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Amazonian Knots: Gender, Genre, and Ariosto's Women Warriors



J. Chimène Bateman

I. Introduction

The first lines of the *Orlando Furioso*, in an ironic departure from the Virgilian “*arma virumque cano*,” signal the famously hybrid nature of Ariosto’s poem: “Le donne, i cavallier, l’arme, gli amori, / le cortesie, l’audaci imprese io canto” (1.1.1–2).¹ The *Furioso* thus presents itself as a text double from the beginning, constructed around the fundamental oppositions of male and female, love and war, romance and epic. Yet, as Deanna Shemek suggests, the way Ariosto intermingles all these topics in his opening two lines leaves open their relation to one another; the word order might logically lead us to match “le donne,” for instance, with “l’arme” rather than with “gli amori” (“Of Women” 69–71). The elements in each pair of terms could also be interpreted as complementary rather than oppositional. In short, the rapid-fire list sets out the categories of gender and genre only to hint simultaneously that the divisions invoked are unstable: in the text to follow, masculine and feminine, epic and romance are profoundly intertwined.

The figures in the *Furioso* who, perhaps more than any other characters, embody the slippery dichotomies of Ariosto’s text are the woman warriors Marfisa and Bradamante. Given their unconventional status as the only Ariostean personae who are at the same time *donne* and *cavallieri*, studies of them have, unsurprisingly, focused on

¹I would like to thank David Quint, Deanna Shemek, and Matthew Gibney for their incisive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

gender difference.² The subtlety of the *Furioso's* portrayal of these characters (who, in the 1532 edition of the poem, are increasingly found together) invites reflection on gender from multiple angles. Bradamante and Marfisa not only challenge the familiar (and often problematic) opposition between masculine and feminine, but they also illustrate differences *between* women, and difference within the self (the realm of the unconscious and of conflicting desires).³ Yet while critics widely recognize the significance of Marfisa and Bradamante for the poem's complex treatment of gender difference, less attention has been paid to the women warriors' embodiment of another kind of difference central to the *Furioso*: the competing traditions of romance and epic.⁴ Indeed, the analysis of Bradamante and Marfisa as gendered figures, and their position in relation to literary genre, are inseparable. For gender roles vary from genre to genre; each literary tradition is accompanied by its own set of gender norms.

Ariosto's women warriors, even at a cursory first glance, emerge as hybrid characters who stand between epic and romance. The female warrior is a figure of traditional epic, but whereas her role in epic is normally marginal and her life short, Ariosto's narrative assigns her a prominent position. On the other hand, although women do play a crucial role in romance (it could be argued that the love-plots of romance set chivalric literature apart from epic), these women only rarely play the parts of lady knights. A closer look at Marfisa and Bradamante reveals in greater depth how conventional oppositions of gender and genre are both undermined by Ariosto and reinforced. First, highlighting the differences between Bradamante and Marfisa, and drawing on classical and medieval sources that may have informed Ariosto's imaginative re-creation of the Amazon, I argue that one figure is primarily a romance and the other an epic character. Nevertheless,

²Critics who see Ariosto's women warriors as incarnating a feminist ideal include Robinson and Tomalin, while Finucci perceives the poem's treatment of women warriors to be explicitly antifeminist. Recent analyses by Mac Carthy and Shemek (*Ladies Errant* 77–125) emphasize ambivalence in the gendered portrayals of Marfisa and Bradamante respectively.

³Such a three-tiered conception of sexual difference is formulated by Braidotti 158–72.

⁴For an overview of the differing ideologies of romance and epic that highlights the interconnectedness of the two genres, see Quint, *Epic and Empire* 21–46. Donato foregrounds the romance elements of Ariosto's poem; Quint ("The Figure of Atlante") and Wells argue in contrast that the *Furioso* ultimately opts for epic over romance. Javitch ("The Grafting of Virgilian Epic") views Ariosto as achieving a harmonious synthesis between the genres, while Ascoli (*Ariosto's Bitter Harmony*), Parker, and Zatti maintain that an unresolved tension between epic and romance persists in the poem to the end.

each woman will also be seen to symbolize within herself the tension in the *Furioso* between romance and epic. I then take a more detailed look at two episodes in the poem (the tale of Ricciardetto and Fiordispina in cantos 22 and 25 and the story of the *femine omicide* in cantos 18–20), where different dilemmas stemming from the women warriors' ambiguous gender identity are described through the common metaphor of a *nodo*, or knot. However, in each episode, the “knot” in question turns out to be a knot that involves genre as well as gender. In a text preoccupied with the bringing together of many kinds of disparate strands, where the verb *variare* and its cognates can apply equally to a single character or to the entire narrative,⁵ Bradamante and Marfisa enable the poet to interrogate the boundaries of difference, both sexual and generic.

II. Bradamante and Romance

Despite their common identity as women knights, Bradamante is defined above all by her commitment to love, and Marfisa by her devotion to arms. This opposition is suggested in the very names that they inherit from Boiardo: Bradamante's name contains the word “amante,” whereas “Marfisa” can be translated as “fixed on Mars.”⁶ More than one critic has noticed the subtlety of Ariosto's initial description of Bradamante: “Ella è gagliarda, et è più bella molto” (1.70.1).⁷ This line, although it establishes the heroine's double nature, puts a slight emphasis on her beauty as opposed to her prowess. Consistent with this portrayal is the fact that Bradamante, armed with a magic lance that unseats but does not kill, slays no one throughout the *Furioso*, with the notable exception of Pinabello. This killing is depicted more as the squelching of a coward than a heroic exploit; Bradamante stabs her victim a hundred times (22.97.3), ignoring his pleas for mercy (23.4.5–8). Furthermore, this event is unique in the *Furioso* given that it is the one instance where Bradamante, in a subsequent statement of self-reproach, declares that she has let her *ira* (the paradigmatic emotion of epic) get the better of her *amor* (23.7.4). That is, her eagerness to take revenge on Pinabello has distracted her from the

⁵See *OF* 2.30.5, 13.80.7, 22.3.5, 29.1.2, and 30.72.6. On *varietà* as a defining characteristic of romance and of the *Furioso*, see Javitch (“*Cantus Interruptus*”) and Parker 32.

⁶This translation of Marfisa's name is proposed by Bellamy, “Androgyny” 30. See also Boccaccio's account of the Amazon queen Marpesia, a “daughter of Mars” (50–55; chs. 11–12).

⁷See for example Finucci 235 and Tomalin 97.

single-minded pursuit of Ruggiero. The exceptionality of this incident, when Bradamante lets her warrior side take precedence over erotic desire, is underscored by the weighty consequences that ensue; beyond the scope of the poem, Ruggiero will be killed by members of Pinabello's clan.⁸

The Bradamante of the *Orlando Innamorato* is fiercer and more Amazon-like than Ariosto's Bradamante; described as "fiera," "robusta," and "superba" (2: 25.14.1–3), she dismembers various pagans (2: 25.18). Thus the moment in the *Innamorato* when the sight of Ruggiero ignites love in this fierce woman presents a striking contrast to earlier scenes of the text. Ariosto's narrator explicitly refers to this Boiardean episode, in which Bradamante removes her helmet for Ruggiero's sake and is wounded (*OI* 3: 5.38–45, *OF* 4.41). The wound possesses evident symbolic importance; desire has rendered her vulnerable, permanently complicating her warrior's identity.⁹ Unlike her counterpart in the *Innamorato*, the Bradamante of the *Furioso* is prey to desire—and therefore endowed with a dual nature—from the beginning.

Early in the poem, the narrator announces that the heroine does not disdain Ruggiero's love, ". . . che né d'orso né di fiero / leone uscì" (2.32.5–6). The infant Marfisa, by contrast, was suckled by a lioness (36.62.5–8), a detail that evokes Virgil's motherless Camilla, who was nursed on wild mare's milk (*Aeneid* 11.570–72). Thus Ariosto dissociates Bradamante from Marfisa, from Camilla, and from the epic genre; he links her rather to the world of romance. Although his heroine alternates between warlike behavior and bouts of love-induced weeping from the start, it is in the second half of the *Furioso* that she conforms with increasing frequency to the prototype of the romance maiden. The insistent demands she makes of Ruggiero in Canto 22 are those of a "vergine saggia" (22.34.2): that he obtain her parents' permission to marry her, and that he be baptized. Confined to the family home at Montauban, she takes up embroidery and chooses a female confidante (23.28) who will act as her go-between with Ruggiero. Throughout the remainder of the text, she exhibits a host of further symptoms that reinforce her status as romance heroine: reproachful monologues addressed to her absent lover, repeated kissing of a letter from him, intense jealousy of a perceived woman rival,

⁸Quint contends that Pinabello's death, which occurs at the exact midpoint of the *Furioso's* first two editions, signals the beginning of the poem's movement away from romance towards epic closure ("The Figure of Atlante" 80).

⁹For an intriguing psychoanalytic account of Bradamante's wound, see Finucci 240–45.

insomnia, self-mutilation, suicidal thoughts, and seemingly endless weeping alone in her room.

The warrior aspect of Bradamante's nature continues to be apparent well into the poem's second half, but it is equally evident that her role becomes less active as the *Furioso* reaches its epic conclusion, and as the magical quests of romance are brought out of timelessness into the finality of history. In the exordium to Canto 32, the narrator offers a two-stanza apology for having so long neglected to take up the thread of Bradamante's story. He explains, "D'una cosa in un'altra in modo entrai, / che mal di Bradamante mi sovenne: / sovienmene ora, e vo' narrarne inanti / che di Rinaldo e di Gradasso io canti" (32.2.5–8). Ironically, however, he caps this promise by going on to say that he must devote a little space first to another character, Agramante. Thus Bradamante's story is deferred still further, and Ariosto takes pains to draw attention to the deferral. On the one hand, this narrative device puts readers into the same position as Bradamante, making them wait for news of her love affair just as she waits. Yet Ariosto is also hinting here that Bradamante and her concerns are, momentarily at least, on the margins of the poem's epic action. At this point in the *Furioso*, the weeping and brooding Bradamante is at her closest to the maiden of romance.

Previous critics who have analyzed Bradamante's character from the perspective of literary genre have emphasized not her romance-like traits, but her centrality to the *Furioso's* dynastic epic plot. Valeria Finucci states that Bradamante is "identified with . . . epic and closure," unlike Angelica, who repeatedly acts as a catalyst for instances of romance wandering and deferral (19). Shemek views Bradamante as following a trajectory from romance to epic (from wandering lady knight to obedient wife), a trajectory that imitates the *Furioso's* movement as a whole (77–78, 123). The increased passivity that Bradamante displays in the text's second half, and her utter submission to Ruggiero in the end, are too unmistakable to be missed by any critic, and have led to Bradamante being cast as an epic Lavinia. Her position, however, is more complicated. While her role as Ruggiero's future spouse and co-founder of the Este line renders her Lavinia-like, the *Furioso's* lengthy descriptions of her mental state and of her desire for the hero are a mark of the romance genre and its professed interest in the female psyche. To clarify Bradamante's relation to the epic and romance traditions, one might view her as a romance character with an epic role (that of future Este matriarch) to fulfill in the *Furioso's* plot. As the other warriors in the *Furioso* converge toward France to

fight, Bradamante occupies a unique position in the poem in that she must, paradoxically, *give up* war—assume a more romance-like persona—for the narrative to achieve its epic close.

Nevertheless, while recognizing Bradamante as a representative of romance in the *Furioso*, it is also crucial to see how she subverts both romance and epic norms. For if the woman warrior is virtually absent from romance, and her role in epic strictly limited, Ariosto's decision to place a female knight at the center of his dynastic plot is startling from the perspective of both genres. Bradamante not only rescues Ruggiero from the clutches of Atlante—a neat reversal of the romance narrative of damsel-in-distress—but it is to her that the glorious future of the Este family is revealed, rather than to the male epic hero. Her fall into the chasm is an obvious rewriting of Aeneas' trip to the underworld, and the sorceress Melissa is both a more powerful female version of Anchises and a type of sibyl. References to Bradamante's *pietà* (see for instance 2.59.6) associate her subtly to "pius" Aeneas.

Ariosto finds various modes of mitigating the shock of Bradamante's radical behavior; he compares her implicitly to the Virgin Mary,¹⁰ and emphasizes her chastity, symbolized by her initial appearance in white armor. Chastity is a typical attribute of the Amazon; Virgil's Camilla, for example, is depicted as Diana's chosen protégée. Nevertheless, Bradamante is preserving her chastity for marriage, a crucial detail linking her not to Virgil's Camilla, but rather to the Camilla of Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*. Boccaccio praises the warrior maiden's chaste life and extols her (somewhat unexpectedly) as an example to Renaissance young women:

Hanc intueantur velim puellule hodiernae; et dum sui iuris virginem adultam et pro libito nunc latos agros, nunc silvas et lustra ferarum accinctam faretra discurrentem . . . et constantissimo animo coevorum iuvenum, non dicam amplexus, sed verba etiam respuentem viderint, monite discant quid eas . . . deceat . . . sentiantque quoniam nec optare quod libet, ne quod licet agere sanctum sit aut castitati conforme; ut prudentiores facte et laudabili virginitate florentes in sacras nuptias mature, maioribus obtemperantes suis, deveniant. (ch. 39, sec. 7)

I wish that the girls of our time would consider Camilla's example. When they imagine this mature and self-possessed young woman wearing a quiver and running freely through the open fields, forests, and the lairs of animals

¹⁰ Bryce points out "the use of Annunciation typology and unequivocal Marian parallels" in Bradamante's visit to Merlin's tomb (41).

. . . and steadfastly rejecting not only the embraces but even the conversation of young men of her own age—when they have imagined this, let them learn from her example the proper demeanor . . . Young women should also realize that it is neither pious nor in keeping with a chaste life to desire everything that is pleasurable and to do everything that is allowed. When they become wiser and blossom in their precious virginity, let them enter into holy matrimony in due season and under the direction of their elders. (Brown 156–59)

This passage is particularly interesting because certain scholars underplay Bradamante's association with the classical Amazon, and with Camilla.¹¹ Yet Boccaccio's recuperation of Camilla's Amazonian chastity as an asset to society is strikingly similar to Ariosto's insertion of Bradamante into his dynastic epic plot.

Ariosto thus lessens the transgressive aspect of Bradamante's two-sided nature. Tasso, however, is one reader who remains unconvinced of her suitability as an epic heroine:

[Bradamante] segue Ruggiero, e cerca di trarlo di prigionie, e fa tutti quegli uffici e quelle operazioni che parrebbero più tosto convenevoli a cavaliere per acquistar l'amore della sua donna, quantunque ella fosse guerriera . . . il che non sarebbe peravventura tanto sconvenevole, se il poeta non fingesse che da questo amore e da questo matrimonio dovessero derivare i principi d'Este. (637–38)

Tasso's objection is founded not merely on Bradamante's departure from conventional gender roles, but on the insertion of such an unconventional woman into an epic narrative with contemporary political and historical stakes. Contemporary feminist critics have also greeted Bradamante's transformation into epic matriarch with discomfort, albeit for contrasting reasons: it is the criteria for feminist heroine, rather than the criteria for epic heroine, that she is seen as failing to meet. Yet these modern and early modern readings (which reflect the critical preoccupations of their eras) both object, in their own ways, to the poem's hybrid representation of Bradamante as warrior, lover and wife: a contradictory and multi-stranded identity that draws on the generic norms of both romance and epic. The additions to the 1532 edition of the *Furioso* preserve and deepen the tensions in Bradamante's character rather than resolving them one way or the other. The episode at the Rocca di Tristano, for example, where she takes delight in warfare and argues persuasively that she should not

¹¹See for example Finucci 239, Robinson 179, and Roche 113–33.

be judged “come donna” (32.102.3), and her extraordinary proposal to Carlo Magno that any prospective suitor be required to outdo her at arms (44.70) emphasize the continued existence of her warrior identity in the poem’s second half. On the other hand, the newfound prominence of her domineering mother, and the introduction of the chivalric bond between Ruggiero and Leone, seem to consign her again to the sidelines, where she resumes the traditional feminine occupation of private lament. In public, it is ultimately Marfisa who comes to her aid with both eloquence and the threat of arms, while she stands by in silence (45.106).

Aware of her heroic destiny, yet motivated above all by erotic desire, Bradamante embodies in microcosm the generic conflict that runs through Ariosto’s poem.¹² It is not, perhaps, by chance that two of the narrator’s most explicit statements about the internal diversity of his work are accompanied by references to Bradamante (2.30.5–8; 13.80, 81). Epic and romance, rather than being starkly opposed, are profoundly intertwined in the text, as they are in her single figure. Admittedly, the generic categories themselves are slippery, inadequate to capture the full complexity of the literary traditions to which they refer. Albert Ascoli remarks on the ironic fact that “the first ‘romance,’ the *Odyssey*, which traces the ‘errors’ of the ironic hero par excellence, culminates, as the *Iliad* clearly does not, in a relatively successful reintegration of self, family, and community” (18). Bradamante’s wanderings, her private desires, similarly turn out to cohere with a master-narrative of family and community. In this sense, she can be seen as representing the epic possibilities of the romance figure. Yet the diverse layers of her identity, if not outright incompatible, are far from seamless. Her guises as Amazonian warrior, romance beloved and epic wife sit uneasily with one another, reminding us of the competing worldviews that inform the poem.

III. Marfisa and Epic

Marfisa is a problematic figure in the *Furioso* for different reasons than Bradamante: she resembles the classical Amazon much more closely, and she is never subsumed into a traditional female role, despite the

¹²Other critics who comment on Bradamante’s divided nature include Shapiro, who argues that Bradamante is one of many characters in the poem to embody Ariosto’s “multiple vision” (152–91); and Jordan, who proposes that Bradamante’s hybridity illustrates Ariosto’s preferred mode of reading history.

partial social recuperation enacted through her conversion to Christianity. As Thomas Roche observes, she is linked to the epic figure of Camilla from the first episode in which she appears, charging blindly after a set of arms (115–16). It is Camilla’s desire for a particularly colorful and exotic set of Trojan armor that brings her to her death: “femineo praedae et spoliorum ardebat amore” (*Aeneid* 11.782) (“She was burning with a woman’s love of booty and spoils”¹³). Marfisa is as reckless as Camilla, but it is her own armor she is trying to recover. Rather than highlighting her greed, the incident demonstrates that her desire is directed entirely toward war and arms. The simile in this passage makes explicit her choice of war over love:

Né fra vermigli fiori, azzurri e gialli
vago fanciullo alla stagion novella,
né mai si ritrovò fra suoni e balli
più volentieri ornata donna e bella;
che fra strepito d’arme e di cavalli,
e fra punte di lance e di quadrella,
dove si sparge sangue e si dia morte,
costei si truovi, oltre ogni creder forte.

(18.112.1–8)

Marfisa is therefore more of an Amazon than Camilla herself; far from falling prey to “feminine” shortcomings, she covets masculine arms, pursuits and glory.

Significantly, the second part of the simile just cited evokes a contrast between arms and female attire (Marfisa versus the “ornata donna e bella”), for Ariosto repeatedly alerts the reader to the crucial role of clothing in the construction of gendered identity. The text places particular emphasis on Marfisa’s reluctance ever to remove her armor: “e ‘l dì e la notte armata sempre andava” (18.100.5). If her garb is invariable, so are her aims; Marfisa is one of the few characters in the *Furioso* who never has to wrestle with the classic dilemma of love (or the wiles of Alcina) versus the demands of duty. Her constant quest to attain honor through combat makes her an epic character par excellence.

A figure of self-imposed isolation, Marfisa carries a phoenix as her emblem. The double signification of this symbol is elaborated in Canto 36: “. . . sopra l’elmo una fenice porta; / o sia per sua superbia, dinotando / se stessa unica al mondo in esser forte, / o

¹³The translation is mine.

pur sua casta intenzion lodando / di viver sempremai senza consorte” (36.17.8–18.1–4). Marfisa is “sola” both in the sense that no male warrior can match her (or best her) and in the sense that she is unrelentingly chaste. There is clearly a relation between these two qualities; the most sexually unattainable of women is the woman whom no man can subdue. Notably, both times Marfisa’s phoenix emblem is mentioned in the *Furioso* (see also 26.3.7,8), the immediate context concerns Bradamante’s passion for Ruggiero, which is thus implicitly contrasted with Marfisa’s independence.

In the *Innamorato*, Boiardo chooses to highlight Marfisa’s arrogance, invariably depicting her as “superba,” “altiera,” and “smisurata.” Ariosto’s Marfisa also displays arrogance and impetuosity, but these traits, along with her preference for solitude, are tempered by the high value she places on friendship. Tellingly, it is for friendship’s sake, to please her companions, that she dons female attire for the only time in the poem (26.69). When she and Ruggiero first witness each other performing in battle, a great mutual admiration arises between them (26.23, 24), and remains intact even when she removes her helmet to reveal her crop of curls (26.28). It is a daring for Ariosto to transform the theme of epic companionship, or male/male bonding, into a relation between the dynastic hero of his poem and a woman warrior. Marfisa, as a representative epic figure, thus undermines the epic norm, much as Bradamante represents and subverts the plots of romance. While Ariosto repeatedly portrays the *compagnia* of Ruggiero and Marfisa in epic terms, Marfisa’s female sex remains, allowing him to play on the conception of a more conventional male/female relationship, and on the jealousy of Bradamante. Bradamante at first applauds “sì degna compagnia” (30.88.7), but is reduced to despair by the rumor that Ruggiero and Marfisa will mate to produce an insuperable race of warriors (32.31).¹⁴ Eventually, following the tardy revelation that Ruggiero is Marfisa’s literal brother (36.59), she ceases to represent an erotic threat for Bradamante, and the two women develop an epic-like friendship of their own. Nonetheless, despite Marfisa’s fierce loyalty to her friends, there are hints that her lust for war and her easily aroused temper can override all other considerations; at the end of Canto 26, she is in such a hurry to pursue Mandricardo that she forgets to take leave of her companions (26.136).

Marfisa embraces epic values, and as in the case of the Iliadic heroes,

¹⁴The rumor itself echoes a classical anecdote about the Amazon queen Thalestris and Alexander the Great; see Diodorus of Sicily 17.77.3.

her public and private identities seem to correspond; both depend upon the honor that derives from her prowess or *virtù* (18.130.6). Yet her relation to the genres of epic and romance, like Bradamante's, is complex. She hails from the East, and her childhood history, full of marvelous elements (a sea voyage, a sorcerer, kidnapping, slavery in Persia), reads like the synopsis of a Greek novel (38.14–15). Early in the *Furioso*, she spends much of her time on the poem's romance periphery with the quirky Astolfo. She is involved in a number of bizarre, romance-like adventures (involving the *femine omicide*, who will be discussed below; Gabrina; and Marganorre). Her participation in epic scenes increases after she heads to France and joins Charlemagne, but in contrast to Bradamante, she has no central role in the text's epic plot. If Bradamante, as I have argued, is primarily a romance character with an epic function in the *Furioso's* narrative, Marfisa can be viewed as an epic character with a romance role in the text: a heroic figure who often finds herself wandering about in a romance world.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Marfisa's fate resembles that of her fellow *guerriera*, in that her personal history, and her Amazonic waywardness, are ultimately turned to serve the poem's dynastic ends. Once Marfisa has learned of Agramante's treachery toward her family, she espouses the causes of Carlo Magno and Christianity with her customary fervor, and joins Bradamante in urging Ruggiero to do the same. Significantly, the very language in which Marfisa's first meeting with Carlo Magno is described associates the episode with the marriage of Bradamante. In the last canto of the *Furioso*, Carlo is said to supervise Bradamante's wedding arrangements: "Carlo ne piglia cura, e le fa quali / farebbe, maritando una sua figlia" (46.73.3,4). Marfisa, kneeling before Carlo and assuring him of her conversion, also assumes the role of his daughter: Carlo ". . . conchiuse ne l'ultima parola, / per parente accettarla e per figliuola" (38.19.7,8). This act of Carlo inserts Marfisa, the loner Amazon, into the structures of society and kinship, just as did the earlier revelation that she was the twin sister of Ruggiero. Moreover, the conversion of Marfisa has repercussions for the wider pagan world; she promises Carlo that she will have her own kingdom baptized, followed by every new kingdom she conquers.

¹⁵Mac Carthy interprets Marfisa's position on the margins of the poem's action in feminist terms, as a "refusal to enter patriarchally-ordered space" (184). I would argue that while Marfisa indeed shuns the patriarchal status quo in one sense, she embraces it in another, through her pursuit of heroic military aims.

Marfisa's recuperation as Christian convert and sister of the poem's hero allows her to survive to the poem's conclusion, and the fact of her survival constitutes a major departure from the portrayal of the woman warrior in classical epic. Nonetheless, to the end of the *Furioso*, something of Marfisa's fiercely unpredictable and unassimilable quality remains. When Ruggiero does battle in Leone's armor, and is awarded Bradamante's hand before he has revealed his true identity, it is Marfisa who steps into the breach to dispute his claim to Bradamante with an angry challenge (46.58.1). A comically hurried unmasking of Leone and Ruggiero follows; Marfisa's propensity for erupting into hasty violence is too well-known not to be feared. This incident from the 1532 edition of the *Furioso* aptly illustrates the precarious nature of Marfisa's involvement in the poem's dynastic scheme. On the one hand, she is committed to furthering Ruggiero and Bradamante's union, but on the other, the turbulent streak in her character threatens to isolate her once more and to endanger the community of which she has newly been recognized as a member. Her headstrong individualism, like that of Achilles, suggests the persistence of potentially destructive romance *errore* within the epic narrative. Much as Bradamante's transformation into Ruggiero's wife reminds us of the epic possibilities of romance, the survival of Marfisa and of her recklessness displays the irrepressible romance undercurrent of epic.

IV. Fiordispina's Daedalian Knot

An especially provocative commentary on the Amazons is given by the geographer Strabo:

A peculiar thing has happened in the case of the account we have of the Amazons; for our accounts of other peoples keep a distinction between the mythical and the historical elements; for the things that are ancient and false and monstrous are called myths, but history wishes for the truth, whether ancient or recent, and contains no monstrous element, or else only rarely. But as regards the Amazons, the same stories are told now as in early times, though they are marvellous and beyond belief. For instance, who could believe that an army of women, or a city, or a tribe, could ever be organised without men . . . ? For this is the same as saying that the men of those times were women, and that the women were men. (11.5.3, Jones 235)¹⁶

¹⁶An Italian translation of Strabo existed in Ercole I's library; see Bertoni 250.

Strabo is uncomfortable with the Amazons because he sees them as hovering between the genres of myth and history, unable to be definitively relegated to either realm. What dissociates them from history, in his view, is their “monstrous element” (*to teratodes*), which forces a reconsideration of the function not only of the female sex but also of the male. While Strabo’s terms reflect a binary schema (the monstrous versus the historical, the false versus the true, women versus men), Ariosto’s women warriors, like their Amazonic predecessors, seem designed expressly to place accepted categories into question: to conjoin what is normally kept apart.

A recurring metaphor in the *Orlando Furioso* for the bringing together of disparate elements is *il nodo*, the knot. The knot denotes many different types of connection or bond in the poem. It can serve as symbol of relations between persons, from love (Angelica and Medoro), to marriage (Bradamante and Ruggiero), to friendship (Ruggiero and Leone), to a quarrel (Mandricardo and Rodomonte).¹⁷ Alternatively, it can signify the psychic turmoil of an individual, as in the case of mad Orlando, whose plea “Solvite me” evokes knots of mind as well as body. It can also refer to the creation of persuasive fictions by Alcina or Atlante, figures akin to the poet.¹⁸ As these examples suggest, the knot in the *Furioso* is a highly ambivalent symbol. Although some of the poem’s many *nodi* are clearly glossed as positive or negative (a good *nodo* of Christian charity unites the guests in a hermit’s hut; false *nodi* of vain love affairs turn up on the moon),¹⁹ the term is flexible enough to signify discord and difference, harmony and unity, and even the potential for both. Therefore, as is the case with the cluster of topics introduced paratactically in the poem’s first lines, readers are left to wonder whether certain Ariostean knots imply a resolution of tensions, or whether they function as emblems of a problem unsolved, metaphors for tension itself.

One intricate knot, closely connected to the figure of the woman warrior, is found in the famous tale of Bradamante, Fiordispina, and Ricciardetto. Ricciardetto, who relates the story to Ruggiero, compares it to a *fabula*: “Io non credo che fabula si conte, / che più di questa istoria bella fosse” (25.27.5,6). The episode is thus represented as a miniature romance within the larger text, and its content

¹⁷ *OF* 19.36.8 and 23.103.1, 46.20.4 and 46.67.2, 46.31.4, 27.102.5. On the *nodi* of Angelica and Medoro, see Marcus.

¹⁸ *OF* 39.54.2, 8.1.8, 8.14.8, 22.17.4.

¹⁹ *OF* 44.4.2, 34.78.1.

is correspondingly romance-like; we encounter a woodland setting, a dizzying array of costume changes and stories within stories, and the plot device of identical male/female twins. The anecdote constitutes a long-deferred continuation of the final scene in the *Innamorato*, but to Boiardo's tale of Bradamante, the "masculine" woman desired by young Fiordispina, Ariosto adds the Amazon's oft-imagined counterpart: a feminine man. Ruggiero first mistakes the beautiful Ricciardetto for his beloved. However, the young man readily identifies himself as Bradamante's twin, explaining that his sister resembles him so closely that after her hair was cut, "alcun segno tra noi non restò più / di differenza, fuor che 'l sesso e 'l nome" (25.24.5,6).

Ricciardetto's story concerns an earlier misunderstanding arising from the uncanny resemblance between Bradamante and himself: the Spanish princess Fiordispina, coming upon Bradamante asleep in the forest, takes her for a man and promptly falls in love. Bradamante quickly reveals that she is a woman, but the damage is done; Fiordispina's desire remains as strong as ever. In a torrent of grief that draws on a speech by Iphis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Fiordispina complains that her passion can never be consummated because of Bradamante's sex. She describes her plight with the metaphor of a knot: "Ma se volasse a me con ogni ingegno / Dedalo, non potria scioglièr quel nodo / che fece i mastro troppo diligente, / Natura d'ogni cosa più possente" (25.37.5–8).

The reference to Daedalus is borrowed from Iphis' complaint: "ipse licet revolet ceratis Daedalus alis, / quid faciet?" (9.742–43). ("Though Daedalus himself should fly back on waxen wings, what could he do?" [Miller and Gould 57]). Ariosto, however, expands the reference to Daedalus by adding the image of the knot. The "knot" here can be characterized in at least three different ways. It results first from Bradamante's double identity as a woman warrior. Fiordispina encounters her "tutta coperta d'arme, eccetto il viso, / ch'avea la spada in luogo di conocchia" (25.28.2–3).²⁰ Contrary to what her sword and "virile aspetto" (25.41.2) would seem to promise, Bradamante, to the princess' disappointment, is not a member of the "miglior sesso" (25.42.8, 25.44.4). In an opposition that seems to contrast sex with gender, nature with culture, Fiordispina maintains that *natura* cannot be overcome by human *ingegno*, even that of the renowned craftsman Daedalus.

²⁰ Camilla is similarly introduced by Virgil as possessing skill in battle rather than a distaff and wool-basket (*Aeneid* 7.805–6).

Fiordispina's stubborn "knot," however, derives not only from the disparity between Bradamante's perceived gender and her biological sex; the knot is also produced by a glaring failure of the story's characters to acknowledge the possibility of same-sex desire. Fiordispina's lament runs through a list of taboo loves, including incest and bestiality, but maintains rather improbably that a woman loving a woman is a phenomenon unheard of except in her own case (25.35.5–8). As though to reinforce this disavowal of homoerotic desire, the Bradamante of Ricciardetto's tale rebuffs Fiordispina's advances without hesitation, whereas in the *Innamorato* and in Ovid's Iphis story, both women love each other equally (*OI* 3:9.25.7; *Metamorphoses* 9.725).

Nevertheless, despite the circumstances of Fiordispina's dilemma (which include Bradamante's unconventional identity as woman warrior, and both women's anxious denial of lesbian desire), her knot in a third sense is only too familiar in the *Furioso*: it is one of unrequited love. When Fiordispina exclaims, "solo il mio desiderio è senza fine!" (25.34.8), the irony is that this longing will be gratified, while so many other instances of desire in the poem—of heterosexual desire—are left unresolved. Although Fiordispina denies that Daedalus could extricate her from her plight, Ariosto himself performs a Daedalian or romance-like maneuver, conjuring up the figure of Ricciardetto to unravel the knot created by Bradamante's complex identity.

The final "knots" of the story are therefore the harmonious ones of mutual passion, as Ricciardetto describes himself and the princess in bed together: "Non con più nodi i flessuosi acanti / le colonne circondano e le travi, / di quelli con che noi legammo stretti / e colli e fianchi e braccia e gambe e petti" (25.69.5–8). Valeria Finucci has argued that this resolution deftly reinstates the polar categories of masculine and feminine that appeared to be questioned earlier in the episode, and reinforces the male heterosexual norm.²¹ Ricciardetto, who uses not only the simile of acanthus knots but also the extended metaphor of a violent military assault to depict the act of lovemaking, offsets the account of his masquerade as a woman with a resoundingly "masculine" conclusion: "Io senza scale in su la rôcca salto / e lo stendardo piantovi di botto, / e la nimica mia mi caccio sotto" (25.68.6–8). Nevertheless, if we consider the episode anew from the perspective of genre, and see how epic frames this romance tale, the conclusion's triumphant tone is problematized in two ways.

²¹ See Finucci 201–25. Shemek (*Ladies Errant* 109–16) perceives a greater openness towards alternative gender categories in the Fiordispina story than does Finucci, yet also concludes by emphasizing Ricciardetto's viewpoint and his role as narrator.

First, Ricciardetto's epic boasts are comical in the context of the romance exploit he describes: an erotic rather than a military triumph. As he remarks at the tale's beginning, *Sesso* and *nome* differentiate him from his sister, and although he possesses the male sexual organ that Bradamante lacks, her *nome* or reputation will remain far greater than his. Ferrau comments later in the poem that he once mistook Bradamante for Ricciardetto, only to realize his error when she demonstrated a military skill that he knew Ricciardetto to be incapable of (36.13.3–8). In the Fiordispina episode, Ricciardetto's sword appears only in the context of an imaginary exploit he invents for the princess' benefit (25.61.1). As for the concluding simile of the acanthus knots, it ironically recalls Ovid's Hermaphroditus, a man rendered effeminate (*Metamorphoses* 4.365).²² In short, far from establishing his heroic status, the close of Ricciardetto's narrative reminds us of the distance still dividing him from the traditional epic hero.

Secondly, as Ricciardetto's initial comparison of his story to a *fabula* suggests, Fiordispina's knot is unraveled in Ovidian or Daedalian fashion: that is, in romance mode, with the desires expressed in her dream world finding direct fulfillment. The implausibility of the solution (which depends on the creation of a male double, and on Fiordispina's credulity) is reinforced by the fact that the lovers' bliss is destroyed as soon as it is exposed to the public space. The first knots appearing in the episode, not coincidentally, are the literal bonds ("i lacci," 25.17.5) that attach Ricciardetto to the pyre where Fiordispina's father has condemned him to be burned alive. It is Ruggiero's sword and his epic *furor* (25.16.5) that save the day. The epic moments that frame Ricciardetto's tale (the battle around the pyre, the military vocabulary used to describe the lovers in bed) thus juxtapose the genres of epic and romance and point up the imaginary quality of the story's romance solution. As a whole, the episode signals both the possibilities and the limitations of the romance genre: while romance can powerfully evoke the complexities of gender and sexual orientation, and the inadequacy of binary oppositions to designate these categories, it does not (in this case at least) put forward a way to negotiate these dilemmas of gender within the historical world. The knots at the end of Ricciardetto's story, although presented as symbols of concord, serve in fact to remind us that the "knots" of Bradamante's

²²For a different interpretation of the Hermaphroditus reference, see Finucci 219–21.

hybrid gender identity and Fiordispina's uncertain sexual orientation have not been worked out after all.

V. Marfisa's Gordian Knot

The episode of "le femine omicide" (19.57.2) also situates the figure of a woman warrior, this time Marfisa, at the heart of a seemingly insurmountable gender dilemma. Again, this dilemma is symbolized by the metaphor of a knot; and again, the intrigue centers on the woman warrior's literal lack of a penis. Yet whereas the tale of Fiordispina treats the intricacies of gender identity within a romance setting, the story of Marfisa among the killer women examines, and questions, significant codes and values that pervade the epic genre.

Just prior to their arrival at the island of the killer women, Marfisa and her companions stop at Paphos, a place where all women are constantly in love (18.139). This utopia of female desire stands in stark contrast to the island of *le femine omicide*, where all male visitors are killed or enslaved unless one of their number succeeds in overthrowing ten knights and, on the same night, satisfying ten women in bed (19.57). When the male knights draw lots to decide who will undertake the two-part challenge, they attempt to exclude Marfisa on the grounds that she will be unable to participate in "la seconda giostra" (19.73.7). But she is confident that she will be able to compensate for anatomical lack with the phallic substitute of her sword: "ma dove non l'aitasse la natura, con la spada supplir stava sicura" (19.69.7–8). When the lot does fall to her, she publicly proclaims her faith in her own strength, gesturing toward her sword and invoking the Gordian knot: "ma questa spada (e lor la spada addita, / che cinta avea) vi do per securtade / ch'io vi sciorrò tutti gl'intrichi al modo / che fe' Alessandro il gordiano nodo" (19.74.5–8).

The Gordian knot, which Alexander purportedly slashed open with his sword, functions in ancient sources as a symbol of his program of conquest; according to an oracle, the person who managed to undo the knot would become the ruler of all Asia, or as Plutarch has it, of all the world (273, sec. 18). Marfisa's self-association with Alexander implies that she is assuming the role of epic hero battling the barbarian: in this case, the female Amazontic barbarian, that quintessential other of classical antiquity. Many details in Ariosto's depiction of the killer

²⁸On the classical Amazon, see Blok's comprehensive study.

women and their topsy-turvy civilization derive from standard classical portrayals of the Amazons.²³ The harbor of the island is shaped like a crescent moon, Diana's symbol (19.64.1); the *guerriere* are armed with bows (19.65.4); and gender roles on the island are reversed in strictly polar fashion, as envisioned by Strabo in the passage cited earlier. The few men present are forbidden to carry swords; they are dressed in female attire and weave and spin (19.71–72). Ariosto's city of women warriors thus offers an easily recognizable representation of the way the Amazon is traditionally thought to emasculate the male sex.

However, the narrative that Ariosto provides to explain the origins of his Amazonic city represents a surprising departure from tradition. His story draws on two tales of female discontent provoked by wartime spousal neglect: the legend of Falanto, a Spartan bastard born during the Messenian conflict; and the legend of the Lemnian women, who murder their husbands out of fury at being supplanted by slave women brought back from Thrace.²⁴ Ariosto's Falanto, however, is a byproduct of the Trojan war, the bastard son of Clytemnestra herself. He and a hundred other illegitimate youths, exiled on the Greeks' return from Troy, become pirates and Cretan mercenaries. After winning the hearts of a group of young Cretan women, they callously rob and abandon them on an island. It is these women who found the colony of *le femine omicide*.

The *Furioso* is unique in that it appropriates the myths of Falanto and of the Lemnian women to present them as the prehistory of the founding of an Amazonic society. The tale of the ruthless killer women thus acquires strong epic underpinnings: their warlike behavior and misandry can be traced back, at least partly, to the male military violence of the Trojan War. The young men's abandonment of the Cretan women mirrors a parallel act of abandonment carried out a generation earlier by the Greeks who left their wives to go to Troy. Yet whereas the Greek wives responded to their husbands' long absence by taking new lovers, the Cretan women take revenge against male cruelty and the epic code by decreeing that all men are to be killed. The precarious nature of this law is indicated by the fact that they revise it again and again: first in order to allow for sexual reproduction, thereafter due to an ongoing fear of the "viril sesso" whom they themselves give birth to (20.32.3), and finally to accommodate one of their number who has fallen in love with a man.

²⁴On Ariosto's sources for the tale, see Rajna 293–99.

In contrast to the ruthless women (and to Falanto and his original band), the male knights imprisoned on the island are highly sympathetic figures. Young Guidone, the women's chief male prisoner, and Elbanio, Guidone's predecessor on the island by some two thousand years, demonstrate impeccable courtesy. If a binary opposition is established between the killer women and the knights, however, the relation of Marfisa to these two groups is more complicated. Marfisa is clear that she values loyalty to her male companions over a gender-based solidarity with the *guerriere*. Once she has witnessed Guidone's prowess and heard his narrative, she is swift to become his ally, and categorically refuses to enter the city as a *donna* (20.78).²⁵ By contrast, she resembles the killer women in her determination to correct violence with violence; she intends to overcome the *femine omicide* through sheer force. She urges Guidone to accompany her, invoking her sword as in her previous boast about the Gordian knot: ". . . – Vientene insieme / con noi, ch'a viva forza usciren quinci. . . / . . . – Il mio cor mai non teme / di non dar fine a cosa che cominci; / né trovar so la più sicura strada / di quella ove mi sia guida la spada" (20.70.1–2, 5–8). Earlier, when Marfisa was slashing her way through Guidone's nine companions, it seemed possible that her epic prowess would make short work of the women's "costume impio" (20.60.1). But "viva forza" ultimately proves inadequate to halt the onslaught of arrows fired by the women warriors. Instead, the epic struggle is put to an end in unheroic fashion by the magical horn of romance, which reduces everyone on both sides to the same desperate flight, including the dauntless Marfisa.²⁶ As though to emphasize the emptiness of her earlier boasting, Astolfo's statement that he intends to blow the horn echoes the same rhyme (*strada/spada*) that Marfisa employed at the beginning of the conflict: "Io vo' veder, poi che non giova spada, / s'io so col corno assicurar la strada" (20.87.7, 8).

Thus, although epic comradeship, as displayed in the mutual admiration and cooperation of Guidone and Marfisa, is valorized in this episode, epic violence is not. Marfisa's sword proves as ineffectual a solution as the women's laws. Her proclaimed resistance to fear and subsequent surrender to it also link her to the "donzelle altiere" of the island (19.71.2), who simultaneously deny and exhibit a fear of men. Marfisa's dramatic flight can be read as a commentary not only on

²⁵ Roche emphasizes the importance of male/female cooperation in this episode (117–22).

²⁶ On Astolfo's horn, see Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony* 258–59, and Roche 122–27.

her unreflective faith in epic might, but also on her adamant denial of erotic desire and gender difference. The knot that she originally promised to cut represented a sexual challenge as well as a military one. Her proposed mode of resolving the dilemma—brute force—sidesteps the question of sex and gender difference altogether. At first glance, her mindset appears diametrically opposed to that of the women warriors on the island: they structure their entire lives according to a rigid binary hierarchy of the sexes, whereas she refuses to acknowledge gender difference at all. Paradoxically, however, Marfisa's absolute denial of gender difference and the women warriors' insistence on it resemble each other in significant respects: both viewpoints involve blindness to the complexity of gender identity, and to erotic desire. Although there is comedy (as well as a challenge to her male comrades' sexist assumptions) in Marfisa's initial claim that a sword can stand in for a penis, her undignified retreat from the island suggests that she has been unable to cope with the "knot" of gender difference after all: that the age-old dilemma of the tension and attraction between the sexes cannot be resolved through force, or through a facile dismissal of male and female.

The Gordian knot that Marfisa confronts appears initially to symbolize the ruthless brutality of barbarian women. But in a surprising twist, the text then reveals the knot's origin to be male cruelty—the abandonment of women that is a side effect of epic's programs of conquest. Marfisa, as a woman warrior, in some ways seems uniquely poised to dissolve this particular knot. For although she is herself an adherent of the epic code, both her capacity to form an alliance of friendship with Guidone and her blatant disregard for gender conventions suggest a way out of the grim deadlock between the sexes that characterizes life on the island. Once again, however, the poet's interweaving of romance with epic motifs denies readers a tidy resolution. The recurring phenomenon of male/female love on the island, of which the "perfetto amor" between Guidone and one of his wives is only the most recent example (20.74.7), functions as an ongoing reminder of the reality of *eros*: a dilemma that neither the *femine omicide*, nor Marfisa, nor the genre of epic itself is equipped to unravel. And Astolfo's final gesture—the blowing of a highly un-Roland-like horn—makes a mockery of epic valor. Ultimately, the attempts of Marfisa and the warrior women to structure their worlds through force are shown to be as fantastic and as untenable as any scenario in romance.

VI. Conclusion: Unity in Difference

The shifting portrayal of the woman warrior in the *Furioso*, and the poem's occasionally bewildering movement between romance and epic, are mirrored by the mercurial attitudes of Ariosto's narrator. His stance towards the female sex alternates between exaggerated complaint and lavish praise.²⁷ Canto 20, which concludes the story of the *femine omicide*, illustrates the text's contradictory stance toward women—and specifically, toward the woman warrior—to a heightened degree. The canto opens by complimenting women of antiquity and of Ariosto's own time, yet in the narrative that follows, as we have seen, Marfisa emerges as a far from exemplary figure. The tale of Marganorre, found in the final 1532 edition of the *Furioso*, deepens this paradox, as it couples an extended proem in praise of women with a narrative of Marfisa retaliating against misogyny in crude, caricatural fashion.²⁸

The *Furioso's* treatment of Bradamante and Marfisa is by no means unequivocally positive. Yet by connecting the two heroines to his own female contemporaries, and refusing ever to refer to them outright as Amazons, the poet links them to the realm of history, and divests them of some of their sinister alterity. More significantly still, if his women warriors retain a capacity to disturb, this very strangeness renders them types of the narrative as a whole. Whereas the Amazon of antiquity, in keeping with the Greek tendency to conceptualize difference in terms of polarity, is largely defined as what the Greeks themselves are *not*,²⁹ Ariosto's *guerriere* play a new role: not only are they central to the plot, but they stand as emblems of it. The hybrid figure of the woman warrior, monstrous within the ancient world, is relocated to a universe where hybridity is the norm.

Throughout the closing cantos of the *Furioso*, and in the poem's final edition, Ariosto takes pains to depict Bradamante and Marfisa together. The women fight side by side for the first time against Marganorre; and when Leone claims Bradamante's hand, Marfisa becomes the chief defender of her cause. A reference to the women's mutual "benivolenza" is replaced in 1532 by the more forceful "grande amistanza" (38.7.4). Thus, along with the "nuovo nodo" that is the

²⁷ On gender and Ariosto's vacillating narrator, see Blum, and Shemek, "Of Women."

²⁸ For a study of Canto 37 that takes the relation between the proem and the Marganorre episode as emblematic of the poem's broader sexual politics, see Ascoli, "Il segreto di Erittonio."

²⁹ See Blok 126–43, as well as Lloyd's seminal work.

marriage of Bradamante and Ruggiero (46.67.2), and the homosocial *nodo* of obligation and friendship that links Ruggiero and Leone (46.31.4), the reader encounters a new and powerful bond between a pair of women. An extended simile describing them in combat against Rodomonte's troops compares them to rushing torrents and concludes with a striking image of unity in difference: "così le due magnanime guerriere, / scorrendo il campo per diversa strada, / gran strage fan ne l'africane schiere, / l'una con l'asta, e l'altra con la spada" (39.14.1–8, 39.15.1–4). This union of the two women warriors, dramatically dissimilar as they are, symbolizes the knot of genres that is the *Furioso*. Bradamante with the magic lance of romance and Marfisa with her epic sword have forged an association that will continue beyond the poem, when the two of them will set out on a new quest to avenge Ruggiero's death (41.62). Together, they redefine the boundaries of difference in a way that is emblematic of the way in which Ariosto's entire text redefines these margins.

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