane' which are, as Rajna correctly observes, more appropriate to portrayals of 'oggetti reali' than of objects of 'pura fantasia', make readers feel encouraged to look through the fantasy of the text at the 'real' world it resembles. When the *Furioso* blurs the 'colori vividi' and 'linee ardite' of *fantasia*, the semi-lifelike characters that emerge constantly remind the reader '[not] to rest in the world of the poem, but to look through it at the real world'.[17] So the *Furioso*'s cross-bred literary types come to have a verisimilitude that captures critical attention by focalizing the historico-cultural context of the poem itself.

More specifically, Marfisa's threshold position on the borders between *le donne* and *i cavalier*, though criticized by Rajna, provides a rich field of study for contemporary scholars of Renaissance conceptions of gender.[18] The suggestion I offer here is that the process of her gender transgression shows how identities, for the *Orlando furioso*, may be constructed at will. Moments of crisis, when her knightliness is undermined by her biological sex, mark the limits of her performative freedom, exposing the poem's inherent anxieties at the prospect of an absolute breaking of boundaries. On balance, episodes playing out what Rajna sees as unsuccessful hybridization afford access to the text's various figurations of gendered identity and to its exploration of gender-related discourse.[19]

The *process* of becoming a female knight means, in general terms, that Marfisa must be a remarkably fierce warrior ('ne le battaglie a maraviglia fiera', XVIII, 98), never leaving her guard down and staying constantly alert to challenge knights errant and so to gain immortal and glorious fame ('di qua di là cercando [...]. | con cavallieri erranti riscontrarsi, | et immortale e gloriosa farsi', XVIII, 99). She must be an

[17] Robert M. Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 131.

[18] For Deanna Shemek, it is Bradamante who 'dwells at the masculine/feminine gender border' while Marfisa 'refuses all identification with womanhood'. See *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 92. Yet both play 'lady' and 'knight', and both have to negotiate the ambiguity of their positions (see my discussion of the Marfisa/Mandricardo episode below). Bradamante certainly tends more towards the traditionally female role, while Marfisa's characterization is more consistently aligned with the predominantly male one; but together, they permit the investigation of a broader spectrum of gendered behaviours and characteristics.

[19] See also John C. McLucas, '"Faccio o nol faccio?" Cross-dressing Initiatives in the *Orlando furioso*', *Italian Culture*, 14 (1996), 35–46 (p. 35).

invincible knight and a flawless 'man–woman' whose femaleness is entirely eclipsed by her 'manly' talents.[20]

More specifically, if Marfisa is to effect manliness, she must first and foremost renounce sex, as in the introductory 'La vergine Marfisa si nomava', and celebrated in the emblem of her helmet, the self-generating phoenix, which, the narrator says, indicates 'sua casta intenzïon […] | di viver sempremai senza consorte' (XXXVI, 18). On one level, Marfisa's virginity is a narrative expedient, saving Ariosto from having to conceptualize unregulated female sexuality and to reconcile it with the patriarchal world of the *Orlando furioso*. At the same time, however, her avoidance of romantic associations, in contrast with other cases, invites further study of the Marfisa-specific value of virginity. For this damsel–warrior's vow of chastity is not the traditional affectation of womanly virtue. Other Ariostean women, Isabella, Angelica, and even Bradamante, for example, treasure chastity over all other 'possessions' as the most powerful endorsement of marriageable value and the greatest gift to offer a husband. What is interesting here is that Marfisa does not preserve her virginity to improve her value in the marriage market. On the contrary, her virginity is a move to remove herself from that patriarchal exchange of women from father to husband. The text recognizes that to be a virgin is to resist commodification as an object of mercantile exchange. Marfisa, in preserving her chastity, claims a right to self-ownership and to act as her own agent.

Marfisa's pledge of virginity seems also to be a way of approximating virility. In fact, medical, theological, and literary texts during the Renaissance often promoted virgins as 'improved' women, more like men. Church Fathers praised virgins' manliness — St Jerome says that 'as long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world [that is, to pledge chastity and to take religious vows], then she ceases to be a woman and will be called a man'.[21] Jacob Burckhardt argues that the greatest compliment a Renaissance woman could receive was that she had 'the courage and mind of men'.[22] 'The title 'virago', he says, 'which is an equivocal compliment in the present day, then implied nothing but praise', a possibly over-simplified view that resonates, however, in recommendations such as Marsilio Ficino's 'Let men be beware of being in any way effeminate. Let women try in some way to be virile and above all else chaste'.[23] Chastity, in this context, not only separates good from bad women; it is also a route to manliness. In the *Furioso*, where women's self-regulation of sexuality does not and, of course, cannot exist, abstinence from sex is a way for women to be free from patriarchal ownership and to become 'masters' of their own destinies.

[20] 'Man–woman' is the term used by Margaret L. King for Renaissance viragos in *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 190.

[21] King, p. 191. She also points out that physicians treating infertility diagnosed 'hotness' and 'manliness' as the root cause. Amenorrhea was not a sickness at all but a state where women were 'healthier', 'moister' and, therefore, better than other women.

[22] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S. G. C. Middlemore and ed. by Peter Burke (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 251–52.

[23] Marsilio Ficino, *Epistolae* in *Opera omnia*, 2 vols (Paris, Guillaume Pelé, 1641), I, 722, as translated in Ian Maclean's study of the exaltation of women by Neoplatonic theorists. See *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 25.

After virginity, the second condition of Marfisa's knightliness is her attire. She dresses and acts like a man — the most visual way of masking her femaleness. The 'vergine Marfisa' is a 'persona ch'al vestire e a' movimenti | avea sembianza d'uomo', even though she is a woman; 'e femin' era' (XVIII, 98). Cross-dressing and masquerade allow for some serious playfulness in the *Orlando furioso*, where identities are frequently constructed, swapped, or concealed by costume, and personae are put on and taken off like outfits. Quite often, the remarkably uniform *Furioso* characters are only distinguishable from one another by their attire and personalized weaponry.[24] Episodes of dressing, undressing, and cross-dressing are, therefore, occasions of 'narrative usefulness', as McLucas puts it, when the complex structure of gender can be dismantled and examined.[25] By playing around with the points where one set of character-types ('le donne') ends, and another ('i cavalier') begins, and by allowing traditionally opposite characterizations to merge, the *Furioso*'s cross-dressings invite reflection on the true nature of gender.[26]

The third most obvious step in the process of Marfisa becoming a knight is that she must separate herself from more traditional women characters and avoid the domestic spaces that lock women into roles of subservience and docility. She skirts around cities, the confines of palaces and other clearly demarcated places, inhabiting instead the *Furioso*'s natural landscape ('di qua di là cercando in monte e in piano', XVIII, 99). Marfisa's refusal to enter patriarchally-ordered space is undoubtedly the text's way of not dealing with the social disruption her androgyny might cause. By having her shun society, the *Furioso* avoids having to reconcile her irregular behaviour with the norms of respectable society. For, as King notes, the Renaissance had 'little place for the woman who was unattached to man or God', and Marfisa's exile from society's confines is as much about the lack of space for her there as it is about an assertive choice to be self-regulating and free.[27] It registers at once her refusal to be put in her place and the lack of a place to put her in.

Having said that, Marfisa's constant mobility also expresses a sympathetic understanding of, and resistance to, fixity in repressive female-gendered roles. Her shunning of society acknowledges, and seems to criticize, how violence, authority, and tyranny

[24] Either that or, as Eugenio Donato points out, by the object of their solitary quest: 'Differences of faith matter little and they have small regard for the communal enterprise in which their respective kings are engaged; what makes them what they are is their solitary quest.' See '"Per selve e boscherecci labirinti": Desire and Narrative Structure in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*', in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. by Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 36.

[25] McLucas, p. 36. For analyses of transvestism in the *Furioso*, see also Chapters 7 and 8 of Finucci, *The Lady Vanishes*, as well as her 'Ariosto and the Game of Desire', in *Desire in the Renaissance: Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. by Valeria Finucci and Regina Schwarz (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 61–88.

[26] According to Finucci, cross-dressing episodes in the *Furioso* are 'moments of fluidity of gender' which the poem eventually reverses and 'corrects'. Focusing on the conclusion of the *Furioso*, where previously cross-dressed characters are re-dressed in outfits deemed more appropriate to their sex, she argues that transvestism is 'an expedient for reaching an approved, heterosexual ending'. Any 'violations of gender codes' are 'superficial' when 'in the end, everything is subsumed to male norms' (*The Lady Vanishes*, p. 229 and p. 202 respectively). The fact that Marfisa exits the poem dressed as she entered it does not apparently upset Finucci's argument in which Marfisa can be dismissed as a figure of fun. Yet as I see it, Marfisa's cross-dressings, as well as having comic value, provoke serious reflection on the concept of gender. Finucci's assessment of the conclusion of characters' plot-lives as key to the poem's ideology can, at times, limit the world of the *Furioso* by diminishing the appeal and impact of all its other narrative parts.

[27] King, p. 29.

relegated Renaissance women to the home and inhibited their potential.[28] It records, in other words, the *Furioso*'s (muted) objection to prescriptive treatises like Alberti's *I libri della famiglia* where women were supposed to be the homebound counterparts of their husbands.[29] Mercantile patriarchs went off to accrue wealth and honour for the family while their wives were to stay at home keeping order and administering that hard-earned wealth.[30] Nubile daughters, especially, were to be detained at home and under close surveillance, since the guarding of a daughter's chastity was the primary business of the Renaissance matriarch. The failure of caution could have terrible consequences for families and the girl who lost her virginity would 'live forever in total consternation: or rather she will die every day, being physically alive and morally destroyed'.[31]

The *Furioso* takes full cognizance of women's claustrophobic confinement when Bradamante is faced with the prospect of returning home in Canto XXIII. Astolfo has asked her to take Rabicano to Montalbano, but in spite of her loyalty to her cousin she is wholly unwilling to go home. Her heart sinks as she gazes on the castle, knowing that once inside it she will have to surrender herself to her mother's strict supervision and relinquish her quest for Ruggiero.

> Come la donna riconsciuto ha il loco,
> nel cor s'attrista, e piú ch' i' non so dire:
> sarà scoperta, se si ferma un poco,
> né piú le sarà lecito a partire;
> se non si parte, l'amoroso foco
> l'arderà sí, che la farà morire:
> non vedrà piú Ruggiero, né farà cosa
> di quel ch'era ordinato a Vallombrosa. (XXIII, 21)

[28] See Mario Equicola, *De mulieribus*: 'Quod si nunc secus est, *violentia* contra divinum ius naturaque leges regna, *imperia et tyrannidem* exerceri sanae mentis, negabit nemo; et sic illa feminis naturalis libertas aut legibus interdicta aut consuetudine intercisa, usuque absoluta restinguitur aboletur extirpatur: […] domi femina detinetur ubi ocio marcescit nec quicquam aliud mente concipere permittur quam acus et filum […]; mox vix annos pubertatis axcedens in mariti datur arbitrium, et si paulo altius se erigit et actollit, velut summae rerum altioris proviciae non capax, oeconomicae dedicatur quasi ergastulo' (italics mine). The text is cited in Conor Fahy, 'Three Early Treatises on Women', *Italian Studies*, 11 (1956), 31–55 (pp. 38–39) and translated in the introduction by Albert Rabil Jr to H. C. Agrippa, *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, ed. and trans. by Albert Rabil, Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): '[…] no one with a sane mind will deny that *violence*, *authority, power* and *tyranny* have been employed against divine law and the laws of nature, and the result has been that the natural freedom of woman has either been prohibited by laws or demolished by custom, at every point absolutely extinguished, abolished, extirpated. […] The woman is occupied exclusively at home where she grows feeble from leisure, she is not permitted to occupy her mind with anything other than needle and thread […]; then scarcely having passed puberty, authority [over her] is given to a husband; he erects and elevates himself a little more highly [than his wife], he puts her in a household as in a workhouse, [treating her] as if she were unable to grasp the most important matters and hold the higher offices' (p. 24). See also Mario Equicola, *De mulieribus*, ed. by Giuseppe Lucchesini and Pina Totaro (Pisa: Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 2004).

[29] Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, ed. by Ruggiero Romano and Alberto Tenenti, 2nd edn rev. by F. Furlan (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), pp. xviii–xix. See also Juan Luis Vives, *De institutione feminae Christianae*, ed. by C. Fantazzi and C. Matteeussen, trans. by C. Fantazzi (Leiden & New York: Brill, 1996–98).

[30] Not just in the mercantile home but in the court palace, too, women and men's territories were clearly demarcated. Women like Elisabetta Gonzaga (and Emilia Pia), for example, wielded considerable influence over their husbands and guests but the conversations of the *Libro del Cortegiano* took place in the Duchess's rooms, far from the staterooms of official business. Exceptions, like Caterina Sforza, did assume masculine roles and occupy male territories but these were anomalous and rare. See King, p. 158.

[31] Carlos G. Norena commenting on Vives's *De institutione feminae christianae* in *Juan Luis Vives*, ed. by Carlos G. Norena (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), p. 209. King also discusses the consequences of sexual indiscretion for unmarried women (pp. 29–35).

In fact she turns her back on Montalbano, only to accidentally run into her brother by whom she is, involuntarily, escorted home. Bradamante's resistance to regimented Montalbano life, then, registers the narrative's sympathy for the unwed woman whose place is under a strict matriarch's eye. Marfisa's avoidance of cities and towns, too, evokes the repressive effects of anti-feminist literature's confinement of women to the domestic realm. The *Furioso*, up to this point, seems to demonstrate a bias towards its women warriors and against the repressive patriarchal strictures governing their behaviour.

So far, then, the gender game played through Marfisa is successful as long as she looks and acts like a man, renounces sex, and avoids the spaces and behaviours of women. The boundaries between feminine and masculine categories, the *Furioso* seems to suggest, shift with more or less challenging alterations to dress, behaviour, and setting. Gender, it seems to suggest, might not be a physiological construct. In fact gender, as expressed through Marfisa, seems to be a fluid arrangement of variables (such as dress, behaviour, and setting) to be configured at will by members of either sex.[32] In other words, the *Furioso* frames gender as a type of performance whose broad spectrum of parts is open to interpretation by both men and women.[33]

An interesting enactment of this concept of gender as performance takes place in Canto XXVI when Marfisa meets Mandricardo. Persuaded by her friends, Marfisa dresses up as a woman for the one and only time in the poem, at which precise moment, Mandricardo spots and makes a bid to win her, considering her fair game. He overthrows her companions and asserts his right, according to the laws of patriarchal ownership, to possession: 'Damigella,' he says, 'sète nostra, | s'altri non è per voi ch'in sella monte. | Nol potete negar, né farne iscusa; | che di ragion di guerra cosí si usa' (XXVI, 78). Without disputing the 'custom of war' and Mandricardo's entitlement to ownership of an unescorted lady, Marfisa sets him straight about her position regarding the law. It does not apply to her as she is not what appearances suggest.

> Marfisa, alzando con un viso altiero
> la faccia, disse: — Il tuo parer molto erra.
> Io ti concedo che diresti il vero,
> ch'io sarei tua per ragion di guerra,
> quando mio signor fosse o cavalliero
> alcun di questi c'hai gittato in terra.
> Io sua non son, né d'altri son che mia:
> dunque me tolga a me chi mi desia. (XXVI, 79)

Without denying that she is female, Marfisa makes it clear that she is not an unescorted and unclaimed lady. She is, instead, a self-owning and self-governing knight. In a scene anticipating Bradamante's feat of persuasion at the Rocca di

[32] Episodes of transvestism from man to woman occur, too, as when Ricciardetto assumes Bradamante's identity to woo Fiordispina (Canto XXV). See, for example, Shemek's discussion of his masquerade (*Ladies Errant*, pp. 111–16). Finucci also discusses both female and male cross-dressing in *The Lady Vanishes* and 'Ariosto and the Game of Desire'.

[33] In so doing it goes against anti-women discourse insisting on the essentialist inferiority of women. For a succinct overview of the misogynist line of argument, see Rabil and King's introduction to the series, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, in Agrippa, *Declamation*, pp. vii–xxvi.

Tristano, Marfisa's insists that gendered roles are distinct from biology.[34] To prove her point, she calls for her sword and shield, tears off her dress to reveal that 'in ciascuna sua parte | fuor che nel viso, assimigliava a Marte', and mounts her steed to attack the Saracen. In Marfisa's book, dressing and acting like a knight amount to being a knight, and her success in the ensuing duel with Mandricardo reinforces her claim. Her materiality and her social identity, she suggests, are unrelated. As long as she can look and perform the part, she is free to choose whatever role she wants, irrespective of her sex. In other words, the positions of knighthood and ladyhood, which are normally gendered, are flexible in Marfisa's world and open to enactment by men and women alike. Gender is a performance that has nothing to do with anatomy.[35]

There is nothing new in this view of gender as independent of biological sex. Marfisa's claim echoes the view of many feminist apologists in the *querelle des femmes* for whom biological distinction between the sexes is only significant as far as reproduction is concerned. Agrippa, for one, argues in his 1509 *Declamation on the nobility and pre-eminence of women* that beyond biology there is no significant difference between men and women:

> Deus Optimus Maximus cunctorum genitor, Pater ac bonorum utriusque sexus foecunditate plenissimus hominem sibi similem creauit, masculum et foeminam creauit illos. Quorum quidem sexuum discretio non nisi situ partium corporis differente constat, in quibus usus generandi diversitatem necessariam requirebat. Eandem vero et masculo et foeminae, ac omnino indifferentem animae formam tribuit, inter quas nulla prorsus sexus est differentia.[36]

By claiming that it is only tyrannical male laws and customs that force women into gender-specific roles and modes of comportment, Agrippa demonstrates how sixteenth-century pro-woman writers argued for gender as a cultural, rather than natural construct. Ostensibly the *Furioso*'s narrator seems to endorse this liberal reading of gender as a type of performance staged and directed by 'the tyranny of men' and by 'habit and usage'.[37]

Such is the view of Jordan for whom the *Furioso* contests the 'so-called natural [...] concept of gender as wholly consistent with biological sex'. Instead, gender is 'fluid and considered as if it were constructed along a spectrum of possibilities that allowed everyone, whether male or female, a prospective latitude of masculine or feminine behaviours, to be adapted to particular circumstances'. The *Furioso*'s women knights

[34] Deanna Shemek offers a compelling analysis of Bradamante's attempt at the Rocca di Tristano to 'decouple the categories "knight" and "man" for a possible realignment of the categories "knight" and "woman"' (*Ladies Errant*, p. 101).

[35] In an argument similar to Shemek's (see n. 34 above), Benson argues that in the first line of the poem 'Ariosto's paratactic syntax frees [women] to combine with arms, courtesies and daring deeds as well [as love]' (p. 91).

[36] C. H. Agrippa, *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), pp. 94–95. In Rabil's translation: 'God most beneficent, Father and creator of all good things, who alone possesses the fecundity of the two sexes, created humans in his image, male and female created he them. Sexual distinction consists only in the different location of the parts of the body for which procreation required diversity. But he has attributed to both man and woman an identical soul, which sexual difference does not affect at all' (Agrippa, *Declamation*, p. 43).

[37] My translation of Agrippa's 'virorum omnia tyrannide' and 'consuetudine ususque' (*De nobilitate*, pp. 94–95).

seem to be based on the apologists' 'symbolic androgyne' whose gender is 'independent of the physiological categories of sex'.[38] Shemek concurs, arguing that the *Furioso*'s 'symbolic androgyne' (Bradamante in this case) deliberately upsets conventional coupling of gendered roles with biological sex.[39] Bradamante, Shemek points out, wishes not to be considered male, as numerous critics have argued, but to question the alignment of the sociological construct of knight with the biological category of woman. Through her, the *Furioso* 'systematically defers the assignment of gender and rigorously questions the content of that category'.[40]

The text undoubtedly does argue against the 'natural [...] concept of gender as wholly consistent with biological sex', especially in the Marfisa/Mandricardo episode in Marfisa's case, and at the Rocca di Tristano in Bradamante's. My point, however, is that through Marfisa in particular it also presents the opposite conceptualization of gender as being firmly anchored in the body. Both Bradamante and Marfisa are granted considerable latitude along the spectrum of gendered identity, but they are also forced to reckon with the limits of their gender game. Cultural determinism is only one of the poem's figurations of gender. At times the *Furioso* clearly does propose gendered identity as 'socially constructed, as, in a sense, a fiction'.[41] At other times, however, it strips the carefully constructed androgyne bare to reveal the 'truth' behind the fiction. So while it admits positive androgyny in one canto, it undermines its liberal position and plays out significant objections in the next. As usual, the *Furioso* sets itself up only to undermine itself. More precisely, it juggles discordant perspectives and invests the same narrative attention in diametrically opposed ways of thinking in what Saccone calls its constant 'andirivieni'.[42]

One of the more obvious alternatives to the pro-social constructionist stance offered by the *Furioso* is teased out in an episode that, at first reading, appears to be an endorsement of that view. In Canto XX Marfisa meets Gabrina, an elderly and seemingly frail woman, and helps her across a river. Along comes Pinabello with a female companion who ridicules the old woman's ugliness. Bound by the code of chivalry, Marfisa defends her charge and asserts that the woman's beauty far exceeds that of Pinabello's lady. To prove her claim she challenges Pinabello to a duel, which she wins, punishing her opponents by having his lady and the 'old crone' swap clothes. Next Marfisa and Gabrina meet Zerbino who laughs at the old woman's ridiculous garb. But Marfisa, in the true spirit of chivalry, insists that the more she sees her protégée, the more beautiful she becomes. She once again ends up in a contest to defend her and once again she wins, saddling Zerbino with Gabrina as recompense. Marfisa has forced both Zerbino and Pinabello to admit that Gabrina is, in fact, young and beautiful. She has thereby 'proven', in a manner of speaking, that identity is not anchored in anatomy and that materiality can be escaped by costume and performativity.

[38] Jordan, p. 297 and p. 313 respectively.
[39] Shemek, pp. 100–01
[40] Shemek, p. 224, n. 45. She further cites McLucas, Bellamy, and Finucci as sustaining that argument. Her objection to this is that 'the critical tendency to read "cavalier" as masculine suggests we still unwittingly share some of the biases that Bradamante's speech questions'.
[41] Judith Bryce, 'Gender and Myth in the *Orlando furioso*', *Italian Studies*, 47 (1992), 41–50 (p. 41).
[42] Eduardo Saccone, *Il 'soggetto' del Furioso* (Naples: Liguori, 1974), p. 234.

This illogical insistence that Gabrina's travesty of youth and beauty should be considered a veritable citation of youth and beauty is clearly an exercise in chivalric repartee and intended for comic effect. Nonetheless, the fact that it is Marfisa who attempts, albeit tongue-in-cheek, to persuade passers-by to look *at* rather than *through* this transvestite is significant because it recalls obliquely her own campaign to be judged according to her appearance. By asserting Gabrina's youth and beauty, she endorses the link between costume, behaviour, and selfhood that she herself plays out. She proves her point and demands that Gabrina be taken for 'grata e bella' because her costume claims that she is. Marfisa's opponents are forced, by the conventions of chivalry, to admit that she is right.

Yet if the Marfisa–Mandricardo episode is a prelude to the Rocca di Tristano, the Marfisa–Gabrina episode is its parody. The fact that Marfisa has to resort to violence to convince her opponents might, to a modern readership, sharply undermine her claim. But it is the gross incongruity between Gabrina's dress and the reality that really makes a mockery of Marfisa's attempt to ignore and transcend the materiality of her own body. Gabrina's age and decrepitude are not masked, but enhanced by her inappropriate dress. The disguise has the opposite effect of highlighting, rather than hiding, the old woman's materiality. If age and ugliness cannot be altered and transformed by dress, how can biological sex? If the other variables that make up a self cannot be protean, how can gender?

So the narrator, a self-professed (albeit tongue-in-cheek) feminist apologist, dresses Marfisa up and announces her success as a fully functioning successful knight. The author, who is more pragmatic and far more capricious, on the other hand, points out the absurdity of trying to disguise biological sex by highlighting the impossibility of concealing those other variables inscribed in the body such as age, aesthetic features, race, and so forth. Without diminishing Marfisa's success as a knight, Ariosto cannot resist making us look *through* rather than *at* this transvestite. He reminds us, with characteristic humour, that while she looks and acts just like a man, she is really a woman — and *only* a woman at that.

Before returning to this essay's claim that the text's narrative ambivalence is more usefully read as an open-ended forum than a dialectical site of conflict, let us examine a particularly vivid illustration of its simultaneous promotion and mockery of Marfisa's gender transgression. In Canto XIX Marfisa, Astolfo, Sansonetto, and Aquilante hasten towards the seaport of Alessandretta, eager to confront the strange challenge imposed on newcomers by its natives. To survive on Alessandretta, a seaport ruled by a band of homicidal Amazons, new arrivals must chose one of their company to defeat ten male champions in combat and then to satisfy ten women sexually in one night. Curiously, one unfamiliar with the *Furioso*'s stratagems might say, Marfisa is as eager as her male companions to take up the contest. She insists on being included in the lottery to choose a representative and she is selected.

As Marfisa fights Alessandretta's ten male champions, we readers are left to ponder how she is going to resolve the second trial. She admits that she is ill-equipped for that 'danza' but she is nevertheless confident of rising to the challenge with the help of her sword; 'ben che mal atta alla seconda danza | dove non l'aitasse la natura, | con la spada supplir stava sicura' (XIX, 69). Over the next thirty-eight octaves the crowd gathers for the performance and Marfisa enters the arena to face her ten opponents.

One by one, she defeats them until only one remains. The two battle on and are so well matched that the duel lasts all day. Eventually nightfall forces them to quit. In the meantime we are wondering how her sword is going to make up for her biological lack. During the night and over the course of another eighty-eight octaves Guidone Selvaggio, Marfisa's opponent, recounts the history of Alessandretta. As he tells the genesis of the ritual trial we are still anticipating Marfisa's solution to its second part.

As it turns out, our curiosity is never satisfied. In a moment of panic, Astolfo blows his enchanted horn, scattering every last person in the arena. Marfisa and her companions scamper too, repelled by the horrible sound. They flee Alessandretta, but not before we have been made fully aware that Marfisa is, in some respects at least, a defective knight. Tomalin reads Marfisa's insistence on representing her companions in Alessandretta as an admirable 'awareness of her own inadequacy'.[43] I take issue with this; her stubbornness seems to me a refusal to accept her anatomy as 'inadequate'. The episode serves to drive home to her that her anatomical 'difference' is, in fact, biological 'inferiority'. She might look and perform the part, but underneath it all she simply lacks the accoutrements of a fully-fledged knight. Once more the text has endorsed Marfisa's self-identification as a knight while, at the same time, undercutting her integrity.

Underlying this humorous reminder of Marfisa's defective travesty is more than a hint of anxiety about ambitious women. A sword-wielding woman, after all, threatened more than physical injury to a man. In taking up the sword she laid claim to the symbol that united, according to Raymond Lull's c.1315 handbook for knights, the patriarch, human generativity, and 'la verità'. 'Lança ès donada a cavaller per significar veritat', asserts Lull, to which his commentator Giovanni Allegra adds a reminder of ancient patrician laws where the lance (or sword) belonged rightfully to the 'pater', symbolizing his 'sacerdozia della verità', as well as the continuity of his bloodline.[44] Patriarchal authority and generativity, then, are bound up in the sword that Marfisa handles so well. Exposing her 'phallic deficiency' on Alessandretta does more than show her incapacity for heterosexual sex with a woman. It also disrupts her appropriation of patriarchal authority and potency and reassures anxious men of her only partial seizure of the phallus.

Such an observation begs questions about the validity of supposing that the spectre of 'phallic' women might 'threaten' in a Renaissance context, but a glance at the abundance of contemporary stories featuring women changing into men seems to validate the view. Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (c.1553), for example, features the beautiful Filomena who is cloistered in a convent to save her from the consequences of her own beauty. While there she develops a painful growing lump in her groin. After a labour-like process, a surgeon's incision releases, to the horror of the convent, a male member: Filomena becomes Filomeno. Suzanne Magnanini points out that Straparola's narrator–poet presents the story of Filomena's painful sex change as a

[43] Tomalin, 'Bradamante and Marfisa: An Analysis of the "Guerriere" of the *Orlando Furioso*', *Modern Language Review*, 71 (1976), 540–52 (p. 542).
[44] Raymond Lull, *Libro dell'Ordine della Cavalleria*, ed. by Giovanni Allegra (Turin: Arktos, 1994), p. 199.

'caso', rather than a 'favola', a factual rather than a fictional case.[45] In fact, she confirms, spontaneous sex change was deemed a real possibility, not just in folklore but in Renaissance science. Benedetto Varchi, for one, contended that excessive heat, generated by masculine activities or hard work, could cause a woman automatically to grow a male member, and Lodovico Domenichi's translation of Pliny's histories cites several cases as fact.[46] Magnanini reads Filomena/o as a positive character, however, finding not a trace of male anxiety in her tale. Molino, the fictional narrator of this tale, she avers, intends to entertain, not to educate or morally indoctrinate. Nonetheless, women's latent masculinity was obviously a cause for concern since women's masculinization suggests the potential for men's emasculation and women's empowerment stands to diminish male power.

Of course there is no actual sex change in the *Orlando furioso*. Yet the deliberate emphasis on Marfisa's anatomical lack suggests angst at the prospect in keeping with the preoccupations evident elsewhere. There is humorous relief when her gender transgression is flawed and when her threat to patriarchy has not reached a potency worth worrying about. Indeed, the spectre of the masculinized woman is unsettling enough to merit the symbolic emasculation of both Bradamante and Marfisa in Canto XXXVI. When Bradamante suspects Marfisa of having an affair with Ruggiero she challenges her to a duel. In the space of a few octaves, a dignified contest degenerates into a veritable cat-fight. First comes Marfisa's anger when accused of 'villania' and pride ('d'ogni villania | odo che sei dotata e d'ogni orgoglio' (XXXVI, 21)). When she fails against Bradamante's enchanted lance, she is even more incensed. The fighting starts on horseback with lances, then proceed to swords and on foot. From swords they opt for daggers until Ruggiero prises the weapons from them. Disarmed, or in a sense, dismembered, they grapple on until by the end they are pulling hair, kicking, and screaming. Eventually Ruggiero intervenes, taking on Marfisa in Bradamante's defence. To the latter looking on, her champion is like ''l dio di guerra' while Marfisa resembles a 'furia infernal' (XXXVII, 54). The former heroine has been reduced to an infernal fury, crossing over the fine line between dignified warrior and ridiculous woman. As Ruggiero makes to strike the final blow, Atlante's voice halts the action. The suspended image of Ruggiero's raised sword menacing a cowering Marfisa has a clear symbolism. The alpha-male has put the pretender in her place, showing her who rightfully masters the sword and all its virile associations.

It is significant that Marfisa, not Bradamante, suffers most in this exchange. For Marfisa's knighthood poses the greater threat to patriarchy and is in greater need of

[45] Suzanne Magnanini, 'Science and Fairy Tale in Gianfrancesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (1551–53)', research paper delivered at the CEMERS conference, 'Science, Literature and the Arts in the Medieval and Early Modern World', Binghamton University, SUNY, 23–24 October 2004.

[46] In Magnanini's words, 'Francesca could become Francesco just by leaping over a fence'. (Many thanks to Magnanini for allowing me to refer to her paper and for her help with this essay.) The same thing happens to Marie Germain, a character 'witnessed personally' by both Michel de Montaigne and physician Ambroise Paré. Marie Germain had been innocently straining to jump when suddenly she became he. Germain, says Montaigne, is now a kindly benevolent old man but local girls, nonetheless, sing a song warning about the danger of great strides 'lest they become boys "like Marie Germain"' (Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. by M. A. Screech (London: Penguin Press, 1991), p. 111).

reining in. Hers, unlike Bradamante's, is not just a temporary disguise. She expresses a deep-felt identification with knighthood, not like Bradamante, whose ultimate quest is marriage and maternity.[47] The latter's inferior threat to the patriarchal alignment of sword/man/power is epitomized in her enchanted sword that confers a semblance of virtuosity on its bearer, but, in fact, needs no skill at all. Marfisa, on the other hand, receives fame and renown on her martial merits alone. It is appropriate that the man–woman who most succeeds in a male-dominated territory is halted at the line of demarcation between masculine and feminine identities and (temporarily) put back in her place.

On the one hand, then, Ariosto's narrator pays lip-service to the notion that women and men are equal and that 'sexual distinction consists only in the different location of the parts of the body for which procreation required diversity'.[48] It is implied that gender is a performance to be learned like a theatrical role. On the other hand, he presents Marfisa's sense of gender as anomalous, freakish and, as we shall see, feral, and the narrative pokes fun at the difference or defectiveness of her female anatomy. This is the point of conflict where earlier feminist readings have tended towards a definitive assessment of Ariosto's precise stand on the *querelle des femmes*. Yet, as I have said before, the *Orlando furioso* does not offer the luxury of absolute conclusions. Its open support of female agency is underscored by an embedded anti-womanism and its misogyny is tempered by a progressive liberalism. So, one-sided assertions like Finucci's 'the [...] ideological purpose [is] to show how necessary it is for women to eventually act as women', and Günsberg's '[the *Furioso*] fundamentally reinforce[s] the dominant ideology of fixed gender attributes and the subordination of the feminine', tell only half the story.[49] Similarly, the opposite view that the *Furioso* hides a 'pro-feminist truth' and that in the end the *Furioso*'s 'women cannot be controlled by suspicion and rules, but they do have the capacity for true virtue equal to that of men' is also partial and only half true.[50] In a way, to dig for underlying truths is to misread the work as dialectical, which as Saccone pointed out in his 1974 essay, cannot be done since 'non c'è mediazione, come non c'è un'idea del tempo come processo d'integrazione'.[51] Without mediation and a conception of plot-time as ultimately integrative, the relationship between the contradictory debates cannot be described as dialectical or even dialogic. For the various discourses neither converse nor converge. Rather they go hand in hand, or more precisely, in tandem, one after the other. They do not cancel each other out, nor are they ever reconciled. The *Furioso* can arguably be read as 'a locus of struggle', as Judith Bryce has said, but that struggle is never fully confrontational, nor is it ever resolved.[52]

Readers of the *Furioso* must, as Shemek puts it, reject the 'either/or terms of the *querelle*' and 'recognise the far greater complexity of human relations' both in the text

[47] See n. 4 above for Marfisa's identification with knighthood.
[48] Agrippa, *Declamation*, p. 43
[49] Finucci, *The Lady Vanishes*, p. 230. See, too, Maggie Günsberg: '[the *Furioso*] fundamentally reinforce[s] the dominant ideology of fixed gender attributes and the subordination of the feminine' ('"Donna liberata?"', p. 34). Bryce agrees with Günsberg's statement but qualifies it by proposing that although the *Furioso* remains a canonic male text, 'there is room for manoeuvre' ('Gender and Myth', p. 50).
[50] Benson, p. 20.
[51] Saccone, p. 241.
[52] Bryce, p. 50.

and in 'the real world'.[53] If they are to reject the neat bipolarity of dialectical frames, readers of the text's labyrinthine narrative must search for alternative methodologies that allow for the poem's rhetorical instability while also airing its complex thematic statements. My method has been to focus on the 'narrative complex' called Marfisa (see n. 5 above), to follow her trajectory through the meandering course of the poem, and to focus on the points where the seemingly discordant narrative threads become momentarily interlaced. These moments of contiguity, where one discourse temporarily dominates the other, afford the clearest views not of the poem's underlying truths, but of the questions it is most interested in pursuing.

In the moment of contiguity when Ruggiero temporarily overcomes Marfisa and is poised to strike a fatal blow, for example, the narrative's misogynist discourse seems to hold sway over its opposite liberal stance. Yet this crisis point does not prove that the *Furioso* ultimately works towards a patriarchal *status quo*. After all, the position will be reversed in Marfisa's next scene as she leads the trio of herself, Bradamante and Ruggiero in punishing the tyrannical misogynist Marganorre and subverting his anti-woman system of government. The episode does momentarily tip the scales in favour of the anti-women side of the Woman Debate; but it also provides further insights into the text's conceptualizations of gender. More specifically, it questions how gendered identities are generated in the first place.

Atlante's disembodied voice interrupts the fight between the two knights to tell them of their early formative years. Unbeknown to themselves, they are actually brother and sister. 'Tu, mio Ruggiero', he says, 'e tu, Marfisa mia, | credete al mio parlar che non è vano: | in un medesimo utero d'un seme | foste concetti, e usciste al mondo insieme' (XXXVI, 59). He tells them how their pregnant mother, Galaciella (see n. 2 above), was exiled after their father was killed and gave birth to them on the uninhabited coast of Libya. After she died, Atlante himself fostered them and looked after all their needs:

> Diedi alla madre sepoltura onesta,
> qual potea darsi in sí deserta arena;
> e voi teneri avolti ne la vesta
> meco portai sul monte di Carena;
> e mansueta uscir de la foresta
> feci e lasciare i figli una leena,
> de le cui poppe dieci mesi e dieci
> ambi nutrir con molto studio feci. (XXXVI, 62)

Marfisa, Atlante affirms, was an orphan who was suckled by a lioness. She passed through her infancy without a human mother. How, then, the text seems to ask, could she desire the traditional female roles of wife and motherhood? Marfisa's adult ambition to prove herself among men and not women is a direct consequence of her early formative years.

Unlike Marfisa, Bradamante grew up in the respectable and traditional environment of the Chiaramonte household. Thanks to her education and background she is eager to take her place in a patriarchally ordered society once her temporary transvestism

[53] Shemek, 'Of Women, Knights, Arms and Love: The *Querelle des Femmes* in Ariosto's Poem', *MLN*, 104 (1989), 68–97 (p. 97).

has led her to Ruggiero. To this patriarchal end she responds eagerly to Ruggiero's courtship:

> La donna amata fu da un cavalliero
> che d'Africa passò col re Agramante,
> che partorì del seme di Ruggiero
> la disperata figlia d'Agolante:
> *E costei, che né d'orso né di fiero*
> *leone uscí, non sdegnò tal amante*.(II, 32, italics mine)

This throwaway comment usually goes unnoticed, but to say that Bradamante was not born of a bear or a lioness is surely a reference to her warrior counterpart. In contrast to Bradamante's wise acquiescence to Ruggiero's attention, Marfisa's response to her first sexual advance is literally murderous. She killed the Arab king who tried to rape her, wiped out his family, and vanquished seven kingdoms — all by the age of eighteen.[54] Her unconventional sense of gender identity is, therefore, rooted in the early stages of her development. It is because she was brought up outside the confines of patriarchal family structures that she rebels against a typically feminine role.

As before, such readings leave themselves open for criticism as crude graftings of twentieth-century, and in particular, psychoanalytical values onto Ariosto's text. After all, Marfisa's literary 'pre-history' features an array of similar tales where the emphasis is less on the absence of a human mother and more on the presence of the feral surrogate, explaining the hero's/heroine's later ferocity and prowess. Marfisa's immediate literary afterlife, however, suggests that my reading is not as anti-historicist or anachronistic as it first appears to be. Fifty years after the *Furioso*, Moderata Fonte picks up on this detail of the Ariostean text and makes its message about the cultural roots of gendered identity more acute:

> Se quando nasce una figliola il padre
> la ponesse col figlio a un'opa eguale,
> non saria nelle imprese alte e leggiadre
> al frate inferior né disuguale,
> o la ponesse in fra l'armate squadre
> seco o a imparar qualche arte liberale,
> ma perché in altri affar viene allevata
> per l'educazion poco è stimata. (*I tredici canti del Floridoro*, I. 4)

Further, she reproduces the Marfisa/Atlante experiment in *Floridoro*'s Risamante/Celidante. Twin sisters, Biondaura and Risamante, are separated at birth. Biondaura, an Olimpia-type, is brought up by her father, the king, and kept exclusively at home. Risamante, on the other hand, is fostered by the *mago* Celidante (Atlante) and moulded for an active military life. The former, of course, grows up spoilt, selfish, and malicious. The latter, on the other hand, becomes valiant and good, thanks to

[54] After Atlante's news, Marfisa remembers her past, from which Ruggiero had previously been excluded. She describes her reaction to the Arab king's advances: 'Portommi in corpo mia misera madre | di là dal mare, e nacqui in gran disagio. | Nutrimmi un mago infin al settimo anno, | a cui gli Arabi poi rubata m'hanno. | E mi vendero in Persia per ischiava | a un re che poi cresciuta io posi a morte: | che mia virginità tor mi cercava. | Uccisi lui con tutta la sua corte; | tutta cacciai la sua progenie prava, | e presi il regno; e tal fu la mia sorte, | che diciotto anni d'uno o di duo mesi | io non passai, che sette regni presi' (XXXVIII, 14–15).

Celidante's encouragement and liberal education. For Fonte there is no doubt, gender is education: 'Se la milizia il mago a Risamante | non proponea né disponeale il core, | non avria di sua man condotto tante | inclite imprese alfin con suo valore' (IV.5). Ariosto makes no such blatant statement; but the Ruggiero/Marfisa encounter does toy with the social constructionist model of gender. Once again, however, the *Furioso*, engages with, but does not conclude, current discourse. It acts as a forum that airs, without resolving, contemporary debate.

The vacillating nature of the *Furioso*'s aesthetic hampers the formulation of neat conclusions, particularly regarding gender. On the one hand, the *Furioso*'s women *can* cross gender lines with performances affording agency and excellence on a par with men. On the other hand, gender flexibility collapses when their materiality comes centre stage and their free alignment of biological and social identities is undermined. The playful juxtaposition of non-reconciled and irreconcilable contraries in the protean narrative is, without doubt, what constitutes the 'enigmatic and inexpressible pleasure' of the work.[55] The challenge for readers is fully to integrate the aesthetic principle and the thematics of the poem in one methodology; to represent, that is to say, the discordant discourses as they supersede each other whilst the narrative vacillates 'da questo a quella; da quella a questo'.[56]

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[55] My translation of Saccone's compelling assessment of the 'soggetto' of the *Furioso* to which this essay owes an obvious debt: 'Il soggetto del *Furioso* sarà, dunque, in questo processo di smembramento e ricomposizione, di costruzione e de-costruzione, dominio e servitù, andare e venire, acceccamento e visione: una struttura che vacilla e si trasforma, da cui sorge il senso del libro e, a un altro livello, *il piacere enigmatico — non dicibile* — del testo' (p. 243, italics mine).

[56] Saccone, p. 247.