TEXTUAL HEALING: GENDER, GENRE, AND DISEASE AT THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN COURT

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Chapel Hill
2020

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ABSTRACT

Tessa Bullington Warren: Textual Healing: Gender, Genre, and Disease at the Sixteenth-Century Italian Court
(Under the direction of Ennio Rao)

This dissertation is an examination of the functions of literary and art patronage in healing the socio-political and physical wounds wrought by a combination of newly emergent contagious disease (syphilis) and widespread social disorder associated with the beginning of the sixteenth century in northern-Italian courts. I focus on the court of Federico II Gonzaga, first duke of Mantua, and a lesser-known chivalric epic poem written in his honor, Giovanbattista Dragoncino da Fano's La Marfisa bizzarra (1531), in order to assess the poet's atypical treatment of gender and genealogy in mythologizing the origins of the Gonzaga dynasty according to generic standards for the Cinqucento epic. Dragoncino's poem re-genders expected norms for the mythopoetic representation of patrilineal dynastic genealogies associated with the genre and presents sexually transgressive behavior by the founding member of the dynasty using language that encodes and masks its salacious content. I ground my view of the Bizzarra as an intentional instance of textual healing (or healing through contact with text) in the specific court culture established by Federico II Gonzaga and his immediate predecessors (his parents Francesco II Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este), and in the contemporary use of art and literature to combat social and physical disorder. My deployment of the term textual healing refers to both the intentionally propagandistic effects of sixteenth-century literary and art patronage, as well as to the physically curative function that meditating on aesthetic works was understood to possess in early-modern medicine. By considering Federico II's syphilis as a threat to his physical, social, and political well-being within the specific context of his court at Mantua, I reconstruct the seemingly incongruous representation of masculine power in the Bizzarra as the duke's overt attempt to harness that which could be de-legitimizing and repurposing it to his own means. In the world encapsulated by the Bizzarra, the transgression of sex and gender norms occurs within a normalizing context that serves to promote Federico II's self-image as a man of
“particular” tastes whose own struggle with a chronic and incurable love-sickness reinforces rather than destabilizes his legacy as a potent and capable ruler.
To my beloved family and friends for all of the love and encouragement along the way, and to Ray and Ennio whose guidance and support have been my constant inspiration to push on.

*Et so ben ch’i’ vo dietro a quel che m’arde.*

(Rime sparse 19)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project, its research and writing, were made possible in part by support from the UNC Department of Romance Studies (ROMS), the UNC Medieval and Early Modern Studies program (MEMS), and the UNC Graduate School and Roysters’ Society of Fellows. Additional support was provided by the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s Reynolds-Finley Historical Library Fellowship in Medical History and the generous assistance of Peggy Balch and Anna Kaetz, and the Archivio Gonzaga at the Archivio di Stato di Mantova and the Biblioteca Teresiana in Mantua, Italy whose archivists and librarians were critical in helping me to develop my research – with especial thanks owed to Andrea Torelli at the Biblioteca Teresiana for sharing his limitless knowledge of the collections and its many resources.

Also instrumental in helping me to achieve my goal of attaining this degree were Daniel Maier-Katkin, Terry Coonan, Dr. Lee Shuping and the staff of the UNC Center for Rehabilitation, and Cora Willow Passanisi – all of whom contributed in different ways to the realization of this project.
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INTRODUCTION

Syphilis. Sixteenth-century Europe finds itself at the dawn of a new cataclysm. The continent is being swept by a sexually transmittable bacterial infection that cuts across social strata and manifests both externally via skin lesions and internally with tumor-like growths and neurological symptoms and death. In 1531 Federico Gonzaga II (1500-1540), a member of one of Renaissance Italy’s most influential and powerful families, and a chronic sufferer of the disease, has commissioned the publication of *La Marfisa bizzarra* (Bizarre Marfisa), a chivalric poem by Giovan Battista Dragoncino (1497-1547?) written in the patron’s honor. This study examines how the epic poem’s portrayal of the Gonzaga dynasty’s founding member occurs as an unexpected reversal of and departure from gendered norms for the genre, while operating within the memorializing function of the poem as explicitly elaborated in the introduction and conclusion to the text. In my work I assess the curative properties of an explicitly transgressive campaign of literary and art patronage directed at healing the social wounds inflicted by a new form of epidemic disease running rampant through the courts of Italy and of greater Europe during the first half of the sixteenth-century, using the Gonzaga duchy of Mantua as my point of focus. The “textual healing” that I identify within the *Bizzarra* and similar works is directed not only at socio-political stabilization under the Gonzaga regime, but also at repairing the physical damage wrought by the duke’s ailing body through the rebalancing of a disordered humoral complexion.

The character Marfisa first appears in Boiardo’s *L’Orlando innamorato* (1495) and is one of a cast of familiar characters called upon to populate the various chivalric epic poems whose production characterized sixteenth-century popular literature in Italy. The Renaissance epic genre emerged on the peninsula in the early fifteenth century and was popularized by Luigi Pulci’s 1483 poem, *Morgante maggiore*. The works of Pulci and Boiardo mark the genesis of a new and distinct form of chivalric poetry, drawing heavily upon literary themes already in vogue in southern France and northern Italy during the late Middle Ages. The emergent chivalric poetic form combined elements from the Carolingian Cycle, or Matter of France, with that of the Arthurian Cycle of Romances, or Matter of Brittany.
The characters and context for the Renaissance epic are largely borrowed from the Carolingian Cycle, which centers on a moment of significant conflict between Charlemagne’s army and that of the “Saracen” occupiers of southern Spain. Set in the court of Charlemagne, these poems revolve around the adventures of that king’s most valiant and favored knight, Orlando (the French Roland), and his cohort of Christian paladins, who go to battle against Saracens, monsters, and enemies of the king. Written as mythologized histories, the tales and escapades in which Orlando and his associates feature, range from graphically violent battle scenes, to comic and arcane side adventures, to romantic exploits and lusty episodes; all told through an omniscient narrator who offers the reader an open-ended editorializing commentary on the events as they unfold. The events being recounted and the “histories” being developed in the epics are presented by the authors as the re-elaboration of accounts passed down from Turpin, the supposed author of a Life of Charlemagne and “legendary Archbishop of Rheims” who accompanied Charlemagne in battle against the Saracen forces (Waldman 627). Conveying their stories as the rediscovery of Turpin’s historical accounts provides the authors with a narrative distancing that imbues the poems with their characteristic air of authority and claim to historical integrity.

Dragoncino’s choice of Marfisa for the title character in his epic represents a significant departure from the male-dominated genre. Not only has he chosen a female warrior from the pool of available characters to serve in the title role, but he has chosen one, who – unlike the better known Bradamante – is a Christian, not by birth but by conversion, having been originally introduced into the literary cycle as an enemy Saracen warrior. The subject of much scholarly interest, Bradamante, the genre’s exemplar of the virtuous female warrior, serves the critical dynastic function within the Innamorato and Ariosto’s L’Orlando furioso of linking the texts to the works’ patrons, the venerable House of Este. It is through such imagined genealogies that the chivalric epic transforms history into legend, one of the defining characteristics of epic poetry from its earliest known origins in the ancient traditions of India, Samaria and Babylon.

During the Renaissance, the historical/mythological function of epic becomes the vehicle by which patrons could establish and reinforce their own legitimacy as powerful individuals or families. At a time of social disorder (wrought by natural disaster, famine, economic crises, and epidemic disease), factionalism, foreign dominion and war, the Este Duchy of Ferrara (1471-1597) was able to maintain a

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1Waldman further tells us “Ariosto, like Boiardo before him, hides behind his authority whenever he doubts his own facts” (ibid).
vibrant and much-admired court culture, seemingly at odds with the actual social and political context of the period. By funding civic projects to promote culture within Ferrara, the dukes of Este projected an image of benevolent and preordained (i.e. legitimate) lordship. Beyond poetry, the Estes were known for sustaining works of theater, dance, and music; as well as the painting, sculpture and architecture often associated with Renaissance art.

Boiardo’s move to mythologize the Este dynasty came as a late addition to the text, not appearing in the initial publication of the first two books. In assigning the role of progenitrix of the House of Este to Bradamante, an idealized and privileged character within the text, Boiardo undermines the negative association put forth by his patrons’ enemies, which had ascribed a dynastic link to the House of Maganza – a symbol of treachery within the Carolingian cycle. Far from idle entertainment or simple creative expression, the genealogical function of the Renaissance chivalric epic belies political and social valences to which its readers would have been well attuned.

In keeping with the political intent of demonstrating an idealized and fantastic origin for the Estes, both Ariosto and Boiardo imbue Bradamante with positive feminine characteristics and attributes. As beautiful as she is wise, as brave as she is talented, Bradamante’s exceptional position as a female in a male-gendered context (that of paladin) never compromises her chastity or her faith – the two feminine traits considered most critical to the social value of a woman of distinction. Rather than masculinize her or demonstrate the monstrosity of a woman occupying male space, Bradamante exists upon a literary pedestal, unique among the female characters and tropes populating the imagined world of chivalric epic.

Returning to the Bizzarre, and to the focus of my project, we find that genealogy is not treated in such unambiguously positive terms, as demonstrated in the Innamorato and Furioso. Given the high social and political stakes underlying the creation and promotion of a dynastic mythology, Dragoncino’s choice of Marfisa unsettles the trope of progenitrix. Unlike Bradamante, paragon of moderation and morals, Marfisa enters the world of Boiardo and Ariosto as a comic caricature of chivalry taken to its extreme. Often described in disparaging terms, it is even suggested that Marfisa, being monomaniacal in her pursuit of chivalric exploits, suffers from a lack of hygiene as a result of her unwillingness to remove her armor in order to leave the public (male) sphere and enter the domestic (female) sphere. The Marfisa that Dragoncino would have encountered in Boiardo and Ariosto, and subsequently adapted for his own
poem, is about as ill-suited a match to found a noble dynastic lineage, as one may find from among the eligible (i.e. virtuous and Christian) pool of pre-existing stock characters.

Dragoncino strays further still from the expected archetypal progenitrix in characterizing Marfisa as abnormal or strange; she is after all bizarre Marfisa. Whereas Orlando is driven to folly and a state of mad fury (furioso) by the concrete evidence of the love affair between Angelica (the source of his innamoramento) and Medoro, reading the signs of their love (and more importantly the loss of Angelica’s chastity) engraved into trees; Marfisa simply loses track of her beloved, Filinoro, during an organized hunt. Underlying Orlando’s flight to madness is the real threat evinced in the coupling of his desired with another man, while Marfisa loses her head with only Filinoro’s physical absence upon which to speculate.

Throughout the poem, Marfisa is described in terms of her animality and ferocity. Her blind rage leads her to eschew the strict rules of chivalry and to violate the hospitality of strangers. She murders her own horse without provocation, and proceeds to tramp through the wilderness harassing the wildlife and leaving a trail of unmitigated destruction. Orlando’s madness is no less violent and senseless, however, he is also not the progenitor of the patrons’ lineage, a significant point of distinction between the two.

Dragoncino selected Marfisa as the title character for his work, and also for the very different, and no less critical, function of dynastic mythologizing within the text. Such a departure from the typical, ennobling portrayal that one would expect for the founder of an important dynasty, initially led me to question if, rather than honor his patron, Dragoncino’s poem may have represented a pointed literary slight. The contemporary sixteenth-century audience for the Bizzarra would have been well versed in the tropes of chivalric epic, and would have held the Innamorato and Furioso as the standard models for the genre. It was difficult to imagine that the Bizzarra would have been well received by a patron expecting the kind of lavish treatment that Boiardo and Ariosto had given the Este family. I thought it also unlikely that a wider reading audience would not have raised an eyebrow in reading Dragoncino’s explicitly laudatory encomia alongside a representation so far from the norm.

In addition to writing their patrons into the fantastical world of chivalric epic through mythologized genealogies, chivalric poets also used their works to speak directly of the virtues of individual members of the courts that hosted them. This was accomplished through elaborate poetic dedications in which the author names various influential individuals, and lists off their many qualities and positive attributes.
Dragoncino’s poem, which was published yet unfinished, is significantly shorter than the other epics of the period, and yet the encomia included therein occupy an inordinate amount of textual space relative to those works. Keeping in mind that the chivalric epic was the genre upon which an ambitious sixteenth-century poet might cut his teeth and seek to find an audience, thereby making a name for himself, it was then unclear to me what Dragoncino intended to accomplish with the *Bizzara*. The stakes were high and yet the poet bet the farm, his own livelihood and perhaps safety ... to what end?

The more I investigated the commissioning of the *Bizzara* and the relationship between the work’s patron, Federico II, and the specific culture of art and literary patronage that he cultivated at his court in Mantua, the more my sense of the work’s purpose began to shift. No longer reading the text as a satire intended at debasing the Gonzaga name in some way, I began instead to consider how and why Federico would have desired this type of a-typical portrayal of his dynastic heritage and his own legitimacy as a ruler. Retaining even today the reputation of the perfect Renaissance prince *a la* Machiavelli (Barbieri, “La Cultura” 9): Federico was a skilled politician and diplomat for whom art and literary patronage were tools by which to expand his domain and shape public opinion. Given these critical and highly valued functions of the literature he sponsored, I began to redirect my inquiry to better understand how the *Bizzara*’s strange dynastic portrayal might have fit into the duke’s overall program of self-fashioning through aesthetic production. By considering the poem within its broader context – the genre of the Cinquecento Chivalric Epic – as well as within a body of works Federico commissioned, the *Bizzara* emerges not so much as an outlier, but as an innovation in form.

In tandem with questions concerning the socio-political reception of the genealogical patterning developed in the *Bizzara*, sex and gender emerged as critical points of examination. Because Federico was a prince whose very identity was shaped by his constant self-projection as a virile and sexually prolific figure (Maurer 388), it became necessary also to consider how the duke’s *malfrancese* (syphilis) was accounted for in the work. As my research expanded to include the contemporary perception and treatment of the disease, I realized that the affliction that took Federico’s life at the age of forty (nine years

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1 Barbieri writes: “Federico II si configura come un perfetto principe rinascimentale dai contorni machiavelliani, nel quale confluirono le virtù belliche del padre, Francesco II Gonzaga quarto marchese di Mantova, e le doti diplomatiche ed intellettuali della madre, Isabella d’Este” (9).
after the publication of the *Bizarra*), would have occurred as a significant obstacle to the image of potency and legitimacy that he sought to express. Taking another look at Dragoncino’s poem and similar works, I began to see a form of intentional textual healing that was taking place. Through aesthetic production of various types and within the cross-class and largely male-male social networks that developed around what Hickson terms a “sodality” of syphilis sufferers, text and image functioned to heal the cultural wounds wrought by the disease and its attendant social instability. At the same time, “advances” in Galenic or Humoral medicine had become necessary to combat widespread social disorder, and art and literature served the medical function of restoring balance to disordered or diseased bodies.

The “textual healing” that I identify in the *Bizarra* and contemporary works functions on a number of levels and in response to the generalized threat of disorder, originating from any of a number of socio-political, cultural, or physical threats prevalent at the time. In this dissertation I discuss the various ways that literature was being deployed to restore order and generate “reality” in a society in flux, considering both meta-literary texts designated for broad-audiences, such as Fracastoro’s poem *Syphilis*, and works commissioned with a specific readership in mind, such as Dragoncino’s *Bizarra*. My work draws upon scholarship from a range of fields of inquiry beyond Renaissance literature and literary criticism, including medical and art histories, and philosophy. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the cultural function of aesthetic production within a given context, my examination of literature provides further insight into the broader picture of sixteenth-century studies and offers new directions in understanding the contemporary reception of Renaissance literary and art patronage.

**Society in Flux: Disease as Conceptual Disorder**

Like AIDS in the eighties, the emergence of French Pox in Western Europe signaled a moment of tremendous biological insecurity at the dawn of the sixteenth century and marked the Renaissance as a “golden age of disease” (Owen Hughes 105). As society grappled with the consequences of unchecked and highly virulent communicable disease, the structure and function of culture shifted, as the need for institutionalized response to public health concerns reached international proportions. While it would be several centuries before the birth of the modern hospital, the sheer brutality and violence of epidemic disease forced communities to begin to develop new systems for preventing transmission and to recognize the social consequences of treating medicine as the privilege of an elect few.
The French Pox, working in concert with the devastation wrought from fourteenth-century outbreaks of bubonic plague, made it impossible for Western Europe to ignore the social transmission of communicable disease. By their nature, these two maladies demonstrated the weakness of contemporary medical understanding, and posed a threat – not only to human life – but to Western philosophy overall, and to the widely held conceptions about the nature of existence that characterized prevailing ideologies. In her chapter on “Bodies, Disease, and Society” in the Italian Renaissance, Diane Owen Hughes discusses the combined effects of bubonic plague and French Pox in destabilizing Western philosophy and medicine. The author identifies two critical problems from among the myriad factors marking plague and pox as disruptive social forces that presented previously unaccounted-for issues in Western thought. For Owen Hughes, the destabilizing characteristics of these “social” diseases are their unknown etiology (or origin) and undeniable contagion (106). She asserts:

The mysterious character and terrifying spread of both plague and syphilis persuaded the medical community to look beyond ancient medicine’s concern with the diseased body and to consider the nature of disease itself, that is, to move beyond restoring humoral imbalance within individuals and to seek external causes in the hope that diseases themselves might be eradicated. (ibid)

Accurate but understated, Owen Hughes’ description of the sixteenth-century medical community’s response to epidemic disease underscores the fundamentally destabilizing nature of these “new” forms of physical disorder. The characterization that sixteenth-century medicine was “persuaded” to “move beyond” its previously held models and norms is magnanimous at the same time that it is

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3 To illustrate, Arrizabalaga et al. site the 1348 outbreak of bubonic plague, which killed perhaps a third of the population in Europe. It killed quickly, generally within three days of the appearance of the first symptom. Regimen, diet, prognosis and prophylactic treatment were irrelevant […] The plague frequently returned, up to and beyond the arrival of the French Disease, and experience of the two diseases jointly altered European medicine. (235)

For more on bubonic plague and French Pox, see Arrizabalaga et al., especially chapters 9 and 10; and Owen Hughes, Diane. “Chapter 5: Bodies, Disease, and Society”. Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300 - 1550. John N. Najemy editor, Oxford UP, 2004.

4 The ubiquity of the term and concept of “contagion” in contemporary (modern) medicine, can serve as a point of reference in approaching a sixteenth-century understanding of medicine as distinct from our own. The idea that physical contact spreads disease is a modern discovery, far removed from early understandings of communicable infection. From the Latin con “together” and tangere “to touch” (Oxford English Dictionary) the sixteenth-century usage of the term did not signify the spreading of germs, but communicated the passing along of some form of taint or decay, or “as a synonym for staining, both in a literal sense of the air [miasma] and in a more metaphorical sense of moral pollution” (Arrizabalaga et al. 35). While sixteenth-century physicians such as Girolamo Fracastoro would begin to develop theories of contagion to describe transmission by “seedlets of disease,” this conception of contagion describes an “infective agent, not in the sense of a germ theory but rather as corrupting the air and reactivated within an individual by food of poor quality” (ibid). The present-day usage of “contagion” in describing the transmission of deleterious ideas or practices comes closer to the early-modern concept and its often moralizing tone.
debateable on the semantic level. With these diseases, the medical community faced an existential threat on a mass scale – in order to persist, the physicians and intellectuals of the period would have to completely re-work their understanding of human life and biological function. It is not that they would elect to engage in progress to more elaborate ways of thinking – but rather, that they were on the front lines of a battle, in a war with infinite chaos. Fashion entirely new ways of understanding the world and thereby re-assert medical authority, or face utter annihilation.

The ambiguous nature of the European response to the conceptual threat of epidemic disease presented the critical problem of re-establishing philosophical, moral, and practical authority among an intellectual elite (and particularly those with specific medical interests), who no longer seemed in possession of special knowledge or truth. In the wave of intellectual discourse surrounding sixteenth-century pox and plague, we see evidence that, “to maintain his position and to solve the problem of the pox, the learned and rational doctor had to bring it into the medical system. It had to be identified with something the medical literature contained” (emphasis my own – Arrizabalaga et al. 114). In a market,

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5Siraisi reminds us that French Pox appeared during a moment in which society – and the medical community – was already scrambling to account for the unparalleled devastation wrought by the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe. She writes:

The experience of plague was sufficiently novel and terrifying to generate a new variety of medical literature, the plague tractate; 281 of these treatises giving explanations for the causes of plague and recommending treatment or precautions are known to have been composed between the mid-fourteenth century and 1500. (Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine 128)

Rather than the product of the Western response to French Pox, Textual Healing is already underway in response to the serious “new” problem of epidemic disease in the fourteenth century. That this was considered an effective strategy to combat disease is evidenced in the number of tracts – 281 – composed in the span of only fifty or so years. Arriving late to the party, as it were, French Pox compounds the need for textual healing – both conceptual and physical – at the close of the fifteenth century.

6A useful tool for contextualizing the historical moment is Contracting a Cure, Gianna Pomata’s work on pre-modern Western medicine, where she reminds her readers that the practice of medicine was in many ways a trade profession, and that the relationship between patient and healer was contingent upon elaborately defined social contracts: “Above all, each healer is expected to engage in progress to more elaborate ways of understanding the world and thereby re-assert medical authority among an intellectual elite (and particularly those with specific medical interests), who no longer seemed in possession of special knowledge or truth. In the wave of intellectual discourse surrounding sixteenth-century pox and plague, we see evidence that, “to maintain his position and to solve the problem of the pox, the learned and rational doctor had to bring it into the medical system. It had to be identified with something the medical literature contained” (emphasis my own – Arrizabalaga et al. 114). In a market,

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In other words, a medical community that failed to “cure” its patients would be rendered obsolete, wither and disappear in a market-based arrangement dependent on the outcome of restored health in ailing bodies. Where plague decimated communities in terms of unparalleled numbers for mortality, it is the visibility and chronic wasting of syphilis that insists upon itself as an intractable social issue for pre-modern medicine (Owen Hughes 107). According to sixteenth-century philosophy and practice, “[a] medicine that met expectations was also stable and in many senses successful” (Arrizabalaga et al. 282). Reining French Pox in – or at least incorporating it into the known epistemology of the world – would be the only means of re-establishing medical authority in foundationally uncertain times. Characterized by certain mortality, especially during the first 50 years following its emergence, French Pox, represented a sort of “PR nightmare” and the unsettling (if not outright, failure) of the (heretofore) established medical authority.
where lay healer and trained medical professionals were on an equally disadvantaged playing ground in terms of an inability to provide legitimate medical care (i.e. “successful” cures and established remedies) for previously unknown afflictions:

[...] the learned, university-trained physicians were under great pressure to act – to bring relief to the suffering, to prevent the spread of the disease and to give advice. There was pressure not only from their patients, but also from civil authorities who were concerned with the health of populations. (ibid)

In such uncertain times, then, we see that medical authority itself was up for grabs, and would then be contingent upon the establishment of new systems for understanding the natural world and the nature of existence. We also recognize the entrance of community health concerns into the social and political discourse of the time, where matters of individual health are swept up into the larger milieu of social issues cutting across the various strata of society. It mattered also that nobody was “above” the French Pox, which “spared neither crown nor crozier” (Quétel 71). As a result of epidemic disease, Western

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7 The point that the factors influencing cultural perceptions of French Pox were many, varied and distinct from those influencing modern medical thought, is underscored in the practical consideration of the economic impact of disease in pre-modern society. The pxed patient taking the best medical advice could only secure himself or herself in a desperately hot place and choose between drinking the juice of boiled sawdust or taking some dangerous compound of mercury, perhaps slaked by the spittle of a hungry person [...] the driving forces were of many different sorts, including religious, intellectual, professional, social, cultural and economic. (Arrizabalaga et. al. 278-79)

Before Pox and plague, cultural expectations determined that efficacious remedies were known to cost more and to come from rare and exotic sources (16) – price, then, serving as a consistent metric for “good” or functional medicine. The same being true for practitioners, the “best” among whom, were those who could offer the most precious and hard-to-come-by remedies, assisted by “successful” treatments and cures, and who were, thereby, paid the highest fees by the most notable patients. The connection between medical and civic authority is critical to our understanding of the additional factors contributing to social destabilization by means of French Pox. The role of Court Physician was a mutually influential representation of power and authority, whereby exclusive medical knowledge possessed by the physician himself, was allied with the prince or pope in whose employ he functioned. In discussing the intellectual response to Pox, Arrizabalaga et. al. remind us that, [...] the court was also necessarily a political, economic and intellectual centre, and what its doctors thought and did about the French Disease was important. [...] In Italy and Germany the important political group was the city and the area it controlled. [...] The city as a political unit might be defined in the person of the lord of the place or in the oligarchy of its important citizens, and it was not in the commercial or military interests of its authority to succour citizens of competing cities. (279)

Here, we begin to understand the far-reaching consequences for destabilized medical authority, and to acquire a sense for the vertiginous threat that a conceptual challenge – like that represented by French Pox and Plague – could impose upon western society.

For more on the devastating impact of plague on the economy of Florence during the 1348 outbreak see Owen Hughes. I further discuss the connection between civic and medical authority in Chapter Three.

8 Here, Quétel is citing a selection from the 1525 poem by Jean Le Maire, Le trois comptes, intitulez, de Cupido et d’Atropos, dont le premier fut inventé par Seraphin, poète italien, le second et le tiers, de l’invention de Maistre Jean Le Maire. The translated passage follows:

But eventually, when the poison had matured, They developed large, scabby spots, So terribly hideous, ugly and enormous, That such deformed faces had never before been seen. [...] Few of them recovered, many died, For this most cruel torment reigned Throughout the world. (qtd in Quétel 71 – emphasis here is my own)
society had arrived at an irreversible point of cultural and social transition, and yet it would be several centuries before the advent of modern medicine.

How then, does one approach the French Pox in the early sixteenth century, when we know that our modern conceptions and assumptions do not hold, and traditional Galenic-humoral models are only somewhat less impotent in reproducing historically contemporary conceptions for the affliction? Is there a form of Textual Healing that can step in, at this juncture, and aid our flagging frameworks and serve as a guide to our thinking? Perhaps, in this case, the best medicine is by means of a homeopathic remedy.\(^9\) By inducing within our own intellects the kind of de-stabilized, unanchored, freely wandering uncertainty that marked the sixteenth-century experience of pox, can we better insert ourselves into its ever-more remote context?

Within the controlled conditions of our present study, let us then try to activate the kind of healing by sympathetic properties that allowed for pre-modern medicine to account for substances to transfer their properties indirectly – in our case, its function is that of remote infection and healing.\(^10\) As we ingest small amounts of that which would poison us – conceptual instability – we open ourselves to a closer understanding for how French Pox came to be and what it meant in sixteenth-century society. A slippery mission with an imminently elusive outcome, we endeavor nonetheless to move in that direction.

To begin down the path to conceptual instability, let us turn briefly to several important distinctions between pre-modern and modern medical thought that provide further contextualization for my own approach to understanding French Pox in literary and cultural production. Our first dose is that we must consider that the experience of disease and disease symptomology had traditionally been tied directly to the individual condition and characteristics of a given patient. In her work, Gianna Pomata illustrates the fundamental import of individual experience of disease in the pre-modern period, relative to

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\(^9\) The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines homeopathy as: “[a] system of complementary medicine in which ailments are treated by minute doses of natural substances that in larger amounts would produce symptoms of the ailment.”

\(^10\) Arrizabalaga et. al. describe the function of sympathetic remedies as follows: “Sympathy” in its broadest sense was a fellow feeling between two natural parts of the world, a communication of an often unknown mechanism. One of its sources was Galen’s discussion of pathology, in which localized, limited damage was identified as ‘idiopathy.’ But idiopathic disorders could also produce pain or damage elsewhere, by sympathy. (246) Formalized within the medical system, sympathies were used to explain the transmission of *qualities* within the human body, and “involved some form of action at a distance” (ibid). In the present metaphor, the span of more than five centuries, nonetheless allows for the sympathetic transmission of destabilized thinking about the functions of disease in society.
our own. Disease as the subject of independent inquiry (the basis of our own medical thinking), upends
the pre-modern model. She explains:

The shift from a concept of illness based upon the patient’s subjective symptoms to a theoretical
framework in which disease acquired individual identity, and the patient became just a carrier or a
“case,” has been recognized as a crucial moment in the history of European medicine. (xiii)

The change in the ontological status of disease – from “condition of the individual, it was [now] a thing”
(Arrizabalaga et al. 252) – is discussed at length in The French Pox and marks a critical distinction,
elsewhere echoed in the literature dealing with the evolution of modern medicine. The emergence of
French Pox both triggered – and necessitated – the eventual reification of disease and the development
of entirely new ways for understanding biological functions.12

From here, our second dose is a further derivation from the intentional release of modern
assumptions (to the degree possible), and the adoption of a culturally/historically-informed approach to
disease. Here we must consider the impact of language on forming cultural perceptions, and to push
ourselves to be careful readers of – and speakers on – the events of the past. In their work, Arrizabalaga
et. al. are explicit to this point, describing their approach as follows:

we concentrate on contemporary understanding and perception of the disease, rather than
making the assumption that the pox was the equivalent of the syphilis of the laboratory and germ
tory [...] the French Disease was a more complex thing than the simple presence of a
pathogen, projected backwards in time by people who know about pathogens [...] Rather than
looking for medical progress, we have been concerned with finding causes of change in
medicine. (278)13

In my work, I have done my best to adopt a similar methodology in order to understand physical disorder
within its contemporary “historicized” context, rather than to examine a modern projection of “syphilis” per
se onto the period. It is for this reason that I limit my use of the term “syphilis” within the text of my own
work. Linguistically, the use of the expression is intractably tied to the (modern) pathological

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11see especially “Chapter 10: The French Disease Grows Old.”
12It is worth noting that the present study neither posits, nor includes the period in which such a distinct transition was enacted.
Here, the distinction serves as an illustration of the fundamentally destabilizing force of epidemic disease in pre-modern medicine,
and to underscore the cultural import of “resolving” French Pox to sixteenth-century society. My own period of focus lies in the
liminal space between pre-modern and “modern,” and within a Gordian knot of influential factors, encompassing both philosophical
and practical considerations alike. In its nascence, French Pox exists outside of “medical history” and its neat, categorical thinking
about “periods” and “progress”; denying classification and specification, it remains suspended in a conceptual no-man’s land,
resisting the proprietary authority of all who would assume to chart the chronology of its status. In short, the change in ontological
status that Pomata has signaled had not yet occurred, but exists as a critical issue in assessing the threat of French Pox.
13Arrizabalaga et. al. further assert the need to translate past cultural experience into present, and the difficulty and risks inherent in
facile/ill-executed translation (17). The meaning here is dual – linguistic as well as conceptual – and has broad consequences for
understanding sixteenth-century literature as well as disease.
understanding of disease. In other words, “syphilis” (as we use the term today) simply did not exist in sixteenth-century Europe. The term itself existed, but was differently understood, and not widely used or generally applied as it is today. For these reasons, I understand syphilis to be a modern invention and conception, and use it accordingly – a strong medicine in suppressing the urge to generalize French Pox, conflating an incongruous historical reality with an incompatible modern understanding for the event.

Tainted with uncertainty, we have now swallowed down the doses of conceptual destabilization that pull us away from the terra firma of modern medical conceptions of disease, and leave us awash in an infinite chaos of “pre-modern,” ancient and medieval thinking. Our own discrete boundaries for what defines “reality” thus being transgressed, the cracks in our persistent subjectivity allow the torrents of liminality to wash through our beings. We are drenched in an otherworldly thinking – unlike history, but also unlike the present – from which vantage we gain perspective and insight into both. Fortified by means of deterioration, Textual Healing has already begun within our minds, as the gentle pull of collapsing borders tugs us further into that undefined space between past and present.

Floating as we are, we have arrived at the moment upon which my examination hangs: in historical flux. It is of critical importance that my contemporary readers not see this period as a historical moment leading into something else. The French Pox is the focus of my interest, not because of its

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14 The Semantic Syphilis Trap is one that I do my best to avoid, but that nonetheless entails a certain degree of inevitability. A term with an unspecified — and importantly so — linguistic origin, first applied to French Pox in the sixteenth century. Arrizabalaga et. al remind us that the common usage of “syphilis” by medical historians dealing with the early emergent form of French Pox is an anachronistic projection of the “post-germ-theory” sensibility of disease. They assert: ‘syphilis’ […] the name given by the Italian humanist and physician Girolamo Fracastoro in 1530 to the disease suffered by the hero of his poem […] was not a term that became popular before the late eighteenth century; and ironically it was the germ theory itself that showed that ‘syphilis’ was a group of diseases. One of them was given the name ‘venereal syphilis’. […] most fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europeans called the French Disease (Morbus Gallicus). Even the term ‘venereal disease’ (lues venerea) began to replace the older term in the later sixteenth century and when the collective term morbi venerei dominated in the eighteenth century, historians have assumed an underlying entity of venereal syphilis. (18 – emphasis here is my own.) Because we are dealing with the cultural construction of disease and not disease itself it is then doubly important that we avoid the SST, and work within the appropriate lexicon for our period.

Nancy Siraisi has pointed out the difficulty in comparing post-germ medical conceptualization with that found in complexion or humoral medicine. The basis of her assertion is that contemporary notions of science and medicine are culturally untranslatable into those of the pre-germ theory past:

From the standpoint of the actual history of disease in human populations, descriptions of morbidity in ancient Greek and medieval Islamic or Western medical or other narratives are thus of limited value. It is frequently difficult or impossible to identify with any degree of certainty conditions described solely in terms of their external symptoms and conceptualized within the framework of complexion theory. Curious instances of continuity in terminology often compound the problem by masking the radical discontinuity between the ancient and nineteenth- or twentieth-century understanding of disease. (Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine 130)

She goes on to reinforce the utility in re-conceptualizing pre-germ theory disease according to its own set of cultural referents, emphasizing that which scholars today may gain from examination of disease in the early modern period. “[B]ut if the range of diseases described, or prescribed for, in the medical literature is not a useful guide to historical epidemiology, it is a rich source of information about the way in which ill health was understood and recognized, and about the kinds of problems practitioners were prepared to treat” (ibid).

See also Quétel 52, 3.
tremendous cultural and social relevance over the past five centuries or so (though that can be little argued), but because of its absolute domination over a critical moment in the History of Western Europe. At that moment – when the very edges of the known world were having to be re-drawn, when cartographers and explorers were clearing the way for colonization and the universalizing ambitions of Western society – at that moment, French Pox came crashing onto the scene, disrupting reality through the powers of horror, revulsion and suffering. The decline of the idealized “Renaissance,” the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Columbus’ return from the New World with indigenous peoples – there are many defining moments that scholars like to isolate or consider significant but too few consider the totalizing nature of French Pox relative to all of these moments. In his history of the disease, Quétel asserts that nothing is more revealing of a society than the history of its diseases, particularly the ‘social’ diseases […] alcoholism, tuberculosis, insanity, syphilis […] But the one which is most a part of our culture, the one which has terrorized people the most, the one which has had the greatest influence on morality and literature, is unquestionably syphilis. It killed fewer people than

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For more on Fracastoro’s “new etymology for the term syphilis” (3), see Piechocki, Katharina N. “Syphilologies: Fracastoro’s Cure and the Creation of Immunopoetics.”

For more on the politics of naming the new malady see Foa, Anna. “The New and the Old: The Spread of Syphilis (1494-1530).”

15Quoting Quétel:
Of all diseases, syphilis is the most social, in every sense of the word. More than any other it has provoked, and continues to provoke, changes in society, cultural responses which have a completely different character from medical ones. It is the disease most adept at surviving in human communities; we do not like it of course, but it seems to like us […] It endures. (8)

16Arrizabalaga et. al. describe the appearance of French Pox during the last decade of the fifteenth century as “one of a series of crises which afflicted the peninsula” during that period (20). Immediately associated with the arrival of Charles VIII’s French troops in 1494, the emergence of pox exacerbated political instability among city-states and “helped to create an atmosphere of uncertainty which fueled the millenarian visions of a figure such as Girolamo Savonarola, whose very success depended on the expectations and fears aroused by the proximity of the end of the century” (ibid). This instability built upon the apocalyptic interpretation of natural disasters such as “floods, earthquakes, pestilences and famines” as well as severe weather conditions in the fall and winter following Charles VIII’s invasion (ibid). In addition, the tense social and economic climate in the 1490s “represented one of the lowest points in fifteenth-century standards of living” and saw a “hardening of official attitudes towards the poor” (21). In effect, the emergence of pox had a far-reaching and destabilizing social impact that was felt across the Italian peninsula, and nowhere so dramatically as in the northern and central principalities.

17Quétel reminds us of significant changes in medical thinking rooted in the sixteenth-century struggle to understand and explain French Pox. While the Hippocratic-Galenic model of the humors would continue to dominate medicine through the eighteenth century, “there was a change in the subject-matter of medicine from the sixteenth century onwards. There were local changes, such as the birth of anatomy and physiology (Vesalius), who would be the first to perform and promote educational anatomical dissections of human bodies, or the discovery of the circulation of the blood (Harvey); there were also structural changes, such as the beginning of medical research which paralleled the era of the great doctors. In this context, the pox was, in the sixteenth century, the object of medical attention whose importance has too often been underestimated. (53 – emphasis my own)

18As a ready example of the lasting effect of pre-modern medical moralizing, we should consider the term “venereal disease,” itself rooted in the sixteenth-century’s struggle with French Pox. As a classification, these diseases stand out for the way in which they have been – and continue to be – moralized, and thereby associated with illicit behavior. They “have been practically the only diseases of the human race to be named according to the means by which they are transmitted: venereal […] The word carries connotations of both sex and sin. One is punished by the very means in which one has transgressed” (Quétel 3). While the moralizing tendency in perceptions of disease is owed to a longstanding tradition in Western society at large (one might consider the pharmakas of Ancient Greece, for example, “a human embodiment of evil who was [ritualistically] expelled from the Greek city at
tuberculosis, or even alcoholism, and it was less feared than any form of psychosis, and yet it was the disease which caused the most, and the blackest, ink to flow.  

In that moment, it was French Pox that was unraveling the known world and threatening the dissolution of society. In the last decade of the fifteenth century, French Pox exploded in Italy (as in Europe, and along trade routes in Asia and Africa), but it also exploded Italy — it made the most fundamental notions for what life is and how it occurs no longer possible. Reality, known reality, no longer functioned as it had. Pox was now reality. Pox was. But what did that mean?

In this examination, I assess how the intellectual world struggled to understand French Pox and thereby to express the newly formed reality of that moment. Rather than examine disease in terms of medical history, I adopt Pomata’s approach to the “social history of medicine,” using aesthetic production moments of crisis and disaster” (Compton 2); whether in punishment or as sacrifice, the scapegoating of the pharmakos provided moral purgation of the polis (or community), and occurred in various forms throughout Ancient Greece), it is to Jacques de Béthencourt (1527) that we owe VD (anachronistically speaking of course) (Compton 2; Quétel 54).

In his medical commentary entitled, Nova penitentialis Quadragesima, nec non purgatorium in morbum Gallicum, sive Venereum… (Paris 1527), Béthencourt “proposes that it [French Pox] should be named after its cause, and is the first to use the term, ‘venereal sickness’ (morbus venereus)” (Quétel 54). Keeping with contemporary sixteenth-century perception of disease – so different from our own – Béthencourt’s usage does acknowledge “divine or sidereal influences,” – as pox would not become strictly associated with “venereal” transmission until much later. However, he also “states clearly that it is a shameful disease which results from blameworthy passions and which is born from an immoral coupling, and that it owes its ‘first origin’ to a pestilential germ arising from the mixture of two seeds, or of the male seed and the menses” (ibid – emphasis here is my own). Indeed, we see already that from its first appearance, French Pox was morally medicalized and immediately associated with sexual transmission (4). Like its modern cousins, VD and STD, the term “venereal disease,” still carries the weight of centuries of cultural stigmatization in Western Society – a lasting legacy, inherited from our dear Béthencourt and his contemporaries.

If we adhere to Quétel’s assertion that French Pox and syphilis are the diseases most prevalent throughout history as topics of literary and critical interest, then the juxtaposition of the general taboo against speaking of sex comes into sharper relief. In his work on the classical origins of medical and biological terminology, John Scarborough asserts that “[t]here is a universal tendency by human beings to mask the realities of sex and reproduction – next to the drive for nourishment, the strongest biological drive for humanity – in complex cultural and social customs that seek to ‘regulate’ both introduction to sex and the process of procreation itself” (198). Not just any topic for examination or exploration, French Pox and syphilis dominate the pathological-aesthetic canon of art and literature despite an inherent cultural compulsion to silence such topics. The coupling of our human aversion to sexual discourse with the widespread fascination with French Pox (as with syphilis), provides an area of critical examination that abounds in cultural-ideological signification, revealing multiple levels of competing interests among various cultural tendencies and impulses.

For the sixteenth century (and beyond) the longstanding problem of culturally regulating human sexuality, is amplified by its association with a new — and untreatable — affliction. One whose contagion and mortally mutilating effects cannot be understood according to culturally appropriate — rational or moral — terms. Recalling that, “before Paul Ehrlich’s (1854 - 1915) famous ‘606’ (arsphenamine, patented under the name Salvarsan) was first successfully used in 1911 to treat syphilis, this sexually transmitted malady was ultimately fatal” (205) Scarbrough reminds us that French Pox – like sexual taboo — was no laughing matter.

“Less than ten years after the outbreak of the Neapolitan disease at the battle of Fornovo [in July 1495], then, the whole of Europe was affected by the epidemic” (Quétel 15). Meanwhile, around 1512, Chinese and Japanese medical tracts of the period begin describing a previously unknown affliction, characterized by a strikingly similar symptomology and virulence. Quétel points out that these tracts are original in content, predating the earliest translations of imported Western tracts, the first of which will not appear there until 1774, providing evidence for the almost concurrent emergence of French Pox across Europe and Asia (58).

In his heroic retelling of “modern” (male) medical achievements, Men Against Death (1932), Paul De Kruif writes that the French Pox:

exploded in Europe amazingly, coming — in historic probability — as the most important gift brought back from the New World by the sailors of Christopher Columbus. Its sneaking through Europe had been unbelievably rapid and horrible. The way of its spread had from almost the beginning made its name unmentionable. Yet, to the confusion of all who would divide humanity into good and bad, or high and low, it soon became plain that this scourge was no respecter of persons. (208)
as a tool for conceptualizing the sixteenth century’s intellectual war on physical disorder (xiii), and building upon Arrizabalaga et al.’s model for historically re-contextualizing French Pox as distinct from “syphilis.”

I discuss newly emergent genres of medical literature at the same time that I illustrate the practical medical function of other literary genres, and explore literature as a critical weapon in the battle against disorder – social, physical, and philosophical/moral. In Chapter Three I institute the final prong to my assessment, using extra-literary forms of aesthetic production – visual art, etc. – to support my reading of textual healing through literature and aesthetic production more generally.

It is important to note that no small part of the terror that French Pox inspired was owed to its “newness” and to the inability to easily define or explain it according to the dominant medical model, that of the Hippocratic-Galenic theory of the Humors. Compounding this fear of the unknown was the slippery nature of its symptomology, which could come and go, popping up where it had not been before, or returning spontaneously in one who had earlier been “cured” of the disease. Additionally, French Pox seemed to take the form of other diseases, masking its identity and making definitive diagnoses unsure at best. Its protean nature continuously defied easy categorization and the establishment of effective...
cures.\

In a world conceptually and technologically ill-equipped to tackle the newly emergent calamity of French Pox, the written word represented the first line of defense in establishing an intellectual plan of attack.

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter One, “Finding the Pharmakon Within: Textual-iatrics in the Composition of Sixteenth-Century Syphilis” I lay the groundwork for my discussion of textual healing at the court of Federico II Gonzaga (elaborated in Chapters Two and Three) by examining the broader philosophical and cultural repercussions of the sixteenth-century struggle to contain the existential threat represented by newly emergent epidemic disease. Because *malfrancese* was unlike any other affliction Europe had seen before, incorporating it within established systems for understanding the known world (i.e. theology and philosophy) was a necessary first step in containing its capacity to inflict social harm. As indicated by the outpouring of “medical” literature in immediate response to the new disease, we see an attempt on the part of intellectual authorities to restore order by binding the unknown within the familiar and authoritative form of the text. The traditional means of transmitting ancient knowledge and authority, the generation of texts to account for *malfrancese* represents the first of many innovations in healing associated with the arrival of the new disease.

Before entering into my discussion of Girolamo Fracastoro’s (1478-1553) meta-literary application of textual healing in his poem *Syphilis* (1530), I turn to a brief discussion of my approach to understanding the “medical” context of the period in which I work. By adapting a de-positivized perspective on “progress” in medical history, I am able to consider the first half of the sixteenth century as one of fluctuation, characterized by a destabilized network of social practices tied to healing that occurred prior to the formalization of “institutionalized medicine.” Here, Nancy Siraisi’s work has been foundational in my conceptualization of early-modern medicine, along with Foucault, and the pox-specific work of Quétel and Arrizabalaga et al.

Some two centuries after its first appearance, the French Pox was, at the close of the seventeenth century, no less difficult to tie down. Gervais Ucay, writing in 1699, notes that “There are those who have jestingly said that the pox was the Proteus of sicknesses and a combination of all the other diseases” (from *Nouveau traité de la maladie vénérienne* qtd in Quétel 77, 78).
I then establish the basis for my subsequent examination of Fracastoro’s poem by discussing the various factors that influenced the contemporary reception thereof including: form (the genre of epic poetry modeled on Virgil), and classical as well as modern philosophical considerations (Aristotelian plenitude; the Platonic rhetorical functions of text-as-pharmakon as elaborated through Derrida; and Bakhtin’s unfinalizeability and the surplus of meaning in text). Through these various lenses, I build the framework upon which to elaborate the textual healing that occurs through the generation and consumption of a text like Fracastoro’s Syphilis. Because the poem is a hybrid text – neither fully literary nor fully medical, but the fusion of the two according to the model established in Virgil’s Georgix, a didactic poem with explicit political and aesthetic functions – it provides an excellent medium for examining the philosophical and rhetorical strategies by which a sixteenth-century text would have functioned as a curative to both social and physical disorder. My assessment of Fracastoro’s text further explores the invocation of ancient authority, the generation of history through myth, and the platonic significance of appropriately naming the disease according to its purported origins.

I conclude the chapter with an examination of another form of contemporary textual healing in the opening to Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantegruel. A decidedly less-medical and lower-brow approach from that of Fracastoro, Rabelais’s dedication of his text to pox-sufferers, and his treatment of the curative function of intellectual discourse and literary activities provides the bridge into my subsequent discussion of textual healing in literary works without an explicit medical function. From the broad contextualization that I provide in Chapter One, I then move into my examination of the Bizzara as a form of textual healing at the Gonzaga court in Mantua.

Chapter Two, “Repurposing Marfisa: The Female Warrior Grapples with Gender and Genealogy in the Cinquecento Epic” opens with an outline of my general approach to the study of Cinquecento Epic, and of a relatively “minor” literary text. I discuss my voice as a female scholar within a historically male-dominated field, and do my best to establish my own authority as a subjective being without diminishing the claims that I make within the work I do. Here, Beverly Allen’s assessment of the problematic nature of canonization has been particularly informative to my own approach to assessing a “minor” work of literature alongside its canonical counterparts.
I then move to provide the background of the figure of the female warrior or *guerriera* in Cinquecento Epic. Derived from Camilla, Virgil’s exemplar of female militancy in the *Aeneid*, the female warrior who emerges in Renaissance chivalric epic in the style of Boiardo and Ariosto occurs as a departure from earlier portrayals of female militancy in medieval French and Italian chivalric traditions. Boiardo’s treatments of Bradamante and Marfisa, and Ariosto’s later adaptations thereof, represent new textual possibilities and horizons for the figure of the warrior maiden. Written for the humanist-influenced courts of the dukes of Este in Ferrara, the *Innamorato* and to an even greater extent the *Furioso* portray female errancy in Bradamante and Marfisa with an added dimension of ambiguous agency that has led many scholars to recognize these figures as proto-feminist exempla within the genre. Scholars whose work has been particularly relevant to my understanding of the cinquencento *guerriera* within the context of the contemporary discourse surrounding the *querelle des dames* (the woman question) include King and Rabhil, MacCarthy, Robinson, Shemek, Stoppino and many others.

My assessment of Dragoncino’s portrayal of bizarre Marfisa begins with an overview of the character as presented in Boiardo and Ariosto, to give the reader a sense for the character that has been adopted and adapted in the later poem. Along with examples from the texts, I discuss the key critical interpretations that have emerged in contemporary scholarship dealing with these canonical texts that have sought to establish Marfisa and her textual counterpart, Bradamante, as proto-feminist innovations within the genre. Having provided a broad sketch for her literary background and for the context in which she was produced, I dedicate the second half of the chapter to my discussion of the dynastic function of Dragoncino’s *Martisa bizzara* (a theme that emerges as centrally significant to my exploration of textual healing in chapter three).

Through elaborate dedications and deliberate encomia memorializing the poets’ patrons and the various sponsors of Cinquecento epic, these works functioned to incorporate the patrons’ founding members within the legendary context of the poems. These texts serve to legitimize and reinforce the hegemony associated with the patrons’ dynastic heritage, and generate a mythologized history to concretize an ennobling image of the dynastic line. Beginning with Dragoncino’s re-gendering of the dynastic patterning typically associated with the genre, I examine the poet’s dedicatory encomia that frame the opening and closing cantos to the *Bizzara*, and consider how Dragoncino’s adherence to and
departures from traditional tropes may inform our understanding of the function of the *Bizarra* at the Gonzaga court. My examination also considers the figure of the Federico II that emerges from the textual representation of Marfisa – the supposed progenetrix of the Gonzaga family line according to Dragoncino – alongside the explicit encomia in his honor. Dragoncino’s atypical portrayal of the Gonzaga dynasty’s founding member indicates that Federico II viewed himself as a transgressor of norms, particularly in the realm of sex and gender, a theme that is further explored in the third and final chapter to the dissertation.

Chapter Three, “Healing the Body Politic: Federico II Gonzaga as Patron and Pox Sufferer” represents the final prong in my assessment of textual healing at the Gonzaga court by means of the *Bizarra*. The chapter opens with an exploration of the co-emergence of *malfrancese* and the Cinquecento epic, and a discussion of the social context in which Dragoncino’s text would have been received alongside other works of this type. The textual healing that I identify in the Cinquecento epic, and in the *Bizarra* in particular, occurs as a response to a general climate of uncertainty and social disorder across the Italian peninsula, where the manifestation of this new form of epidemic disease was understood as a part of a broader spectrum of issues. For the Gonzaga court in Mantua, as for the Estense in Ferrara, *malfrancese* and the Italian Wars represented significant obstacles to the expansion and maintenance of their respective dominions. As with art, architecture, and public works, literature presented a tool by which to shape the public image that the ruling dynasty wished to perpetuate, and functioned to counter some of the damaging effects of political instability and of the stigmatization of the world’s first “venereal” disease.

Building upon the textual examination initiated in Chapter Two, I now discuss the specific presentation of Marfisa within the *Bizarra* with special attention to Dragoncino’s re-gendering of Boiardo’s initial Orlando-Angelica one-way love dynamic. Considering again the express dynastic exigency inherent to the Cinquecento Epic, I examine Dragoncino’s atypical portrayal of the Marfisa-Filinoro dynamic, as of a non-idealized dynastic coupling, identifying Filinoro as a male version of the *donna angelicata* according to the then popular Petrarchan/stil novisti poetic standard. My discussion turns once again to Federico II’s unique cultural preparation as a patron of the arts and considers the repercussions for interpreting Dragoncino’s a-normative presentation of sex and gender dynamics within the supposed Gonzaga dynastic lineage. Here I identify the intentional deployment of textual healing occurring on both the socio-political and personal levels.
Of the intended audiences for Dragoncino’s work – the patron himself and the broader reading public – the text functions to heal or to treat potential disorder incurred by disease, and by the transgression of social and political norms by the patron and his known historical antecedents. In the case of the text’s patron, Federico II, first duke of Mantua, the physical manifestations of his chronic suffering from *malfrancese* (the disease that took his life at forty) are mitigated through the text by the humoral rebalancing that occurs in diverting one’s attention away from stress and from reflecting on pain. Reading serves as an outlet by which the duke can engage his senses without the physical overexertion and public scrutiny associated with his preferred courtly leisure pastimes. Tailored specifically to Federico II’s desired self-image and aggrandizement, Dragoncino’s poem places the duke within his own favorite literary genre, and bends the established norms to accommodate the duke’s transgressive and antinormative behavior regarding sex and gender. The text of the *Bizzara* serves as a form of delightful distraction *a la* the *Decameron* whereby the text’s first audience, Federico II, may delight in the pleasures of the text without the burden of reflecting on the harsh realities of life at court and the political ambitions of a smaller Renaissance principality during the trying years of the Italian Wars and the attendant outbreak of *malfrancese*. I once more ground my discussion in the work of medical historians such as Siraisi, Quétel, and Arrizabalaga et al., as well as in contemporary medical texts dedicated to the treatment of “Courtly Diseases” (and of *malfrancese* in particular), and in recent scholarship by Hickson, Bourne, and others.

For the secondary audience of the *Bizzara*, the text functioned to heal both contemporary perceptions of the duke himself, as well as those associated with the Gonzaga ascension to power in 1328. From the moment that they turned on their one-time allies, the Bonacolsi, and seized power of the commune of Mantua, the Gonzaga family employed art and architecture, alongside the generation of “creative” histories and genealogies to legitimize their own claim to power in the region. Federico came into his own within a dynastic and familial context that was reliant upon the successful self-projection and generation of hegemonic legitimacy through artistic patronage and the establishment of mythological or legendary origins to obscure the sketchy truth surrounding the monumental rise of the Gonzaga family in the later middle ages. Through the *Bizzara*, Federico sought to heal the family image and to participate in the necessary familial tradition of perpetuating the ongoing myth of Gonzaga primacy in Mantua and its
surrounds. Seminal works by historians such as Luzio and Malacarne provide an abundant source of material from which I have formed my understanding of the specific cultural context in which the Gonzaga used mythologized genealogies and art patronage to further their dynastic political ambitions.

Delving further into the potentially stigmatizing effects of sixteenth-century *malfrancese*, I then consider the specific court culture in Mantua, in which Hickson has identified a “sodality” of sufferers surrounding Federico’s father, Francesco II. The in-group network of male-male relationships that Hickson traces, provides evidence that Federico was also inculcated early-on to his father’s hyper-sexualized court culture in which the shared experience of suffering from *malfrancese* did not prevent the patron and the infected artists, musicians, and architects with whom he associated, from engaging in active displays of their sexual promiscuity (read as “virility”) and exploits. Bourne has examined a similar tendency within the epistolary culture surrounding the fourth marquis (Francesco), and even demonstrated where the marchioness (Isabella d’Este) participated in grooming the young crown prince for his eventual role as the ruler of the hypersexualized court culture of the Gonzaga at Mantua. By creating social networks built on art patronage and male-male bonding based in the shared experiences of *malfrancese*, the Gonzaga were able to normalize an otherwise stigmatizing affliction incurred through the transgression of formally condoned sexual behavior. Traditional scholarship and historical treatments have tended to white-wash the lascivious elements within the Gonzaga patrimony at Mantua, while pioneering examinations by Hickson, Bourne, Talvacchia, and others have recently sought to de-stigmatize the study of more transgressive tendencies within Renaissance studies of the Gonzaga.

In the last half of the chapter, I focus on textual healing in the *Bizarra* using the frame established above for physical and socio-political “healing.” I trace the remainder of Marfisa’s textual exploits and examine a number of critical scenes in which the duke’s sexually-laden self-identity is reflected in the bizarre behavior of the poem’s titular character. Building on work by scholars such as Hickson and Maurer, who have discussed Federico’s art patronage in terms of the explicitly erotic nature of the duke’s constructed self-image, I consider the possibility that the duke’s struggle with *malfrancese* was also insinuated within this context. Rather than attempt to obscure the marquis’s affliction – a social impossibility at the time – works such as Giulio Romano’s racy decorations of Federico’s suburban apartments at the Palazzo del Te (initiated before his ascension to duke), and recurrent images of
Federico’s *imprese*, the salamander emblem and accompanying motto (adopted in 1530 when he acquired the title of duke) may have functioned to integrate the conflicting elements of the ruler’s flagrant and unrestrained sexuality with the dire consequences thereof. By constructing and reproducing an image of undiminished virility in the face of a perpetual battle with chronic *malfrancese*, the duke was able to leave a lasting reputation that minimized those social wounds.

The salamander, whose likeness Federico had emblazoned throughout the Palazzo del Te, as elsewhere, was understood to be self-generating and immune to fire. Hickson points out that the symbol of the salamander along with the motto that accompanies it, *Quod huic deest me torque* (that which he lacks torments me), “are thought to refer to Federico’s vulnerability to the flames of love and temptation of sex” ("Federico" 42), while I would expand upon this to consider also the punishing flames of *malfrancese*. Despite its constant and recurrent presence in his life, Federico persisted beyond its burning torments, to expand the territories under Gonzaga dominion, to build the Gonzaga marquisate into a duchy under the approbation of emperor Charles V, and to transform the city of Mantua from a provincial hub of Renaissance humanism to a more urbane and sumptuous center of Renaissance arts through extensive building projects and art patronage.

The *Bizzarra* is published in 1531 at the height of Federico’s prominence and with his explicit approval. The portrayal of Marfisa that comprises the bulk of the poem is laden with transgressive sexual innuendo and double entendre that implicate Gonzaga’s original ancestor as a bestial, lust-induced madwoman and figure of extreme female errancy. The reckless abandon that Dragoncino paints into the familial “history” that he relates underscores Federico’s exceptionality as a ruler whose self-image and displayed identity rely upon the ability to flaunt his transgression of social norms. Like Federico, Marfisa burns with lust and suffers from a love-sickness from which there is no remedy. In the *Bizzarra* Marfisa’s “love” occurs as a parallel to the incurable physical and psychological torment that *malfrancese* induces in its victims, and yet, according to the explicit encomia and poetic digressions within the story, this is the figure who will found the great house of Gonzaga. The afflictions from which Marfisa and Federico suffer fail to diminish their social and political stature, and do not impede the legacy of Gonzaga primacy that

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25 Talvacchia explains, “The emblem, devised by Paolo Giovio, plays on the belief that the lizard did not couple to procreate, and therefore was spared the torments that Federico undergoes from the physical forces of love” (110).
the duke sought to perpetuate. By engaging Marfisa’s transgressive errancy to his own ends, the poem occurs as a platonic *pharmakon a la* Derrida, whereby the introduction of a poisonous image does not harm the duke’s campaign of self-aggrandizement but rather reinforces it by inoculating himself to the potential claims of detractors, and transforming a physical, social, and political weakness into a display of his own strength and potency. Like gold, the duke is hardened by the flames he endures ultimately emerging victoriously like the salamander whose imperviousness spares him the torments of others.
CHAPTER ONE
Finding the Pharmakon Within: Textual Iatrics in the Composition of Sixteenth-Century Syphilis

Into the living elements of things
I, Proteus, mingle, seeking strange disguise:
I track the Sun-god on an eagle’s wings,
Or look at horror thro’ a murderer’s eyes,
In shape of horned beast my shadow glides
Among broad-leaved flowers that blow ‘neath Afric tides.

“Proteus; or, a Prelude” by Robert Williams Buchanan

At the nucleus of my reading of sixteenth-century Textual Healing is the written word as an anchor or point of conceptual stability, the enactment of logos. The text provides a constancy that allows for the transmission of ideas across time and space, becoming a foundational element upon which to fix meaning and generate permanence. Binding is a critical component of textual healing, where the principle organizing feature of the text is that which provides a context in which the intended meaning is preserved. Without its binding, the text opens, the pages fall away, and the order – which provided the message contained therein – is nullified, annihilated. The power of the words themselves, then, depends upon a sturdy and well-imparted binding. Beyond the level of the text (i.e. the word, the sentence, the paragraph) – the binding is the overarching structure necessary to communicate the underlying meaning, and that which gives the text a functional purpose: the transmission of ideas.

The text as a means for the transfer of knowledge allows for a systematized response to external threats to the socially-generated ideological frameworks which comprise understandings of lived “reality.” Finite and fixed, the text represents a point of reference that binds or connects the wholly conceptual – i.e. meaning, signification, ideas – to the wholly physical – the page itself. The text enmeshes the physical with the intellectual, the spiritual, the moral, and embodies a form not unlike our own; comprised of

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1 Here I am leaving beside modern critical and theoretical work on the fluidity of verbal signification, and adopting what I hope will be a less anachronistic vantage, from which perspective, the text (as represented in the Bible, for example) possesses certain inalienable truths. Textual interpretation is a moral undertaking, contingent upon appropriate knowledge and not subject to multiple and varied realities. One might consider here the enduring privileging of logos in classical philosophy and later Christian theology. The Oxford English Dictionary defines logos as “the Word of God, or principle of divine reason and creative order, identified in the Gospel of John with the second person of the Trinity incarnate in Jesus Christ.”
elements of this material (perceived) world, along with those of the ineffable, the undeniable realm beyond our direct mortal perception.

The bound text represents a contract with the infinite, and reflects our human impulse to generate meaning through imposed narrative. Like the text, the human body is understood according to an imposed and implied system of order and a hierarchy of functions. We understand our existence according to the story that we tell ourselves about the nature of the cosmos – a narrative whose strands are indelibly inscribed upon and within our own physical form, our bodies. The human being is a text whose binding is variously ascribed, and according to which, we will differently understand our own nature, and the nature of all things. As creatures, we embody the very texts we generate – producing a reflection of perceived “reality,” at the same time that we are creating the very form we intend to reproduce.

Binding concretizes our reality, as it does our texts, as it does our physical forms. It represents an agreed upon understanding in the face of chaos and relativity, and displaces nihilism with inherent purpose. By inscribing meaning to text, and binding that meaning therein, knowledge is preserved, transmitted, diffused, and the threat of the infinite (i.e. meaninglessness) is avoided – however temporarily. The text is our physical means for combatting the immaterial. It is our inflatable dingy in the vast sea of Being – something to cling to when the alternative is absolute conceptual dissolution.

By providing the illusion of fixed significances, the text is the means by which we generate reality at the same moment we provide the proof of its very undoing. The text fixes our position in time, situating us temporally by showing us what and where we are not, while concurrently bringing us into a space outside of our own perceived time and place. “And this is writing. Wherever one enters it, there is something before and something after that makes it meaningful” (Neel 28). The text provides the human intellect with an external medium by which to reflect and replicate itself, transcending time, space and the

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2The importance of binding in Textual Healing is further underscored in the upcoming discussion of Fracastoro’s Syphilis and Derrida’s Platonic pharmakon, where the process of writing represents the creation of an unfinalizable conceptual opening. Jasper Neel describes this process for Plato: he clearly recognized that writing is a forever-opening. Its words are open spaces always waiting to be filled yet never finally filled up; its process is the forever-incomplete antithesis of itself, as invention and arrangement constantly cancel each other; its embodiment is the Janus-faced operation of matter and style, each emerging from the other [...] Plato offers to lead us out of the morass created by writing, rhetoric, sophistry, and discourse in general and into the realm of truth [...] the sources of his power [...] is writing. (64 – emphasis is my own) As Plato knew, the text is the only human creation that can accomplish the impossible task of accessing the realm of truth.
physical limitations of the mortal body. The text becomes the membrane through which we process the ineffable, projecting – and enacting – the illusion of conceptual stability, and transmitting that message ad infinitum over time. The content of the particular message – its specific meaning – is secondary to the fact of its existence. The text is – therefore, it contains a message; therefore, meaning is possible; therefore, there is a truth that can be known, comprehended and perceived. Through the text, the unknown and unknowable are bound, contained, and neutralized. The text renders certainty. It imposes order where none is possible.

The intellectual salvation of sixteenth-century existence, Textual Healing also occurs on the physical level – text as medicine – and as a tool for social bonding – through the circulation of texts. I explore these additional properties of textual healing more in depth in Chapters 2 and 3, where I discuss the Cinquecento Epic as a genre deployed in part as a response to emergent French Pox; and then examine literature and art at the court of Federico II, first duke of Mantua, which serves as a micro-history or case study, in the application of text as medical treatment, and as a tool for establishing social bonds.

The concept of sixteenth-century Textual Healing demands the question: What can a text do? The answer is to be found in its binding – physical as well as intellectual; in the physical and emotional effect that the act of reading has on a person; and in the way that texts can influence and shape the social networks in which they occur. Before stepping into specific examples of Textual Healing at work in the literature of the period, I return first to the medical context in which sixteenth-century French Pox was understood – or rather – not understood.

Towards an Institutionalized Model

As the early modern world scrambled to mount an organized campaign to combat the Pox, the ideological framework by which society understood physical disorder underwent a major shift, and communities were forced to develop new forms of social response to disease. Still centuries before the Enlightenment and the formal establishment of institutionalized medicine, medical colleges and boards were only beginning to take shape in the sixteenth century, and healing was largely a practice tied to local tradition, custom, and disposition. The authority granted physicians was a rarity, and treatment by a physician would have been a distinct luxury, enjoyed by only the privileged few in society. Hospitals as we
know them today had not yet come into existence and the vast majority of individuals – were they so lucky as to be solvent enough to pay for care from a third-party – would not have had the resources to pay for treatment from anyone other than a surgeon (again, not in the modern usage), barber, quack or other lay healer, most likely from within their own community. Unsurprisingly, men and women were treated differently by medicine, and men were far more likely to receive treatment than were women. The use of simples and botanical concoctions was common, and served as a further marker for wealth and status (the best cures coming from the costliest and most exotic ingredients available).

These points illustrate the utility in distinguishing between modern and early modern medical “institutions,” where the former indicates a distinct and well-defined system, with specific rules and guidelines for how medicine may be practiced and by whom, whereas the latter refers more broadly to a loosely interrelated network of methods and practices, geographically and politically variant, and tied to power and status. For those in power, access to the newest trend in medicine, i.e. university-trained physicians, provided a novel means for the conspicuous consumption of wealth. As a result, it is during this period that we see a shift in the way in which medical authority was understood and conveyed, and the re-imagining of a distinct medical institution removed from the public sphere, within the exclusive purview of the social and intellectual elite. While early modern medicine was a social institution, it was not institutionalized in the modern sense, and should convey a somewhat fluid and composite system, rather than the more-or-less neat and categorical one we know today.

\*Issues of social class come to the forefront here. We recall that the pre-modern world operated within a market-based treatment model, where medical expertise was provided at a premium, and occurred within a particular, rarified and elite context. Although different forms of sanitorium existed at the time, they were largely purposed for the segregation of socially unacceptable persons (lepers, for example), rather than in the interest of public health. To address the practical and moral/ethical (i.e. theological) issues presented in providing medical care to suffering members of the indigent class, the sixteenth century developed new forms of philanthropy and founded religious confraternities, such as the Companies of Divine Love, dedicated to social redemption and salvation through charitable acts (Arrizabalaga et al. 153).

Beginning around 1530, and continuing through the end of the century, the chronic wasting nature of French Pox and its high visibility and prevalence across all strata of society contributed to the formation of hospitals for the incurables (spedali degli incurabili) throughout the Italian peninsula. These institutions emerged in urban centers, where the afflicted among the urban poor – the largest and most visible social group – blighted the social landscape. The connection between pox and the poor became institutionalized as:

[i]the very founding of these institutions to deal with this specific threat led to growing public awareness and to a sharper definition of the problem. Now [that] the threat of Mal Francese […] had come to be institutionalized, its victims could be isolated temporarily from society. (170)

By the middle of the sixteenth century, French Pox had come “to be seen as the incurable disease [once leprosy’s dubious honor]” (ibid).

For more on the influence of early syphilis on the development of modern public health and the modern hospital, see Arrizabalaga et al., especially chapters 7 and 8.
In her work on sixteenth-century physician and polymath, Girolamo Cardano, Nancy Siraisi employs the term “Renaissance medicine” as a strictly temporal/chronological grouping, rather than one intended to signify “its characteristic features.” She writes:

For Italy, at any rate, the term “Renaissance medicine” certainly should not be read to imply a complete rupture, either intellectual or organizational, with the preceding period; yet the sixteenth-century practitioner functioned in a very different cultural and social world from that of his fourteenth- or fifteenth-century predecessor. (*The Clock and the Mirror* 3, 4)

From the identification of French Pox in the late fifteenth century, until the early seventeenth century, western medicine had become unsettled and destabilized, clearing the way for new modes of thinking and performing (what would later become) science. At a point of liminal reckoning, the sixteenth-century medical practitioner – whether they be a lay, “learned,” or occult healer – operated in an untested social and cultural context characterized by the commingling of novelty (French Pox, etc.) and continuity (established models and Greco-Arabic sources of authority, etc.).

Shifting away from a unifying understanding of Renaissance medicine, opens the door to new ways of considering individual texts and authors (whether medical or aesthetic) from the period. To this end, Siraisi does not equivocate:

> At this point, to attempt a general definition of "Renaissance" scientific culture in medicine and related fields is perhaps not very useful. It appears more profitable to examine how physicians actually deployed the intellectual resources available to them in the context of specific social and professional pressures. (4 – emphasis my own)

Contemporary texts dealing with medical subject matter, such as the French Pox, can then be examined as projections of the individual contexts in which they were produced – revealing the latent influence of underlying ideological forces. Whether aesthetic, political, theological or philosophical (to the modern mind), sixteenth-century medical writings “hold up a mirror—sometimes, to be sure, a distorting mirror—to many aspects of a complex medical world” (ibid) and allow present-day scholars to peer deeper into the sixteenth-century cosmos, approaching a closer sense of the historical moment and a more accurate reading of its traces.

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*The blending of old and new – novelty and continuity – is a characteristic that overlaps with the genre of the Epic Poem, and is further explored under the section subheading, “The Epic Significance of Form.” As we see with medical literature and theorizing at the time, the Epic Poem is an excellent source for exploring the latent expression of various ideologies through the inclusion/exclusion and adoption/adaptation of established models.*

*These modes of thinking were not so distinct in the sixteenth century. See Cohen, Elizabeth Storr. “Health and Healing.”*
With the reckoning that Renaissance medicine was a composite system, rather than a codified “institution,” it is the seventeenth century, that Michel Foucault identifies as the critical turning point in the evolution of the “institution” – in form and function – in western society. As others have pointed out as well, this development can be tied directly to changing cultural perceptions of madness and affliction, and to early public health initiatives resulting in the first hospitals. Having originated in the expulsion and displacement of lepers following the Crusades (not only a Holy War, but an event of cultural – and perhaps pathological – transmission which is thought to have been the source for leprosy in Western Europe), and carried forward in the social exclusion of persons suffering from illness or madness, it is in the seventeenth century that the early-modern hospital emerges.

From exclusion/expulsion of the critically sick, to their confinement/concealment and eventual quarantine, the “hospital” as a place for the restoration of health only comes into being after the close of the Renaissance. In the dreamily poetic tone that Foucault has adopted for his text on delirium and the social history of mental “disorder,” the critic drives home the oneirically literal metaphor of the Ship of Fools (literal because these ships were a historical phenomenon of the late middle ages – the historical source for the popular imagery) as the holding place for society’s throwaways during the late medieval and early Renaissance. It is a transition which occurs on multiple levels, expressed by Foucault’s evocative admonition: “Behold it moored now, made fast among things and men. Retained and maintained. No longer a ship but a hospital” (35).

While Foucault’s work specifically focuses on mental disorder and its social and institutional consequences, his critical and literary deployment of the Ship of Fools provides a metaphor that is readily applied to sixteenth-century French Pox as well. We should recall, then, that the conceptual vessel with its characteristic cargo of the miserable and unwanted, is still far from solid land. Removed from the stable structures that might hold it in place, the problem – displaced and lacking a specific directional orientation from which to grasp it – persists.

Returning to our period, we find our Ship of Fools has not yet docked, and bobs uncertainly in the dense fog of misapprehension. Pox sufferers and lepers, the mad and the physically deformed – through literature and art we begin to see the castoffs of sixteenth-century society as the proverbial tip of the iceberg, beneath which something far more sinister and intractable lurks. Through Textual Healing the
sixteenth century begins to re-order its ideological frameworks, attempting to gain authority and control over an unknown and unknowable adversary – epidemic and chronically wasting disease. We leave the port, now, and take our first foray into the literary restoration of physical health.

**Syphilis: A Poem and A Concept**

At the center of my discussion of the literary response to sixteenth-century French Pox is Girolamo Fracastoro’s epic poem, *Syphilis Sive Morbus Gallicus* (1530). In an 1842 edition to the poem, Filippo Scolari likens the work to the *Aeneid*, that heroic poem considered emblematic of the height of Roman cultural achievement, and describes the work as containing all of the taste and exceptionality characteristic to sixteenth-century science, literature and arts (Scolari 7). A hybrid text with an explicit didactic function, the work provides a fictionalized etiology for French Pox, along with symptomology, prognosis and a description of treatments and remedies employed by contemporary physicians. Entirely foreign to medical literature of our own day, the poem occurs as an artistic medium adapted to the practical function of repairing a damaged intellectual framework. In this context, poetic invention is understood as the product of divine inspiration, thereby rendering the text “truthful” exposition and efficacious medicine (contrary to and despite the superabundance of elements of “fantasy,” so apparent for a modern readership).

**The Epic Significance of Form**

Fracastoro’s deployment of epic poetry as the means by which to provide an invented genesis for the new malady is both emblematic of the sixteenth-century affinity for the epic form, at the same time that it represents an important departure from associated literary tendencies. In his work, the poet constructs a fictionalized history blending myth and legend with contemporary events and figures, in order to give form to a coherent concept of *syphilis* – an ideologically laden social construct with implicit and explicit associations. In order to accomplish this important work in a comprehensible way, the poet must engage in a careful process of elaboration (of literary convention) and innovation. By adhering to familiar forms, Fracastoro renders his text meaningful to an audience of contemporary readers by providing the ideological context which concretizes his own authority – as poet, philosopher and physician.

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*“… la Sifilide, Poema didattico, ritrae tutto in sè il buon gusto e la grandezza, che nelle scienze, nelle lettere e nelle arti divennero la caratteristica del secolo XVI” (Scolari 7 – the in-text translation cited above is my own).*
That Fracastoro enacts textual healing within the Epic Poetic tradition is a critical component in establishing and reinforcing his own authority – as well as that of his text. Marking the transition from pre-literate to literate society, around 700 – 675 BC, Homer’s Iliad “is the beginning of European literature, which opens with a cosmic bang” (Griffin 22). In sixteenth-century literature, as in medicine, and philosophy, there can be no greater model nor source for authority than Ancient Greek culture.

Composing a work within this tradition ties Fracastoro directly to his predecessors, and contextualizes the sobriety and import that characterize the function of the text as medical tool. The Epic Poetic Form harnesses the human impulse to understand the world by means of narration (i.e. imposed order) – providing an explicit message and meaning – at the same time that it refracts and resists specificity, presenting myth as history and vice versa.

From the blending of history and myth, the themes of origin and authority emerge as central within the epic form. Paul Merchant has expressed this tendency within epic as variations and instances in translation – textual/linguistic as well as cultural/ideological, where “a main characteristic of the original epics is their ability to generate successors. They translate their predecessors in the sense of carrying them forward into new territories” (246 – emphasis my own). Understood according to these terms, the epic defies temporal fixity, oscillating among divergent registers and implying also “the notion of transfer, expressing continuity through the persistent motif of travel, symbolic of a search for identity” (ibid). For Merchant, this “motif of cultural transfer” is crystalized in the image of Aeneas carrying his father and household gods “from Troy to Italy, following a western star that was a folk motif in the almost contemporary Nativity story” (247). The cultural transfer of authority emerges as the translatio imperii – “the tracing of authority back to an imagined eponym” – a near constant characteristic of the Epic in western literature (ibid).

In examining the epic in its various forms across history and cultures, distinct eras emerge characterized by both innovation and adherence to pre-established traditions, forms, and topoi. Merchant tells us:

The genre repeatedly translates into new narrative modes, every time reminding us that ‘translation’ is itself a literal rendition of the Greek ‘metaphor.’ Once again, this combination of strangeness and familiarity is present throughout the tradition. Epic poets aim at invention while remaining faithful to the demands of telling the tale of the tribe. […] In no other literary form is originality of invention so clearly tempered by fidelity to a tradition […] The basic tradition remains stable, but the definition of epic is stretched with every new example. And this fluidity of definition
begins to seem the key quality of epic, with each successful assault on the form breaking the mold. (247 – emphasis my own)

It is thus that analysis of the various texts that emerged within a given era can reveal underlying cultural particularities, values, and morals, making the genre an “excellent medium for analysis” of a given moment in history (262). What did the epic poet choose to preserve and enhance in borrowing from posterity; and what did he invent? Maintaining a self-identity ever rooted in the past, the epic serves as a point of reference in examining how cultural ideologies manifest within a text – both overtly and covertly – by the poet’s willful inclusion or exclusion of matter (heroic and non) and forms (meter and length, prose and poetry, etc.), and by an examination of the cultural assumptions underlying a text; especially as revealed in the spoken or unspoken relationship between the poet and his assumed or ideal audience.

There is something essentially human revealed in the impulse to relay and to receive epic narrative. Whether executed for didactic or philosophical purposes, to an aesthetic end or a moral one, the reader or audience of epic finds themself and their era reflected in the portrayal of epic themes appropriated and adapted to contemporary tastes and social/cultural expectations and limitations.

For the Renaissance epic in particular, rhetoric (the use of poetic form in this case) becomes an ideological act on the part of the poet, for whom selecting among tropes is a necessary and significant first step in creating narrative direction. Whether secular or religious, historic or legendary – the source of epic poetic authority lies always in the model upon which the narrative is based, ultimately influencing the ways in which the poem will be read. Susanne Lindgren Wofford locates a “poetics of division and disruption” within the epic form, viewing poetic innovation and the deferral of established models and tropes, as the site for the explicit and implicit expression of the poem’s ideological functions. She points out that:

Classical and Renaissance epic poems often work against their expressed moral and political values, generating a poetics of division and disruption … [t]hese divisions are in large part what makes the epic into an institution that can express and define an entire cultural system while also revealing its contradictions and the costs of its ethical paradigms and political solutions. (1, 2 – emphasis my own)

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8 I further explore this paradigm within the Cinquecento Epic genre in Chapters Two and Three.
For Wofford, the epic genre represents a body of “culturally central works” which “should not be ceded to interpretations that are univocal or idealizing” (8). Rather, one must explore these texts in relation to one another – as to the historical context in which they were first produced and received, and to explore the individual authors’ deployment of poetic figures and the action or events of the text, as the appropriate method by which to tap into the poem’s underlying meaning and signification indirectly.

Necessarily grounded in the models upon which the poet has innovated/elaborated, and from which they have deferred, we understand that “[b]oth action and figure participate in or speak through discourses that provide a *prior shape and cultural value to the story*” (8 – emphasis my own). It is no wonder then, that we speak of cycles of epic poetry, of the entrelacement of narratives, and of the textual open-endedness, all of which characterize a genre which is never fully contemporary (neither to its audience nor to its composer) nor fully historical – but which seems to fluctuate between the two registers seamlessly, one period bleeding into and overlapping with the other.

Digging a bit deeper, Wofford identifies the Epic Poem as an ideal locus for examining latent ideological systems and functions within a given society. As “a literary form whose narrative is always in part a story of social and aesthetic foundation” (16), the Epic Poem embodies the ways in which “society inescapably shapes thoughts.” And, while poetic figures and actions can describe these unacknowledged cultural forces and their functions, the interpretative work in Epic is accomplished indirectly:

Neither the social or moral vision expressed in these works nor their use of certain rhetorical devices and tropes to emphasize it is in itself my topic, then, but rather the unacknowledged assumptions, poetic substitutions, and suppressed ambivalences that make the expression of such moral and poetic claims possible – and hence the poetic cost of the politics of each work, and the political costs of its poetics, including those steps necessary to establish poetic authority.

While Wofford has presented the epic form as a potentially disorienting morass of significations and interpretational challenges, she offers some direction in developing a point of entry into understanding these texts. The “inevitable lack of closure” characteristic of Epic poetry:

need not bring us to interpretative chaos, however. It suggests, rather, a different focus for interpretation – a focus on the transformations, substitutions, and suppressions necessary to

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Wofford describes the poetic figures she considers significant:

By poetic figures, I mean both evident tropes and figure – such as the epic simile, apostrophe, metalepsis, or prosopopoeia – and other meta narrative gestures by which the poet explains, provides meaning, gives form to events, or focuses on the poetic process itself. Such generic conventions as the epic catalogue, the invocation to the Muses, and the use of divine intervention are thus included here in the analysis of the poetic figures […] [such analysis] also includes the allegorization of the story, as well as the other symbolic claims made less explicitly. (8)
arrive at a given literary resolution. Epic poetry in particular resists this tendency to sum up the narrative in one meaning because of the ways in which the narrator must negotiate its encyclopedic scope and give it a *cultural coherence* and naturalness, while representing it as something *distant and “other.”* (13 – emphasis my own)

From this perspective, we can begin to assess the Epic poem as a voice in an ongoing conversation with the past, as with the future – and beyond. Disentangling individual instances from among the chorus of the great bards of Epic becomes a negotiation of the familiar and the foreign – apparently oppositional elements – whose intermingling is an essential feature of the Epic form. From one poet to the next, as from author to reader – the Epic Poem represents the social transmission of ideologies, and the blending of contradictory forces and impulses.

In terms of Textual Healing then, the Epic Poem is the site of both infection and healing, and represents the spreading of something “other” to something that is known. The genre occurs as an act of literary contagion (in the sixteenth-century understanding of the term), where the text is the point at which conflicting ideologies come into contact (*con + tangere*), tainting one another with the stain of external – foreign – elements. Occurring, as it does, within a context that binds individual poetic intent to a nexus of imposed (i.e. external) meaning and function, the epic genre in sixteenth-century literature represents an incidence of conceptual fusion, *ad infinitum.* In the epic, what is “real” and what is fantastic function in tandem to become indistinguishable in the limited perception of the reader, for whom both are presented on equal footing and with equal gravity within the philosophical/moral architecture of the text. Fantasy, legend and myth fill the gaps and provide the buffer by which the incredible is rendered probable, and the impossible seems somehow plausible.

By incorporating fantasy into the literary “reality” that the narrative constructs, the epic text represents a form of *immunopoetics,* by which, elements from an existential threat of foreign origin are taken into – and incorporated by – the established ideological system, thereby neutralizing its disruptive and disordering effects.  

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10 It should be noted, that my use of Piechocki’s, “immunopoetics,” expands upon her own usage of that term, and should be understood more broadly within the present work. Piechocki, who has asserted herself as the originator of the term (3), limits its application to the context of Fracastoro’s poem, focusing on the socio-linguistic and philological levels of interpretation, and does not penetrate the physical function of Textual Healing – that which is central to my work here. The term itself is highly relevant, however, and its function, as described by Piechocki, can be readily expanded to the level of literal immunology within the context of sixteenth-century textual healing.

Piechocki’s *immunopoetics* builds upon work done by Robert Esposito, in which he identifies the Renaissance as a critical period of transition for medicine, directly tied to transoceanic territorial expansionism on the part of the West. Working within Esposito’s philological understanding of *immunitas* in sixteenth-century society, Piechocki emphasizes that:
Textual Healing of the French Pox, Piechocky’s discussion of \textit{immunopoetics} serves as a reminder that the epic genre and its characteristic narrative plasticity, enables the form to be adapted (or even translated) to time and context in a way that few other genres have, and introduces us to several key issues in functional textual healing. Piechocki asserts:

I emphasize in this essay not the \textit{body natural} and \textit{body politic}, but poetics and the boundaries of philology. I ask how an immunologically inflected gaze at Renaissance poetics, with a particular attention to Fracastoro’s neologism “syphilis,” can deepen and complicate our understanding of the intricate relationship among early modern philological, medical, and geographic boundaries. Fracastoro’s first New World poem, \textit{Syphilis}, functions as a privileged vantage point that brings poetics and philology to bear on medicine and geography. A unique hinge between poetics and medicine, the poem takes the shape of an unprecedented philological intervention that I like to call \textit{immunopoetics}. (3)

While Piechocki’s focus is primarily based in philological considerations surrounding the specific incidence of the term “syphilis,” and openly neglects the \textit{body natural} and \textit{body politic} (essential components in the present discussion), it provides a socio-linguistic basis and support for my own understanding of Fracastoro’s work through an “immunologically inflected gaze at Renaissance poetics.” In her description, the important relationship between Fracastoro’s text (considered an incidence of epic literature for present purposes) and shifting considerations for recognizing the limits of the known world, are brought to the forefront.

Through my adaptation to Piechocki’s \textit{immunopoetic} lens, Fracastoro’s text possesses real-world implications for his contemporary readership, tapping into essential questions relating to the politics of identity formation and alterity, and providing a material nexus for re-working the conceptual “borders” which comprise perceived “reality.” Within Textual Healing, immunopoetics views the text in terms of its real-world, as well as its conceptual therapeutics, and moves the medical discourse therein from aesthetic representation of individual pathology to practical social intervention.

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Esposito considers crucial thresholds in early modernity’s “obsession with self-protection” (123). Safety concerns and immunological thinking were triggered by the rapid transoceanic spread of infectious germs and venereal diseases — syphilitic and other — and gained importance in a context, as Esposito underscores, of increased contact with hitherto unknown cultures, ethnicities, and territories. (2)

For more on immunopoetics, see Piechocki, Katharina N. “Syphililogies: Fracastoro’s Cure and the Creation of Immunopoetics”; on the development of immunological thinking in response to epidemic disease of the sixteenth century, see Esposito, Robert. \textit{Imunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life}, especially the subchapter titled “The \textit{Pharmakon}” which addresses Fracastoro’s poem along with later, and more formalized medical tracts by the same author.

\footnote{Emphasis here Piechocki’s.}
We have seen, beyond Fracastoro’s poem the epic genre itself presents an appropriate locus for sixteenth-century Textual Healing of French Pox. By operating in a literary liminal space, and in open defiance of discrete categorization, the narrative plasticity inherent to the Epic form provides a source for endless critical exploration into the ideological structures at work within a given text.\textsuperscript{12} In chapter three, I delve deeper into the Cinquecento Epic as a specific form of Textual Healing, while we return now, to Fracastoro’s text which provides a readily available and salient example from within the genre.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Rhetorical Prostheses and the Restoration of Plenitude}

It is my assertion that Fracastoro’s poem, \textit{Syphilis}, be read as the embodiment of the sixteenth-century’s primary medical concern: the emergence of a new and unknown malady, and the need to incorporate it into the epistemology of the known world. It is not the fictionalized re-telling of myth and legend, but the self-conscious construction of an alternative reality in which to navigate a rapidly changing universe. For the modern reader, Fracastoro’s poem does not reveal history but \textit{is} history – it becomes the poetic manifestation of the (ongoing) collaborative process of meaning-creation, at the same time that it informs our understanding of the period in which it was composed. In Fracastoro’s poem, the distinction

\textsuperscript{12} Despite its nuanced complexities, Bakhtin’s work on genre and on the socially-constructed nature of language provides a guiding framework in understanding the open-ended approach to literary criticism. Because language is inherently social, \textit{every} utterance, or act of generation (whether through speech or in the written word), provides a point of collaborative meaning making between generator (speaker/author) and receiver (listener/audience). Here, the language producer’s \textit{intent} is displaced as the central function of language, where the opposing force of \textit{heteroglossia} (understood as diversity in language – category, dialect, etc.) denies the unifying impulse of the \textit{verbal-ideological} world which seeks to incorporate outliers in its distillation of a: \textit{unitary language} of culture and truth, [i.e.] the canonization of ideological systems […]

\textit{Alongside} the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their \textit{uninterrupted work}; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward […]

Such is the fleeting language of a day, of an epoch, a social group, a genre, a school and so forth. It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language. (\textit{Norton}’s 1198, 99)

Through Bakhtin, one reads the text as a living document whose meaning is infinitely contingent upon shifting socio-ideological contexts, and characterized by an impenetrable resistance to static significations. As critic and scholar, my engagement with literature is meaningful only insofar as I may appropriately contextualize my interpretation according to its particular socio-ideological forces – centripetal and centrifugal. My understanding of a given text, is but one point in a universe of possible constellations – the connections I make are dependent upon equal measures of preparation and happenstance.

\textsuperscript{13} In discussing Fracastoro’s poem as an incidence of sixteenth-century (i.e. “Cinquecento”) epic poetry, I am using a set of characteristics which generally define the genre in broad terms. A distinction should be made, here, that Fracastoro’s poem is not one of the romantic or chivalric epics, a popular subgenre often referred to as the “Cinquecento Epic,” as popularized by such authors as Boiardo, Ariosto and Tasso. While works within the subgenre share a general tone and subject matter/context, Fracastoro’s epic poem shares only the general characteristics for epic poetry, tying that work back to such poetic models as Virgil’s \textit{Georgics} and Homer’s \textit{Iliad}. The ideological deployment of the Cinquecento chivalric epic is examined at length in chapter two and explored in its social, political, and medical contexts as a locus for textual healing in chapter three.
between literal and textual are necessarily moot, as the poem itself provides the “history” that history itself seems to have neglected.14

At this point, it can be helpful to remember that what Fracastoro’s poem is and what it does depend entirely upon one’s frame of reference. Where modern scholars find an opportunity to explore latent ideological structures, as well as an elaborate description of the medical approach to early sixteenth-century French Pox, for Fracastoro, as for an audience of his contemporaries, the text functions as a kind of prosthetic supplement for missing medical knowledge – an elaborately constructed artifice that performs the work otherwise carried out by nature. Recalling that medicine “was recognized as an extension of natural philosophy” (Arrizabalaga et al. 273), reminds us that the stakes were not limited to professional credibility and authority for physicians and intellectuals, nor to the loss of life and infliction of sustained suffering to mankind more generally; rather, epidemic disease, as wrought by French Pox and bubonic plague, effectively threatened to remove the stopper from the conceptual bottle – to pull the thread dangling from the philosophical tapestry underlying society and Western thought.

Still operating in the second wave of response to pox,15 Fracastoro’s text illustrates the connection between social order and natural philosophy – a relationship that would become explicit in the

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14 In the Introduction to Butcher and Lang’s prose re-telling of the Odyssey, the poem is presented as the exemplar for a “national legend” constructed through epic. In the process of compiling, sorting, integrating and innovating from sources within the tradition, the notions of historical “fact” and fantasy become indistinguishable within the epic telling (and creation) of legend.

This is the rule of development – first scattered stories, then the union of these into a national legend. The growth of later national legends, which we are able to trace, historically, has generally come about in this fashion. To take the best known example, we are able to compare the real history of Charlemagne with the old epic poems on his life and exploits. In these poems we find that facts are strangely exaggerated, and distorted; that purely fanciful additions are made to the true records, that the more striking events of earlier history are crowded into the legend of Charles, that mere fairy tales, current among African as well as European peoples, are transmuted into false history, and that the anonymous characters of fairy tales are converted into historical personages. We also watch the process by which feigned genealogies were constructed, which connected the princely houses of France with the imaginary heroes of the epics. The conclusion is that the poetical history of Charlemagne has only the faintest relations to the true history. And we are justified in supposing that quite as little of the real history of events can be extracted from the tale of Troy, as from the Chansons de Geste. (xi – xii)

From the above selection, we are provided with a useful illustration of how history and legend interface within the epic genre. Proceeding with caution, contemporary modes of scholarship reveal the historically positivistic undercurrent which characterizes such categorical thinking about “true” and “false” histories (the above selection was published in a 1950 edition of the work). Rather than posit “false” or “transmuted” history, we must consider how our understanding of history is shaped by the configuration of the stories we construct in order to communicate about events of the past, present and future.

Described a bit differently, the events of the past – be they “real” or “invented” – possess meaning only to the degree that meaning is thereby consciously ascribed to them by their audience(s). Historical narratives are necessarily false and can provide only the narrowest approximations for the what, why, who and where that they essay to preserve and transmit. The “poetical history of Charlemagne” is the history of Charlemagne – for it is the constructed story – the narrative, that creates and imposes the meaning we derive. Speaking of “feigned genealogies” and “imaginary heroes” obfuscates the reality that history is what – and how – we make of it. The empty “facts” that make something verifiably true do little to inform an understanding of what came before us, and how we have been shaped by it. If History is to carry any cultural significance whatsoever, it must be divorced from categories of “true” and “false” history, and understood as the fluid abstraction it is – the most basic form of social memory – infinite and incomplete, and constantly remade through human intervention.

15 In marking the “second wave” of pox literature, I am referring to that which was produced during the first half-century or so immediately following the emergence of French Pox. In the middle of the sixteenth century, something about the disease and/or
second half of the fifteen-hundreds, when the West had been grappling with pox for nearing a century. By which point, "many began to see not only that traditional natural philosophy played an important role in imparting common belief and hence stability in society, but also that it did not represent the physical truth of things" (ibid). But this way of thinking would come later, and in response to myriad attempts by the intellectual and medical elite, to restore the stability and Truth that natural philosophy had, up until that point, provided. Early on in its western trajectory, at the time that Fracastoro was composing *Syphilis* in the early sixteenth century, French Pox, by its nature and through its biological processes defied the essential Truth that natural (Aristotelian) philosophy otherwise represented. In creating *Syphilis*, in generating a concrete concept to stand in for an otherwise obscure threat, Fracastoro is actively restoring order to the universe.

In this way, Fracastoro’s text accomplishes a form of Textual Healing that begins with philosophical considerations, which, through their textual application, then carry out what modern readers about the human immunological response to it, shifted, resulting in a much more subdued “variation” of the disease’s symptomology. This change in the characteristic effects of the affliction was readily noted by contemporaries in the literature, where the shrill tone of physicians' early-felt desperation, is gradually displaced by that of grave, and experientially-based authority.

Writing in the early seventeenth century, Jean Astruc would identify six historical periods in the metamorphosis of French Pox from descriptions taken from the literature, revealing an early association with the French Pox's amorphous character. The first three of these "transformations" occur during our period of interest. These are: 1494–1516 when the disease was most virulent and its mortality most extreme; 1516–1526, characterized by the appearance of two previously unreported symptoms “exostoses and genital warts”; and 1526–1540, "when the disease grew milder but a fresh pair of symptoms, buboes and alopecia, appeared" (Quattiere and Slichts 7). According to Astruc, the pox would continue its metamorphosis. Quoting Quattiere and Slichts:

1540–1550, when the pox abated and gonorrhea became prevalent; 1550–1562, when he notes complaints of "noise in the ears like the sound of bells"; 1576–, when a fresh symptom, "chrystallines," first appeared. (Jean Astruc, *De Morbis Veneris* (Paris, 1737). We quote from the English translation by William Barrowby, *A Treatise of the Venereal Disease* (London: W. Innys an and R. Manby, 1737), 1:106–110.). (ibid – here Quattiere and Slichts are quoting from Barrowby's 1737 translation of Astruc's *De Morbis Veneris* of the same year)

As Quattiere and Slichts have illustrated, Astruc's historicization of early French Pox reveals the ubiquitous “theme of change that is such a prominent part of early records of the pox. Indeed, the pox seemed at times capable of transforming itself into another disease altogether” (ibid). Read differently, the theme of metamorphosis which runs throughout accounts of early French Pox, can translate as inconstancy, instability and unpredictability – the Protean characteristics of French Pox that were so damaging to established medical authority and social order at the time.

In their work, Arrizabalaga et al. have provided a general summary of the “intellectual and cultural changes” that they have identified as resulting from French Pox from the first half of the sixteenth century (our period of interest) to the second. While it is not within the scope of the present work to examine each in detail, it informs and supports our discussion of the philosophical and intellectual response to French Pox, and reminds us of the cultural context in which it was occurring.

The new Platonism, hermeticism and atomism of the late fifteenth century were a fecund source of new doctrines throughout the sixteenth. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation changed people’s ideas about the relationship of man to God and about the nature of the human body. Italian civic humanism provided a base outside the universities for an alternative culture. (273)

For more on later developments in the western response to French Pox, see Arrizabalaga et al., especially chapter 10 “The French Disease Grows Old.” See also Quétel, especially chapters 4-10, and the conclusion.

First published in 1530, Gardner has suggested that Fracastoro would have been working on the composition of *Syphilis* as early as 1510, while in his mid-thirties (xiii). For a brief chronological examination of the composition of the poem, *Syphilis*, see Gardner’s “Note on the Text” pp. 353 – 355, which offers a general outline of the philological development of the text.
might mistakenly see as preposterous or even magical work.\footnote{In his work on the use of mind-altering substances in Ancient Greece, Michael Rinella reminds us that a strict division between medicine — understood as science — and other forms of occult healing such as sorcery and magic, is a relatively recent historical development. Not until the nineteenth century, does science take on the mantle of “supposedly unimpeachable truth,” where magic, religion and medicine become discrete and mutually exclusive categories.} For his contemporaries, we must remember that Fracastoro’s text is both abstraction and reality, and that the act of writing is not attributed solely to the author, but occurs as a moral and ethical undertaking with spiritual and practical implications.

We should recall too, that magic was not strictly condemned by Renaissance medicine, and was in fact an acknowledged piece in the composite system of western medical culture (along with astrology and divine intervention). Siraisi writes:

magic and astrology were both essential, and at bottom insuperable, components of the view of the natural world transmitted from late antiquity and Islam. Since celestial forces were believed to govern all things on earth, they were naturally held to affect plants, animals, and stones — that is, medical ingredients — and, of course, the human body itself. (Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine 149)

During our period of interest (i.e. before the second half of the sixteenth century), magic and astrology still served an essential function in medical treatment and diagnosis, and, “were wholly rational and considered entirely reputable from both a religious and a scientific standpoint” (152). Siraisi further reminds us that:

although belief in the existence of demons and malign magic was general, these were seldom blamed for ill health except, as already noted, in the case of impotence. The conviction that witchcraft and demonic possession posed substantial and ever-present dangers to health was a feature of the witch panic that afflicted parts of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not before. (149)

It is during the second half of the sixteenth century, that magic and the occult begin to come under increasing scrutiny, as the Councils of Trent kick off the Counter-Reformation movement in Italy and beyond. A program for intensive cultural reconstruction, under the Counter-Reformation, all levels of society are subjected to the imposition of strict rules of conduct, aimed at codifying and re-asserting Church (Catholic) orthodoxy — marking a distinct ideological, aesthetic, and philosophical shift from that which previously characterized Italian and European religion and politics.

Returning to the period in which French Pox first emerged in Europe, astrology was still an integral component in medicine. Considering one of Fracastoro’s contemporary figures, the Italian physician and polymath, Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576), illustrates the prevalence of occult elements in philosophical and scientific discourse of the Renaissance. A Catholic, for whom “the One (God), the ordered variety of nature (multitudo ordinata), and the soul represent the main ontological coordinates in [his] view of the cosmos” (Giglioni 4), Cardano’s understanding of metaphysics was yet deeply reliant upon astrology, and an occult cosmology based around the date of Christ’s birth. Evolving scholarship on Renaissance medicine, as on Cardano’s works, indicates that the version of natural philosophy which he espoused, was not necessarily a radical departure from other contemporary modes of thinking. Siraisi explains that:

[...] central to his entire intellectual enterprise was his belief in astral powers and influences. This belief in turn connected him strongly with the world of Renaissance occult sciences, in the sense of ideas about hidden forces in nature, natural magic, and the role to be ascribed or denied to demons. The large role that this complex of ideas played in Renaissance intellectual and scientific culture is now generally recognized. (The Clock and the Mirror?)

She goes on to insist that:

although Cardano was unusually prolific—both as medical author and in the variety of his interests—as well as unusually concerned to record and explain his experience, he was far from unique in combining medicine with other philosophical and scientific interests. University education in medicine was normally preceded by studies in arts, that is, chiefly logic and Aristotelian natural philosophy. (10, 11)

Contributing to the (potentially-anachronistic) view of Cardano as a theological radical, and philosophical outlier, was his condemnation under the Catholic Inquisition at the end of his life, whereby all of his works — excepting his strictly medical tracts — were condemned. It is important to note, however, that Inquisitional condemnation did not silence contemporary interest in his mode of thinking about the philosophy of nature, and those works “especially the encyclopedic De subtilitate and De rerum varietate, were frequently read until the Enlightenment” (Baldi). Siraisi also points out that Cardano was not alone in working beyond the limitations of “academic” medical philosophy, and points to Paracelsus (1493 - 1541) and Jean Fernel (1497 - 1558), as ready examples among his contemporaries, of a “new type of practitioner in some ways emblematic of the complex interaction—in medicine as in so many other areas of Renaissance culture—of old and new, academic and civic or courtly, elite and popular” (12).

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consequences, the result of divine and possibly occult inspiration. The act of writing – an art as well as a practice – sets the human animal apart and connects mankind to the infinite and ineffable.

A unique form of communication, writing is also an act of creation, through which the human mind is able to realize abstract concepts, giving them a discrete shape and form, and breathing life into that which was empty space. Beyond his selection of the epic genre, in order to accomplish the epic work of textual healing for a damaged world-view, Fracastoro’s poem reminds us that writing itself – on the most basic level – provides human beings with a mysterious medium, bridging the unseen and unknown with that which can be perceived. The unknown origin and occult causes for epidemic disease have derailed sixteenth-century understandings of the cosmos and the orderly nature of existence. In order to gain footing and to begin to assess the threat more directly, new knowledge would need to be produced.

Before the scientific method, in an age when empirical thinking was generally understood to represent a threat to medical, religious, and philosophical orthodoxy, there emerged the need for conceptual repair – for a scaffolding to be created and erected, and for Truth to be reestablished and asserted. The text emerges as the appropriate form to carry out this important function, an undertaking that brings us to Plato’s assessment of Rhetoric and Truth in the dialogue “Phaedrus,” as outlined in Derrida’s recognition of text-as-pharmakon – the remedy, as well as the poison – in the search for true knowledge. What better remedy – what better poison – than an epic poem, incorporating myth, legend and history – addressing contemporary concerns, and providing the world with the first poetic account of

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19 From Greek, pharmakon (plural pharmaka) translates as “medicine”, “drug”, “pharmacy”, “remedy” or “poison” (Dissemination 70). It can also denote various signifiers beyond the remedy-poison binary. Michael Rinella has pointed out that a number of these definitions can refer to aspects of perception and altered perception or intoxication (the focus of Rinella’s work), such as “perfume,” “pigment,” “magical charm, philter, or talisman” and “recreational drug” (13).

The term may also carry occult connotations, and is linguistically related to the pharmakos or “scapegoat” of ancient Greek ritual. Compton explains that “[b]oth poison and drug were originally magical; [and] so a pharmakon is a magical dose (Greek dosis ‘gift, dose’; cf. the German Gift ‘poison’) causing destruction or healing” (Greece Part I http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_Compton.Victim_of_the_Muses.2006). Like the magical dose (the pharmakon), the pharmakos (scapegoat) possessed supernatural properties, and served as the “human embodiment of evil who was expelled from the Greek city at moments of crisis and disaster” (ibid). We see then, the operation of the pharmakon reflected in that of the pharmakos:

On the one hand, the pharmakos could be the medicine that heals the city (according to scholia on Aristophanes Knights 1136c, the pharmakos is used in order to obtain a therapeia—‘service, tending, medical treatment’—for the prevailing disaster [4]); on the other, he could be the poison that had to be expelled from the system (he is often ugly or criminal). Thus these two interpretations are not exclusive. (ibid)

Laden with cultural-linguistic baggage, the pharmakon, identified by Derrida within Plato’s dialogue, “Phaedrus,” leaves ample room for various interpretational possibilities, and for the blending of multivalent associations. Derrida writes:

The pharmakon would be a substance – with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy – if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself: that which resists any philosopher, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite absence of what founds it. (70)
Columbus’s voyage to the Americas, alongside the presentation of the effects of the “first disease of globalization” (Piechocki 2)? This is Fracastoro’s *Syphilis*, a text designed to heal the cultural and physical wounds inflicted by an international medical catastrophe.

Beginning to understand how a sixteenth-century text like *Syphilis*, a pharmakon, accomplishes that which we would consider absurd today – i.e. functioning as a medical tool with material properties – brings us to Derrida, whose foundational work helps to illuminate the apparatuses by and through which Textual Healing occurs. In order to examine these processes, we first ask, what is the Derridean Pharmakon? And then, how can we locate it within Fracastoro’s text? Finally, we will move with and beyond Derrida: to consider which elements of the pharmakon can be further examined, and ultimately

21 I return to a point made earlier about the distinction between syphilis and French Pox – and the question as to whether we can even identify French Pox as *syphilis*. This is a conceptual and anachronistic bridge too far – and the connection cannot be made that the pathological organism – the spirochete treponema palladium – who we know and love today, is the same creature that struck early modern Europe. The same is true for the *actual* origin of “syphilis” on the European continent – specific paleological evidence has yet to be found proving (in our modern understanding of this word) its presence prior to Columbus’ voyage to the New World. That Piechocki terms it the “first disease of globalization” is conceptually true insofar as transoceanic expansionism was readily and immediately associated with the initial outbreak of French Pox in Europe – it has not been determined whether French Pox arrived with Columbus’s returning fleet, or whether it was already (or had at some point in the past been) present in Europe.

To reiterate, for the purpose of the present work, French Pox is distinct from syphilis. It is not a form of the same, but an entirely different concept, differently understood and with diverse outcomes and effects. In this work, syphilis serves as tool for modern readers to conceptualize French Pox – it cannot be said to be a stand-in or substitute one for the other. If anything, French Pox helps us understand syphilis (such as in cultural responses to, and projections of the disease) in ways that syphilis will never be able to help us to fully understand the French Pox. Syphilis did not yet exist in sixteenth-century Europe. There was only French Pox – and boy, was there ever.

21 Along with Mikhail Bakhtin (see n. 35) and Michel Foucault, the work of Algerian-born French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), has been essential in shaping my own approach to literary criticism, as to historical and cultural studies. Strongly attracted to the de-essentializing function of Derrida’s philosophy and methodology, thinking through, with and beyond Derrida, allows me to engage directly with literary and historical texts, unmediated by ideologically directive filters – such as canonization – that otherwise inhibit the kind of profound – and broadly speculative – examinations that “Text,” as a means of gaining insight into human nature, demands.

In different ways, each of the above-named philosopher/critics have provided the intellectual equipment necessary to break down borders, deny categorization, and to consider the text as a living and interactive document – something that colors and shapes the way I think and read, even as my own interpretations and treatments color and shape the text in front of me. The interpretative cycle that “results,” does not begin and end with the text before me, but occurs continuously, stretching ad infinitum across time and space, arching back to the pre-Historic human development of linguistic systems of communication.

Relying ever on concrete examples – as one must - Bakhtin reminds us:

There can be neither a first nor a last meaning; [anything that can be understood] always exists among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning, which in its totality is the only thing that can be real. In historical life this chain continues infinitely, and therefore each individual link in it is renewed again and again, as though it were being reborn. (qtd in Speech Genres, “From Notes Made in 1970 – 71” ix)

For Derrida, this continuity occurs as infinite instances of linguistic indistinguishability, where the origin of speech cannot be reduced to “one original language,” as suggested in the Biblical story of the tower of Babel (Norton 1815). Such an origin story, as culturally potent as it may be, fulfills the human need to impose narrative, but “is not evidence for its validity” (ibid). From the mythic generation of “humanity’s loss of an original universal language” (ibid) Derrida identifies translation as a conceptual hang-up and limitation, where a single “superior” linguistic system, is transmuted and deformed into multiple “inferior” and derivative linguistic systems. Hence, our cultural conditioning “to think of translation as a secondary activity that presupposes a primary text” (ibid). Derrida offers a ‘reversal’ – as what we have conceived of as primary simply disappears – changing everything. Language is not merely a vehicle for something that preexists it” (ibid). Language replicates at the same time that it invents – always new and yet tied to that which came before. The human intellect – considering itself reflexively and, most consciously, linguistically – cannot but insert itself in the discourse of language and translation. Bound to finite perception, our consciousnesses function to translate the abstract “world” (or better “cosmos”) that we inhabit, into the mortally comprehensible – into language.

Infinitely indivisible, I am narrative – it is my first and last means for conceiving of myself and of the world around me – just as I am every text that I read, thereby internalizing and incorporating its “external” elements into my “internal” system of “knowledge” apprehended. But again, the external/internal divide is shaky at best – appearing and disappearing, drawing up and into itself, as a mirage, when one attempts to establish clear boundaries and neat divisions. Caught in the moebius strip of philosophy, the external
built-upon, in order to gain the insight into Textual Healing that we seek? Working backwards and forwards, we enter now into the realm of the Derridean interpretation of a Platonic *pharmakon* – not to worry, its elemental structure is only *partly* composed of poison…22

**Building on the Void: Fracastoro’s *Syphilis* and the Platonic *Pharmakon***

*Socrates*: Well isn’t the method of medicine in a way the same as the method of rhetoric?
*Phaedrus*: How so?

*Socrates*: In both cases we need to determine the nature of something – of the body in medicine, of the soul in rhetoric. Otherwise, all we’ll have will be an empirical and artless practice. We won’t be able to supply, on the basis of an art, a body with the medicines and diet that will make it healthy and strong, or a soul with the reasons and customary rules for conduct that will impart to it the convictions and virtues we want.

*Phaedrus*: That is most likely, Socrates.

*Socrates*: Do you think, then, that it is possible to reach a serious understanding of the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the world as a whole? (“Phaedrus” 270 b – c; *Plato Complete Works* 546, 7 – emphasis my own)

In the above selection from “Phaedrus” (composed around 370 BC) Plato has established what will be the stakes for Fracastoro – some nineteen centuries later – in generating a text that will be *pharmakon* to an ailing sixteenth-century world-view. The problem for the Italian physician/poet is the unknown nature of something – a problem which transcends the body/soul distinction Plato sought to

and the internal touch, overlap, blend and contaminate one another – their existence(s) tightly bound and yet “conceptually” absolutely distinct one from the other. However useful a metaphor, the mobius strip yet panders to our restricted, categorizing tendency of human perception. And so, the cycle continues, forcing us to attempt to begin again – *in medias res*, as always – groping blindly for the non-existent edges of the spherical temple of our minds, relying on myth (faith and fiction) to impose the narrative structure and perceptual order that make our human lives possible.

With Derrida, as with Bakhtin and Foucault, I find myself in, with, beyond and through the text, wedded to its neatly delimited structure and form, even as those artifices dissolve upon close inspection. I should note here, however, that “schools” of philosophy and criticism, such as Deconstruction (Derrida) or Formalism (Bakhtin), play into the very same tendency toward narrow and directed modes of thinking, that they attempt to dissemble, “erase” (Deconstruction) or explain, justify and describe (Formalism).

As a scholar and critic, I attempt the impossible, dipping my toe into the inescapable undertow of formalized critical thought, while remaining, hovering, above and removed from its intellectual grasp. What am I doing? Am I following Foucault and “[h]is unclassifiable work (is it history? philosophy? cultural theory?)” (Norton 1615)? Am I moving toward the delimited forms of literary study he would influence, “poststructuralism, New Historicism, cultural studies, and queer theory”? Does my interest in medicine and literature reflect his own? When I consider the “institutional bases from which writers and critics operate” or the “processes of identity formation” (Ibid) am I engaging in Foucaultian thinking? The answer is and remains so. The answer is an emphatic and categorical “YES!” at the same time that it is the pre-linguistic gesture of revulsion and denial, an absolute negative. The truth can only be all and none.

This is the point from which I derive the courage and audacity to approach a text, to approach history, to approach culture – from the knowledge and belief in my own absolute intellectual authority, the same tyranny of thinking that I abhor, drives me on. I am the only consciousness capable of doing this work, and the work must be done. It is mine – a product of my labors – at the same time that I am its passive recipient, a product of coincidence, happenstance and mystery. Timidly, I reach out to the text, in full knowledge of inevitable failure, and at peace in the understanding that this will be the root of my success. Through the “finite” text I engage with the “infinite” – both and neither – and ultimately, this is how I contribute to the shape of knowledge in my world.

22The difficulty of working with theoretical apparatuses such as the *pharmakon* is their tendency to totalize one’s thinking. In considering the *pharmakon* in my own work, it is that which helps to animate, breathe life into and ground my thinking about Textual Healing, while, at the same time, it ensnares me in its modes and functions. I brandish the *pharmakon* as a tool for conceptual reimagining, and am, at once, slain by its insistence upon itself. If there is a problem of interpretation in the texts I examine (as of course there must be), the *pharmakon* is that problem – it is also the only possible solution – which it cannot be. Entering into the *pharmakon* inevitably means swallowing that poison – (in)voluntarily committing the life-giving suicide of the “self” that my work demands, and yet, also refuses.
emphasize. In composing *Syphilis*, Fracastoro uses rhetoric (i.e. text – epic poetry in our case) to effect medicine and vice versa, effectively blurring the distinction between physical and moral/intellectual. In terms of Platonic philosophy, the issue at the heart of *Syphilis* is a transcendent one, encompassing not only the nature of a new and unknown affliction, but rather, *the nature of the world as a whole*.

Working backwards, in order to *reach a serious understanding of the nature of soul*, we must first understand the nature of all things. An unaccounted-for element, French Pox, undermines our access to truth and knowledge by creating an inescapable vacuum through which the truth drains away from philosophy, leaving empty infrastructure and the frameworks of an *empirical and artless practice*. Healing the conceptual – and physical – wounds introduced by French Pox, occurs as an essentializing process, through which obscure knowledge is recognized, obtained, *bound* and diffused. This is the process that Derrida’s *pharmakon* will help to elaborate in Fracastoro’s text, and is the artifice that comprises a prosthetic supplement for missing knowledge. We begin to see also, the physical implications for rhetoric – i.e. its physically therapeutic properties, as well as the moral/ethical/philosophical implications for medical praxis. Without abandoning the physical/metaphysical distinction entirely, *Syphilis*, as a textual *pharmakon* operates in a privileged space of conceptual liminality. *Syphilis* does the work of *both/and* – ideologically fusing body with soul, and concurrently driving those notions apart.

Here, we return to Derrida’s examination of Plato’s dialogue. In the classical work, Plato’s interlocutors, Socrates and Phaedrus, engage in a discourse on the merits and pitfalls of oratory, using the topic of erotic love, and alternating speeches made thereupon, to compare various attempts at revealing the essential truth of the topic. Poised in a mythical *locus amoenus* outside of Athens, Phaedrus is positioned to learn from Socrates’ artful dialectics, that “a rhetorical composition […] must construct in words mere resemblances of the real truth […] so as to draw them [listeners] on toward knowledge of the truth – or else to disguise it” (*Plato Complete Works* 506). An admirer of the great orators of his time, Phaedrus is now presented with the double bind of the rhetorical practice, and exposed to the knowledge that “the truth is known only through philosophical study” and therefore cannot be communicated through written or spoken word alone (507).

The beauty of Plato’s text is its self-contradictory nature, and the embodiment of the very issue being discussed. At the same time that we are admonished that “[w]ritings cannot contain or constitute
knowledge” (only facsimiles thereof), we are challenged, through reading the text he has left us in writing, to engage in “a creative, multilayered intellectual encounter” where the written word is structured in such a way as to enable “ever-deeper reading, for the discovery of underlying meaning beyond the simple presentation of its surface ideas” (ibid). Derrida will build upon the contradictory nature of Plato’s text, taking the opportunity to explore philosophy through our most readily relatable metaphor – that of the human body. To realize Truth, the Intellect must accomplish the impossible, approaching it indirectly and at no small risk. In trying to “see” what is beyond our limited perception, we may achieve new knowledge – or we may burn our retinas in a blinding display of the brilliant and ineffable. Derrida writes:

The eidos, truth, law, the episteme, dialectics, philosophy – all these are other names for that pharmakon that must be opposed to the pharmakon of the Sophists and to the bewitching fear of death. It is pharmakeus against pharmakeus, pharmakon against pharmakon. [...]

If truth is the presence of the eidos, it must always on pain of mortal blinding by the sun’s fires, come to terms with relation, nonpresence, and thus nontruth. (442, 445)

But here, our eager theorist is getting ahead of us, drawing us full-bore into the gravity of his irascible pursuit of knowledge. For now, let us return to Plato’s text, and to the important elements therein that Derrida has so nicely prepared for our happy, ever-critical, consumption.

The issue at the heart of Plato’s dialogue between the great Socrates and Phaedrus, is the matter of whether rhetoric – in the form of the written word – is an adequate means for transmitting Truth. The connection to medicine – as an art and practice – lies in Plato’s admonition against sophistry, and the exercise of unsanctioned intellectual activity, that is, that which is not grounded in a superior authority. Both of the Arts that Phaedrus has signaled in the earlier cited passage – Medicine and Rhetoric – have the potential to do harm, as well as good. At stake in medicine, the health of the body – at stake in rhetoric, the health of the intellect, and moreover, of the soul.

23 For more on Derrida’s work on the human body see Duttmann, Alexander, “Recognizing the Virus” in Deconstruction: A Reader; Irwin, Jones, Derrida and the Writing of the Body.

24 There are various moral and philosophical interpretations which determine the limitations of human access to divine knowledge. For Girolamo Cardano, for example, it is a matter of incompatibility between the human intellect – which is finite – and the infinitude of metaphysical truth. Giglioni explains Cardano’s position using the same metaphor of indirect perception (by sight). He explains: Man cannot reconcile the finite with the infinite, for “no finite thing can be transformed into an infinite nature.” Cardano rules out that “this life of ours can get close to that which truly is,” for there is no proportion and no resemblance between the two levels of being. Echoing Cusanian motifs, he argues that “everything that is understood by a finite being is finite, for the act of understanding (comprehensio) occurs through some proportion; but there is no proportion between the infinite and the finite.” Likewise, our eyes cannot grasp the direct light (lux) of the sun, but only a glimpse of its brightness (lumen) (De arcanis aeternitatis, OO, X, 4b-5a). Such a powerful and all-encompassing view of divine and natural order, in which the presence of latent Platonic and Averroist motifs contributes to strengthen the cogent organization of the whole universe, has inevitable repercussions concerning the meaning of moral action. (4)
It is within this morally laden nexus, that Jacques Derrida, has situated a framework for understanding the text-as-*pharmakon*, and it is upon the *pharmakon* that various forms of sixteenth-century Textual Healing will play out. Through the *pharmakon*, Derrida, reveals the mysterious, contradictory and impenetrable nature of Absolute Truth, that which Plato’s dialogue serves to illustrate, and moreover, to embody, and to enact/activate in its careful readership. Derrida’s cultural-linguistic definition for *pharmakon* is steeped in the kind of philosophical wanderings and wonderings that can seem a bit abstract at times. It does, however, provide a well-reasoned and insightful perspective on the magic of Plato’s remotely activated dialectics (a form of Textual Healing at the moral/philosophical level).

For readers of Derrida, as for those of Plato, no facile interpretation can offer an effective remedy to the matter we seek to illuminate. And so, buoyed by the knowledge that “[w]isdom, like other precious substances, must be torn from the bowels of the earth” (Gerolamo Cardano qtd in Foucault 22) we descend, immersing ourselves in the compounded musings of our brilliant – and perhaps mad (in the Foucaultian sense, to be sure) – philosophers, letting the waves of meaning and meaningless crash above our heads. However dense it may be, as we read, surely some sense from these words will soak into us, penetrating our minds and souls, and imparting a deeper understanding of the power of Textual Healing, from the meta-philosophical level. Derrida expounds:

Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficient. The *pharmakon* would be a substance – with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy – if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself: that which resists any philospheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, non essence, non substance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity (literally, “othersidedness”) of what constitutes it and the infinite absence of what dissolves it. (429)

A network of contradictions, the *pharmakon* that Derrida describes seems to work against the rational understanding of health as distinct from knowledge. In the textual *pharmakon*, Derrida locates both *substance* and *antisubstance*, as well as the negation of all sources of certainty or ambivalence. In its

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25 In so saying, I only hope to live into the occult and ineffable elements of Plato’s, as in Derrida’s, work. I should hate that my assertion be mistaken for – or recognized as – a privileging on my own part, of sophistry over dialectics. I only mean to underscore the mysterious potency embodied in the literature and philosophy being presently considered.
inexhaustible adversity, marked by infinite absence and presence, the pharmakon accomplishes the impossible – the alchemical transformation of the abstract into the physical and vice versa.

For Derrida, the Platonic pharmakon operates according to the contradictory interplay – on textual as well as meta-textual levels – of mythos and logos within text. We can understand these terms to mean myth and philosophy (i.e. truth), bearing in mind that Plato’s response to mythos is contextually – and significantly – very different from that of later writers and philosophers. For Plato, mythos represents a threat to logos, and is that which his text seeks to neutralize. The rhetorically incompatible pairing of the two occurs, however, throughout “Phaedrus” and reveals that mythos is both necessary to logos, and simultaneously, that it renders “(pure) logos impossible” (Spitzer 89). Mythos contaminates the logos that Plato has set out to uphold, purify, and distill. Spitzer writes:

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26Logos – the Greek for “word” – is also a philosophical consideration in the binding function of Textual Healing, as discussed earlier.

27To further contextualize Plato’s text historically, the Encyclopedia of Philosophy reminds us of three significant, culturally-determined periods in dealing with philosophy (also understood here as logos) and mythos:

 [...] the period in Greek philosophy when philosophers wanted to discard and to criticize mythological modes of thought but when they were still so close to those modes of thought that mythology recurred in philosophical contexts [i.e. Plato].

Then in modern thought there is the period from Giambattista Vico to Auguste Comte, when mythology was taken seriously as a clue to the primitive history of thought, and from the nineteenth century on, when there was a variety of systematic attempts at a science of mythology. Finally, there is the role of myth in modern irrationalisms.


28Turning to Spitzer, we see that “[a]s undecideables, mythos and pharmakon destabilize the very foundation of philosophy as logos, demonstrating that logos has not, in fact, freed itself from mythos, which both grounds and ungrounds the discourse of logos” (48). As Spitzer explains, mythos and pharmakon are “undecideables,” sharing a characteristic irreducibility and composed by unresolvable oppositional elements that resist strict categorization.

Myth is intimately connected to logic and reason – and therefore philosophy – and yet it is often purposeful to explain or justify that for which reason and logic cannot account. When the element of “otherness” arises in philosophy, it is through myth that its complicating (unaccountable) factors are resolved, restoring the internal logic of the ideological system being generated. Deconstructionists refer to these unresolvable philosophical snags as aporia (from Latin ‘apóros’ impassable’ from a ‘without’ + poros ‘passage’ Apple Dictionary), whose presence represents a rupture, “internal tear” and “fissure” in the reading of a text (Spitzer 47). Indeed, myth often functions as an extension of philosophy – resolving the otherwise unresolvable:

The subject matter of mythological narratives is no different from that of later philosophy and science; what differentiates myth from these is not merely its narrative form or its use of personification. It is, rather, that a myth is living or dead, not true or false. You cannot refute a myth because as soon as you treat it as refutable, you do not treat it as a myth but as a hypothesis or history. (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy 464)

Myth, by definition then, is undefinable and essentially unverifiable. It resists its own categorization, at the same time that it undermines, overlaps and influences the borders that protect and distinguish Philosophy.

Like the pharmakon, myth can occur in an infinite variety of forms and serving a multitude of functions according to a given context, making it difficult, if not impossible to define. Under the entry-heading “Myth”, the Encyclopedia of Philosophy cautions:

no initial definition of mythology has been offered. But here the danger is that by delineating the field of mythology too sharply, one biases one’s account in favor of one sort of theory. And any definition broad enough to escape this charge would be either vague or a mere catalog, (ibid)

The fact that myth is a universal and essential feature of human culture – in all its shapes and nuances – reveals its socially important function, at the same time that it illustrates the difficulty in establishing a strictly unifying definition by which to characterize it.

In Plato, the pharmakon and mythos emerge as processes which both impart and destroy meaning. Their sub-textual functions remain shrouded in irreducible discourse and in the movement, play and interaction among all of the various constitutive elements of the text. Through mythos, Plato “helps us to understand how the break with mythological thought forms involves the raising of sharp questions about truth and falsity which the mythological forms themselves are able to evade” (ibid). Beyond mythos and pharmakon, looms logos – and the possibility of an attainable Truth.
Poison or remedy, remedy or poison, the antidote itself is impossibly cryptic. These forces (of resistance) elude mastery or control. Instead of ‘curing’ philosophy of mythos they contaminate it from within. The unsuspected affinity between logos and mythos tolls the death knell of philosophy as ‘pure’ logos. (91)

Building on Spitzer’s supposition, the text as pharmakon becomes the site of transmission between the unknown and unknowable, and the perceived world. Mythos infects logos, which in turn transfers its own poisonous remedy back into mythos. Operating as a membrane, the pharmakon is multivalent and multidirectional, using mythos to generate logos and vice versa, while simultaneously undermining and indefinitely excluding the same.

Returning to Fracastoro’s Syphilis, the pharmakon emerges as the wound itself and the site of diseased thinking. It is the problem – the text is the source of infection and contamination – an abstract (via mythos and logos), but importantly also, physical, locus of contagion. Considering for a moment the material interface of human/text, Derrida notes that every act of reading (i.e. interpretation) emerges as “a corps-à-corps between reader and text’ (Derrida 1986c: 126)” (qtd in Irwin) – a body-to-body connection that transcends the metaphysical limitations of the known world. Understood in this way, the text has a physical and material potency that is transmitted back and forth between it and its readership. The reader’s body is not divorced from the actions of its intellect, but fully immersed in the mutually-influential interaction between material “object” (text) and “mortal being” (human reader). As an incidence of body-to-body contact and physical contagion, the text, as we have already seen, transcends physical boundaries, and enters also into the realm of the abstract, where elements of logos (truth within the text) and intellect (the human perception thereof) are held, but never contained.

The text, our pharmakon, remains the source of contagion – our poison – but it must also contain its remedy. Reading Syphilis we come to a corps-à-corps with textual French Pox, intimately entangled in its workings, we are immersed in the problem of catastrophic epidemic disease, and yet, through direct contact with the source of contagion, we have also placed ourselves within its healing properties. In generating the poem Syphilis, Fracastoro provides a textual catastrophe, within which the seeds of its own dissolution are sown. To access the Textual Healing contained within Syphilis, we must also swallow down its poison – suspending our modern conceptions of magic as distinct from science and science distinct from medicine – to understand Textual Healing we must approach it indirectly, and in full-knowledge that we are unequal to the task of perceiving such Truth. Rather than examine it apart from
ourselves, we must participate in its occult workings, allowing our own bodies and intellects to receive and transmit the textual contagion our modern minds resist.

Having established a working sense for the interpretational system which comprises it, we will return again to the pharmakon in assessing the textual element in Textual Healing within Fracastoro’s poem. For now, let us take one last voyage into the specific cultural and philosophical context in which Fracastoro was operating.

**Light from the Underside: Recovering Knowledge, Recreating Order – Or – The Madness of Seeing**

In the same way that the epidemic of early emergent syphilis – marked by unrelenting virulence and mortality, and largely unchecked by known medical interventions – represented a threat to human life, the disease, by its very nature, engendered a rupture in the foundational principles which gave form to sixteenth-century understanding of the cosmos. In the context of medical discourse at the time, any problem unaccounted for by Greco-Arabic medicine represented a tear in the fabric of the universe, a point of instability through which the body of sixteenth-century philosophy might be infected, corrupted and thrown out of equilibrium. In their discussion of Fracastoro’s conception of disease and contagion, Arrizabalaga et. al. touch upon a number of salient points which serve to ground Fracastoro’s medical theorization within contemporary philosophical discourse.

For the purposes of the present discussion, we should recall that the physician/poet’s medical doctrine was reliant upon a holistic notion of the universe and functioned according to “a Neoplatonic intellectual framework” (Arrizabalaga et al. 247). For Fracastoro,

> The whole universe acts 'sympathetically' or in consent (consensus). ... nature does nothing in vain ... a vacuum is a negation of existence and ... the purpose - the final cause - of universal sympathy is that there should not be a vacuum ... all action is by contact, and matter is passive and not sentient (247, 8).

These are the critical points of foundational instability that Fracastoro’s poem seeks to shore up – and they are the greater threat to humanity. While the disease’s outward, physical manifestation – in all its gore and disfigurement – may damage human life in a superficial sense (i.e. causing the organism to cease to function), it is the fact of its existence – the unknown nature of the disease – that threatens to

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29While it is not within the scope of the present work to discuss each of these tenets in detail, it can be useful for the modern reader to recall a number of the contemporary considerations that made syphilis such a challenge to traditional medical and philosophical discourse of the time. Arrizabalaga et. al. remind us that “[u]nderstanding the French Disease was inextricably bound to forms of dissent from the orthodox natural philosophy of manifest causes” (236).
unmake man’s carefully ordered universe, plunging mankind into the murky infinitude of conceptual annihilation.30

Fracastoro is not the only physician to attempt to repair a destabilized Neoplatonic framework in the early years following the emergence of syphilis, however, it is his unique approach – one which serves as a literary act of creating a pharmakon – that makes his work exceptional. As the poem Syphilis illustrates, a critical issue in the intellectual recourse to French Pox, was the problem of “establishing a proper technical name” for the affliction, which,

they believed, [would] fix the essence of the new phenomenon, thereby allowing its nature and causes to be integrated into treatment of the whole person for that particular disease entity. Not until the disease had been located within a classical taxonomy could the learned doctors prescribe a complete regimen. The naming process would also help university-certified doctors to establish their preeminence in authorizing cures. (Qualtiere and Slichts 6)

The florid outpouring of medical tracts written by physicians31 treating French Pox are further evidence of attempts by the medical community – and by society at large – to incorporate the new disease into the existing conceptual framework underlying society’s most influential institutions – religion, philosophy, etc.

30 One may note, that for Foucault, the threat of conceptual annihilation is embodied in the figure of the sixteenth-century “madman” (to borrow a potentially polarizing, and much used, phrase from the translation of our author’s text). This liminal figure – outcast from society and at odds with cultural expectations – is a living paradox of absolute wisdom and ultimate folly. Through her madness – whether mania, delirium, etc. – the disordered mind flies freely in a void of nothingness – a gaping, yawing chasm that, in its infinite vacancy, represents the entirety of existence. This is the “plentitude of death” (Foucault 31), made real in the ever-expansive mind of the madperson, for whom all things are possible. Like the figure of the early Christian mystic, her unbound intellect grants her a privileged position regarding her unfiltered access to the true nature of the cosmos. With madness comes complete knowledge through direct contact: “This knowledge, so inaccessible, so formidable, the Fool, in his innocent idiocy, already possesses. While the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unnerving images of it, the Fool bears it intact as an unbroken sphere: that crystal ball which for all others is empty is in his eyes filled with the density of an invisible knowledge” (22).

Here it can be helpful to recall the foundational principle of Humoralism – the reigning model for biological function at the time – according to which, any disorder or disease within the body was caused by the imbalance of characteristic qualities, known as the four humors, leading to temperamental dysfunction in the organism. Environmental (i.e. external) factors were considered to be contributing to the overall imbalance, but the primary issue at cause for any given disorder was understood to invariably be internal to the organism itself.

A man ahead of his time (though not entirely alone in his thinking), Fracastoro is credited with having developed an early sense for the infective nature of contagion. According to his conceptualization in Syphilis, and later elaborated upon in his more technical, theoretical tract, De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis (1546), the actual origin of pox infection was an external agent or virus (not in the modern biological sense this word now holds), which, having penetrated the body, functions as the seed (fomes is the term borrowed from Galen and used for this purpose by Fracastoro, and before him, by Pietro Trapulino – an instructor at the medical school in Padua where Fracastoro received his training) of the disease (Arrizabalaga et al 244, 45). In common parlance, the terms “contagion” and “infection” both referred to the “passing of a taint or poison” and were often used interchangeably, whereas for Fracastoro “contagion” acquired also the sense of the specific means of transmission, i.e. referring to “person to person” contact. Finally, as Arrizabalaga et al. explain: “The essential thing about contagion was that it took place between different things (not different parts of the same thing) and that something unpleasant but always similar was passed between them, simile quaaddam vitium” (248).

For Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), the French Pox represented the confounding of life and death, and the corruption of life infected with death. In a dialogue addressing the question of pox and marriage, Erasmus raises the issue of entering into legally binding contracts with the deceased (i.e. the afflicted): “In this case it is a dead person that one is marrying” (Quétel 67). Erasmus reasons “But what is syphilis if not an unending death” (qtd in Quétel 68). See Erasmus, Seu conjugium impar (1524; translated into French as L’union mal assortie).

31 See Sudhoff, Karl. The Earliest Printed Literature on Syphilis; Quétel, Claude. History of Syphilis; and Arrizabalaga et al. The Great Pox.
medicine, family, etc. Similarly, disputations were held amongst the best-known medical minds of the time, hosted by the courts of nobles and popes; these lengthy philosophical discussions were aimed at reaching a correct resolution for the problem at hand: giving a name to and explaining this disease and its nasty set of particulars, so far removed from any other known malady, and thereby neutralizing its incumbent threat. Unfortunately for the Sixteenth Century, French pox was resistant to eradication by syllogism – as by mercury or guaiac, for that matter – and so the disease continued on its determined course.

Immediately following its calamitous first appearance in Western Europe, the pox became the subject of medical inquiry and popular fascination alike, and various other forms of pox literature began to emerge in the early years of the sixteenth century. From medical tracts and poems written about its cruelest effects, to farcical jibes at sufferers, to local chronicles and epistolary documenting the daily horror of those afflicted, the disease quickly became the subject of literature, as it did for theater, and for art. Its lasting popularity is revealed in the writings of the most influential intellectual figures of the time from across the European continent. From Erasmus (1466 - 1536) to Rabelais (1490/94 - 1553), to Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) and Cervantes (1547 - 1616), the pox becomes a source of cultural expression and ideological transmission. Explicit woodcuttings by German printmakers Albrecht Dürer (1471 - 1528) and Josef Grünpeck (1473 – 1530?), the Neoplatonic fascination with the Stultifera Navis (Ship of Fools) and associated imagery of processions or catalogues of the unfortunates in society,

32 I refer to medicine here as an “institution,” but would encourage readers to bear in mind that as such, I am speaking in terms that are distinct from our own modern conception thereof, as I earlier elaborated.

33 Significantly to my subsequent discussion of textual healing and the Cinquecento epic poem (see chapters two and three), one of the earliest such disputations was held at the Este Court of Ferrara between the end of March and early April 1497 – only two years after the initial outbreak of European Pox at the Battle of Fornovo in July 1495. For more on this and other contemporary disputations on the “new disease,” see Arrizabalaga et al., especially chapters 4-6.

34 Qualtiere and Slights refer to the pox as “the most prominent disease on the early modern English stage” (5).

35 One of the earliest images of French Pox comes from Albrecht Dürer’s (1471-1528) 1496 woodcut depicting a knight suffering from pox, with the date of the malign planetary conjunction of 1484 – one of the purported astrological causes for the epidemic – featured among the signs of the zodiac. The image accompanied a medical poem on epidemics by Theodoricus Ulsen (1460-1508) (Quétel 34).

36 French philosopher and critic Michel Foucault dedicates the first chapter of his foundational text on the history of Madness and Civilization, to the popularity of the image of the “Stultifera Navis” in the late-Medieval period. He considers: Why does the figure of the Ship of Fools and its insane crew all at once invade the most familiar landscapes? Why, from the old union of water and madness, was this ship born one day, and on just that day?

Because it symbolized a great disquiet, suddenly dawning on the horizon of European culture at the end of the Middle Ages. Madness and the madman become major figures, in their ambiguity: menace and mockery, the dizzying unreason of the world, and the feeble ridicule of men.
along with illustrations and paintings by artists such as the Dutch painter Hieronymous Bosch (1450 - 1516) remind us that the pox, its inexplicable contagion, and contemporary social disorder and decline were deeply enmeshed in the public psyche. Disentangling the pox from amidst a chaos of cultural associations would be a necessary first step in arresting the devastation it caused.

By examining the intersecting themes of social, physical, and mental “disorder” in the sixteenth century, we begin to see the ways in which the threat of pox extended far beyond the simple fear of unknown contagion. Though focused on the interplay of mental and social disorder, Foucault’s seminal work on madness in the Renaissance enables us to see beyond our own cultural preparation for interpreting and negotiating biological and existential threats. He identifies the effect of apocalyptic catastrophizing within the Renaissance response to disorder (in this case mental):

By a strange paradox, what is born from the strangest delirium was already hidden, like a secret, like an inaccessible truth, in the bowels of the earth. When man deploys the arbitrary nature of his madness, he confronts the dark necessity of the world; the animal that haunts his nightmares and his nights of privation is his own nature, which will lay bare hell’s pitless truth; the vain images of blind idiocy – such are the world’s Magna Scientia; and already, in this disorder, in this mad universe, is prefigured what will be the cruelty of the finale. In such images [of madness] … the Renaissance has expressed what it apprehended of the threats and secrets of the world. (23, 24)

The reader comes to understand, that for sixteenth-century intellectuals and artists like Fracastoro (as for Dürer, Erasmus, Rabelais and Bosch), the pox and its unknowable unknowns was, quite literally, the threat of madness – the undoing of the necessary artifice that would make life and society possible. To be infected with pox, was to be living in full contact with death. Erasmus writes “But what is syphilis if not an unending death?” (qtd in Quétel 68).37 Again, we can return to Foucault for insight into the effects of other-worldly suffering and the “déjà-là of death” (16): “He did not come from the solid land, with its solid cities; but indeed from the ceaseless unrest of the sea, from those unknown highways which conceal so much strange knowledge, from that fantastic plain, the underside of the world” (12).

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First a whole literature of tales and moral fables, in origin, doubtless, quite remote. But by the end of the Middle Ages, it bulks large: a long series of “follies” which, stigmatizing vices and faults as in the past, no longer attribute them all to pride, to lack of charity, to neglect of Christian virtues, but to a sort of great unreason for which nothing, in fact, is exactly responsible, but which involves everyone in a kind of secret complicity. (13 – emphasis my own)

Here Foucault highlights the general critique of society incumbent to such imagery, in which blame for the follies of mankind is universally shared.

37 See n. 30.
The pox victim was at once, the helpless captive of a diseased physical form, and a person unbound by cultural fixations – free to float “ceaselessly” in wonder and awe. Defined in terms of negation – the pox victim is not, well before he is. He represents a point of contact between this world and the next, an unrestricted intermediary between the solid cities and land of mortal men, and the strange knowledge that our human minds must necessarily resist, incapable, from this limited vantage point of health and order, to access the invisible spaces – sea, highways, plain, world – that elude our perception and defy demarcation. It is a space that defies space, that is the hallmark characteristic of our “poxy friend” (to borrow from Rabelais). Through the suffering pox victim, we realize that our own vantage onto our solid land and its solid cities is a grand illusion. Upon the ceaseless unrest of the sea we project an image of the truth, that cannot but obscure the greater, amorphous Truth below. Understanding this world requires the unmaking – of it, of ourselves – of the artifice that makes our daily lives possible. Below, within, around, throughout, despite – the Truth can never be glimpsed directly by mortal eyes, ever-bound to our solid imaginings of the utterly incomprehensible.

As a university-trained physician, Fracastoro was unique in his readiness “to abandon peripatetic natural philosophy, the theoretical underpinning of medicine” and to strike out instead for the uncharted waters of new theories of contagion and disease (Arrizabalaga et al. 245), adopting as he did the philosophers’ argument of the eternity of the world: in aeternum aevum […] he says, everything possible must have happened, including the pox. But cultural decay – so clear to the humanists and hellenists of his time – had blotted the memory of it and its name from men’s minds. (ibid)

As Arrizabalaga et al. point out, the moralizing tendency within Fracastoro’s conception of the pox, occurs primarily as a Humanist reproach of the times. Rather than emphasize the “venereal” nature of the illness (though Fracastoro does acknowledge this immediate association), he offers an admonition against the facile misinterpretation of the known world, underscoring the classic virtue of fame, and its critical social function of preserving collective memory. Looking beyond the problem of French Pox,
Fracastoro recognizes a larger social ill – cultural decay – as that which has complexionally predisposed the early sixteenth century to the incumbent pox catastrophe.

Steeped in the notion of idealized antiquity, and the sense that his contemporary society had lost contact with an essential Truth (more readily accessible in ancient times), Fracastoro’s poem is a new act, one of generation for an entire concept (i.e. syphilis its nature and histories – “real” and mythologized alike). It is, necessarily, also the revelation of undisclosed, but ubiquitous Truth that can be found only through careful scrutiny of the “underside of the world” – the liminal but privileged perspective of the madperson or pox sufferer (Foucault 12).39

Privileged authority, as represented by individual access to hidden knowledge (such as in mysticism, astrological readings, divine inspiration, etc.), invites a brief digression into the work of one of Fracastoro’s humanist contemporaries, Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel (1532 – 1564).40 As an indirect approach to textual healing, Rabelais’s work illustrates another approach to the medical function of a sixteenth-century literary text. Before concluding the present chapter, we will return momentarily to Rabelais for additional insight into an alternative form of textual healing in action. For now, we turn at last, to Fracastoro’s text, briefly contextualizing the work and its author, and then embarking on an examination of the poem itself, identifying incidences of Textual Healing and the text-as-pharmakon along the way.

Girolamo Fracastoro (1476/8-1553) was a Veronese humanist and physician whose body of writings encompassed both poetry and prose, and extended from medical treatises, to astrology,

39The figure of the Christian mystic is another such example of privileged liminality within the pre-modern conceptual framework. Typically female, these individuals were understood to occupy a special status within the religion, as persons sharing in a direct, unmediated relationship with the divine. The messages they communicated were not interpretations or elaborations, but were received through their immediate contact with/access to God (i.e. Truth). Unbound by orthodoxy and scripture, the mystic’s experience of the divine could be a matter of religious controversy, and was tied directly to her female corporality. Such experiences were often mediated through the mystic’s physical body rather than her intellect – where the presence of God is made manifest within her by the pleasure, pain and various sensory (and extra-sensory) stimuli she receives during fits of ecstasy or divine vision. Speaking through her physical form, God’s ineffable and inexpressible presence is conceivable only as the annihilation of self, through an experience of what Julia Kristeva termed the abject. By losing herself in the physical, sensuous experience of the divine, the mystic comes into contact with the absolute and the intangible.

For more on abjection and female embodiment in Medieval Christian mysticism, see Julia Kristeva, The Powers of Horror; Caroline Walker-Bynum, Christian Materiality; and Amy Hollywood, Sensible Ecstasy.

40A composite work of five books, Gargantua and Pantagruel was published piecemeal beginning in 1532, with the complete edition we know today first coming to press in 1564 (Cohen 28, 30).

41Both authors typify an approach to Renaissance medicine and philosophy that has been termed medical humanism, wherein these writers “are either humanists with medical training or physicians with a humanistic education” (Heitsch 5). For more see Hirai, Hiro, Medical Humanism and Natural Philosophy: Renaissance Debates on Matter, Life and the Soul. For a discussion of medical humanism within early-modern French writing, see Heitsch, Dorotea. Writing as Medication in Early Modern France: Literary Consciousness and Medical Culture.
mathematics, philosophy and psychology. His poem *Syphilis Sive de Morbo Gallico* (1530), written in dactylic hexameters and praised as possibly "the best-known example of neo-Latin verse," has largely remained in print since the Renaissance (Gardner ix). Modelled upon and favorably compared to Virgil’s *Georgics*, the work introduced the term “syphilis” in reference to the French Pox, and provided both practical, medical advice alongside a mythologized origin for the “new disease”. His body of work included strictly medical texts such as *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis* (1546) – a significant forebear to the modern field of epidemiology – as well as dialogues and other Latin poetry. He was well-known in his time and was assigned as head physician to the Council of Trent in 1545, and enjoyed lasting relationships with some of the most prominent figures of his time including Pietro Bembo, Ludovico Ariosto, Matteo Bandello, Pietro Aretino, Copernicus and Titian – Gardner further points out that there is a historical rumor “emblazoned on a plaque that now adorns his house in Incagli – that Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, once visited him there” (x).

Fracastoro’s poem, which he likely began in 1510 and consists of three books, “offers the reader scientific and medical lore, enlivened by poetic interludes of Fracastoro’s own invention that are (or appear to be) derived from Greco-Roman mythology” (xiii). Book One entails an elaborate dedication to Pietro Bembo, followed by an explicit description of the disease’s symptomology. Book Two opens with an enumeration of remedies and cures, including the application of mercury, and concludes with a poetic digression into the story of Ilceus. The unfortunate gardener to the temple of gods kills a stag that was favored by Diana and is thus punished by the goddess with an affliction not unlike the pox. In order to treat his disease, he must make an Orpheus-like journey to the underworld, where quicksilver is found flowing from the rocks. In the final book, Fracastoro introduces the New World remedy of guaiac wood, describing its preparation and application, and then digressing into “what appears to be the earliest poetic account of Columbus’ voyage” (xv). In the tale, Columbus’s men massacre a number of tropical birds before receiving the prophecy of the impending pox epidemic from a bird who has a human voice. Columbus befriends a local chief who recounts to him the story of disease’s origin, in which the Sun God afflicted the shepherd, Syphilus, for honoring his king above the god.

Fracastoro layers his poem with myth and contemporary medical theories regarding the origin and cures for the new disease. The association between Columbus’s voyage to the West Indies and the
emergence of pox is acknowledged, at the same time that both astral and theological causes are elaborated. The disease ultimately occurs as a divine punishment, and its remedies are to be found in the natural world – in mysterious realms that reflect the obscure nature of the affliction itself, as well as its proposed origins.

**Called to Arms: Invoking Authority**

Our exploration of Fracastoro’s song of *Syphilis* – *pharmakon* and source of Textual Healing for French Pox – starts at the beginning, with the incipit to the poem. Before launching his treatise on the new malady, the poet offers his justification for the work, and establishes the legitimacy of the text to follow by invoking and asserting authority – poetic, as well as medical; his own, as well as that of tradition. In so doing, Fracastoro demonstrates that he, as poet, is an adequately qualified mediator, and that his poem is the appropriate vessel, for the purpose of transmitting occult wisdom on the topic at hand.

A renowned physician and poet, Fracastoro’s credentials placed him among the top medical thinkers of his time, and at the forefront of the philosophical battle with French Pox. Gardner tells us that: “Fracastoro knew more about syphilis than any doctor of his generation, since he had studied it virtually from its initial appearance and had been among the very first to inquire into the nature of contagious diseases in general” (xiii). Recalling that in this period “successful medicine” was largely defined according to an individual patient’s subjective experience and perception of disease and treatment underscores the importance of Fracastoro’s recourse to authority. In order to have success in curing the disease, the poet must, first and foremost, manage its popular image, and generate a “safer” (i.e. more stable) conceptual framework within which to operate. Here, the *pharmakon* of *Syphilis*, and the balance of malign and benign forces is activated, as the poem generates the disease which generates the cure.

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42According to Arrizabalaga et. al.:  
It is recognized that physicians from the Greeks to the Enlightenment turned to the medical past for three major reasons. One was to enhance the dignity of their profession by giving it a distinguished ancestry. A second, related tactic was to seek credibility for novel systems by claiming that the ancients knew something of them. The third reason was to improve directly their own knowledge of medicine and therefore its practice. (3)  
Furthermore:  
one school of academics would not believe that any disease could appear which was not described within the canon of accepted medical belief, namely within the writings of Galen and Hippocrates. This was not simply professional obduracy. It had implications for treatment, given that in describing the disease the ancients would then provide a clear idea of the symptoms and therefore a guide to the best remedies. (25 – emphasis my own)
which is the poem, which was a product first born of the disease… And so, with much fanfare, we take our medicine, and swallow the magic dose, that is Syphilis.43

Book one opens:

Now I will sing of the varied accidents of nature and the seeds that have brought forth a strange affliction: unseen by anyone for many centuries, it has raged in our time throughout Europe, parts of Asia and the cities of Libya. It burst upon Italy in the wake of the sad wars of the French and from that nation it took its name. I will sing as well of the cure of the disease, of the benefits revealed by experience and by man’s great resourcefulness in trying circumstances, and of the help that the gods have granted, together with the generosity of heaven. Through the clear air and the stars of the vast firmament I will seek the deeply hidden causes of the disease. Struck by dear love of new things, I take up this task at the prompting of the peaceful gardens of Nature, with their sweet blooms, and of the Muses who rejoice in marvels.44 (Fracastoro I.1-14; p. 3)

In the first lines to the poem, Fracastoro establishes the purpose of the text, as one of imposing order in a world torn apart by disease – but also by war and conflict. Extending across three continents, the “strange affliction” (morbum insuetum) of which the poet will sing, arises from unknown causes, and spares no land – familiar or remote – its perils and cruel wrath. Despite its sinister genesis and unrelenting fury, however, Fracastoro has already contained the threat, situating it within the known cosmos, where the cure is also to be found. Strange – and horrible – as it may be, the existence of the previously unknown disease does not portend end-times, as some may fear, for, it is not actually new in this world.

In the passage above, the strange affliction that Fracastoro presents, is a damaging force because it both reveals, results from, and causes disorder – physical, social, philosophical. “Unseen by anyone for many centuries” – the disease, like ever-changing Proteus, or Dante’s infernal thieves and

43In order to gain access to the Textual Healing locked inside Syphilis, it is necessary to ingest the pharmakon’s poison – to willingly undergo the physical and conceptual contamination of taking Syphilis into our intellect. Only through pox-maddened eyes can we glean sixteenth-century Textual Healing at work.

44This and all subsequent translations of Fracastoro’s text come from Gardner’s translation which includes the original Latin on facing pages.
fraudsters, operates by deception and through false-recognition. A critical component in textual healing within Fracastoro’s poem, is the generation of change in the place of novelty.\(^4\) A mere mortal, Fracastoro cannot re-figure cosmology and all of natural history to accommodate a single phenomenon – no matter how disordering that element (French Pox) may be – a task to which both poet and physician are wholly unequal.

Fracastoro mediates the problem of his own limited knowledge by invoking the muse to poetry and astrology, Urania:

> And you be present for me too, Urania, for you know the causes of nature and the ways of the stars, and the varied influences of heaven and the regions of the sky […] wander with me then through pleasant shades, while soft breezes and myrtle groves inspire my song, and Benacus echoes from his hollow caves. (I.24-31)\(^4\)

As the muse of astrology, Urania knows the source of the planetary conjunctions that have led to the outbreak. An origin that the poet continues to reference throughout the poem. Through a recourse to divine inspiration, the mortal poet will reach beyond himself to access the knowledge needed to counter the disordering and corrupting influence of pox. In the preceding dedication to Pietro Bembo he makes clear that “beneath this appearance of a humble subject lies an abundance of nature and fate, and a grand origin” (1.22-23). This is not the explicit knowledge of a well-read and learned physician, but the occult knowledge that results from poetic and artistic inspiration.

As poet, operating with the inspired and experiential authority of a well-regarded physician, Fracastoro essays to disabuse the affliction of its “strangeness,” accounting for its unfamiliar nature as the result of misrecognition and a lapse in cultural memory. The poet signals the cultural failure to preserve knowledge, by flagging another – the inappropriate naming of the “French” disease.\(^4\) By

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\(^4\)To clarify, according to a stable sixteenth-century world-view, the nature and substance of the cosmos itself is necessarily unchanging, as is its hierarchical structure and ordering. In a closed-system, nothing can be novel or new. The change that Fracastoro must highlight, is one in perception – and a change in state from ignorance, to possessing knowledge. The cosmos itself did not change, but it also did not create something new – the change that occurred was cultural/philosophical and contextual.

\(^4\)Tu mihi, quae rerum causas, quae sidera noscis, et caele effectus varios atque aeris oras, Uranie […] ipsa ades et mecum placidas, dea, lude per umbras, dum tenus aurae, dum myrtae silva canenti aspirat, resonatque cavis Benacus ab antris. (I.24-31; p. 2)

\(^4\)Foa explains that the general tendency to name the disease according to geography meant that doctors had to first wrestle with the problem of assigning the disease its appropriate name, resulting in the coining of a number of “erudite names” for the disease. “Among these, only Fracastoro’s syphilis had a future” (30).
assigning the malady an ambiguous and essentially meaningless name, society missed the opportunity to etymologically delimit the disease (a wound which Fracastoro’s poem dilates, even as it provides succor). During this period, the French association was predominant throughout Europe, however, other common appellations followed a similar pattern of “incorrect” naming. The general consensus being, that no consensus was to be reached. Linguistically unbound from its essential nature, the so-called “French” disease operates by subterfuge; free to change its form and nature – to be all things and to be everywhere. “The Pox is the Proteus of diseases and a collection of all distempers” – the imminent threat of annihilation (anonymous medical tract 1690 qtd in Qualtiere and Slights).

From the first lines, Fracastoro is reassuring his audience (those who will receive his textual cure) that he – as physician and poet of divine inspiration – possesses the necessary authority to establish dominance over the disease, reining in its unchecked course of destruction, soothing its physical and social lacerations, and restoring the voids it creates. Textual Healing permeates Fracastoro’s poem and the functional pharmakon is at work, already, in the reader’s passage from title to incipit. Reading the title, Syphilis Sive de Morbo Gallico (Syphilis or the French Disease), Fracastoro’s audience is immediately subjected to the first curative dose of the pharmakon – the assurance that the physician authoring the

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48Ambiguous because an actual French origin to the disease was not commonly assumed. In other words, the French association – as intractable as it would become – was essentially held to be coincidental, or, to refer to the association with venereal transmission and “stereotypes of their [the French’s] lasciviousness and general decadence” (Qualtiere and Slights 5).

Equally as uninformative about the thing being named, was the tendency, within other common parlance for the disease, for localities to name it for whomever the political rivals or social scapegoats were at that time. The French, for example, did their best to reinforce the Spanish-Italian connection, by calling it Mal Napoletano, while associations would also be drawn to the Jewish diaspora and the expulsion of Moors from Spain in 1492.

49Among the 15th- and 16th-century names commonly used across the European continent to refer to the disease, the association to France predominates:

Albdras; Male delle broghie; Gangrena grossa; Condiloma; Lichne; Mentagora; Mertagra; Mertagrae; Morbille; Morbillorum species; Morbili venerosi; Nodi foedi; Platern; Grosse; Swaartze Wilde; Pose Platern; Grosse Blotten; Pocken; Pustulae; Morbus pestularum; Pustulae malae; Rogne; Scabies epidemicæ; Scabiea glutinosa; Nova scabies; Scabies mala francesa; Schorra; Variola grossa; Variola chronicæ, croniqua; Variolæ veruculae; Gross vayrolle, verolle; Zapfren; Male frasso; Franzozes; Francosae; Francos; Francois morbus Francisox; Mal franzos; Malefranzos; Mala frances; francose, Male francos, Male francoz; Male francoz, Male francos; Male francio; Mayl franzos; Mall de franzosz; Malade franzos; Bozoli chiamete francesco; Contract mal di franzos; Dogle francose; Piage franciosse; Platern, mayl franzos; Malum francicum; Malum francia; Morbus frances; Morbus francoz; Morbus gallice; Maladie de Naples; Male de Yob; Mele de S. Yob; St. Hiobs Kranckheit; Sante Job Suyckten; Plate egipoiaca; Krankheit Sant Menus; Sand Monus Krankheit; Male morigeratum; Planta noctis. (Morton 286 – emphasis my own)

Foa describes the immediately problematic nature of assigning a name to the disease: the most widespread [name] was the one immediately given to it in Italy, attributing its origin to the army of Charles VIII – mal francese. But before long, the disease had many other names virtually paralleling its spread across space, from mal napoletano, which the French called it, to male dei cristiani, as the Turks labeled it.

One thing is immediately clear: syphilis was always a disease/evil (male) that came from the outside – from a neighboring country or, better yet, from the country of the enemy. Moreover, it was a new disease, an unknown one. (26)
text, possesses the capacity to enact healing through his exceptional knowledge, and medical authority. The name that Fracastoro employs to perform this authorial work is *Syphilis.*

With its title, reassurance is issued in anticipation of the fearsome subject matter to follow, and the negative effects to be incurred in his readership by activating knowledge of the reality of French Pox – a conceptual poison – becomes the remedy. “It burst upon Italy in the wake of the sad wars of the French and from that nation it took its name” (*in Latium vero per tristia bella Gallorum irupit, nomenque a gente receptit*) (Gardner 3). In first describing the disease, Fracastoro underscores the accidental nature of its Gallic assignation, an association which refers only to the context (spatial, temporal – and political) in which the disease was first recognized, and reveals insufficient knowledge of the naturally occurring phenomenon. As a naturally occurring event or corrupting substance of some (heretofore indeterminate) kind, the appropriate name for the affliction must provide an etymological link to its nature and/or origin – a convention as longstanding as Plato and Aristotle.

Insisting upon the plenitude of existence, the poet reminds his readers again that this disease has, of course, existed in perpetuity and its name has simply been lost from cultural memory. The apparent “newness” of the pox is the fault of mankind who failed to preserve and transmit the knowledge that would now serve a world in turmoil:

> Of such a sort is the dire disease that lately emerged into the light, finally breaking free from dark mists and bursting the chains of its harsh birth. But we may assume that it was seen on Earth not once, but often in the eternal passing of the ages, though its name, until now, was unknown to us. For great antiquity covers everything in decay, erasing even the names of things, and distant descendants no longer recognize the monuments of their ancestors. (1.100-109; p. 9)

Underlying Fracastoro’s assessment of the lost origins of the disease is a humanist morality that sheds light on the need to recover lost knowledge and thereby to restore the natural order of things.

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50Anna Foa reminds us that from its initial outbreak, the medical community was divided in its reaction to the disease, with one group considering French Pox “new” and the other rejecting the theory of newness as too conceptually destructive, for “what was new had no right of citizenship in [the] universe” (29). The clear benefit of the approach adapted by the latter group (Fracastoro among them) was that “it eliminated the danger of the new and made use of preexisting patterns, in short, it reinserted this punishment in a more reassuring frame, helping in a certain sense to *exorcise fear*” (28 – emphasis my own).

51 De genere hoc est dira lues quae nuper in auras
Exit, et tandem sese caligine ab atra
Exemit, durosque ortus et vincula rupit.
Quam tamen, aeternum quoniam dilabitur aevum,
non semel in terris visam, se saepeuisse
ducendum est, quamquam nobis nec nomine nota
hactenus illa fuit, quoniam longaeva vetustas,
cuncta siti involvens, et res et nomina deleat,
nec monumenta patrum seri videre nepotes. (I.100-109; p. 8)
Binding the Immaterial: Naming within the *Pharmakon* or the *Pharmakon* within Naming

Binding the anonymous element (French Pox) with its *proper* name provides the foundation for Fracastoro’s textual healing in *Syphilis*. Without the “correct” name for the disease, it would be impossible to locate the *morbum insuetum* within the existing textual sources for ancient medical authority. To understand naming as a morally-infused act of revelation and inspiration, we enter now into a brief discussion of the Platonic discourse surrounding the philosophical underpinning of the “correctness of names.”

Plato’s dialogue “Cratylus,” provides insight into the functional healing performed through and by *Syphilis*, through its assessment of the manner in which conventions for assigning names to natural phenomena develop. The two philosophical positions that the dialogue mediates are ultimately left unresolved – as seen in “Phaedrus” wherein *logos* and *mythos* remain intractably conflicted and yet intertwined – opposing forces whose irreducible interplay provides the basis for Derrida’s *pharmakon*. In “Cratylus,” the positions adopted are by Hermogenes, who represents a “minimalist position that correctness is by convention: whatever is agreed in the community to be the name to use for a thing is the correct one in that community,” and Cratylus, who takes on the “obscure ‘naturalist’ position that each name names only whatever it does ‘by nature’ – no matter what the convention in any community may be” (Cooper and Hutchinson 101). By revealing the insufficiency and interdependency of each supposition, relative to its counter, that is, the impossibility of definitively locating correctness of naming either within custom or alternatively by its nature, leaves the matter unresolved, passing along to its readers an ongoing and open-ended philosophical negotiation (as we saw in “Phaedrus”). This blending of what should be mutually exclusive determinations, breathes life into Plato’s texts, and places the...

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52 It should be noted again, that, in contemporary use, Fracastoro’s poem did not, effectively, supplant “French Pox” – and other similar appellations which predominated in popular use. Neither, is he the first to apply the term “Syphilis” to French Pox, as Quétel has pointed out. Barring future new discoveries of lost manuscripts, revealing an earlier date of attribution, we can thank Erasmus of Rotterdam for his *Seu conjugium impar* (1524), a satirical work, in which he “addresses the question of syphilis and marriage” (67). The pox-stricken man who defrauds his wife, hiding his infection is portrayed as “slave to that very strict mistress, Syphilis” (Erasmus qtd in ibid).

A significant contribution that Fracastoro’s deployment of “Syphilis” made, was in the application of *mythos* and the ritualized sealing of the name with the element. The physician has located the appropriate medical terminology by which to associate the disease, and the poet – by divine inspiration – relays the re-telling (for a myth is necessarily the re-evocation of a pre-existing narrative) of the aition of the disease. The primary function of Fracastoro’s Textual Healing in *Syphilis* is carried out through *mythos* – where unverifiable events are rendered True knowledge through custom and ritual.
reader within the network of the phärmakon’s self-contradictory/reinforcing interplay of logos and mythos, actualized here through examination of linguistic custom.

Names should reveal the nature of a thing – its essence; and yet, in their limited capacities, our human intellects are unable to perceive the True nature of reality, and therefore the names that humans assign to the “things” they encounter, occurs by means of a necessarily imperfect/unattainable practice. The Truth, once again, must be located and assessed indirectly through philosophical interrogation and divine inspiration – providing an approximation, at best, of what absolute knowledge would reveal. If Truth is to be gleaned, we must “go behind words altogether, to examine with our minds, and grasp directly the permanent, unchanging natures of things as they are in themselves: Platonic Forms” (ibid). That Truth is characterized by its “permanent, unchanging” nature, is a critical component in locating the moral correctness of naming – and, it is that which the Textual Healing within Syphilis addresses.

It is within the nexus of Truth and Perception, Infinite Knowledge and Contextual Limitations that the phärmakon does its magic work within the human mind, body and soul – experiencing logos as an affective state and sensual experience. As “Phaedrus” and “Cratylus” illustrate, for Plato, mythos and language (naming) are the paltry tools with which humans attempt to bind logos to that which we perceive – a problem presented again in the “Republic” with the Allegory of the Cave. While the slippery natures of language and custom make it impossible to tie reality down to a unified vision of the cosmos, this unverifiability which characterizes Truth (logos) – as well as mythos – does not imply that the nature of the universe is one of constant change – rather, it exposes the perceptual and moral/philosophical limitations inherent to the human (mortal) condition.

In reaching this open-ended conclusion, Socrates – the arbiter in the dialogue between Hermogenes and Cratylus – provides an extended discussion and analysis of a series of names, including those of the gods. As Cooper and Hutchinson remind us “[w]e should bear in mind that, when Plato was writing, expertise in etymology was highly regarded, precisely as a means of discovering the ultimate truth about things through coming to possess knowledge of names” (ibid). Practically speaking, Plato must work in the medium to which he has access – the human intellect and its capacity to generate mythos – aspiring, nonetheless, to accomplish what he understands to be impossible: the unmediated grasping of logos – its binding.
Within the text, the \textit{pharmakon} occurs as the perceived site of conceptual binding. Emerging as the interface between the ineffable and the perceived, and in defiance of \textit{logos}' necessity to stand alone, the \textit{pharmakon} – nonetheless a product of philosophical discourse – challenges the impulse within philosophy to “resolve” the unresolvable and categorize the non-categorical. Its fluctuations are constant. Derrida writes:

Philosophy [\textit{logos}] thus opposes to its other this transmutation of the drug into a remedy, of the poison into a counterpoison. Such an operation would not be possible if the \textit{pharmako-logos} did not already harbor within itself that complicity of contrary values, and if the \textit{pharmakon} in general were not, prior to any distinction-making, that which, presenting itself as a poison, may turn out to be a cure, may retrospectively reveal itself in the truth of its curative power. (443)

The power of the \textit{pharmakon}, comes from the perpetual motion generated by the movement of its oppositionally structured elements. Coursing from finite to infinite, from abstract to material, from real to fantastic, \textit{logos} – the divine fountainhead, and immaterial source of all knowledge, is ever-present within the \textit{pharmakon}. Despite its ubiquity, however, the characteristic trait of the \textit{pharmakon} is that of the \textit{action} it performs and its effects upon the reader, rather than the substance from which it is composed. Ever-present and yet absent, the \textit{pharmakon} makes it possible for humans to perceive the possibility of \textit{logos} – while concurrently blocking our access thereto by serving as the (im)material anchor, that grounds (literally – almost!) the text and its readership – mind, body, and soul – preventing our pre-mortal (or non-trance induced) entrance into the absolute ineffable.\footnote{A more simplified metaphor, the \textit{pharmakon} is the two-ton step ladder to which we are chained. Climbing the ladder, we can reach the top-most step, but, so long as we are on the ladder, we are a part of it, and can never step across the infinite divide, or peer in a bit more closely.}

The fluid, ambiguous, and ever-shifting nature of the \textit{pharmakon} is that which is essential to its truth-revealing capacities. It is this trait of the \textit{pharmakon} that Derrida privileges, for its restless resistance to conceptual binding forces the human intellect to function beyond its actual capacities, and perceive that which is imperceptible.

The “essence” of the \textit{pharmakon} lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no “proper” characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a substance. The \textit{pharmakon} has no identity; it is \textit{aneidetic}, firstly because it is not mono \textit{eidetic} (in the sense in which the Phaedo speaks of the \textit{eidos} as something simple, noncomposite: \textit{monoeides}). This “medicine” is not a simple thing. But neither is it a composite, a sensible or empirical \textit{suntheton} partaking of several simple essences. It is rather the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced, along with the opposition between the \textit{eidos} and its other; this medium is analogous to the one that will, subsequent to and according to the decision of philosophy, be reserved for transcendental imagination, that “art hidden in the depths of the soul,”
which belongs neither to the sensible nor simply to the intelligible, neither simply to passivity nor simply to activity. (ibid)

The *pharmakon* is both and neither – *logos* and *mythos* – the function of what Derrida identified as an infinite “complicity of contrary values,” it is the transcendental and the mundane (ibid). The liminal fluctuations that grant the *pharmakon* its incessant force of motion, bring us to the *practical* function of textual healing by means of the *pharmakon* – the translation of abstract symbols (text) to material medicine for ailing bodies, minds and souls.

Peering deeper into the *pharmakon*, we see the text as the substitution of the “breathless sign for the living voice” (435), wherein the transubstantiation of real into text, and of text into concept, occurs through the morally-laden acts of writing (the living voice displaced or deferred) – and of reading (the activation within ourselves of a sort of “borrowed” voice of the other – which is not other). Moving beyond the false/truth oppositional dichotomy of *mythos/logos*, the *pharmakon* is a network of displacement, substitution and deferral whose coordinates cannot be fixed in time or space. The *pharmakon*, originating in the text, crosses into our minds through the sensory organs of our bodies, and performs its ceaseless functions upon and within ourselves.

Through writing and reading the interior/exterior divide is broached, and elements that are “external, alien, [and/or] oppositional” (436) are able to transgress our bodily borders, penetrating even the deepest reaches of our intellects. Within our minds, the *pharmakon* performs its work, “the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth” (438), infinitely reproducing that which cannot be approximated. “For [like the *pharmakon* itself] writing has no essence or value of its own, whether positive or negative. It plays within the simulacrum” (ibid). Through writing and reading, the *pharmakon* – our poisonous remedy to conceptual and physical disorder – brings external elements into our interior spaces, contaminating the physical with the abstract, and vice versa. The *pharmakon* is the action within writing (and reading) that is characteristically exterior, and yet possessing the “ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside” (440). And so, it is by the penetrative, infective and transgressive function of the *pharmakon* that *Syphilis* is taken into our bodies, minds and souls – tainting and contaminating, healing and restoring – moving from material, to abstract, and back, all within our most-interior selves.

Born of battlefield chaos and disorder, the *morbus insuetus* was able to masquerade as *morbus gallicus*, shielding its actual nature and origin from those who sought to understand the disease and
thereby assuage its damaging effects. For the physician, much of the disorder caused by French Pox, is caused by the incontinence of humankind in the face of a seemingly unrestrained threat. Like Proteus, the morbus insuetus takes advantage of human nature (in this case fear and scapegoating) to disguise itself, reinforcing its image and potency, and perpetuating its reign of terror. With Syphilis, Fracastoro infects his readers, sowing the seeds of disorder within his descriptions of the real-world conditions of the disease, while simultaneously eradicating the destructive force of the “unknown,” that is, a conceptually infinite, and therefore totalizing, threat.

**Mythos and Logos in Fracastoro’s Pharmakon**

First Syphilus, who had spilled blood while establishing rites and raising mountain altars to the king, discovered disfiguring sores throughout his body. He was the first to pass sleepless nights and to feel his body being convulsed. From this first victim the disease took its name and so the people called it Syphilis.

Soon the evil affliction had stricken every city, savagely attacking even the king himself. (Fracastoro III.327-334; p. 79 – emphasis my own)

The passage above, in which the naming of syphilis occurs, provides the context of a myth within a myth as the locus for the disease’s proper attribution. Fracastoro bases the tale that frames the revelation of the origin of the name syphilis in the West Indies on an island called Ophir. Using a common trope from pre-modern maritime travel literature, the poet describes how Columbus’s men, having come to land at the peak of starvation and with the aid of the goddess of the moon, Pheobe, immediately set upon the extensive native bird population, killing indiscriminately and beyond their need. In the midst of the melee, one of the birds speaks with a human voice, prophesying impending disaster and social discord among Columbus’s crew, as well as the immanent outbreak of pox in Europe.

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54 Primus, regi qui sanguine fuso
Instituit divina sacrasque in montibus aras,
Syphilus ostendit turpes per corpus achores.
Insomnes primus noctes convulsaque membra
Sensit, et a primo traxit cognomina morbus,
Syphilidemque ab eo labem dixere coloni.
Et mala iam vulgo cunctas diffusa per urbes
Pestis erat, regi nec saeva pepercrat ipsi. (III.327-334; p. 78)

55 Gardner tells us that the mythical city of Ophir “is mentioned in the Old Testament as the city from which King Solomon received gold and other precious merchandise” (434).

56 Reiss has assessed this commonplace scene according to its possible valences as a critique or commentary on conquest. He introduces the image and possible metaphor as follows:

There is a forever-repeated factual sighting in travel accounts, histories, geographies, charts and navigational aids of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European expansion, chiefly and at first Atlantic. The sighting is of coastal and ocean islands thronged with birds and eggs on which sailors “refresh” themselves and stock their ships, often to extinction of the avian populations. (1)

See Reiss, Timothy J. "Bird Islands or, Rethinking the Renaissance."
‘You men of the West, who have done violence to the sacred birds of the Sun, hear now the oracle that great Apollo addresses to you through my mouth. Thanks to favorable winds, you have finally arrived, though unawares, at the long sought shores of Ophir […] you will suffer unspeakable calamities on sea and land […] And that day is nigh when an unknown affliction will defile your bodies and, in your misery, you will seek remedy in these woods, until you come to repent of your crimes.’ (III.174-193; p. 71 – emphasis my own)57

Columbus’s men have accidentally slaughtered the Sun’s sacred birds – a scene evoking both Virgil’s Aeneid (III.129-65), and Homer’s Odyssey (XII.260-419) (Gardner 435). Following this ghastly revelation, Columbus and his men are welcomed by the local tribe who will recount the tale of Syphilus the shepherd, and perform an annual ritual in tribute to Apollo.

As a lasting monument to that deed, our forefathers first established these annual rites, and a shepherd, led to the sacred altars as a fictitious victim, attests to your crime, Syphilus. This luckless and miserable crowd that you see has been afflicted by god, atoning with vows and songs and pious prayers, conciliates the gods and mitigates Apollo’s wrath. After purification, they carry into their homes the large branches and wood of the sacred tree. Using drafts made with it, they expel, thanks to its wondrous power, the contagion of the dread disease. (III.369-79; p. 83)58

Here Columbus’s men learn of the curative properties of guaiac wood – a New World remedy that rivals mercury for its popularity in healing pox in sixteenth-century Europe. Even as the poet describes how “Far and wide beneath the European sky the selfsame affliction was spreading, and dumbstruck cities chafed for want of a cure” (III.385-87; p. 83), he celebrates the divine gift that will succor the afflicted – guaiacum. “But if somehow, through my song, the Muses succeed in scattering your name among the mouths of men, then will you be known in these parts as well and sung beneath our sky” (III.410-14; p. 85).

57 Qui Solis violatis aves sacrasque volantes, Hesperii, nunc vos, quae magnus cantat Apollo, accipite, et nostro vobis quae nutiat ore. Vos, quamquam ignari, longum quaesita secundis Tandem parta Ophyrae tetigistis litora ventis.

Ergo eius facti aeternum ut monumenta manerant, hunc morem antiqui primum statuere quotannis scrorum. Ille tuum testatur, Syphilis, crimine, victima vana, sacras deductus pastor ad aras.

58 Illa dies, foedi ignari, longum quaesita secundis Tandem parta Ophyrae tetigistis litora ventis.

Illa omnis, quam cernis, inops miserandaque turba Tacta deo est, veterumque luit commissa parentum, cui votis precibusque piis numerisque sacerdos conciliat vates divos et Apollinis iras. Lustrati ingentes ramos et robora sanctae Arboris adveictae tectis, libamine culus Vi mira infandae labis contagia pellunt. (III.369-79; p. 82)
Through his poem, the Muses have provided mankind with the knowledge necessary to remedy the destructive ravages of the pox. From an unknown disease with a contested origin, Fracastoro uses myth and divine inspiration to generate truth in a world nearly undone by the threat of “new” disease. Fracastoro’s text provides a name and a context for the disease, relocating it within ancient tradition and human ritual, and recovering lost knowledge to the benefit of mankind. By giving pox the name “syphilis” Fracastoro incorporates the disease into the epistemology of the known world and contains the otherwise infinite damage that can be wrought by the unknown. While mankind may continue to suffer its physical ravages, the disease can no longer contaminate natural philosophy and undermine all of medical thinking.

Certain that his text has contained the disease by identifying its astral causes, providing an explicit symptomology and appropriate remedies, and establishing its mythological origin and proper name, the poet once again invokes the muses, this time on behalf of posterity:

I ask only that the Muse and Apollo – who has unfurled the long centuries and cares for poetry – grant that my song might survive for many years. Perchance one day it will avail by descendants to read it and so learn the symptoms and nature of this disease. For there will come a time many years hence when, by the decree of fate, this affliction, having disappeared and lain dormant in black night, will rise up after long centuries, and once more revisit the winds of heaven, and once more a future age will be moved to wonder at it. (I.310-18; p. 21 – emphasis my own)

The poet calmly predicts that the disease will run its astrologically determined course, and the “contagion” that arises from bad air will once again desist, only to return in future generations. Syphilis is not the unmaking of mankind through occult forces, but a familiar risk of the mortal condition in which divine influences over astral confluences may only be tempered through the re-evocation of ancient knowledge.

While the unfortunate loss of this knowledge once threatened humanity with the first appearance of a “new” disease at the close of the fifteenth century, the poet has harnessed divine inspiration and the power of mythos to recreate the logos that was earlier possessed. Through his poem, Fracastoro has incorporated contemporary medical “knowledge” into the pre-existing frame of natural philosophy that

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59 Atque utinam concedere tantum
Musa quae, tantumque velit defendere Apollo,
tempora qui longa evolvit, cui carmina curae,
haec multas monumenta dies ut nostra supersint.
Forte etetim nostros olim legisse nepotes,
et signa et faciem pestis novisse iuvabit.
Namque iterum, cum facta dabunt, labentibus annis
Tempus erit cum noce atra sopita iacebit
Interitu data: mox iterum post saecula longa
Illa eadem exsurget, caelumque aurisque reviset,
atque iterum ventura illam mirabitur aetas. (I.308-318; p. 20)
dictates the order of all things, and thereby harnessed the power of the *pharmakon* to heal the conceptual wounds wrought by unknown epidemic disease.

**Breaking the Bone: Textual Healing in Literature**

As written by French author Rabelais in chapter five of *Gargantua* (1532), "*Natura abhorret vacuum* – Nature abhors a vacuum. – Would you say that a fly had drunk out of this? – Toss it off like a Breton! – Down in one gulp. That’s the stuff. – Swallow it down. It’s a fine medicine" (51). A noted physician and author, today we see Rabelais as a peer of Fracastoro, though with a very different take on humanism and its attendant discursive practices. Like Fracastoro, Rabelais was responsible for treating the effects of syphilis in his patients, but where Fracastoro searched for epistemological clues in the natural philosophy of the world, Rabelais’s work suggests that he sought instead to understand the role of human behavior in the etiology of disease and disorder. Despite their differences, however, when viewed in tandem, the two authors are clearly functioning within the same broad philosophical sphere.

The Aristotelian plenism to which Rabelais’s invocation of the principle of *horror vacui* refers, is the same conceptual fullness that Fracastoro is essaying to restore through his creation of a literary prosthesis through the poem *Syphilis*. In further assessing the above quotation, it can be informative to consider that "[f]or Rabelais the headiest liquor of all was the liquor of learning, and the most exhilarating feasts those at which learned men met for the exchange of ideas" (Cohen 24). Returning then to the text, we understand that Rabelais has located within his own work, the same abhorrent lacuna (*vacuum*) that threatens to unmake Fracastoro’s reality. Rabelais presents the drunken disputation as a stand-in for

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60 François Rabelais (1490/94 - 1553), was a French-born Franciscan, then Benedictine monk and physician whose satirical mockery of religious and secular institutions, as well as of human nature and intellectualism took form in the pentalogy *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532 - 1564). A source of much controversy, in the year following its publication in 1532, the first book was condemned by the Sorbonne as obscene, with subsequent books receiving a similar critical reception, viewed as violating a number of theological, philosophical as well as aesthetic concerns of the period (Cohen 26). Now recognized among the great authors of his time, Rabelais’s playful use of vernacular French and the *double entendre* have secured for him a lasting legacy despite the unsympathetic formal reception it received from contemporary critics. Today we recall this ludic application of language and bawdy content in the adjective "Rabelaisian," an epithet we apply to writers like himself, "who mentioned human functions [birth, copulation, death, etc.] which, after his day, were referred to, by imaginative writers at least, in a far more guarded way, until James Joyce, his counterpart and admirer in our own age, put them back into literary circulation" (Cohen 17).


All translations are taken from the 1986 reprinting of J. M. Cohen’s translation of the text.

62 Heitsch recognizes that Rabelais, along with other early-modern French authors such as Montaigne and Helisenne de Crenne, share an "ambivalent perspective on writing that is linked to the notion of the *pharmakon*, both poison and remedy … [the therapeutic and detrimental aspects of putting pen to paper thus have a long tradition that many Renaissance writers and readers explore" (1).
medical discourse of the time. The interlocuters – drunkards every one – are intoxicated by the intellectual abstractions upon which they feast, even as they fill empty space with their endless debates and inquiries. We can imagine then, that for Rabelais there was likely a seat at the table for a man of Fracastoro’s ilk, whose poem served a different but not entirely dissimilar practical function in restoring the universe to plenitude.

For both Rabelais and Fracastoro, the text along with its heady infusion of liquor a la Rabelais (i.e. intellectual and philosophical considerations) represents a remedy or cure to a damaged worldview. “Swallow it down. It’s a fine medicine” – whether palliative or curative, the real solution could only be reached by making repairs to the damaged philosophical framework of the universe, through the only means available, i.e. discursive textual elaboration. In the case of Rabelais, the significance of his text is to be found in its effect upon the reader, and in the intellectual digressions it inspires, and in fact, demands.

In the author’s Prologue to the text of Gargantua, Rabelais cautions readers that: “… the reason why you must open this book, and carefully weigh up its contents … [y]ou will discover then that the drug within is far more valuable than the box promised; that is to say, that the subjects here treated are not so foolish as the title on the cover suggested” (38). In this passage, which appears in the first paragraph of the work (which, he not insignificantly opens with the dedication: “Most noble boozers [i.e. intellectuals], and you my very esteemed and poxy friends [i.e. sufferers of syphilis] – for to you and you alone are my writings dedicated”) the author provides explicit information for the manner in which his seemingly contradictory text should be read. It becomes clear, then, that despite its disarming themes and presentation, the book is intended as a worthy endeavor and serious exercise – its reading is expressed as an act of intellectual and physical nourishment. From the prologue, readers should understand that Gargantua is both food (for thought) and medicine (for body and soul).

In order to drive home the importance of considering his work as both medically curative and physically and intellectually nourishing, the author invokes the ancient authority of Galen, likening the

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\(^{63}\) Heitsch again recognizes the pharmakon at work in the prologue to Gargantua, writing that the author, “in the guise of the quack Alcofridas Nasier […] advertises his outwardly lascivious book as a precious pill box whose content may have harmful and beneficial effects” (1).
hidden truth within his text to the richest of foods – the marrow found in bones. Paraphrasing, Rabelais writes, "It is true that this little is more delicious than great quantities of any other meat ... marrow is the perfect food concocted by Nature" (ibid). That Nature has provided the solution, is a necessary component of any traditional contemporary conception of medicine, and allows the author to contextualize his own work within a broader frame of recognized authority – we have seen that Fracastoro is also emphatic on this point. Still within the context of sixteenth-century discursive practices, the fact that such sustenance be concealed, protected deep within an indigestible exterior, suggests the importance of divine election (and inspiration) and critical rumination in gaining access to the essential truth contained therein.

For Rabelais, an appropriate reading of his text requires that the reader, as a human animal, access both parts of his being – that which is divine, i.e. his intellect; and that which comes to him through nature, i.e. his physical self and basest instincts. Here the author calls upon the authority of Plato in likening his ideal reader to a dog, "... the most philosophical creature in the world," and drives his point home:

Now you must follow the dog's example, and be wise in smelling out, sampling, and relishing these fine and most juicy books, which are easy to run down but hard to bring to bay. Then, by diligent reading and frequent meditation, you must break the bone and lick out the substantial marrow – that is to say the meaning which I intend to convey by these Pythagorean symbols – in the hope and assurance of becoming both wiser and more courageous by such reading. For here you will find an individual savor and abstruse teaching which will initiate you into certain very high sacraments and dread mysteries, concerning not only our religion, but also our public and private life. (38 – emphasis my own)

The essential point here, is that the truth which nature can conceal, may be revealed through artistic (in this case literary) production. As a reflection of nature, art – when properly executed (and viewed/understood) – may contain innate and undiscovered truths that are otherwise indiscernible to the human intellect. Existing in myriad forms and universally across cultures, artistic production is "easy to run

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64 How one reads, who reads, and what comprises “appropriate reading” were important ideological concerns of the early modern period. From Dante to Boccaccio and beyond, we understand that reading represented not only an opportunity for ideological dissemination, but also the very present threat of the same. Facile interpretation of texts, misprision, and errors in translation all presented obstacles to human access to Truth, and therefore, ultimately, to salvation.

While modern criticism has secularized such interpretative risks, Bakhtin (notably a scholar of Rabelais) has underscored the very point that Rabelais' dog breaking the bone metaphor also makes: “A passive understanding of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning” (Norton’s 1206). Such abstractions are limited to literal and superficial understandings, devoid of actual content, and deprived of the kind of fluid, relativistic meaning, that makes language a living concept. Only through active understanding – our own act in the collaborative process – may we hope to access the Truth underlying a given example of language. It is in this way that language is characterized by its capacity to incorporate and reflect the audience within its message. Signification then, occurs in the “eye of the beholder” as it were. In Speech Genres and Other Late Essays Bakhtin writes, “Quests for my own words are quests for a word that is not my own” (qtd in Norton’s 1186).
down” i.e. widely accessible (in the broadest sense – leaving aside here the very real issue of unequal access to aesthetic production across social strata in the highly stratified sixteenth century) on a superficial level. The true value of art, understood to be the conceptual truth embedded therein, is “hard[er] to bring to bay.” The smelling out and tasting of such truth is necessarily textually mediated – rendered sensible to our limited human capacities only through the consumption of the artist’s product which – unlike the intangible truth it reflects – exists in our mortal, sensual realm. The text provides a material – and thereby delimited – means by which to explore the infinite and unseen.

Rabelais’s text becomes the mirror or *speculum* by which to gain access to insight he should not otherwise be able to possess, let alone divulge. It is important to note here that while Rabelais is adamant in the way in which his text must function as a vehicle by which to disseminate hidden truth, he is also careful to underscore that how the text accomplishes this should necessarily remain a mystery. He asks, “But do you faithfully believe that Homer, in writing his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, ever had in mind the allegories squeezed out of him by Plutarch, Heraclides Ponticus, Eustathius, and Phornutus …?” (ibid). By shifting the interpretative responsibility from author to consumer, Rabelais leaves ample space for divine inspiration and free will to comingle within his conception of ideological revelation.

As the product of mortal hands and a mortal mind, Rabelais has provided a text that is an ineluctably imperfect representation of the essential truth it reflects. It is not for the author himself to express – or even to recognize – the significance hidden therein, but should be the subject of a collaborative process of meaning-making. As his reference to Homer’s various interpreters illustrates, the social generation of knowledge occurs over time, and through accumulation and elaboration by multiple actors. As a process with the potential to expand infinitely, so long as literature and literary criticism shall persist, the divine source of truth will remain one of those “dread mysteries,” while the act of interpretation becomes ritualized, as one of those “high sacraments” that concerns “not only our religion, but also our public and private life.” The assertion here is not that the author is being cagey or deliberately camouflaging his true message with disarming themes, it is that he himself cannot know what truth will come from his text. Having provided the text itself, the author knows only that the truth can be found somewhere therein, and encourages his readers to get to work, to “break the bone and lick out the substantial marrow.”
For both Rabelais and Fracastoro, the text itself – or rather, the act of reading and reflecting upon it – is the cure, both in terms of its form as well as content. Where Rabelais adopts an unassuming and genial tone to tell a story without explicitly treating the pox as its subject, in the case of Fracastoro, the text supplies both intellectual and practical knowledge couched in philosophy and adorned with Latin verse. For Rabelais’s “very esteemed and poxy” readers, the text is efficacious insofar as it has a direct effect on its audience, who absorb the truth of his message through the careful (or inebriated) examination of allegory and presentation. For Fracastoro’s readers, the text functions in a similar manner on an aesthetic level, but accomplishes a great deal more in terms of providing practical information on cures, treatments, and diagnosis, as well as the prognosis of an ultimately successful outcome for society as a whole.
CHAPTER TWO
Repurposing Marfisa: The Female Warrior Grapples with Gender and Genealogy in the Cinquecento Epic

At the mid-way point of my examination of gender, genre and disease in sixteenth-century Italian court culture (specifically that of the dynasty of Federico II Gonzaga, first duke of Mantua), this chapter represents a bridge between the macro-level assessment of emergent French Pox in Western art and literature of the sixteenth century in chapter one and the micro-level examination of the functions of art and literature in the treatment of socio-political and physical disorder at the Mantuan court of a sufferer of French Pox and important patron of Renaissance art, Federico II Gonzaga, in chapter three. In chapter one, I situated the outbreak and subsequent pandemic of French Pox as a cataclysmic event at the end of the fifteenth century, leading to widespread social disruption and change throughout the sixteenth. Viewing the emergence of Pox as an existential and epistemological crisis across all forms of social institutions, reveals a critical oversight in scholarship dealing with sixteenth-century art and culture, that tends to minimize the impact of this critical moment in medical, philosophical and religious discourses.1

The historical ‘neglect’ afforded by scholars past and present results largely from what I see as the indelible effects of the stigmatization of ‘venereal disease’ – an ongoing process of marginalization begun in the sixteenth century and continuing into the present day – but also from the way in which discipline-specific scholarship has, until recently, been produced, maintained and contained. Fearing to stray from our areas of expertise – lest we speak out of turn or make incorrect assumptions – scholars have remained siloed in our various fields of interest, avoiding the vulnerability of working outside the limits of our specialized training. We can rest there, comfortably working within the contexts we know

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1Here I do not mean to infer that sixteenth-century French Pox has been wholly ignored or overlooked in scholarship of the period, only to express, that its universal impact (for the disease spared no class or creed) has largely been, and continues to be, under-emphasized. Particularly for the early sixteenth century (during its initial phase of absolute mortality and extreme virulence), French Pox was a much-feared force of social disruption, and its ‘modernizing’ effects have been traced through various medical and cultural studies. Medical, social, and cultural historians have examined Pox in relation to the developments of the ‘institution’ of modern medicine, as well as modern medical theory and practice, and systems for public health. Additionally, Pox has been central to studies of the evolution of disease (and history of modern ‘syphilis’), as well as Early Modern epidemics, medical theories and practice related to the diagnosis and treatment of contagious disease.
best, and occupying a position of relative intellectual authority that gives more weight to our assertions, or we can think about our work in more holistic terms.

By adopting a vision that connects Renaissance literary studies to contemporary life, our work becomes increasingly relevant beyond the page upon which it is written, and offers a wider audience more information about the human experience: its universalities and particularities. Many scholars are already exploring the possibilities for working across disciplines, a shift that requires dynamism and a movement beyond the limits of our established reputations – to borrow from those who know more, and to lend to those who know less. In chapter one, I attempted to eschew a priori assumptions about what I can and cannot do with my training as a critic of literature, in order to stake my claim to historical pox, to its aesthetic legacy – artistic and literary alike – and to the social and philosophical context in which it was first apprehended. Amateur (at best) in the fields of art and medical histories, I return now to my intellectual patria, the text and textual analysis (but not only!).

The present chapter narrows the focus of my study to a single literary genre: Cinquecento Epic. This point of entry stems from the broad discourse that I established in chapter one, as I assessed the treatment of Pox in early modern medical theory and practice along with its manifestations in art and literature, in order to expand upon the intellectual-philosophical framework of Derrida’s Pharmakon, revealing the text itself as both medical tool, and agent of corruption or infection. As an interpretational system, the Pharmakon provides the language and underlying conceptual structure, by which to enter into a now ‘defunct’ form of textual consumption, that I call textual healing. Chapter three provides the analysis of textual healing in action, as I consider the pharmakon at work within Federico II Gonzaga’s art and literary patronage – and the relationships that surround, embed and encode it. In order to apply textual healing to Federico II Gonzaga’s malady, I must first identify an aesthetic marker by which to trace its effects – physical, conceptual or otherwise. The Chivalric Epic of the Cinquecento will lay this groundwork.

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2 I do not mean to assert that there is no place for highly specialized, discipline-specific study in Renaissance scholarship today, only to stake my own claim otherwise. As an early-career scholar, my survival entails securing a future for the ever-imperiled Humanities, in a culture where such pursuits are increasingly devalued. The push that I make to promote Interdisciplinarity opens the field to new ways of thinking about texts and contexts, and removes barriers to making our expertise available to the broadest possible audience. The critical distinction, for me, has to do with expanding accessibility, and not gate-keeping our highly specialized disciplines out of existence.
While I do not believe it has been noted elsewhere – and certainly not remarked upon at length –
the Cinquecento Epic, in its purest dispensations\(^3\) came into being and took its earliest forms alongside
the incomprehensible and all-corrupting Pox.\(^4\) The major figures at play upon the “world’s stage” (read
clearly from a decidedly Western perspective) are reading Boiardo and Ariosto as they debate the fate of
Christendom, assailed by the “Turkish threat” to the East, and Lutheranism to the North; navigate shifting
political borders, further complicated by changes in warfare technology, expanding colonialism and the
“discovery” of the New World; and race to resolve the great equalizing force of uncontained and
untreatable contagious disease. Excepting the latter-most (contagious disease), these are among the
many salient topics that critics have used as tools to better understand the function of varying ideologies
within the Cinquecento Epic, and to situate the narrative in its socio-political historical context. I essay to
open the conversation further, to turn our attention to the fifteen-foot poxy gorilla in the room, to consider
our historical figures – whether they be dukes or emperors, popes or cardinals, courtiers or ladies of the
court, or physicians or artists or ambassadors or poets (or some mashup thereof, for we must not forget
this is the time of *renaissance men!*), in their *basest forms*: i.e. as human animals, susceptible to physical
ailment and disease, and to the psychological impact of bearing witness to the unmaking of human lives.

In this context, War comes immediately to mind, and we do well to record that – at least in
literature and art – *war* does not always mean *War.*\(^5\) And, *ah!*, we have arrived at epic signification, and
the endless cycle of meaning making that necessarily occurs within a constellation of open-ended, loosely
linking works such as epic poems. No epic, then, can be understood in a vacuum, and epic studies
proceed most convincingly when closely situated, amongst “similar” works and across time periods: a
necessary first step in any critical approach to epic literature. The messiness of assigning meaning to epic

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\(^3\) I say this with more than a hint of irony, as epic literature and the epic narrative form, more generally, are characteristically
derivative. Catherine Bates asserts that “it is a quintessential if not *defining* characteristic of epic to refer back to and revise what
went before”, describing the epic as “a literary tradition [within which individual works] at once constitute, continue, and change” the
legacy of which they are a part (ix). Traceable always to a remote and distant past, and couched in formulaic representations of
narrative elements such as setting, action and character – much of the underlying meaning behind these texts is generated through
the interplay of the author’s various deployment of literary tradition and innovation.

My comment above reflects the overarching tendency toward canonization which characterizes the formal study of art and
literature, and the irony here is both multivalent and intentional. It will be addressed further, in short order.

\(^4\) In her discussion of Ariosto and Tasso, Günsberg makes no mention of French Pox, historically contextualizing the former
according to political and social disorder resulting from “the most fraught, middle years of the Wars of Italy which raged from 1494 to
1559” (173). Tasso’s writing, on the other hand, she associates with the increasingly restrictive, Post-Tridentine religious climate,
and tensions resulting from conflicts with the hostile Ottoman and Turkish forces to the “East” (ibid).

\(^5\) In her treatment of ideology in Cinquecento epic, Wofford quotes from Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations:* “All efforts to render politics
aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (xi).
figuration, and the sheer open-endedness – *ad infinitum*, which characterize the genre are attended to by scholars in a number of ways, but they must necessarily be considered.

**Approach**

**Confronting Epic**

The interpretation of epic, then, is both intertextual, as well as intercontextual; and occurs as the process of finding correlations among the irreducible and dynamic interplay of highly subjective terms. Shemek describes the interpretational morass of the *Furioso* thusly: “[it] asserts the world’s disheartening complexity, its irreducibility to any single, clearly presentable story or perspective” (*Ladies Errant* 81). The characteristic “lack of closure” and the attendant threat of “interpretative chaos” are mediated by epic authors through a re-directed “focus for interpretation,” taking into account how the author has used the epic model as the basis for particular instances of “transformations, substitutions, and suppressions necessary to arrive at a given literary resolution” (Wofford 13). Taking a more expansive view, Wofford sums up the epic struggle of locating signification within the genre, stating simply: “Epic poetry in particular resists [the] tendency to sum up the narrative in one meaning because of the ways in which the narrator must negotiate its encyclopedic scope and give it a cultural coherence and naturalness, while representing it as something distant and “other”” (ibid). The “encyclopedic scope” to which Wofford is referring, is the historic and cultural legacy attached to epic, that is, its “literary precedents” and antecedents, all of which operate recursively to generate patterns and systems for interpreting and receiving epic content (Günsberg 179).

It is this interplay of *trope* and *ideology* which characterizes the genre as an excellent medium by which to study the function of ideology in literature, by exposing:

the role of *topos* in transmitting value systems, such as that which perpetuates the gender hierarchy. Sheer repetition creates a *topos*, resulting in the building up of an automatically receptive and conditioned response, thereby reinforcing what have become received values, in a sort of ideological *fait accompli*. (ibid)

Viewed in this way, Epic literature becomes an aesthetic lens by which to expose and examine the function of ideology in the perpetuation of all kinds of social issues, and presented across varying contexts. Considering how an Epic perspective on social issues might be limiting, Toohey reminds us that epic literary production is both vast and diverse. “What isn’t epic,” he questions. The response is indicative: “Very little it seems.” According to his assessment of the range of epic literary forms surviving
from antiquity, there remains very little that has not been covered in one way or another, by one form of epic literature or another (Bates 31).

[As] one of the most transportable of narrative genres and one of the easiest to experience, whether through public or private performance or recitation, or simply through reading oneself or being read to. So it is that we find that epic narrative becomes the major and most popular purveyor of narrative within most periods of the ancient world […] (34)

Flashing forward to the sixteenth century, the epic form persists and manifests according to new social and historical contexts. For Renaissance scholars, as for scholars working within the Classics, the epistemological value of the epic form comes from its lasting popularity, its diversity, and the way in which imposed narrative order and tropological patterning function in opposition, and in tandem, to generate and communicate ideological information.

Enter: the female warrior archetype and her specific – and varied – deployment(s) in Cinquecento epic, and things get interesting. Trope, meet the ideology of gendered hierarchy; meet, also, the (thoroughly destabilized) context of pox-afflicted, and politically divided, northern-Italian principalities at the start of the sixteenth century. Who we are talking about, and why, adds an additional layer of ideological consideration: that of the restrictive process of canon-formation and perpetuation. This time, our critical interpretational focus requires the adoption of a long-view on the generation and transmission of hierarchies within forms of aesthetic production, and we must, once again, look beyond the specific epic literature being interpreted, to consider the work’s reception and critical treatment across time and cultural contexts.

This brings us back to the point made earlier, regarding the “purest forms” of Cinquecento epic, and the irony inherent in the seemingly inconsequential deployment of such ideologically laden phrasing when discussing epic types and themes. Before ever contacting a given text, by nature of its very existence, the “Canon of Literature” has already influenced our reception thereof. Because there is a canon within which we may operate, we are thereby bound to participate in its principal function: ideological transmission. Whether we mean to or not, when we work within the system of canonization, our criticism necessarily bears the mark of our original literary sin: we are guilty by our association to the field in which we work. Even such an off-hand device for the categorization of subgenres, functions as an ideologically-laden assertion hinging upon the assumption of truth and authority and influencing how the text will be read and understood – or if it will be read at all.
Purity or Obscurity from Canon to Closet

But how does one begin to break free from the ideologically restrictive function of canonization, while simultaneously working within its bounds? One such call to arms has been made by Beverly Allen, whose manifesto for feminist scholarship within contemporary Italian Studies is contextualized within the broader issue of gendered hierarchies at play within the process of canon formation. Allen points out that traditional discourse on the canonization of an Italian “national” literature is, by necessity, gendered male; and the implications of such a lopsided literary and intellectual practice serves to obscure and effectively to silence the voices of women both as writers – and thus the objects of criticism – and as scholars, whose relative marginality within the male-dominated field (in Italy as in the US) is, even today, undeniable. In order to begin to correct this inherent imbalance, Allen suggests that all scholars, but female and minority scholars in particular, must resist the urge to substitute female or “other” for male in the hierarchal system that canonization implies. We must instead engage in the risky work of undermining the overarching patriarchal structure on two levels: that of the canon itself and that of the cultural context in which we ourselves work and from which vantage point we receive texts. By exposing the underlying ideologies that serve to create meaning and aesthetic form within a work, we can examine texts at the same time that we recognize and accommodate our own biases and subjectivity, utilizing a self-

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Allen makes her argument specifically around feminist discourse, but points out that the silencing that occurs affects not only women, but other marginalized groups as well, whose objectification (i.e. lack of subject position within discourse) serves to gender them “feminine.” Here Allen includes such categories as class, “race,” etc. in her discussion.

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Photo taken in 2019 in the Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, where 4 of the 20 tables provided for consultation still bear such plaques from the early twentieth century. When I asked our tour-guide what would have happened should more women arrive than tables allotted, I was deflected with a response along the lines of “much fewer women were engaged in scholarship than men.” While this may be so, no attempt was made to explain the social factors influencing such a disparity. The response, which neither answered my question, nor addressed the bigger issue being raised, was offered to our group of serious and interested scholars – which consisted of a majority of female students, and a contingent of all-male professors. It was disheartening that no further attention was given the matter – as though the issue had been settled. I am still curious to know what would have happened, and remain troubled by such a misrepresentation of history and the outright dismissal of gendered hierarchies in scholarship. Neglecting the opportunity to openly discuss such issues continues to be a real and pressing problem in Italian Studies today. As an international community of scholars, we can do better – and we must do better. How we talk about these subjects influences our daily lives and those of the generations of scholars following in our wake.
awareness that working within the traditional canon obfuscates under the “universal” privileged male perspective.

Allen dubs this radical restructuring of the canon “feminist literary archaeology,” where “feminine” becomes the stand-in for all marginalized categories, referring to the power differential of bipartite gendering more than to the limited notion of female-authorship. In Allen’s proposed system for textual interpretation and criticism, subjectivity – or rather, agency – is expanded to include all categories of persons, and to account for differential cultural contexts in a way that the traditional canon not only neglects, but effectively erases from history. It is, she asserts, the work of feminist scholars to perform the complete revision of which works be included in the canon through the redefinition and restructuring of the process of canonicity itself – an inherently hierarchical and therefore biased and incomplete approach to textual interpretation. Allen also reminds us that we must, as scholars, engage in a constant process of acknowledgement and recognition of the influence our own cultural contexts and distinct subjectivities have on the work we do. As we receive texts, we must first lay bare the hidden ideologies that inform our own practice of conceptualization and interpretation, never losing sight of the contradictory nature entailed in the performance of procedures aimed at destabilizing the phallocentric/logocentric nature of canonization, while at the same time working from within cultural and political structures dominated by their own phallocentric systems of hierarchy.

The coming out, that Allen’s title suggests and also undermines, much like her vision for a radically restructured concept of canonization, works on multiple levels. First, as a scholar, Allen suggests, she must come out as a “woman” – not as a “feminist” per se – but as a subjective being, whose own material body informs the work she does, just as it is the medium through which she physically engages with the world. Whatever external cultural forces may influence her understanding of the reality she experiences, it is her body that mediates those interpretations – her first filter in the process of locating meaning in the world around her. For the individual scholar, having established her own, distinct, non-male subjectivity, it is now her task to bring marginalized texts into the light, exposing the “closet” that relative obscurity has built around the “other” voices in literary and artistic production, whose silence and invisibility are essential to the traditional process of canonization of “national”

“From One Closet to Another? Feminism, Literary Archaeology, and the Canon”
literature. It is not sufficient that marginalized texts be added to the existing canon, because, as Allen has shown, the process itself is one of closeting the non-male, non-privileged, “other” voice in literature, art and history. In order to escape the closet of traditional canonization, we must dismantle it completely and begin the ideologically threatening work of exposing the varied subjectivities that occur within literature (as within culture) when the dominant (male) subjectivity is removed from its privileged station as “universal,” and the diversity of human experience in literary production and scholarship is taken into full account.

**Resisting the Canon**

The solution, as Beverly Allen suggests, is to be found through (feminist) literary archaeology, an alternative approach to literary studies, that acknowledges and lays bare, the otherwise latent ideological function of canonization. For Allen, the literary canon in Italian Studies (in the context of the American Academy) serves as a “model of supreme centrality” whose ideological reproduction of patriarchal gender hierarchies effectively erases the contribution of all minority groups – neglecting not only women as writers, readers – and scholars – of literature, but also marginalized males and intersexed groups (30).

Because it is tied directly to the discourse of a constructed national identity, the primary function of canonization (whether of art or literature) is always to reproduce itself, without seeming like it is trying. The canon naturalizes and seeks to neutralize, its own transmission of socially divisive ideology by limiting the subject of what is classified as worthy of study.

Allen’s literary archaeology assumes that all tendencies toward canonization entail subjective valuation, and suggests that such subjectivities – relativistic as they may be – contain the essential and “objective” truth about the text being treated. A de-canonized, archaeological approach to literary studies can come “from any given subject position in any given context without overt concern for the projected status of the found texts” (32). A more egalitarian approach to literary studies, literary archaeology

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9While Allen comes from the feminist perspective, and names her approach to literary archaeology accordingly, she explicitly means to include other marginalized groups as well as women, in her suggested approach: A literary archaeology inspired by a recognition of the significance of gender in cultural power dynamics would be sensitive to other categories that may be used to marginalize texts unjustly. […] feminist literary archaeology would seek to discover and analyze texts by men as well as women who by virtue of their sexuality, ethnicity, regionality, so-called race, or the simple fact that they write in dialect, are nudged away from positions of centrality, persons who, by virtue of these subject positions and regardless of their sex, are gendered as feminine. 31 (emphasis here is my own)

10This chapter appeared in 1996 and makes no mention of the latter, however, we now recognize the lacuna Allen herself made by omitting them from her argument. I believe the author would agree with this yet more expansive approach to sex and gender.
situates truth within a constellation of subjectivities, allowing each work to determine for itself the appropriate set of contexts and ideologies in which to situate it.

And this is precisely why we cannot all study Ariosto (our canonical exemplar in Cinquecento epic), and, at the same time, it is the reason why we can – and in fact, we should – all study Ariosto as well. Because the truth of a much-studied text like the Furioso is necessarily subjective; it is only attainable through the practice of literary analysis and direct engagement with the text, over time and in relation to others’ considerations of the same and related texts. The canon, it would seem, can serve us still, but only insofar as we can resist the urge to work towards locating objective truth therein.

In my own work, I tend to follow Allen’s line of thinking, situating the objective truth contained in literature within the web of latent ideologies and subjectivities that encode the text, as well as the criticism and scholarly commentary which surround it. By actively working through subjectivities, my own, as well as those of author, critic or historian, I essay to maintain a constant awareness of whose interests are being served and how, through the ideology being espoused or reproduced. Rather than obscure my subjectivity as critic, or feign scholarly objectivity (an illusion at best), I instead maintain the centrality of my own subject-hood in relation to the texts, authors and commentators with whom I am working. Just as the Truth per Ariosto can be known only to him, the Truth per myself can be known only through my own interaction with the text. What the text is and what it does are wholly subjective. And, until I approach a text, it cannot be said to contain any form of identifiable truth whatsoever (this is the emptiness/openness that the canon seeks to obscure). The truth is not a thing, but an event. We can document it with words and image, but we cannot apprehend, nor may we distill it. The Truth is the dialogue between text and reader – and the mingling of subjectivities past and present.

The danger of canonization is that valuation displaces memory. Texts that are not valued are not assigned to memory, and are condemned to obscurity. Considering the canon as a form of collective memory-making, tied to cultural identity, brings to mind Plato’s admonition on the dangers of rhetoric in his dialogue “Phaedrus,” where the philosopher presents the myth of the Origin of Writing. In the dialogue, writing is presented as a tool for memory, at the same time that it represents a crutch for forgetting. In the myth of the King Theuth, to whom writing is first presented as a gift, we find that there is no discrete value to this craft:
but the value of this gift is uncertain. The value of writing […] has been spelled out to the King, but it is the King who will give it its value, who will set the price of what, in the act of receiving, he constitutes or institutes. The king or god […] is thus the other name for the origin of value. The value of writing will not be itself, writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it. (Derrida 431, 2)

Taken a beat further, we can see where canonization itself is the very danger that Plato sought to warn against. Canonization possesses all the allure and risks of sophism.

The canon, as god or king, dictates value, and determines meaning, absent true knowledge.

But god-the-king nonetheless experiences [Writing] as a product, an ergon, which is not his own, which comes to him from outside but also from below, and which awaits his condescending judgement in order to be consecrated in its being and value. God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. (ibid)

Canonization emerges as a system that grants determining power to the figure of the patriarch, but that power is not connected to absolute Truth. God-the-king, or the canon, is no revealer or aggregator of abstract truths contained within texts. Rather, the canon reveals truth about the dynamics of power among the participatory figures (authors, readers, commentators, etc.), and how the power to dictate meaning and value shape our understanding and reception of text.

The canon, like writing, is recursive, and it is in this repetition that authenticity or direct access to truth is lost.

Repetition is the very movement of nontruth: the presence of what is gets lost, disperses itself, multiplies itself through mimesis, icons, phantasms, simulacra, etc. Through phenomena already. And this type of repetition is the possibility of becoming-perceptible-to-the-senses: nonideality. This is on the side of nonphilosophy, bad memory, hypomnesia, writing. Here, tautology is life going out of itself beyond return. Death rehearsal. Unreserved spending. The irreducible excess, through the play of the supplement, of any self-intimacy of the living, the good, the true. (445)

Rather than study the important or the best texts as determined by a given canon (and the dominant ideologies whose interests it propagates), the archaeological approach “advocate[s] the desirability of remembering and harken[s] to the ways in which canonicity constitutes a kind of ideological memory, but it would claim the right to remember free of the injunction to remember in a particular way” (Allen 31 – emphasis my own). The last bit here is critical, because it signifies the ability to locate objective truth.

Only by applying my own subjectivity directly to the text and its commentators can I hope to access the

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11 From Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics, ergon is defined as function, task or work (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ergon).

12 Apple Dictionary defines tautology as repetition through re-wording, a redundancy that is typically considered a flaw in rhetorical style, and that is used also in certain forms of logical argumentation (accessed September 25, 2019).
truth contained within; while the canon itself has the opposite function: it pushes me toward “objective” scholarship, and predetermines what I can and will find within a given, predetermined text.

As a woman scholar, then, I look to the work of thinkers such as Allen, to understand the ways in which I can claim a space for myself in the masculine-gendered world of Italian Studies, and literary criticism more broadly, without conforming “to the very norms of [my] own oppression” (28). I do not want to subvert the gendered-hierarchy in critical studies, but I do seek to dismantle and disempower it; a process that can only be accomplished from within the system itself. Harkening to “a Deridian critique of language, a Marxist critique of class, and perhaps most closely, the reevaluations of subject positionality that are taking place at present in ethnographic practical theory,” Allen reminds us that, “there is no subject position not already traversed by ideology” (33, 34).

**Subject, Object, Scholar**

As a cis-identifying female, it is my bodily identity that gendered-hierarchies speak to, and I am in no way immune to the forces of ideology. When I do engage with such ideologies, my relationship to my corporal self, as well as to my intellect, is affected. My body is my first means of understanding womanhood itself, and it “is the final site of ideology” (ibid). My objective understanding of what it means to be a woman, is wholly subjective and based in my own bodily experiences. In part, textually-transmitted ideology is received by my body, for which, as the focus of so much sixteenth-century debate, scorn and rhetoric, to feign objectivity would be to remove all possibility of locating truth within my reception of text.

Working with subjectivities allows me to locate truth as it occurs in flashes and twinkles in the connections I make between text and context, art and history, past and present. Approaching the text as none other than myself, and acknowledging and asserting my own subjectivity –as well as its powers and limitations – brings me closer to understanding a given text or context, let alone any essential human truths nurtured therein. Allen’s literary archaeology allows me to hold onto my own critical subjectivity, without sacrificing the “objective” truth I seek. I follow her refrain:

As long as I keep humming this song, I shall be able, I believe, to understand the intellectual and scholarly implications of my own subject position and my own feminism. And if I do that, I shall avoid that fearful silencing that would occur were I to pull some texts out of the closet of obscurity only to lock them up once again in the closet of canonicity. (ibid)
Like Allen, I must constantly remind myself not to fall into the trap of canonicity – not to write myself out of the story, as it were. I remind myself again, that ideology is not only about “who gets to have power, but how power is constituted” (ibid) – and the only way for me, as a “gendered” (i.e. non-male) scholar, to avoid participating in the recursive ideological function of the canon, is to work within and beyond it, never allowing myself to fall subject to its rules and stipulations. Holding onto subjectivities is the life-line that allows me to perform this work, reminding me always to consider perspective, and disabusing me of the tendency to accept canonical assumptions at face value. While I cannot participate in critical studies if I choose to absent myself fully from the forces of canonization, I also will be bound to failure if I do not work to dismantle its “closeting” effects from within.

**Bending the Canon and Scrutinizing Authority**

The question of poetic authority and legitimacy becomes increasingly relevant, when we consider how seemingly unfit the ingredients for the Cinquecento epic are to a form of “high art.” The same process of canonization that should have formally excluded authors like Pulci and Ariosto, served instead to institutionalize these figures and their texts, in an ideological program that began with the poems’ composition and publication, and carries on today in the formalized context of literary studies. The long-form epic poem, classically considered the “noblest form of secular writing” (Zatti 93), was rendered “popular” through its adoption by vernacular poets working within the chivalric romance tradition, starting most notably with the Florentine Luigi Pulci in the late fifteenth century. Along with Dante Alighieri (their predecessor by roughly two centuries – though not of chivalric epic) vernacular poets such as Ariosto and Tasso succeeded in transposing texts from the popular form of the vernacular epic into the corpus of formally accepted literature.13

Those who are familiar with the Cinquecento epic as a genre, will recognize a potentially problematic elision, in the approximation of pre- and post-Tridentine epic poetics – situating Tasso

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13Ross reminds us of the importance of linguistic standardization in the diffusion of popular literature in the early modern period, pointing out that Ariosto’s choice to write in a dialect other than his own, would set him apart from writers like Boiardo, whose works would have to be translated for a wider audience:

The most important difference between Boiardo and Ariosto was a refinement in language that underlies what Francesco de Sanctis called the magic of Ariosto’s style. At the suggestion of Cardinal Pietro Bembo, Ariosto tells us in his Satires, he wrote not in his native dialect but in the language of Florence instead, a linguistic turn that put him in the tradition of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio […] [and] gave him a broader, more sophisticated audience […] (Orlando furioso, xiii)

Boiardo’s poem originally appeared in the dialect of Reggio Emilia, the koinè padana (Ross, Orlando innamorato, xxiv).
immediately alongside Ariosto. Very different works and authors, Tasso’s conscientious and highly structured rhetorical response to the pre-Tridentine form of Cinquecento epic, does not bear directly on the social context of the early sixteenth century, and so, despite its inarguable canonicity, the Liberata will remain a marginalized text within the present study, and serves largely as a point of reference and contrast.

In order to speak as I do about the “Cinquecento epic,” it is fundamental that I am explicit in defining my parameters for such, which fall outside the commonly assumed notion that these will be a body of canonical texts spanning that century. My focus will be otherwise, as I begin with a semi-marginalized character, the warrior maiden Marfisa, who is the literary product of Boiardo’s canonical Innamorato, popular in its time and later revitalized by Ariosto’s masterpiece (a continuation of Boiardo’s story), the Furioso, and about whom a series of eponymous “minor” epic poems are composed. While the voices of marginalized authors of epic – including those of women poets – have been receiving more attention in scholarship in recent years, it has historically been the case that the “minor” poems and poets, whose work has rarely been the subject of specialized study, are condemned to obscurity at best, ignominy and formal critical derision at worst.

Explicit expressions of this tendency have become increasingly less fashionable in contemporary scholarship, and yet we are reminded that our scholarly legacy is built upon remarks from such titans of epic criticism as the late C. S. Lewis, who, in his discussion of “dominant” (i.e. canonical) literary forms, could not resist infusing his considerations with a bit of high-brow snark. He wrote of “minor” authors that: “a dominant form tends to attract to itself writers whose talents would have fitted them much better for work of some other kind” (232, 3 The Allegory of Love, 1936). The veiled misogyny and ageism of Lewis’s subsequent comments, reveal a different sort of pattern of ideological reproduction, calling to mind Cinquecento debates surrounding the Querelle des dames still relevant well into the twentieth century.

The distinctly patriarchal connotations of an inquiry into “dominant” literature and authors are reinforced by the all-but-explicit recourse to misogynistic derision that Lewis launches against the anonymous author of a second-rate poem, nearly devoid of all allegorical merit – judged to be the likely
work of a poet-ess. Lewis asserts, “the Assembly of Ladies written by a poet who has no better vocation to allegory than that of fashion” and insists that:

a dominant form attracts to itself those who ought not to have written at all; it becomes a kind of trap or drain towards which bad work moves by a certain ‘kindly encycling’. Youthful vanity and dullness, determined to write, will almost certainly write in the dominant form of their epoch. (ibid)

There is, for Lewis, ultimately, a formal manner for separating the literary wheat from the chaff, and for distinguishing properly, “between good and bad work – between the poetic use and the fashionable abuse” (ibid).

While obviously dated in its specific presentation, the general approach to criticism, to canonization and to “minor” literature that Lewis is espousing here, persists in critical studies today, even as emergent studies into marginalized texts and figures have begun to challenge its preeminence and demonstrate the utility in working beyond the canon. In examining latent ideologies – that which is unstated and yet morally transmitted through content and representation – literary scholarship has succeeded in moving genre studies into the realm of the immediately relevant: connecting literature to human experience more broadly and revealing the underlying functions of narrative in the formation, maintenance and dissolution of social institutions.

In contextualizing her discussion of the female warriors of chivalric epic, Tomalin explores the earlier poetic form of the Italian cantari, whose chivalric themes and subject matter were later concretized by the literary epics being discussed here. Because these compositions were largely transmitted orally, being chanted or sung in Italian marketplaces or at court from around the 1300s, few traces remain of what was likely a vast body of works (33). Despite such material limitations, Tomalin’s

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15 There are various theories regarding the authorship of the Assembly of Ladies, an anonymous Middle English poem dating to the fifteenth century. While three known manuscripts are extant, it is presumed that these are in the hand of someone other than the author. Early scholars mistakenly attributed the work to Chaucer based upon Thynne’s inclusion of it in his 1532 edition of the author’s works. They included it in his oeuvre until Tyrwhitt removed it in the second half of the eighteenth-century (Pearsall, “Introduction”). Today, it is generally accepted that the work is female-authored, taking at face-value, the narrator’s proclamation in the opening stanza:

In a gardyn, abowte tweyne after none,
There were ladyes walking, as was ther wone,
Four in nombre, as to my mynde doth falle,
And I the fift, symplest of alle.

(Pearsall, Stanza 1, Lines 4-7)

16 The Italian cantari refer to a popular poetic tradition of the 1200-1300s, recited in vernacular and modeled upon the troubadours of Provence. These tales included and drew upon translations of Latin classics, eastern epic narratives, and the “Matters” of Brittany and of France. They would typically be sung or chanted in busy market-places, presented with a loosely moralizing conclusion and an opening dedication to Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary. Their content was often crude and formulaic, based in stereotyped portrayals and “a somewhat perfunctory religious bias” (Tomalin 33, 34).
examination reveals the way in which the forces of institutionalization restrict the range of content depicted in aesthetic production. In the following passage, “popular” is to be understood in opposition to “literary”: “The more popular the poem [...] the more chance the woman has of remaining independent. The nearer the poem comes to the literary elitist tradition, the more she is drawn into the conventions of the donna gentile” (35). While the cantari occur in a somewhat different context from the chivalric epics later composed for the Houses of Este (Innamorato and Furioso) and Gonzaga (La Marfisa bizza and La Marfisa disperata), we see already that the literary success of such poems may have some bearing on whether female figures retain independence.

Viewed from another angle, obscurity (historically and canonically speaking) permits more liberty of expression – a general aesthetic tendency that has repercussions for examining “minor” works of epic literature. While the canon of epic literature contains a great deal of innovation in art, it may also represent the stifling of content in the transmission of popular ideas and present posterity with a lopsided perspective of the ideological potential for the period and for the genre, more broadly understood. Rather than expressing a generalized literary social identity, the canon defines the specific terms under which a period or genre is to be understood and conceptualized, ultimately reducing the range and significance of the cultural and ideological information contained therein. Let us not disabuse ourselves entirely of what is a necessary tool in artistic and literary analysis, but let us also consider how works falling outside the canon can present novel information on exactly what information the canon provides – and what it erases.

Considering the literary canon as a form of social institution unto itself, one concerned with the exclusion and privileging of certain texts and authors, brings us once again to the question of authority in marginalized texts and to the transmission of poetic legitimacy by legacy. In order to enshrine, isolate and demonstrate a delimited corpus of aesthetic production – effectively fashioning a literary handle or cultural identity marker – the canon (as a social institution and function) conveys selective authority and poetic legitimacy upon a given text (demonstrating Lewis’s poetic use or fashionable abuse depending on context), according to an imputed legacy inherited directly from its authoritative predecessors. As Tasso’s Discorsi and similar theoretical treatises demonstrate, within the canon, epic authority is produced

17 The mid-sixteenth century saw a shift in considerations of the epic poetic genre and a move toward re-defining its characteristics, limitations and purposes. This occurred in part following the emergence of Bernardo Segni’s Italian translation of Aristotle’s Poetics in 1549 (the first of its kind) and in part as a response to the Post-Tridentine move to contain literary and artistic material according
through the presence and presentation of history within the text, where the poet must demonstrate his ability to reconcile the potentially conflicting roles of "artificioso poeta (artful poet)" and "verace istorico" (truthful historian)" (qtd in Zatti 92).

It is at this juncture that the distinction between objective truth and history are blurred: the “high literary tradition” functions as history; as truth, itself (ibid). The measure of poetic legitimacy, then, is not traceable to an adherence to truth or history, or to any objective standard found within a given text for that matter, but rather, to the successful presentation of both tradition and innovation, in concert and at odds. The highly subjective determination of a “successful” literary presentation hinges on the demonstration of both impulses – traditional and innovative – in a manner that perpetuates rather than disrupts, the existing institution, that is, the canon itself.

Because the canon is foremost a self-perpetuation machine, the work of navigating its conflicting impulses in order to create a text that represents neither history nor art – but the infusion of the two into a non-presentational truth presents significant poetic risks for the artist, as for the patron. Considering the real-world implications for communicating ideologies through literature, reminds us that “the fame of the epic poets across the centuries would be assured not by the privilege of historical truth but by the political legitimization of their literary inventions” (93). The canonical valuation of epic poetry engenders the recourse to ancient authority in order to present ideology as unassailable fact, thereby demonstrating its own legitimacy, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of what came before, and determining the potential legitimacy of future works.

In its limiting capacities, the canon presents itself as an ideal locus for the explicit examination of ideological transmission in literature. Through the canon, we glimpse the edges of what was deemed “possible” in literature and what was condemned, and we can trace the internal tensions coursing through and amongst genres. The canon is best apprehended in a sideways glance, that both accepts and rejects the aesthetic hierarchy inherent to its production: it is our best tool, and yet, it is also the Achilles heel that

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18 Being condemned to obscurity was not the worst fate an erring poet could face in the sixteenth century.
will seal our interpretational fate. In examining the social repercussions for various forms of aesthetic ideological dissemination, the canon of Cinquecento epic poetry is the best/worst tool at our disposal: a long-term, thoroughly programmatic, cultural identity-generator and perpetuator.

A signifier without a distinct signified, the canon is the embodiment of empty signification: form or “symbol,” without meaning, i.e. devoid of self-substantiating content. The canon-tool provides a scholarly language and distinct set of principles with which to interact with a given text, at the same time that it undermines our interest in objective truth, which seems to have no place in the canon itself – for, when has good literature been sufficiently demonstrated by an adherence to “known fact?” Bearing in mind that: “Poetry neither reflects history, nor betrays it; it simply confirms or denies other poetry” (ibid), let us turn back again, peering deeply into the canon for a glimpse at an empty signifier, one with the ability to elucidate sex and gender norms – and perhaps also inform our understanding for the practical function of aesthetic production in response to epidemic disease(?) – let us go now, to meet the warrior maidens of Cinquecento epic, and to locate Marfisa among their distinguished ranks.

**Guerriere in Renaissance Literature**

**Her Latin Origins**

The *guerriere* of Renaissance epic – in their many variations and instantiations – represent a radical shift in the longstanding figuration of the trope of the virtuous warrior maiden, as established by Virgil's *Aeneid*, the epic poetic model for Renaissance poets. Virgil’s Camilla stands out as the matriarch for the *guerriere* of Cinquecento epic: desexualized and androgynous, characterized by her unflagging valor in battle, “[h]er progress is pure and beautiful, like her body, so that both terms in the phrase ‘virgin warrior’ are equally significant” (Robinson 70). Dedicated to the goddess Diana – virgin and huntress – Camilla’s masculinity permits her to operate independently as a non-gendered, and therefore non-sexual figure. Aside from the fact of her sex and the emphasis on her beauty, Camilla’s only other feminine

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19 In renaissance poetry, “Virgil was always the center, the point of reference. His work provided a model for epic poets and theorists alike, and his artistic development was the prescribed pattern for a poetic career […] a source for the scope and themes of national epic” (Robinson 11).

20 The closest model for what would become the Renaissance *guerriere* (a la Boiardo and Ariosto), Virgil’s Camilla is not, however, the first warrior maiden featured in western literature. The longstanding European fascination with female violence harks back to Greek and Latin mythology (the unrestrained fury of goddesses and female monsters alike) and the warring Amazons of Homer’s *Odyssey*. It is with Camilla that female violence is first linked to virtue, and where a number of poetic devices emerge – such as the moment of revelation upon removing her helmet, her beautiful and flowing hair, etc. – that will become standard motifs among Cinquecento epic *guerriere*.  

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attribute is that which leads to her ultimate demise (as inevitably it must).\textsuperscript{21} It is her attraction to the shiny target of Chloreus’s armor – feminine greed – that leads her to death (71).

In her reading of Virgil’s treatment of sex and gender in the \textit{Aeneid}, Robinson emphasizes the ongoing (and unresolved) conflict between public duty (to the state) and private needs (as represented in sexuality). It is not womanhood that Virgil critiques, but the forces of erotic love that threaten public order (47).\textsuperscript{22} The Renaissance guerriere, who are derived from Camilla, retain her characteristic chastity and yet “are capable of love and preparing to join their lovers in combat or marriage. They succeed because they are women; Camilla succeeds because, by Virgil’s own standards, she is not one” (71).\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{Early-Modern Context: Fitting the Guerriere into the Querelle}

The Renaissance guerriere emerged in a period of cultural transition, where questions about the subjectivity and role of women in society coincided with a “general reshaping of European culture in the period 1300 – 1700” (King and Rabil xi). King and Rabil have identified the early modern period as one in which the “other voice” emerged, displacing the universalized “first voice” of the educated male whose three-thousand-year reign of unquestioned authority in Western culture can be traced to Hebrew, Greek, Roman and Christian civilizations (ibid).\textsuperscript{24}\textsuperscript{25} During the medieval period, women’s subordination in

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\textsuperscript{21}“In Camilla, Virgil once more presents us with a figure who is expected to resolve the conflicts between masculine and feminine elements. Instead, she reinforces the poet’s view, repeated throughout the epic, that the only way to reconcile the female principle, the principle of sexuality, with the state is to purge it” (Robinson 72).

\textsuperscript{22}For a discussion of Virgil’s poetics as propaganda reinforcing contemporary patriarchal power in public as well as private spheres, under threat from new marriage and inheritance statutes granting women greater liberty, see Robinson, “Virgil: Hic Amor, Haec Patria” in \textit{Monstrous Regiment}, pp. 11 – 72.

\textsuperscript{23}Bettin asserts that, in contrast to their ancient and medieval predecessors, the Renaissance emphasis on the guerriere’s binding of femininity and masculinity, Mars and Venus (an irresolvable conflict in Virgil), is best exemplified in the figures of Marfisa and Bradamante, who are the sisters of valiant knights – Ruggiero and Rinaldo, respectively – and yet, who earn their lasting fame through their own exploits, rather than by association, and who, despite being capable warriors equal to their male counterparts, retain their femininity as expressed in their beauty, courtesy, and gentility in inspiring decorous love.

\textit{[…]} Marfisa e Bradamante sono degne sorelle di Ruggiero e Rinaldo, godono di fama propria e non riflessa dalle gesta di avi e fratelli, e sono ancor più nobilitate rispetto alle antiche guerriere, perché, pur combattendo alla pari con i cavalieri, restano portatrici della loro femminilità, fatta di bellezza, cortesia e gentilezza ispiratrice di amore \textit{[…]} (585)


\textsuperscript{24}For a thorough and yet concise accounting of the historical development of the “other voice” in Western culture, see the Editors’ Introduction to the Series in any of the titles from King and Rabil’s, \textit{The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe}. The version I am working from appears as: “The Other voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series” in \textit{Floridoro: A Chivalric Romance}, U of Chicago P, 2006.

\textsuperscript{25}Sapegno reminds us of the significant influence of the fourteenth century’s \textit{Tre Corone} (three crowns) of Italian literary production, Dante (1265-1321), Petrarch (1304-1374) and Boccaccio (1313-1375), in laying the foundation for a radically altered European context:

\begin{quote}
\textit{In essa [the literary trend encapsulated by the \textit{tre corone}] si rispecchia, si matura e si risolve, la crisi della civiltà medievale, nel momento in cui si spezzano le robuste strutture ideologiche che l’avevano sorretta per secoli, si affievolisce il prestigio delle istituzioni universali su cui aveva lungamente poggiate l’assetto della cristianità, l’unità morale}
\end{quote}
Western society was carried out publicly in literary representations of the inferior sex, in women’s diminished status in ecclesiastic life, and in their lack of rights to property ownership and even over their own children; and privately in their familial subjugation, and duties to unpaid labor. As King and Rabil write:

When the modern era opened, European culture was so firmly structured by a framework of negative attitudes toward women that to dismantle it was a monumental labor. The process began as part of a larger cultural movement that entailed the critical reexamination of ideas inherited from the ancient and medieval past. (xix)

It is the rise of Humanism in the fourteenth century that would make the intellectual space necessary for the advances in literature, science and philosophy that we now associate with the early modern period and which “laid the basis for the eighteenth-century Enlightenment” (ibid). Humanism occurred as a radical retooling of intellectual and philosophical practices, where “calling authors, texts, and ideas into question […] made possible the fundamental rereading of the whole intellectual tradition that was required in order to free women from cultural prejudice and social subordination” (xx).

In 1405 Christine de Pizan’s (1365-1431) Book of the City of Ladies first called into question women’s inherent inferiority to men, and opened up literary space for a new humanist debate that would span several centuries, the resulting Querelle des femmes (the woman question). Proto-feminist or pro-woman and misogynistic texts emerged throughout the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries in vernacular as in Latin, written by educated men and women alike and occurring in a variety of genres, which sought to either reinforce the subjugation of women as naturally inferior beings, or to argue against their differential treatment and to espouse the socio-cultural – and not natural – origins of such.

In terms of the role of women in society and their perceived capacities and limitations, the guerriere of Cinquecento epic were born into a socio-cultural context very unlike that of their medieval predecessors. The querelle not only made room for new figurations surrounding the portrayal of women’s
virtue (beyond the context of chastity or motherhood and faithfulness), but it also situated women in the precarious position of being under heavy scrutiny in a highly polarized cultural discussion whose respondents were deeply invested in their relative positions. Despite this newfound “flexibility” of characterization, the overarching tendency underlying major social institutions and systems of order – legal, ecclesiastic, intellectual – remained heavily patriarchal. It is the very existence of the *querelle* and not its radical restructuring of social realities that makes this historical event so remarkable. The *querelle* changed what was possible in literature, art, and philosophy – and moved women’s inferiority from an unquestioned, and universal natural truth, to the realm of reason where it had to be justified, examined, and explained.

As a significant threat to established social order and the fundamental roles of both men and women, the debate surrounding the *querelle* tapped into a much larger sense of social instability on the Italian peninsula, resulting in an outpouring of literature dealing with proper comportment. At all levels of society it was necessary to reestablish social order and the legitimacy of hierarchies, and from this urgent impulse, texts were generated to guide society back to a point of stability. Within the context of generalized hegemonic insecurity, where the *querelle* raised new questions about the very nature of patriarchy itself, the figure of the *guerriera* in epic literature became an increasingly complex symbol of female errancy and acquired new and potentially polarizing valences. In her examination of this gendered political and aesthetic shift Shemek situates woman as a site for either fixing – or alternatively – displacing established norms and codes of conduct within the context of early sixteenth-century Italy’s (and more generally that of Europe) rapidly changing social structures, as signaled by the shift from feudalistic to aristocratic hegemony, and further complicated by periods of foreign invasion, civil war, and

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27 It is important here to note that the *querelle* occurred in the context of a society very much in flux, and that the debate over women is only one piece of a much larger picture of potential and real social disorder sparked in the fourteenth century. Sapegno points to the “profound lacerations that had debilitated the vitality of medieval communes” and paved the way for the emergence of new systems of hegemony, primarily the Italian Signorie and principalities:

> Ma intanto le lacerazioni profonde che incrinano la vitalità dei comuni, l’asprezza dei conflitti di classe, di parte e di famiglie, le persecuzioni, gli eccidi, gli esili, creano un senso di stanchezza, un desiderio di ordine e di pace, che promuove e accelera l’evolversi degli ordinamenti giuridici verso forme di dominio accentratore e potenzialmente egualitario, e apre la strada alle signorie e ai principati. (8)

The problem of ultimate authority, however, becomes central in these new systems where unanswered questions of legitimacy lead to a diminished sense of justice and order, and leave room for civil instability and disharmony: “Manca ai comuni come alle signorie un fondamento ideale di legittimità, si dissolve il senso della giustizia, dell’ordine, di una stabile e armoniosa convivenza civile” (ibid). The only remaining “universal institutions” capable of reinforcing peace and justice, became the Church and the Empire, whose idealized hegemony had also come into question as conflicts arose surrounding the division of Church and State, and the threats of tyranny, greed, and corruption loomed large in political and philosophical discourse (ibid).
I would add, epidemic disease. In her work, Shemek “illustrate[s] the cardinal function of a clear gender dichotomy in early modern conceptions of an orderly world” locating the Italian Renaissance as “an age of creative innovation” and also “a moment of intense cultural normalization” (*Ladies Errant* 16).

Shemek again points to the wide popularity of texts devoted to the proper conduct and education for various categories of people, whether they be wives, husbands, noblemen, ladies of the court, political leaders, etc., as well as the many explicit treatises on the *querelle* which “betray a consistent fear that unstable boundaries for feminine behavior might forebode more generalized social disorder” (5). The lasting legacy of Machiavelli’s *Il principe*, Castiglione’s *Il cortegiano*, and Alberti’s *Libri della famiglia* (all canonical texts to this day) serve to illustrate the influence that such texts likely held in concretizing appropriate decorum and its association to politics and the implementation of social power as determined by such critical factors as class and gender (to use modern terminology). Similarly, texts such as Boccaccio’s *De Claris mulieribus* (Concerning Famous Women) provide enumerations and descriptions of famous women from history and literature, emphasizing female virtue in its appropriate forms. A selection from “Hic Mulier or The Man-Woman,” an anonymous English pamphlet printed in 1620, illustrates some of the specific insecurities that the *guerriere* of the Cinquecento raised in contemporary European society:

> The weapon of a vertuous woman was her teares, which every good man pitied, and every valiant man honoured: the weapon of a cruell man is his sword, which neither Law allowes, nor reason defends: and will you leave the excellent shield of innocence for this deformed instrument of disgrace? Even for goodnesse sake (that can ever pay her owne with her owne merits) looke to your reputations, which are undermined with your owne follies, and doe not become the idle sisters of foolish Don Quixote, to beleev every vaine fable which you reade, or to think you may bee attired like Bradamante, who was often take for Ricardetto her brother; that you may fight like Marfiza, and winne husbands with conquest, or ride astride like Cloridiana, and make gyants fall at your stirrops, (the morals will give you better meanings) which if you shunne, and take the grosse imitations, the first will deprive you of all good societie; the second of noble affections; and the third, of all beloved modestie: you shall lose all the charmes of womens naturall perfections, have no presence to winne respect, no beauty to inchaunt mens hearts, nor no bashfulnesse to excuse the vidlest imputations.28

28 I have left spelling inconsistencies as they appear in the text, and italics are original as well. The full title that appears on the frontispiece is “Hic Mulier or The Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to Cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of Our Times. Exprest in Briefe Declamation,” followed by the inscription, “*non omnes possamus omnes*” (we cannot all do everything), along with a “humorous” illustration featuring the caption “Mistris, will you be trim’d or truss’d.” The work concludes with the author’s final admonition to ladies to pursue virtue by being obedient, chaste, and motherly, clothed not as knights or men, but rather, in the “rich garments” of “sober shrews.” While the author has clearly infused the text with an air of comic jibing, I know which I would prefer – and it is certainly not the shrew garb.

> To knit up this imperfect declamation, let every Female-Masculine that by her ill example is guilty of Lust or Imitation, cast off her deformities, and cloath her selfe in the rich garments which the poet bestowes upon her in these verses following.

> The vertues that in women merit praise
> Are sober shrewes without, chast thoughts within
> True faith and due obedience to their mate,
> And of their children honest care to take.
A century after the *guerriere* of Cinquecento epic make their entrance into European literary culture, the threat that such figurations of female independence pose to established order is still being felt – and mitigated – across the continent. Bradamante and Marfisa are not examples to follow or from which to draw inspiration, but are disgraceful deformities that undermine feminine virtue and rob women of the (few) merits inherent to the female sex. This is, of course, but one response to the Cinquecento *guerriere*, but it illustrates an important point of contention regarding the shift in gendered literary representation within the epic genre, and reminds us of the historical exceptionality that these figures signal.

It is in the context of a society in flux, under threat from external and internal forces alike, in which establishing and enforcing social hierarchical structures becomes a critical concern on an aesthetic as well as political level, where female figures who move beyond the limited domestic space appropriated for them represent transgression writ large – an embodiment of the violent disruption of expected patterns of behavior. A world in which women move in unexpected ways represents the instability of longstanding social institutions, where feminine displacement becomes a significant force in dissembling the most basic unit of social cohesion – the family, that which ensures the propagation and endurance of the system in which it occurs. Returning to Shemek’s interpretation of female errancy, Woman and her various representations become “the site for potential disorder” within a given work of art (whether literary or visual) (1) and her specific figural valences are tied to the genre in which she occurs.

Adapting “Bakhtin’s description of genres as not merely established forms but as environments or mediatory devices that allow meaning to emerge and permit readers particular ‘ways of perceiving’” (81) allows for the present examination of Marfisa to consider character innovation within the established genre as instances of the aesthetic deployment of ideology, tied to underlying concerns over social and political order. At the same time, as Shemek also points out, it is important to recall that it is impossible to fix a specific meaning to Marfisa in a given context. Considering Bakhtin’s work on textual interpretation as a fluid, and wholly subjective act in which there is no single and definitive understanding of the meaning behind a given text, the critic cautions that it is Bakhtin’s “surplus of potential meanings that makes works, cultures, and even individuals ‘unfinalizable’ in the most positive sense and allows them to

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From the text, it is evident that masculine attributes are feared to render women incompatible with their established roles as wife and mother, and threaten to undermine the family itself.
continue speaking, even though interpreters in previous epochs may not have heard them in quite the same way" (7). The goal then, in the present context is to identify the factors – social, political, aesthetic – that imbue our Marfisa with meaning, and provide the various perspectives from which to view her specific representation. And so, having broadly contextualized the figure of the Cinquecento guerriera, let us localize our discussion, and begin to examine Marfisa’s struggle with gender and genealogy.

**Marfisa’s Literary Legacy: Cinquecento Epic in Brief**

Marfisa’s specific literary legacy is most prominent in the Cinquecento epic and narrows the focus of the present discussion to texts following the pattern for chivalric epic established in Matteo Maria Boiardo’s (1441-1494) *L’Inamoramento de Orlando* (better known as the *Orlando innamorato*), first published in 1482 or 83, and left unfinished at the author’s death in 1494. Marfisa first appears in the *Innamorato*, a best-seller that “dominated” the popular literary market from 1505-1521 (Decoste 68) the period during which Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533) was composing and first publishing his sequel to Boiardo’s text, the *Orlando furioso* (1516). While Ariosto’s text would come to eclipse its predecessor from the sixteenth century onward and is typically seen as the model for the genre, Cavallo reminds us of Boiardo’s essential contributions to the form:

> [...] organically merging the Carolingian epic and Arthurian romance [...] creating a coherent and original poem through the rewriting of stories from sources spanning the whole of the literary canon available in his day, ranging from ancient Greek and Latin to medieval French and Italian and encompassing genres as diverse as history, tragedy, comedy, the novella, and the lyric. Creative imitation for Boiardo, however, was not simply an end in itself, but a means to establish a critical dialogue with previous poets on the human and social problems of his day. (7 – emphasis my own)

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29 In the present work, I will refer to Boiardo’s work as the *Orlando innamorato* or simply the *Innamorato*, in keeping with contemporary and popular usage. As Cavallo has pointed out, this is “the title by which the poem has been known through the centuries, a practice legitimized by the fact that it was used at the opening of each book in the earliest extant edition (1487)” (236).

30 Luigi Pulci’s masterful romance epic, *Il Morgante maggiore* (1483), “did not have the same impact on subsequent chivalric literature” (Cavallo 236) as the *Innamorato*, and so is not included in the present discussion.

31 The year of the printing of the third edition to the popular text (Decoste 68).

32 Decoste reminds us that the manipulation and adaptation of earlier stories was a characteristic trait and means of transmission for the *cantari* (an oral tradition in which tales were recited or sung) and other chivalric epic stories from whose material the *Innamorato* and *Furioso* were derived (Decoste 68).

33 Like Boiardo, Ariosto continued to work on his poem throughout his life, publishing a second edition in 1521 with modifications to the original text, and the third and definitive version of the *Furioso* in 1532 with the addition of six cantos and other textual emendations, one year before his death (Slavitt vii, ix).

34 The Carolingian epic, also referred to as the “Matter of France,” are medieval stories dealing with the Court of Charlemagne and the famed knight Roland (eighth/ninth century), while Arthurian romance, or the “Matter of Brittany,” are medieval stories dealing with King Arthur (fifth/sixth century) and his legendary Knights of the Round Table. The Cinquecento epic adapts the setting and characters of Carolingian epic (the crusades serving as a fitting parallel to contemporary threats from “Eastern” forces) and incorporates elements of magic, fantasy, and courtly love from Arthurian tradition.
In the Furioso, Ariosto takes Boiardo’s characters (the guerriere Marfisa and Bradamante among them) and develops them in a striking new fashion. Ross describes Ariosto’s epic as “the first chivalric poem to achieve modern levels of character development and vivid detail,” stylistic elements “that were inappropriate, however, for the late-Gothic edifice of seemingly random design that Boiardo intended” (xxi). In Ariosto, both Marfisa and Bradamante, are given specific character-traits, and portrayed according to unique impulses and motivations. It is in the Furioso that the single-minded Saracen warrior maiden, Marfisa, is ultimately transformed into a knight in Charlemagne’s court, she willingly undergoes baptism at Charlemagne’s own hand, and learns of her shared parentage with and subsequent estrangement from her twin brother Ruggiero. It is Ariosto’s Marfisa who will be taken up again and once more retooled by Giovani Battista Dragoncino da Fano in La Marfisa bizzara (1531), the text that will occupy the second-half of the present discussion, as I examine how gender and genealogy function in a text designed to mythologize and legitimize the ruling dynasty of Mantua, that of Federico II Gonzaga.

Before exploring Marfisa’s specific figuration in the Bizzara, it will be helpful briefly to outline her “known history” as provided by Boiardo and Ariosto. This legacy provides the reader with a general familiarity of the character upon which to elaborate and will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent examination of the Bizzara. As previously mentioned, Marfisa’s literary debut occurs in Boiardo’s Innamorato in Book I, Canto XVI (stanzas 28-30 and 54-57) in a description of King Galafrone of Cathay’s troops (the Saracen forces waging war against Charlemagne and Christian France), where she serves as a lieutenant:

All of these troops come from the Sea of Gold, the edge of India. A giant, Archiloro, led the first platoon to charge. The second rank was commanded by a queen, and not a knight in all the East could match her in the saddle. She was bold – as bold as she was lovely. The woman I’ve been telling of was named Marfisa, one so fierce

35King Galafrone is also the father of Angelica – the beautiful and elusive woman, for whom Orlando is rendered first innamorato and later furioso, and whose pursuit underlies the romantic thrust of both Boiardo’s and Ariosto’s epic poems.

36In the Cinquecento and throughout the chivalric epic genre, the term “Saracen,” much like “Moor,” was deployed as a catchall phrase referring to Arab or African Muslims, and that was applied rather indiscriminately to non-Christian persons of color. As such, its use typically did not refer to a specific ethnic group or heredity.
that she remained in arms five years from dawn until the dark of night. The overreaching maid had sworn a promise to her god Mohammed to wear her hauberk, plate, and mail till she subdued three kings in battle.

They were the King of Sericana – that is, the powerful Gradasso – King Agrican, the northern lord, And King Charles, France’s emperor. Later, our history will show her drastic strength, her arrogance, so I’ll say nothing else for now.

[…](emphasis my own – Book I, Canto xvi, stanzas 28-30)37

From Boiardo’s first portrayal of her, we understand that Marfisa is an Eastern Queen, whose sworn loyalty is to the Islamic faith. She is a commander whose martial ability is unmatched among her male counterparts, and while she is courageous she is also characteristically beautiful. The trait that most defines Boiardo’s Marfisa is her refusal to remove her armor (that which encodes her as outwardly male), preferring to obscure her femininity at all times, and to remain ready at arms. She is chaste and wants nothing more than to prove her superior strength against the three kings whose powerful armies vie for supremacy. As Boiardo readily illustrates, she is not only an enemy of Christianity, but she is enemy also of Charlemagne’s empire – in the context of the poem, she is fighting on the wrong side of history.

Marfisa remains relatively consistent throughout Boiardo’s poem, doggedly focused on waging war on behalf of the Islamic faith, and committed to her oath of honor and duty. Even Orlando is unable to defeat Marfisa, when, in Canto XXVI the two engage in an extended duel that is nonetheless interrupted at a point when neither knight is shown to have the clear advantage. Marfisa’s hawkish fixation carries her throughout the poem, and at moments serves as a point of comic relief, such as in her extended pursuit of the thief Brunello, who – with the aid of Angelica’s stolen ring of invisibility – steals her sword in Book II, Canto V (stanzas 37-42). A diversion that keeps Marfisa occupied through the end of the poem.

As Sacripante and Marfisa rest following their second duel, the thief makes off with Sacripante’s steed, while Marfisa, dumbfounded at the sight, is unable to react as he lifts her sword and gallops off.

Marfisa followed, screaming threats, yelling, “You knave! You’ll pay for this!” He wheeled and raised a middle finger and shouted out, “You’ve learned a lesson!”

37 This and all subsequent translations of Boiardo’s text are taken from Ross’s translation.
The mad flight is taken up again in Canto X (stanzas 57-60), as Brunello continues to taunt the furious warrior:

She’d followed him from then till now
and said that she would hang him, but
he’d mocked her and a hundred times
gave her the finger in her face.
He’d led her anywhere he wished
and she’d already chased for six
full days, lured on as he played tricks
that tortured and tormented her. (II.x.58)

And once more in XVI:

Marfisa followed in his tracks,
still threatening to have him hanged.
That dark imp stopped a thousand times.
He slowed, he slowed as she closed in,
but slipped away, fled like the wind.

That fervent woman followed him
for fifteen days, as I have said,
and she’d become extremely weak,
because she’d eaten only leaves.
She would not stop till he was caught,
her heart was so presumptuous,
but could not see it was no use:
he rode a horse; she ran on foot.

Marfisa’s horse had lost its force;
on the sixth day, it fell, a corpse.
Her stallion dead, she used her legs
[... ] (II.xvi.3-5)

At this point, a bedraggled and exhausted Marfisa (after all, she has eaten only leaves for fifteen days,
and has been on foot for nine of them) relinquishes her armor, stripping down to lighten her load. Her
enhanced speed is such that she nearly overcomes Brunello several times, though Sacripante’s mount is
able to keep the thief just out of reach. She would have run herself to death, but for a distraction: the
opportunity to gain Brandimarte’s horse and armor and to reequip herself.

The queen – untiring – dogged his heels.
Suddenly something new appeared,
distracting her, who otherwise
would have chased hard until she died. (II.xvi.7)
In Canto XIX Marfisa, unarmed and appearing as a “disheveled lass” (xix.4) without her masculine armor, captures Fiordelisa and forces Brandimarte to trade his horse and weapons for the life of his beloved. Brandimarte capitulates, and Marfisa rears and rides off, re instituted once more, as a knight.

She galloped – headlong, fast – away like one who’d never been afraid, and met two – armed with lance and shield – on two huge horses in a field. These two will be her guides to France. I’ll tell this story later on. [...] (II.xix.15)

Left unfinished as Boiardo’s story is, however, and despite the poet’s intimations to the contrary, Marfisa’s fate is left to later poets – Ariosto principally among them – to develop.38

It is in the *Furioso* that Marfisa’s genealogy is established and that she is realigned as a Christian paladin among the ranks of Charlemagne’s troops.39 Through Ariosto, Marfisa is elevated from a relatively flat trope of established female militancy – chaste yet beautiful, and fierce yet risible – to a more ambiguous and difficult to pinpoint portrayal of fluid gender dynamics in action. In Ariosto, Marfisa’s zealous loyalty to Macone40 is supplanted by her duty to chivalric ideals, and she becomes eligible for Christian redemption through baptism. Along with her future sister-in-law, Bradamante, Marfisa’s portrayal in the *Furioso* creates a more nuanced version of the archetype of the Renaissance guerriere and generates new possibilities for gendered outcomes relating to female militancy.

Marfisa enters the *Furioso* at Book I, Canto XVIII (stanzas 98-101):

[...] at a certain place where two roads converge, they meet a man ... Or, no, it's a woman dressed in armor, another case of feminine achievement in an arena dominated by men – but then think of Athena.

This is the maid Marfisa, a woman of great valor who has often brought to the brow of Orlando of Brava furrows and even sweat and to Rinaldo as well. We should mention how she never takes off her armor, early or late, day or night, having taken an oath. But now

38The poem ends abruptly at Book III, Canto IX (stanza 26).

39For a chronological recounting of scenes in which Marfisa appears within the *Furioso* see Cerutti.

40The use of “Macone,” along with other bastardized forms of Mohammed, in referring to the Muslim prophet is commonplace in works dealing with the “Matter of France” and reflects a standard trope in Cinquecento epic, retained from medieval Christianity, whereby the notions of pagan/Islamic/demonic are elided in a non-specified demonization of the religious “other” as the enemy of Christianity in the west (Ross, *Innamorato*, 615).
is not the time for that. She wanders here 
and there, looking for knights — and for trouble, I fear.

She sees two knights coming toward her. She is alone, 
but that only makes it better. Both look to be 
impressive warriors, strong in flesh and bone. 
She intends to test herself against them, but … See, 
she knows Astolfo, the Paladin. They were thrown 
together in Cathay long ago when he 
was gracious to her and courteous. There’s no need 
to try to conquer him and make him bleed.

Instead, she takes off her gauntlet and she raises 
her visor, which are gestures of friendliness. 
She calls out to him that this is a pleasant surprise or 
some such thing and is happy to express 
her amity. Then, ignoring her disguise or 
whatever one calls her masculine armor and dress, 
she embraces him, and he returns her greeting 
delighted that they once again are meeting.  

Picking up Boiardo’s telling at the point he left off, Ariosto’s Marfisa recalls a woman firmly lodged in a masculine context. She is the epitome of a knight errant — wandering in search of contest to prove her valor among men. An unaccompanied woman, custom dictates that Marfisa should be in grave danger as two strange and armed men approach, but already we are presented with her exceptionality as she reacts without fear — only demonstrating eagerness at the chance to fight not one, but two worthy opponents.

In recognizing Astolfo, who is travelling with Sansonetto, Marfisa displays her characteristic civility and adherence to the chivalric ideal of loyalty. Her desire for achievement is tempered by her duty to allegiance and honor. Marfisa, who typically prefers to travel alone (fighting en masse is deemed less valiant) accompanies the two knights to Damascus where they are travelling to participate in a tournament. At Damascus Marfisa will once again demonstrate her prowess and earn the respect of her companions, as of the king, Norandino, and reclaim her previously shed armor.  

Throughout the Furioso we are reminded of Marfisa’s single-minded desire to prove herself against worthy opponents, and it is this drive that takes her to France. Following the tournament, her companions feel compelled to aid in the battle against the Christian forces, while Marfisa joins their cause in pursuit of glory:

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41The emphasis here is my own. This and the following passages have been taken from Slavitt’s translation. Where other translations of the Furioso have been used, it is noted.

42See canto xxviii, stanzas 103-133.
[...] they bid goodbye [to their host, King Norandino], troubled as they are about the war in France, which needs the help they can’t deny any longer. Marfisa comes, too, for a chance to meet the paladins and try her skill with theirs. She desires to get her chance at last to show the world who’s better.

Are all these famous warriors as good as they are so often said to be? She is unconvinced and doubts that anyone would give her much trouble. [...] (I.xviii.133-134)

The ultimate lady errant, Marfisa’s characteristic independence is yet balanced by her duty to chivalric ideals including honor and loyalty, and is demonstrated time and again throughout the *Furioso*.

Critical to the present discussion, is Ariosto’s introduction of Marfisa’s genealogy in Canto XXXVI where her shared parentage with Ruggiero – Bradamante’s future husband – is also revealed. This revelation is relevant on a number of points as it sets the stage for Marfisa’s future baptism (her father was the Christian, Ruggiero II), and for her new allegiance to Charlemagne’s forces. In addition, Marfisa is tied back to a number of figures from previous epics – including Hector himself – and is given a wildling upraising that sets her apart as an exceptional figure and explains her ability to fully navigate in a masculine context, without the sex/gender contradictions that assail other similar figures (Bradamante chiefly among them) who, in the context of the poem itself, grew from properly domestic origins.

At a moment when Ruggiero very nearly kills his twin sister (not yet realizing who she is), his sword strikes a cypress tree instead, from which the voice of the magician Atlante emerges:

[...] “It is inhumane for sister and brother to fight, neither Marfisa nor Ruggiero should die at the other’s hand. It would not be meet or right. Would you take it upon yourselves to defy the laws of heaven and sin in heaven’s sight?"

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43 The paladin from Boiardo’s and Ariosto’s texts is in fact the third “Ruggiero” distinguished in the tradition of chivalric epic. In this paper I refer to Ruggiero III, simply as “Ruggiero” in order to indicate the Cinquecento figure known as Marfisa’s brother and Bradamante’s betrothed, while Ruggiero II refers explicitly to Marfisa’s and Ruggiero’s father.

44 Here I am referring to Bradamante’s struggle with contradictory impulses and duties that arise from her dual-gendered nature. As a knight she must behave as masculine, while her overarching duty in the dynastic tendency of the story is to becoming a wife. This struggle will be explored at more length in the subsequent discussion.

45 Milligan reminds us that previous iterations of “narrative poetry had been replete with female warriors named Bradiamante, Bradamante, and Braidamante. This diverse group of Bradamantes demonstrates that sixteenth-century readers would have been quite familiar with her namesakes as well as any number of armed women” (51). In a related endnote, Milligan goes on to summarize Stoppino’s rendition of the Pre-Ariostan Legacy of ‘Bradamante’ wherein the female warrior, “begins as the daughter of an Arab king, then becomes a fighter among female giant warriors, then the illegitimate daughter of the Christian lord Amone, and finally, in Ariosto, is made both legitimate and Christian” (247 see endnote 27).
Believe this voice that speaks to you from the tomb.  
You came at the same time from the same womb." (xxxvi, 59)

From here it is revealed that Atlante himself saved Marfisa and Ruggiero as orphans, when their pregnant mother, Galaciella, was shipwrecked following the murder of Ruggiero II at the hand of her treacherous brother. On a deserted coast, Galaciella gave birth to the twins before dying herself, and was buried by the wizard Atlante, who carried the babies to his remote home in mount Carena, where he raised the two on the milk of a lioness he enchanted for the purpose.47

As Milligan illustrates, Ariosto’s elaboration on Marfisa’s specific genealogy serves to re-situate her among Renaissance guerriere, altering her fate in epic literature. By fixing Marfisa “within a genealogy of warriors (daughter of Galiziella)” (Milligan 59), Marfisa (and Ruggiero) are established within the context of a traditionally-rendered “Amazonian Past,”48 a theme that Stoppino describes as reflective of

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46The character Galiziella, wife of Ruggiero II, is likely derived from Andrea da Barberino’s (1370-1431) prose romance L’Aspramonte and rendition of the Matter of France, I Reali di Francia where her offspring are left unnamed (Ross 610). Rajna suggests that while Boiardo did not develop the shared parentage of Ruggiero and Marfisa in the Innamorato, he may have had the intention to do so, and hinted at this in Book II, Canto I (stanza 73-74) where Ruggiero’s origins are described (510):

“A little girl was born with him.”
I have not seen her, but if she
is like her brother, whose looks pass
the sun’s, she must be beautiful.
Their mother died delivering,
and these two children reached the care
of Atalant, a vavasor
and necromancer in your realm.

“He lives at mount Carena, where
by magic he has built a garden
that’s difficult to reach, I think!
A great astrologer and seer,
he knew the force and mighty strength
that infant would possess on earth.
He, therefore, rightly nourished him
Only on lion meat and marrow.” (O1, II.i.73-74)

Rajna further explains that given Marfisa’s specific figuration, patterned on the archetype established in Galiziella (“che fu ormai tipo e progenetrice di tutta la specie”), and her mysterious and unknown parentage, Ariosto must have either deduced Boiardo’s intent, received direct instruction from Boiardo himself, or been instructed to do so by someone with specific knowledge thereof (510-11).

47The “wildling upbringing” that Atlante describes adhere’s to Virgil’s model, where Camilla is raised on the milk of wild beasts, rendering her what Milligan terms, “an anomaly – a woman unlike other women” (46). Unlike the trope of the warrior Amazon (a woman raised in the company of warring matriarchs), this upbringing ties Marfisa to the tradition of the huntress-turned-warrior, where like Camilla, having been sustained on the milk of wild animals “[s]he is thus both spiritually and biochemically altered, different from other women who are raised by human mothers” (ibid). Pointing to Francesco Barbaro’s (1390-1454) On Marriage in which he makes the prescriptive assertion that nurse milk is formative to a child’s mind and body, Milligan suggests that this physical exceptionality serves as “one way that authors may have sought to explain the existence of armed women within the structure of a society that could not otherwise accommodate them” (58).

48Stoppino reminds us:
Galiziella is the product of the union between an Amazon and a king: her bastardy, her supernatural prowess in battle, mark the otherness of her femininity. The Amazon is a figure generally linked to the realm of the ‘other,’ and generally interpreted as disruptive. Critics have read her barbaric and violent nature as a form of female empowerment or, at least, as a reflection on gender categories. (81)

In her work, Stoppino further discusses the functions of the Amazonian trope in Renaissance aesthetics as examples of titillating stories of female menace and representations of the unmaking of society, and conversely, as incidences in which the subjugation
Renaissance insecurities regarding dynastic legitimacy and bastardization. She writes of the *Furioso* and related texts: "Not only is the presence of Amazonian societies pervasive, but also the theme of bastardy seems inextricably linked with the figure of the Amazon. In the epic-chivalric tradition, the rule of the Amazons is clearly connected with fears of loss of control over reproduction and threats of illegitimacy" (71). At the same time that Marfisa’s mother was an illegitimate daughter to royalty, trained as an Amazon warrior, Marfisa’s upbringing is linked with a different exemplar of female militancy, that established by Virgil’s Camilla.49

Milligan suggests that Marfisa’s wildling upbringing may make her “the first virago in the Italian tradition since Camilla to be nursed on the milk of wild beasts,” an alteration through which Ariosto is asserting new possibilities for female agency within epic (59). Milligan elaborates:

Such origin stories inform how we view the agency of women – the choice they are shown to make between warrior identities or more conventional womanhood […] Marfisa seems both destined to be and unalterably a warrior […] (ibid)

Even her name seems to reflect Marfisa’s inborn militancy, as she is one who is “fixed on Mars” (Mar + *fisa*) (Cerutti 21).50

As Atlante recounts it, one sad day Marfisa was kidnapped by a horde of Arabs, from whom Ruggiero managed to flee. Upon his death, Atlante, who had foreseen the battle between siblings that would one day occur in this very spot, convinced Charon, ferry-man to the underworld, to allow him to reside in a tomb, situated so that he might intervene from beyond the grave, to save the twins on this fated day. The twins are overjoyed to learn of their shared parentage. They immediately embrace, dropping all former pretenses of antagonism, and Ruggiero explains their noble heritage to an enrapt Marfisa.

and mitigation of the Amazon threat is viewed as the restoration of social order and justice, and the re-institution of legitimate rule. See Stoppino, *Genealogies* especially “An Amazonian Past: Female Rule and the Threat of Illegitimacy” pp. 58-87.

49That Ariosto considered Marfisa apart from the standard Amazonian trope is emphasized in Canto XIX-XX, the scene of the *femmine omicide* (homicidal women) on the island of Alessandretta, where the *guerriera* not only stands apart from a society that would otherwise welcome her, but makes a conscious choice to stay and do battle on behalf of her male companions (for Marfisa’s conscious decision see xx.78). For more on this scene, see MacCarthy (for Marfisa as a defective or incomplete knight and the scene as “a particularly vivid illustration of its [the OF’s] simultaneous promotion and mockery of Marfisa’s gender transgression”) in “Marfisa” pp. 169-190 and also *Women and the Making* pp. 83-85; DeCoste (for Marfisa as an example of failed chivalry where her “insistence on absolute adherence to the values of knighthood […] continually endangers her comrades” (97)) in *Hopeless Love*, see esp. pp. 92-99; and Stoppino (for Alessandretta as Ariosto’s portrayal of an experimental state “that collapses under its inability to create a law that does not mandate continuous exceptions” (87)) in *Genealogies*, see esp. pp. 72-87.

50Regarding the specific etymology of Marfisa’s name, Ceruti cites Paolo Baldan’s assertion that the name derives from Giustino’s Amazon queen, Marthesia (a name linked to *Marte* or Mars – the god of war) (21), and Stoppino identifies it as the likely transliteration of Marpesia from the classical tradition, as interpreted through Boccaccio (83 – see *Genealogies* endnote 51 at p. 201 for Stoppino’s discussion of the lack of scholarly agreement surrounding the etymology of Marfisa).
Ruggiero told her then of their descent by Hector's line from Trojan ancestry

[...]

[...]
Many a king and emperor, she'll find, from this same Roman branch descended are, beginning with Constantius and then to Constantine and up to Charlemagne.

[...]
'The deeds of our descendants will be known in history and famed in many a land.'
And he described to her King Agolant's arrival, with his sons, to menace France.

A daughter too the king accompanied. Such was her valour, many a paladin she had unhorsed from many a brave steed; and she, who came to love Ruggiero, in defiance of the king, the Christian creed accepting, was baptized; not long she'd been Ruggiero's wife before Beltramo burned with an incestuous love and traitor turned.' (xxxvi.70-73)

Ruggiero describes their mother as a fierce knight whose love for their father – a member of the Christian opposition – inspired her change in allegiance through baptism and marriage. Galaciella's defiance spurs the jealousy of her own brothers whose treacherous act leads to Ruggiero II's murder and their mother's eventual demise. Upon learning of her genealogy, Marfisa immediately switches her allegiance from Islam to Christianity:

'I swear to God that I will worship now Christ the true God to whom my father prayed;
and I will not put off these arms, I vow,
till vengeance for my parents has been paid.
If from today I see you [Ruggiero] use your blade in Agramante's ranks, or any Moor's, unless their swift undoing it ensures.' (xxxvi.78 - emphasis is my own)

In the same breath, she admonishes her brother for fighting on behalf of Agramante (descendant of the treacherous Troiano) – to whom both twins owe a familial debt of revenge for the murder of Ruggiero II. Her true parentage revealed, Marfisa the warrior changes sides in the struggle of Christianity versus Islam, but never at the expense of her previously established warrior self-identification. Marfisa's vow to remain at arms in pursuit of glory is shifted to the pursuit of vengeance, but does not radically revise her

[51]This and the following excerpts are taken from Reynolds's translation of the Furioso.
character-type. Meanwhile, Marfisa will play a critical role in instigating Ruggiero’s conversion to Christianity, a fundamental necessity in Ariosto’s dynastic genealogical program for the poem, the ideological mythopoeia which underlies the central story-line.\textsuperscript{52}

In Canto XXXVIII Marfisa enters into Charlemagne’s court, and is eagerly baptized by Turpin in the presence of the emperor himself. MacCarthy points out that Marfisa’s willing conversion:

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. ("Marfisa" 181)

As Bradamante and Marfisa (now sisters at arms) approach Charlemagne, Marfisa humbles herself for the first time.

They came before King Charles with reverence
this was the only time (so Turpin says)
Marfisa knelt to make obeisance.
To Pepin’s son this homage she now pays.
That majesty he only represents
which she has never seen in all her days
in Christian or in pagan kings renowned
for glory or by virtue’s halo crowned (xxxviii.10; p. 412)

In pledging her allegiance to Charlemagne, Marfisa has found a higher calling within her knightly character. She describes to the emperor the events leading to her conversion, her newly discovered heritage, and warrior upbringing. Here we learn of Marfisa’s early life, and the defense of her chastity which led to her career as knight.

Following her kidnapping from the sorcerer Atlante, Marfisa recalls how at seven years old she was sold into slavery:

‘In Persia then they sold me as a slave.
The king who purchased me I later slew.
He tried to take my maidenhood and have
his way with me; I killed his courtiers too
and chase to his degenerate sons I gave.
I seized the realm and such good fortune knew,
no less than seven kingdoms I possessed,
when scarce my eighteenth birthday I had passed.’ (xxxviii.15; p. 413)

\textsuperscript{52}As MacCarthy points out “her easy conversion serves to emphasize by antithesis Ruggiero’s reluctance to be christened” ("Marfisa" 181). Ruggiero’s reluctance occurs as the result of his inner conflict over violating the code of chivalry by which he had sworn to serve Agramante.
As kin to Charlemagne and further spurred by the desire to avenge her father’s murder, Marfisa swears her service to the emperor and requests baptism. Upon the death of Agramante, she swears that she will bid her subjects convert to Christianity, and that her mission will forever be to fight on behalf “of Holy Church and for the Emperor” (xxxviii.18; p. 414). Amid much pomp and circumstance, “Archbishop Turpin came to christen her” while Charlemagne “with due ceremony raised the maid / from the health-giving, saving lavacer [baptismal font]” (xxxviii.23; p. 415). And so Marfisa joins the brotherhood of knights in service to Charlemagne and to the Holy Roman Empire. In the context of the Carolingian tradition, her ferocity and strength have been harnessed and redirected for the forces of “good” and her future displays of force will continue to bring honor to her liege and religion. Her final appearance in the Furioso occurs in the ultimate canto (xlvi), as she attends the wedding of Ruggiero and Bradamante.

Having provided an overview of the figure of Marfisa in Boiardo and Ariosto, it is now possible to turn to the work that is central to the present discussion, G. B. Dragoncino da Fano’s La Marfisa bizarra, for an examination of the role of gender in establishing dynastic genealogies. In Dragoncino’s “minor” chivalric-epic, a new variant on the Marfisa trope emerges, one that is difficult to reconcile with her more canonical counterparts, and that throws new light on the possibilities for interpreting the functions of mythopoeia within the genre. Patterned on Boiardo’s and Ariosto’s dynastic legends for the House of Este, Dragoncino’s telling of the founding of the House of Gonzaga presents the reader with a puzzling set of questions surrounding representations of dynastic genealogies and the ideological and thematic consequences for the ambiguous deployment of gender therein.

**Your Grandmother Wore Combat Boots and Other High Compliments: Questioning Dynastic Encomia in Canto One of Dragoncino’s Marfisa Bizzara**

*Quod Huic Deest Me Torquet* (that which he lacks torments me)
- Federico II Gonzaga’s personal motto

Giovanbattista Dragoncino da Fano’s (1497-1547?) chivalric epic poem, *La Marfisa Bizzara*, first appeared in print in 1531, from the Venetian presses of Bernardino Viano Vercellese (Castellani 185). A chivalric epic in the style of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato*, the

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53 The date and location of Dragoncino’s death is unknown.

54 Alternate spellings of the title in library catalogues and critical documents include the variants “Marphisa” and “bizara.” While I am working from a 1545 edition of the work, which utilises the “Marphisa” morphology, I have opted to adopt the modern Italian spelling for the name in the interest of consistency.
poem consists of a single volume of fourteen cantos of variable number, written in ottava rima. The
*Bizzara* occurs as a dynastic epic, sponsored by Federico II Gonzaga (1500-1540), first duke of Mantua,
dedicated in his honor, and memorializing the founding member of the Gonzaga dynasty as the character
Marfisa. In deploying the stock character Marfisa to this purpose, questions of gendered representation in
dynastic mythopoeia in sixteenth-century Italian literary culture are brought to the fore, and are further
complicated by the specific figuration provided in Dragoncino’s text.

In her discussion of sixteenth-century chivalric literature, Robinson contextualizes the
Renaissance as a period that “was preeminently and self-consciously a time of transition” in which “its
literature reflects the actual process of change, as well as its results” (74). According to her reading, the
chivalric epic genre should not be understood as a simple reflection of society but in terms of genuine
“contributions to the development of social thought” playing “an active albeit mythopoetic, part in the
historical process” (75). She points out that this work is carried out in the dynastic genealogical function of
these poems and asks what would it mean “in literary and social terms, for a poet to say to his patrons,
‘Your ancestors accomplished certain glorious, pious deeds; and, what is more, *you are descended from
a couple that married for love on the basis of equality demonstrated through military combat*” (74 –
emphasis here is my own). As I hope to demonstrate in this examination, Dragoncino’s use of
mythopoetics seems to turn this essential assumption (based largely on the “major” works of the canon)
on its head. Understanding the *Bizzara* demands a broader conception for how dynastic genealogies and
encomia interact and function within a text, and what the interpretational consequences may be.

In the present examination, I explore the opening canto to the *Bizzara* for clues into the social,
political and aesthetic context in which the poem would have been received and understood, considering
how both form and content convey a multitude of valences, whether at odds with one another, or in
concert.56 Within the first canto, the poet establishes the narrative registers that will characterize his poem
and uses the opening stanzas to frame the three critical figures within the work: the titular character,
Marfisa; the dedicatee and patron to the *Bizzara*, Federico II; and the poet-narrator “himself.” My

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56My approach utilizes M. M. Bakhtin’s discussion of form and content in *Discourse in the Novel*:
[The study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract “formal” approach and an equally
abstract “ideological” approach. Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a
social phenomenon — social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the
furthest reaches of abstract meaning. (qtd in Leitch 1190)
discussion builds upon Bakhtin’s definition of genre, which, in the context of chivalric epic Shemek frames as a specific poetic form whose use of rhetoric and aesthetics generate “environments or mediatory devices that allow meaning to emerge and permit readers ‘particular ways of perceiving’” (Ladies Errant 81). Based in a “common thematic nucleus” of significant historic events and an idealized chivalric value-system, the “consciously constructed Renaissance epic tradition” and the “specific ways of knowing the world” that it communicates, function through intertextuality57 and entrelacement58 where meaning is derived from the interplay of past, present and future – historic “fact” and literary legacies intentionally intermingled (Bates 95).

Produced for the literate and refined audiences of Northern Italy’s Renaissance courts, these works repurposed the internationally popular material from the matter of Britain and of France to generate a high art form that mythologized the works’ patrons and encapsulated an idealized version of the culture in and for which they were written. At the same time that the poetry of Boiardo and Ariosto delighted and titillated their rarified audiences with tales of love, adventure, and war, and praising their patrons and the important political and cultural figures in whose circles they moved, these works yet present readers with a critical perspective on the biggest social issues of their times. Mazzotta tells us that:

barely beneath the surface of the refined courtly entertainment, [chivalric epic poets] would rethink history’s great events – comical and tragic – and would narrate the dissolution of confidence in the solidity of their privileged social microcosm. (Bates 94)59

These “poets turn to the past because they know that memory is the real route to the future” while the commingling of narrative registers permits the authors to present real and pressing social matters in an equivocal and deceptively light-hearted manner (95).

With Dragoncino Marfisa is elevated to a place of prominence as the title La Martisa Bizarra (1531) suggests and her well-known companions – Orlando principally among them – are reduced to secondary characters. Such a gendered reversal cannot be said to be insignificant when we know that

57Specifically, within the chivalric epic this occurs frequently through the continuity of story-line among epics, as well as explicit references to literary predecessors.

58That is, “the systematic interweaving of episodes and multiple plot lines, such as love quests, battles and a variety of characters” (Bates 95).

59Shemek and others have pointed to the critical role that gender plays in the social commentary that underlies the chivalric epic genre, while Stoppino’s work has focused on the critical role of gender in the political/dynastic function of mythologized genealogy at the Este court of Ferrara.
poems like the *Furioso* use “manipulation of [their] sources” in order to generate “contrasts and upheavals” (Tomalin 95). Moments of surprise that indicate cultural significance in a genre where “one is forced to suspend belief in the exploits of the heroes. What else is epic but a vision of a cultural ‘image’ thrown up in huge relief on the literary ‘screen’” (59). Dragoncino’s re-gendering of chivalric epic provides one such cultural image that would certainly have occurred as both contrast and upheaval, and therefore entails further examination.

In canto one of the *Bizzara*, Dragoncino explicitly frames his work by describing the two topics that he will treat: the story of a known female warrior figure gone mad and the significant honor owed his patron.

L’Arme, e l’amor d’una Regina io canto
L’incite cortesie: l’ire, & le paci
Fra speme, & timor fra ’l riso, el pianto.
Di feminil furor l’imprese audaci,
et d’antiqui guerrieri il pregio: e ’l vanto
Di feminil furor l’imprese audaci,
et d’antiqui guerrieri il pregio: e ’l vanto
Della fama, et di virtu seguaci
alhor, che Carlo per forza di lancia
fu Imperador, di Roma, et Re di Francia. (i.1) 60 61

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60 This and all subsequent translations of *La Marfisa bizzara* are my own. I thank Ennio Rao for his many suggested revisions and insights into my own linguistic oversights along the way.

61 All citations within the present paper refer to the 1545 editions of *La Marphisa bizzara di Giovan Battista Dragoncino da Fano* printed in Venice, utilizing the digitised versions made accessible through the British Library (OCLC: 559687492; http://books.google.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/books?vid=BL:A0021473164) and the Bayerische StaatsBibliothek digital resource (OCLC: 645583934; call number: P.o.it. 606 m#Beibd.3; permalink: http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10189920-9). These two sources appear to be different copies of the same edition of the text, and give both the date and place of publication on the title page, as well as in the final page. In addition to being more readily attributable, the texts themselves are more consistent than the other two digitised versions available (see below) and are formatted in a single column that makes reading the text itself more accessible.

I located two other digitised versions of *La Marfisa bizzara*, neither of which document contains information relating to the date and place of publication. The Bayerische StaatsBibliothek digital resource provides one of these editions where the title page features a woodcut of the author and gives the title as *Marfisa Bizzara di Giovan Battista Dragoncino da Fano*. From the image it is unclear if the spelling on the title page is actually “bizzara” as it appears to be somewhat truncated in the digital file. The first page of the text gives the title as *Marphisa bizzara* and the catalogue lists the printing as 1546 in Venice (information not verifiable within the document itself). The text is formatted in two columns and the document is missing the last fifteen stanzas of the poem.

GoogleBooks has a fourth digitized edition of the *Marfisa bizzara* giving 1620 as the date of publication in the entry, while no such information appears in the document. This text ends at Canto Decimoterzo (thirteen), while the three sixteenth-century digitized texts end at Canto Quartodecimo (fourteen). The omission of the fourteenth canto in the later edition is not owing to missing pages, as the final page (ninety-six) clearly identifies the canto and bears “IL FINE” as well as the same final stanzas present in the two digitized 1545 editions that are not missing pages.

A note on the British library digitized text: WorldCat lists the British Library as possessing two different digital editions of the poem but the links provided are identical, resulting in the same document (mentioned above). Both entries give the title as *Marphisa Bizzara (a poem) (primo libro)* and state “Another edition” under publication information. The OCLLC numbers for the two separate entries do not match.

WorldCat lists a total of twenty-seven separate entry-headings matching the title *La Marfisa bizzara* and with variant spellings for “Marphisa” as well as “Bizzara.” Twelve of these entries are listed as seventeenth-century editions, eleven are listed as
Nel nome vostro onde convien, ch’io scriva
et canti audacemente in novo carme
de la figlia di voi l’amor’ et l’arme. (i.4)\(^62\)

O moderno figliuol del piu gran nume
di cui sol suonan le piu nobil cetre
gloria di bei nostri anni, honor et lume,
che le lode d’altrui fai basse, et tetre,
pari al tuo nome e havess’io voce, et piume
che denote di te farei le pietre
Gonzaga alzando a l’alte stelle lustre,
eccelso Duca Federico illustre. (i.5)\(^63\)

The poet’s seemingly explicit exposition simultaneously opens the door to inferences beyond those he expresses directly, and adheres to the characteristic open-endedness of the epic form. It is its open-endedness, Wofford explains, that renders the genre resistant to univocal derivations of meaning, even “in the face of an asserted ideological closure,” where narrative ambivalence and incongruencies such as those apparent in the Bizzarra, yet leave room to provoke “controversy about the extent of its programmatic or even propagandistic effect” (12).\(^{64}\)

I believe that Dragoncino’s encomia and incongruous textual figuration for the Gonzaga family and its mythologized founding member occur as the explicit dilation of such textual open-endedness. The effusive language that Dragoncino uses to describe his patron early in the poem is difficult to match to the representation of Marfisa in the following thirteen cantos of the text, and begs further examination into the

sixteenth-century editions and four do not provide a date or estimated-date of publication. Copies are held in libraries in Germany, the UK, Switzerland, France, the US, and Italy. Interestingly, there is only one entry listed for an Italian library – the Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma. I consulted an incomplete copy of the 1545 edition held at the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze (not listed in WorldCat), and while I have found scant traces elsewhere, I believe it is possible that other Italian libraries may contain uncatalogued editions or those whose records are only available through the manual consultation of undigitized catalogues. The earliest extant copies, according to WorldCat, are a 1531 edition held at Harvard, a 1532 edition held at the Cleveland Public Library, a 1532 edition in the British Library and a microfilm reproduction thereof held in Germany.

\(^{62}\) Dragoncino canto I, stanza 4:
  In your name it behooves me to write
  And sing audaciously in a new poem
  Of your daughter’s love and arms.

\(^{63}\) Stanza 5:
  Oh modern son of the greatest god
  About whom only the most noble lyres sing,
  Glory of our wonderful years, honor and light,
  You who make the lauds of others low and squalid
  When compared with your name. Would that I had the voice and the pen
  To make the stones aware of you, lifting Gonzaga to the high shining stars
  O sublime and illustrious Duke Federico

\(^{64}\) See also p. 13: “Epic poetry in particular resists this tendency to sum up the narrative in one meaning because of the ways in which the narrator must negotiate its encyclopedic scope and give it a cultural coherence and naturalness, while representing it as something distant and ‘other.’”
possibility of intentional multi-layered interpretations for both. Events in the poem may be read as satire or critique, at the same time that the work adheres to a number of standards for the genre, and was published with explicit license and privilege from Gonzaga’s Mantuan state, as from that of Venice where it was printed.65

Subscribing to Bakhtin’s understanding of language as inherently dialogic and interpretation within literary production as essentially “unfinalizable,” allows for the reading of the Bizarra as a text with both explicit and implicit – or even acquired – meanings. The surplus of meanings contained within any given work of literary production is described as the “capacity to grow in unforeseeable circumstances” where “[i]n a universe of uncertainty, capacity to perform a present, specific function is not the sole value; no less important is the flexibility to adapt to the unexpected” (Morson and Emerson 286). Carrying this logic forward to the chivalric epic, we see that “[m]ajor genres contain that kind of flexibility and major works exploit it” (ibid). The wealth of scholarship surrounding the chivalric epic and its “major” works sufficiently demonstrate this supposition well enough, but fail to account for the ideological silencing that canonization itself entails. To presuppose “major” works have more to reveal than those which have been less-studied, belies an inherent and limiting flaw in literary criticism as a field of study.67

I argue that evaluating the Bizarra as an under-examined cultural event reinforces work being done on canonical texts, at the same time that it enriches the canon-limited perspective that literary criticism generally presents to us. We should recall too, that scholarship surrounding the querelle in works such as the Innamorato and Furioso occur as a relatively new field of scholarship – one which has

65Barbieri includes a transcription of the Mantuan decree dated 20 July 1531 held in the Archivio Gonzaga at the Archivio di Stato di Mantova in which document the nobile e molto dotto (the noble and very refined) Gio. Battista Dragoncino da Fano is reported to have composed an elegante opera volgare di battaglia (an elegant vernacular chivalric work) that merits the official approbation. See Barbieri, “La cultura letteraria,” pp. 376-77; see also Archivio di Stato di Mantova, Archivio Gonzaga, Decreto, Lib. 39, c. 96r, within the archive, the decree is recorded in Schede Davari, b. 7, c. 1000.

The first edition of the Bizarra appeared in print shortly thereafter on 15 September 1531 and Castellani tells us that its popularity merited a reprinting shortly thereafter in 1532 (186). These are the only two editions issued during the life of the patron, though the work enjoyed continued popularity throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, appearing in five different editions: first in 1531, 1532, and 1545, and later in 1622 and 1678. Additionally, like the Innamorato and Furioso before it, the Bizarra influenced its own cycle of chivalric poetry including Marco Bandarini’s La Marfisa innamorata (1550), and Danese Cattaneo’s L’Amor di Marfisa (1562). The Bizarra was known even into the eighteenth century when Carlo Gozzi borrowed Dragoncino’s title for his own poem La Marfisa bizarra (1772).

66“Between any word and its object, between any word and its speaking subject, between any word and its active respondent(s), [he] argues, there exists ‘an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object’” (Leitch 1188).

67See King and Rabhile eds., “Introduction to the Series: The Old Voice and the Other Voice.” The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe, Chicago; and Allen, “From One Closet to Another? Feminism, Literary Archaeology, and the Canon.”
contributed to a significant change in the way in which gender normative behavior in the Italian Renaissance is understood.\textsuperscript{68} The very beauty of the work being done is that it presents scholars with more questions and possibilities, rather than resolving the simple binary gender-polemics feminists of the early eighties initially set out to address. As our understanding of these concepts becomes more fluid, the same canonical texts we have been reading for generations are re-vitalized by Bakhtin's potential and capacity of surplus meanings. The more we open ourselves to textual unfinalizability the closer we come to that impossible goal of teasing out authorial intent:

authors intend their works to mean more than their intended meanings. They deliberately endow their works not only with specified meanings they could paraphrase, but also with 'intentional potentials' for future meanings in unforeseen circumstances. (Morson and Emerson 286)

In the \textit{Bizarra} and similar works, poets such as Dragoncino are able to present issues relating to the \textit{querelle}, to modern warfare, to social dissolution and inequity, all as impossibly irreducible subjects, while yet maintaining the integrity of the stated intention of their work: to grant their patrons lasting fame and memorialize their dynastic legitimacy.

In the present examination of the \textit{Bizarra}, I read the poem as neither an elaborate portrayal of dynastic superiority (as initially presented in the encomia) nor as an ironic affront to the work’s patron, rather as a potential incidence for better understanding the complicated nature of sixteenth-century artistic patrimony. Federico II was a complicated figure whose public image only provides brief insight into his interior person, just as Dragoncino, about whom scant traces remain from which to piece together the patchiest of biographies, seems to have been resentful of the eternally subjective position of an everyday poet constrained to “vivacchiare coi prodotti della sua musa” (eke out a living from the products of his muse) in conditions other than his choosing (Castellani 189).\textsuperscript{69} I read the composition of the \textit{Bizarra}

\textsuperscript{68}MacCarthy identifies Ariosto’s Marfisa as a character who exemplifies gender fluidity within the \textit{Furioso}. She writes:

The boundaries between feminine and masculine categories, the \textit{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. (*Marfisa* 186)

For an outline of scholarship dealing with gender normative behavior in the Cinquecento epic see the introduction in: MacCarthy, \textit{Women and the Making of Poetry in Ariosto’s Orlando furioso} pp. xi-xx; see especially endnote 2 at p. xix for significant examples.

\textsuperscript{69}Here Castellani references an incomplete sonnet written late in Dragoncino’s literary career (and possibly his life) in which the poet laments being constrained to live and work in Venice rather than his beloved home of Fano.

\textit{Egli dunque a Venezia trovava da vivacchiare coi prodotti della sua musa, e quest’ultimo infelice parto ne è la prova. Scriveri più di quarant stanzze sullo stesso argumento, perché si tratta sempre di lodare una gentildonna, è uno sforzo dovuto proprio alla fabbrica dell’appetito, come si dice volgarmente.}

In Venice, however, he was able to eke out a living from the products of his muse, and this final and unhappy product of [this] likelihood is the proof. Writing more than forty stanzas on the same topic, in order to praise a gentlewoman, is a concerted effort owing to the ‘industry of taste,’ as is said in popular parlance. (*ibid – translation here is my own*)
differently from scholars such as Barbieri who writes of a similar work under production contemporaneously with Dragoncino’s – Pietro Aretino’s Marfisa disperata – that the work occurs as a “poema cavalleresco teso a magnificare i fasti di Casa Gonzaga” (chivalric poem intended to magnify the memorable facts associated with the house of Gonzaga) whose function:

avrebbe dovuto rispondere a molteplici attese: il signore di Mantova sperava di ottenere un testo che stesse alla pari con quelli di Boiardo e di Ariosto e che celebrasse la propria dinastia al posto di quella estense, e l’autore desiderava guadagnarsi con essa fama e ricompense materiali.

… should have responded to a number of expectations: the Mantuan ruler hoped to obtain a text that equaled those of Boiardo and Ariosto and that celebrated his own dynasty in place of that of the Estense, and the author wanted to use it to earn fame and material rewards. (“La Cultura” 296 – translation is my own).

For myself, this kind of literal reading of the poem and its purely pragmatic social functions neglects the content of the work as a site for expanding our understanding for implicit functions and meanings within the texts themselves, and fails to recognize the underlying insecurity that Mazzotta reads in the great chivalric epics of the period:

Aware of the violence rampant in their midst, these poets share one central perspective: none of them is deluded by the current rhetoric of scientific discoveries, novelties, and all too real energy of their own culture. They do not escape the present, but they turn to the past and proceed by rewriting their predecessors’ works. (Bates 95)

While Boiardo and Ariosto are undeniably the models for the Bizarra, Dragoncino’s work deviates consciously from both in significant ways. Gender and dynastic genealogy are refigured in the latter’s dynastic epic, and cannot be reduced to simple emulation, rather, there are underlying messages here. They are both political and aesthetic, and characteristically irreducible.

Stoppino’s work on dynastic imagination in the Furioso has interesting implications for the interpretation of the Bizarra, a text in which the eponymous Marfisa embodies both the unflappable stature of Charlemagne’s most treasured knight, Orlando himself, at the same time that she performs the fundamental role of establishing the patron’s dynastic genealogy within the text, work carried out by Ariosto and Boiardo’s Bradamante. Dedicated to the “illustissimo signor Federico Gonzaga Primo Duca

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71 According to Stoppino, as the progenitrix of the House of Este, Bradamante opens the door to fundamental questions of the role of gender in patrilineal genealogies wherein “women both guarantee and, consequently, threaten the legitimate line of succession” (4). In the plot of the Furioso, Bradamante’s chivalric exploits come to be understood in terms of justifying her as the most qualified source for that genetic lineage. Within the text, Stoppino identifies three genealogical practices – textual, sexual, and dynastic – that reflect the culturally and politically central role of dynastic imagination in the formation and perpetuation of northern Italian Renaissance hegemony among its various noble lineages. Funding artistic and literary works was one way in which patrons could ensure their own perpetuity while retroactively – as in the cases of the Furioso, Innamorato, and Bizarra (as well as related works) – providing justification for their elevated social and political status.
di Mantoa* the opening to Dragoncino’s *Bizarra* immediately recalls the literary legacy in which he participates, while neatly eliding Marfisa’s Orlando/Bradamante duality.

From the start, the opening stanza of Dragoncino’s *Bizarra* both echoes and contrasts with the *Furioso*’s incipit:

Le donne, i cavallier, l’arme, gli amori, le cortesie, l’audaci imprese io canto che furo al tempo che passaro i Mori d’Africa il mare, e in Francia nocquer tanto, seguendo l’ire e i giovenil furori d’Agramante lor re, che si diè vanto di vendicar la morte di Troiano sopra re Carlo imperator romano. (i.1; p. 11)

Where Ariosto has given a broad overview of his epic poem – of its intricacies and the overarching frame of the battle of Charlemagne’s forces against those of Agramante, Dragoncino immediately sets his work apart, by placing a Queen at the center of his epic program. Ariosto’s *donne* (women) are categorized separately from *cavallier* (knights) – indicating a clear distinction recalling that the *guerriere* (female warriors) of the poem occur nonetheless as an exception to their species, and are in many ways gendered masculine throughout.73 Dragoncino’s *Regina* is already gendered both masculine and feminine – a duality that the author highlights rather than obfuscates.

In the first stanza, Dragoncino’s Marfisa is the source of both *arme* (war) and *amor* (love), but she is not the *object* as in the case of Angelica and the other *donne* of the *Furioso*, but is the *subject* of both – it is of her exploits that the poet sings. Her noble and chivalrous nature (*l’inclite cortesie*) is countered by

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72Adapted from the Turchi and Sanguinetti edition of the *Furioso*. This and all subsequent translations of the text of the *Furioso* come from Barbara Reynolds’s translation:

Of ladies, cavaliers, of love and war,
Of courtesies and of brave deeds I sing,
In times of high endeavour when the Moor
Had crossed the sea from Africa to bring
Great harm to France, when Agramante swore
In wrath, being now the youthful Moorish king,
To avenge Troiano, who was lately slain.
Upon the Roman Emperor Charlemagne. (i.1; p. 117)

73MacCarthy reads the opening line to the *Furioso* differently, resituated the *Furioso* as a poem in which women are both first and central among its many themes. She writes, “‘Le donne’ take pride of place here. In his prefatory letter, he makes it clear that the poem is written for the entertainment of ‘madone’ and ‘signor’ alike” (Women and the Making xii). For MacCarthy, this primacy is not casual, and she sets out to illustrate how this proposition takes form throughout the rest of the work. I believe that MacCarthy’s reading yet leaves room for the distinction that I am making in the present context. I should also make clear here that I am not arguing against readings of Ariosto’s Bradamante as a character with a multitude of feminine attributes (as I later discuss) – only to distinguish between those attributes and her function within the text as a *guerriera*. For the poet’s Marfisa too, a female gendered identity is all but incompatible with her role as knight, and in those moments when either figure is portrayed according to feminine characteristics, these very traits *interfere* with their ability to properly perform the role of *guerriera* and occur at odds with the chivalric value system in which they operate.
her feminine inconstancy and a fluctuation between extremes of temperament: *ire/pace* (ire/tranquillity), *speme/timor* (hope/fear), *riso/pianto* (laughter/tears), *feminil furor/imprese audaci* (female fury/brave deeds); which are couched by the *pregio* (esteem) that her legendary cohort of *antiqui guerrieri* (traditionally-modeled [male] warriors) retain for her nonetheless. While love is central to our story, the poet quickly maintains the queen’s status as knight first and foremost, for her actions are ultimately performed in the chivalrous context of the pursuit of *fama* (fame) and *virtu* (virtue), in the service of Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor and King of France – embodiment of Christianity and the idealized State. In his text Dragoncino has elected to gloss over Marfisa’s textually historical allegiance to Agramante, as to the Islamic faith, adopting the character post-conversion, and calling no attention to the Islamic-Christian conflict immediately resonant in the *Furioso* and *Innamorato*. There is no “other” in Dragoncino’s early framing of the *Bizzarra*, there is only the one faith, the one political alliance, and the one figure – whose nature itself provides the conflict and duality that will trigger the action within the text.74

The unresolved duality that marks Dragoncino’s Marfisa recalls Shemek’s interpretation of Ariosto’s Bradamante as a consistent character of marked duality. In Shemek’s reading, Bradamante occurs as a transgressive figure who characteristically defies categorical definition. Bradamante’s “both/and-ness” allow her to move – at will – within established roles for males and females, at the same time that she occupies a liminal space that refuses to be bound by binary gender distinctions of male/female. Where generations of critics have puzzled over Ariosto’s shift in registers for the textual space in which this figure operates at various points, Shemek locates a continuity of discontinuity within her various textual representations.

Shemek nonetheless sees room for such a transgressive female figure to occupy a textually central role as does Dragoncino’s Marfisa. She identifies where Ariosto has placed Bradamante’s progress in performing the actions that will lead to the fulfillment of her destiny and familial/dynastic duty as the core function within the labyrinthine movement that characterizes the action of the *Furioso*.

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74Here, Dragoncino is adopting Ariosto’s Marfisa rather than her earlier portrayal as a “pagan” zealot that “place[d] Boiardo’s Marfisa firmly on the wrong side of the Carolingian wars, Ariosto’s version is not such a glaring threat to Christianity” (MacCarthy, “Marfisa” 181). Regarding Marfisa’s baptism in Canto XXXVIII, Tomalin points out that Marfisa, “having discovered that she should be a Christian by birth, she simply transfers her allegiance to the other side and continues her life as before” (113).
Bradamante provides the “real,” that is “historical,” link that hybridizes the text, displacing it from romance, and infusing the work with its significant epic thrust. In the Bizzarra, Marfisa performs this critical function, and like Ariosto’s Bradamante, the competing interests of errancy and domestication remain unresolved and thus defy simple categorization. She is neither fully feminine nor fully masculine, but fully both.75

Skipping ahead to where Marfisa is first properly introduced into the text itself, we move now to the eighth stanza of the Bizzarra. While the work’s title gives a clear understanding of the identity of the Regina of the first line of the poem, she is not explicitly named until now, when her performance in the Furioso is recalled:

A tutti e noto che questa donzella
Fu già figliula al gran Ruggier di Risa
Gagliarda, & saggia quanto altera, & bella
& nominata la forte Marphisa
Che non mai da guerrier giù de la sella
Fu scavalcata, ne punto conquisa
Fece gran prove di lancia, & di brando,
mentre, ch’amor tenne in catena Orlando. (i.8 lines 4-8)76

Nubile as the term donzella would indicate, we are reminded at once of her significant patrimony (her shared parentage with Ruggiero, progenitor of the House of Este), and well-established reputation. The description of her persona follows, with her masculine, warrior-like characteristics presented first – gagliarda (powerful),77 saggia (wise) – and her most generic (and potentially destructive) female attribute,

75Shemek does not see a conflict with Bradamente’s overall portrayal and her domestication in the final canto of the Furioso, where the guerriera willingly occupies a position of domesticity and subjugation, and apparently renounces the violence that earlier marked her portrayal. Here, the guerriera turned sposa (bride) is demonstrating her own constant inconsistency. Ariosto’s reader may not rely on Bradamante’s actions – past, present, and perhaps even future – to fall under any established rubric, whether it be chivalric and thereby gendered masculine or dynastic/domestic and thereby gendered feminine.

By “closing” his work with a novel and seemingly contradictory portrayal of an otherwise constant character, Ariosto demonstrates that the careful reader must take nothing for granted. To the last, Bradamante refuses to be bound to any sphere, public or private; she is the very embodiment of errancy. In this light, her “domestication” signifies errancy within errancy, and not the simple renunciation of the masculine, and acceptance of the feminine that critics have identified. In other words, by willingly casting aside the armor that allows her to mask her sex and thus function as a figure of freewheeling disruption to social norms, Bradamante is proving herself errant from her own identity as a knight – that which marked her as an errant woman. Her “domestication” is not a finite point on a timeline, but another layer in the rich tapestry that Ariosto uses to build an identity that is at once intangible and deceptively complex. See Shemek, Ladies Errant.

76To all it is known that this maiden
Was indeed the daughter of the great Ruggerio di Risa,
Powerful & wise as much as self-possessed & lovely
& named the mighty Marphisa
Who had never by a warrior [been thrown] down from the saddle
Unhorsed, certainly not conquered
Committed great deeds by lance & by sword
While love held Orlando in chains.

that is her beauty (bella), presented last, and tempered by an attitude that renders her unobtainable – altera (disdainful). Her strength is then re-emphasized upon her first explicit naming within the text – la forte Marphisa. Never overthrown in battle, nor conquisa (conquered) – a term laden with innuendo, and a context that recalls Bradamante’s vow to marry the warrior who can unhorse her – the chivalric epic standard to signal a female warrior’s transition from an errant life to a domestic one.

The one knight who was able to overthrow Marlisa in the Furioso was, of course, Bradamante in canto thirty-six, stanza twenty, where her future sister-in-law does so in the garb of a lady and with the un-chivalric aid of her enchanted lance. As Tomalin describes it, “the disguised donna gentile meets the true guerriera” of the text (105). This scene occurs in the context of Bradamante’s very feminine and very un-knightly fit of jealousy and passion over Ruggiero, scenes in which Ruggiero is presented as the most rational (i.e. masculine) knight out of the bunch – both chivalrous and level-headed – whereas his future bride is presented as a woman unhinged, and in need of taming (by a firm masculine hand perhaps), and his sister (mistaken identity and obscured parentage soon to be revealed) is rendered uncharacteristically unreasonable by rage at what is certain to have been an unfair fight (injustice begets unreason). Tomalin asserts:

whereas Bradamante’s impetuosity has its roots in her own frustration, Marfisa acts out of a strict sense of honor [...] The one moment in which Marfisa descends to discourteous behaviour is after the extreme provocation of Bradamante’s discourtesy to her. (109)

78 I concur with this judgment only in terms of the aesthetics of the scene, in which Bradamante is indeed behaving as a guerriera gone donna gentile and using un-chivalric tactics towards un-chivalric ends. In the overall context of the poem, however, I subscribe to a more nuanced and open reading of the figure of Bradamante, and the possibility for understanding her as a character whose gender fluidity remains unresolved and unresolvable within the text. In MacCarthy’s assessment, it is entirely possible that the apparent ambivalence on the part of the narrator and written into female characters – their portrayals and their functions within the text – is intentional and serves to put the reader in the uncomfortable position of attempting to resolve the irreconcilable. Understood in this way, the poet – narrator – reader dynamic becomes a knot of influences, interactions, and intersections which has no definitive points of entry nor exit. The modern critic must then approach the text with an understanding for her own biases, as well as for the inherent limitations of textual analysis as a process.

For MacCarthy, Bradamante’s fluidity marks her as the textual “exemplar of female agency and political aptitude” (Women and the Making xviii). Ariosto’s various and inconstant portrayals of Bradamante throughout the poem serve to imbue her with a sense of all-encompassing femininity, where she is the embodiment of the poet’s stated aim for the poem, that is, to tell of chivalric themes – first among which are le donne. In yet another plausible interpretation, Stoppino sees Ariosto as questioning the underlying assumption that dynastic foundation necessitates the subjugation of women. She concludes her genealogical reading of the text with Ariosto’s own final inscription:

Ariosto has challenged the traditional view of the foundation as violence against women. Another foundation is possible, one based on loyalty, mutual agreement, and negotiation, and woman could be the political subject who is free to realize it. Violence, however, is a threat from within this delicate balance, and betrayal is the other side of the gift. Pro bono malum. (179)

See also n. 74 for Shemek’s interpretation.
Marfisa’s chivalric character is soon restored through her reunion with Ruggiero, while Bradamante’s dynastic fate is shortly to come to pass in her ultimate union with the same, placing her in the inarguably feminine role of wife and mother.79

The extreme nature of the heroine of the *Bizzarra* is reflected in the poet’s own passion to recall a history that was – until his present intervention – silenced and neglected. The second stanza of the *Bizzarra* opens:

M’accendo a dir con un desio di foco
Questa historia fin qui tacita, e ignota,
non piu vista, ne intesa in altro loco
ovunque scalda il sol, ch’intorno rota,
di Francese idioma a poco, a poco
la faccio in questi versi al mondo nota
ma prima drizzo con fervente zelo
le mano, gli occhi: et le parole al cielo. (i.2)80

Burning (m’accendo) with an urgency that flames (un desio di foco) within himself, the poet must bring this all but forgotten history to light. His rush to give voice to a history long-silenced (tacita) and neglected

79 As to whether Bradamante is intended, ultimately, to remain in the circumscribed sphere of domesticity following the end of the *Furioso* is an issue well-argued by scholars in both camps. In terms of the story of the text itself, however, Bradamante’s final actions occur within the context of her role as bride – open-ended story that it may be.

Shemek explores the potential for identifying Bradamante as an enduring figure of feminine errancy, despite her apparent “domestication” (a topic of much critical debate from the time of the *Furioso*’s publication) at the poem’s conclusion. Where earlier feminists and proto-feminists expressed dismay at the apparent truncation of Bradamante’s dynamic and category-defying representation in the first part of the poem, Shemek looks beyond the literal, textual representation, to that which gives the work its epic force, Bradamante’s genealogical link to the Estense dynasty, which, she asserts, leaves open the possibility for a return to errancy on the part of Bradamante. In alluding to the impending loss of Ruggiero, the husband to whom Bradamante willingly submits and for whom she resigns the unique freedom afforded a maiden-knight, Ariosto has left space for future heroic exploits on the part of the character.

As Shemek indicates, the confinement of Bradamante to the domestic and matriarchal sphere that seems to mark the character in the final scenes of the poem is, perhaps, only a layover (rather than the ultimate destination), in the otherwise constant progress of that figure throughout the text. Similarly, Milligan points out that:

[i]he revival of Bradamante’s militancy is prophesied to happen once she is both a mother and a widow, and thus female militancy is presented not as a profession of only the resolute virgin (e.g., Marfisa) but as an identity that is not necessarily contained or reversed by motherhood and marriage. (60)

Günsberg, on the other hand, has interpreted subordination and subjugation for both Bradamante and Marfisa in the *Furioso* where marriage signals Bradamante’s submission and conversion Marfisa’s. She points out that neither *guerriera* will battle again after these critical moments (see pp. 23-24). In comparing the *Furioso* to Tasso’s Post-Tridentine *Gerusalemme liberata*, her overall assessment is “that despite the differences between the *Orlando furioso* and the *Gerusalemme liberata*, both poems fundamentally reinforce the dominant ideology of fixed gender attributes and the subordination of the feminine” (34). While Ariosto certainly provided portrayals that reinforce the dominant ideology he also provided many important examples that do not.

MacCarthy reads Marfisa’s conversion in xxxviii otherwise, pointing out that Ariosto’s Marfisa possesses none of the “pagan” fervor that characterized Boiardo’s portrayal. Instead, Ariosto’s Marfisa is less concerned with religion than she is “driven by personal ambition” and her newfound allegiance to Christianity can be understood in terms of her entrance into the service of Charlemagne (“Marfisa” 181). MacCarthy further points out that “[o]n no occasion does she accept a conventional ‘female’ identity or destiny” (178). For a similar reading by Tomalin see n. 73.

80 I burn to tell with a flaming desire
This history, until now silenced and unknown,
No longer seen, nor understood in any place
Wherever the sun shines, and revolves.
From the French language, little by little
I fashion it in these verses to be known to the world
But first I redirect with fervent zeal
My hands, my eyes: and my words to heaven. (i.2)
(ignota) is tempered only by a dedication yet more fervent and zealous – he turns to heaven, surrendering himself to a greater power.

Again, in the second stanza the poet-narrator of the Bizzarra has set himself apart from that of Ariosto. Here we have a poet moved by forces beyond his control as the very heavens set him aflame, directing him to correct the faulty memory that history has provided. It is piety rather than humility that is to direct the discourse in the coming verses. In Ariosto’s second stanza, the language is similar, but the tone is more aloof – farther removed from the furore (frenzy) and matto (mad) plight of his titular character. We know from tradition that the subject of the poem is to be a recovered history and the implied duty to do his subject justice, but the poet-narrator of the Furioso is anything but a madman.

Dirò d’Orlando in un medesmo tratto
Cosa non detta in prosa mai né in rima:
che per amor venne in furore e matto,
d’uom che si saggio era stimato prima;
se da colei che tal quasi m’ha fatto,
che ’l poco ingegno ad or ad or mi lima,
me ne sarà però tanto concesso,
che mi basti a finir quanto ho promesso. (i.2; p. 11)

Likening himself to Orlando for the fault of a beloved – da colei che tal quasi m’ha fatto (she has made of me almost the same) – the poet’s words reflect a man who once wise (saggio) and esteemed (stimato) is now rendered of reduced wit (poco ingegno) and limited sensibilities (mi lima). He wills only that she permit him the power to finish his task, to execute the promised poem despite the state of his diminished capacities. There is an irony to the expressed humility, born out in Ariosto’s elegantly wrought verses that underscores the quasi (almost) in that which she has rendered him (m’ha fatto), and a reading of Ariosto’s present narrator as even quasi furioso is unconvincing when paralleled with Dragoncino’s fervent and zealous urge to tell – a poet on the verge, bizarro even.

The stanzas of the Bizzarra that follow present a familiar trope of the Renaissance guerriera, calling upon neo-platonic symbolism and the human embodiment of “[t]he union of Mars and Venus”

81 And of Orlando I will also tell
Things attempted yet in prose or rhyme,
Of the mad frenzy that for love befell
One who so wise was held in former time,
If she who my poor talent by her spell
Has so reduced that I resemble him,
Will grant me now sufficient for my task:
The wit to reach the end is all I ask. (i.2; p. 117)
where “the lovely fighting maiden symbolizes this union” (Tomalin 15). “*Cupido in questa, et Marte in quella guerra […] mentre d’arme, & d’amor le glorie canto*” (Cupid in this war and Mars in that one … while I sing of the glory of war and love) (Dragoncino i.3). Dragoncino’s Marfisa, however, presents an interesting departure from her earlier characterizations – unlike Boiardo’s comically-fixated and properly asexual virago or Ariosto’s single-minded warrior in pursuit of chivalric ideals, never distracted by the romantic or domestic impulses of those around her – now she will fall in love in a way that is thoroughly out of character-type for a *guerriera* in love. She is not the woman "seen as a warrior admired for her prowess by the men" but feeling “that she must find a husband who will overcome her in battle” as Tomalin describes her counterparts such as Bradamante or Tasso’s Clorinda (15). In Dragoncino’s epic Marfisa will submit to love for the first time in her literary legacy and to one who could never overcome her by force. Unlike in the *Furioso*, the male component in the dynastic coupling remains undefined and unresolved. The inherent irony underlying the source of Marfisa’s folly – an obsession with Filinoro (a beautiful boy and not a *guerriero*) is yet unrevealed in the text however, and we are presented with a Renaissance *guerriera* sensibility that feels more or less familiar.

Dragoncino is aware that he is striking new ground with his work and departing from his exemplars. He comes to life with the exhilarating task of glorifying the patron’s name in audacious and novel verses inspired by the Gonzagas’ female ancestor – the *guerriera* of love and war, who is the topic of his poem.

```italian
Tutto verdeggio come fronde al Maggio
Sotto ’l color d’una speranza viva
& mi riscaldo come serpe al raggio
Del chiaro sol, che tutto ’l mondo aviva
Et mi rinovo come arbor selvaggio
Nel nome vostro onde convien, ch’io scriva
et canti audacemente in novo carme
di la figlia di voi l’amor’ et l’arme. (i.4)
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82 I become green as boughs in May
Under the color of a living hope
And I warm myself like a serpent in a ray
Of the clear sun, who revives the whole world
And I am renewed like a wild tree
In your name, so it behooves me to write
And sing audaciously in a new poem
Of your daughter’s love and arms. (i.4)
Already, we see that Dragoncino is aware of the modifications he is making to the epic treatment of
gender, and that the prospect is wholly enlivening. Peppered with the imagery of Spring – verdeggio (I
bloom), Maggio (May), raggio del chiaro sol (ray of the clear sun) – of rebirth – mi riscaldo come Serpe (I
am warmed i.e. reanimated like a serpent), tutto ’l mondo aviva (revives the whole world) – and of new
beginnings – mi rinovo (I am renewed) – the poet’s song reflects new potential – una speranzaa viva (a
living hope) – within an established form – novo carme (new poem). Central to the poet’s newfound
program of innovation, inspiration, and generation are: the epic genre in which he revels, and the
gendered representation of genealogy – de la figlia di voi l’amor’ et l’arme (the love and arms of your
daughter) – for his patron’s most elevated dynasty.

In stanza four, Dragoncino has set himself apart from his predecessors and literary models,
making a conscious move to bring gender and genealogy to the fore. While scholars such as Stoppino,
Shemek and MacCarthy (to name a few) have illustrated the many ways in which Bradamante is the
figure of central importance in interpreting the Furioso and Innamorato as dynastic genealogies, even
Ariosto leaves such nuanced readings buried within the text itself. In the opening passages to his poem,
the poet expresses the patrilineal focus of his own genealogical program explicitly stating that the original
ancestor of the house of Este – “capostipite di casa d’Este”83 – is “quel Ruggier, che fu di voi / e de’ vostri
avi illustri il ceppo Vecchio” (i.4 lines 3-4, p. 12) (Ruggiero [...] the founder of the lineage you bear).84

As the ceppo vecchio Ruggiero is quite literally the trunk of the genealogical tree that begins the
line of Este. In keeping with standard patrilineal genealogical patterning, Bradamante is left
unacknowledged. According to the opening here, this is the story of Ruggiero’s founding of the House of
Este, implying that Bradamante – again a figure of central importance in interpreting that genealogical
representation within the text itself – remains a secondary character, embodying the unnamed role of
progenetrix. She is not even alluded to in these lines. Her presence – if she can be said to have one –
relies entirely on one’s explicit knowledge of Boiardo’s text and of the later content of the poem itself.

Dragoncino’s fourth stanza occurs as an absolute reversal of the gendered representation of
dynastic genealogy within the Furioso, and he seems thrilled at the prospect. While she is not yet named,

83From footnote to stanza four in Turchi and Sanguineti’s edition of the Furioso Ariosto (12).
84Reynolds 118; i.4.
Marfisa is presented as the *guerriera* exemplar who will carry the text and found the House of Gonzaga. There is no prior-established romantic history for the character of Marfisa, who both Boiardo and Ariosto left as an un tarnished, virgin warrior – rarely sexualized, and only ever in the eyes of others who *mistake* her gendered identity as female in scenes which play *explicitly* on her subjective assumption of an asexual male-gendered identity.85

Where we might, with careful reading and specific foreknowledge, recall that Bradamante too is a founding member of the Este dynasty in Ariosto’s early reference to Ruggiero, this is left unvoiced. In his opening, Dragoncino makes the impossible move of founding the House of Gonzaga on the back of the woman warrior, Marfisa, who has no male, romantic counterpart to intertextually recall. The arboreal imagery that Dragoncino calls upon is not the staid patriarchal system of legitimization, that *ceppo vecchio* which Ariosto employed, but the reawakening of a wild tree (*arbor selvaggio*) that the Gonzaga name inspires within the poet. In the opening to the *Bizzarra*, Marfisa stands boldly alone at the base of the Gonzaga family tree.

Dragoncino, reveling in the honor and inspiration his patron inspires, continues on fulsomely for three stanzas, before turning back to the topic of the poem. By the fifth stanza of the *Furioso*, Ariosto has already made this shift. In stanzas five and six of the *Bizzarra*, the poet’s only focus is the explicit and overtly laudatory expression of humility and praise in service to the House of Gonzaga, and specifically to the great Duke Federico, the patron of the present work.

O moderno figliuol del piu gran nume
di cui sol suonan le piu nobil cetre
gloria di bei nostri anni, honor et lume,

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85MacCarthy assesses Marfisa as a “narrative complex” (a term borrowed from Günsberg) (MacCarthy, “Marfisa” 178-79) within the *Furioso* who functions as Ariosto’s “deliberate enquiry into gender identity” (180). Her methodology is:

*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.* (193)

Within the *Furioso*, MacCarthy identifies a “Marfisa-specific value of virginity” where her commitment to chastity serves as her claim to the “right to self-ownership,” while:

*[o]ther 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.* (183) MacCarthy’s identification points to the Renaissance convention by which chastity and virginity when performed outside the marriage-economy (as with nuns for example), served to masculinize women – in a positive sense. She points to medical, religious and literary texts that describe virgins as “‘improved’ women, more like men” (ibid), and references Burkhardt’s description of the Renaissance term “virago” as an explicit compliment.

See MacCarthy, *Women and the Making* for a reading of episodes dealing with confusion over Marfisa’s gendered-identity in cantos XXVI, XX, XIX of the *Furioso*. 

121
che le lode d’altrui fai basse, et tetre,
pari al tuo nome e havess’io voce, et piume
che denote di te farei le pietre
Gonzaga alzando a l’alte stelle lustre,
eccelso Duca Federico illustre.

Si a te dedico, dono, drizzo, et piego
Le rime mie, ch’altronde gir non sanno
L’alta eccellentia tua supplice io prego
Che quelle acceti al tuo sublime scanno.
Gli alti honor tuoi, ch’in queste carte spiego
S’io son devoto tuo segno ne fanno.
Spirito real’animo, largo, & giusto,
a te m’inchino come a un novo Augusto. (i.5-6)

Making himself low in the presence of such greatness, to the point of veritable groveling – *a te de dico*, *dono, drizzo, et piego* (to you I dedicate, I give, I direct, and bow in humility) – the poet cries out for the memorialization of a most exceptional man of his times (*moderno figliuolo … gloria di bei nostri anni*). Imperial, noble, sacred, Federico’s excellence (*eccellentia*) bring the poet to direct his words in service and in submission as to a new Augustus (*a te m’inchino come a un novo Augusto*). Federico’s exceptionality is beyond compare – *le lode d’altrui fai basse, et tetre* (you make the praise of others low and squalid) – and the verses that the poet generates on his behalf cannot be found elsewhere – *le rime mie, ch’altronde gir non fanno* (my rhymes that elsewhere *i.e. to other purpose* do not circulate).

The poet’s reference to Augustus and its implied comparison to the classic epic of imperial foundation, the *Aeneid*, provides Dragoncino with a ready self-aggrandizement as he wordlessly slips into the role of imperial poet. By recalling Virgil, the poet not only elevates his patron to the ideal of Roman civic and urban greatness, but he plays upon Mantua’s historic association as the birthplace of Virgil himself, the *genius loci* or “protector and symbol of the city” (Furlotti and Rebecchini 15). The parallel that

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86 See n. 62 for translation of stanza 5.

87 It is possible that these lines may be considered in reference to the poem, *Marfisa disperata*, that Pietro Aretino was commissioned to write for Federico, but that was left unfinished when that relationship soured. Considering the tone and content of these stanzas, as well as the parallel timing to the Aretino-Mantua falling out, it is not a stretch to interpret some of Dragoncino’s dedication to be in direct response to a patron disillusioned with certain aspects of the poetic process – namely the poet-patron relationship. For more on Aretino and Gonzaga’s literary dissolution see Romei, Danilo. “Introduzione: Storia di Marfisa (e degli altri poemi impossibili),” 9-32.
the poet makes also begs a brief diversion into the historical moment in which Dragoncino’s poem was composed and then printed with the explicit approval of his patron.\textsuperscript{88}

Born 17 May 1500, Federico II came into power as the marquis of Mantua on 3 April 1519, following the death of his father, Francesco II. The Mantuan state operated under the shared regency of Federico’s mother, Isabella d’Este, and uncles Sigismondo and Giovanni Gonzaga until the marquis received Imperial Investiture from Charles V on 7 April 1521. On 25 March 1530 Federico’s political wheeling and dealing in the interest of Charles V earned the Gonzaga family the dukedom of Mantua, making Federico the first duke of that city. Federico held the office until shortly before his death in 1540, when his son Francesco III assumed the title.

During the early years of his reign, Federico was responsible for a number of successful political and military campaigns, extending the territories held by the House of Gonzaga and transforming the city of Mantua into a center for Renaissance art and culture. The construction of his so-called pleasure palace, the Palazzo Te, from 1524-1534 involved a number of significant architects and artists from the period, and provided the young marquis, and later duke, with an attractive setting in which to entertain important cultural and political figures such as Emperor Charles V (hosted from 7 November – 8 December 1530). From provincial marquisate to a center for Renaissance politics, art and culture, Federico oversaw the transformation of Mantua and the expansion of Gonzaga hegemony beginning in the earliest years of his reign. That Dragoncino would see in Federico a man of his times, a cultural leader, and a political model is reflected by his patron’s accomplishments in the context of Mantuan sovereignty and literary and artistic patrimony.

Moving on now, to the text of stanza seven of the \textit{Bizarra}, the poet’s explicit praise of Federico continues – \textit{la risonante fama tua mi move} (your resounding fame moves me) – even as he shifts to the story and the dynastic genealogy that his poem will celebrate (\textit{celebrar}). Still Marfisa stands alone as the source of the Gonzaga heredity: \textit{la gran donna […] \textit{quella singular nobil radice / che fu de gli avi tuoi progenetrice} (the great woman […] that singular noble root that was the progenitrix of your ancestors). As expressed by Dragoncino, the Gonzaga family tree comes not from a \textit{ceppo vecchio} consisting of an expressed male ancestor and his implied coupling with a worthy female counterpart, but from a

\textsuperscript{88}See n. 64.
progenetrice – from a singular nobil radice – from a masculinized female warrior who does not fit the mold for either gender. With no mention of a male capostipite, Marfisa serves as progenetrix of the Gonzaga lineage as if by self-replication. She retains her virginal status and reflects the emblem of the “self-generating phoenix” that she bears upon her helmet (MacCarthy, “Marfisa” 183).

In the opening canto, Dragoncino has immediately employed the dynastic imagination as his reason and method for writing the Bizzarra as per the genre-standard, but makes clear that his own work goes beyond the models established by his predecessors. Interestingly, the link between Ariosto’s and Dragoncino’s dynastic imaginations is strengthened by the endogamous move to make Marfisa the source of the Gonzaga lineage. As previously mentioned, in looking back to the Furioso, we see that the progenitrix to the House of Este is Bradamante, who marries Ruggiero – Marfisa’s twin brother. While Stoppino views Bradamante as the crucial figure in this coupling, in the present context Ruggiero also serves a function – that of an exogamic source for heredity.

In selecting Marfisa as the progenitrix of the House of Gonzaga, Dragoncino takes that which was exogamic and inverts it to endogamy by linking Gonzaga’s paternal and maternal lineages. Federico Gonzaga’s mother was after all, Isabella d’Este – a supposed descendant of Marfisa’s twin brother and Bradamante according to the Furioso and Innamorato. How can we interpret the implications for Gonzaga to have come from Marfisa on his father’s side and Ruggiero on his mother’s side? Is Dragoncino simply coopting Ariosto’s labor in developing the Estense dynastic genealogy (first established in the Innamorato) within his own poem and amplifying Federico’s dynastic legacy by demonstrating hereditary greatness on both sides? In other words, is the choice of Marfisa the easiest way to tie the Gonzaga line back to Ruggiero, rather than an indicator of other more complicated gender dynamics at play in the text and politics associated with the House of Gonzaga? For example, does a direct link to Ruggiero by way of Marfisa circumvent the indirect link that Federico’s mother, Isabella d’Este, otherwise provides in connecting her son’s genealogy to that established for the Estense dynasty?

As the link in the hereditary chain that ties Federico to both the Gonzaga and Este dynasties, Isabella occurs as a female with exceptional valences in both artistic/literary and social/political contexts.

The *Primadonna del Rinascimento*, Isabella d'Este remains a fascinating historical figure whose art patronage and collecting brought her into direct contact with most major cultural figures of her period. Not only is she lauded for her refinement and exceptionality within the *Furioso*, but she had direct contact with Ariosto regarding the poem's composition. She was – and still is – considered one of the most significant female cultural and literary figures of her time.

Additionally, Isabella is unique in terms of the political power and influence that she wielded alongside her husband, Francesco II, stepping-in for him during prolonged periods in which he was absent from the Mantuan court for military campaigns associated with the Italian Wars, and when he was held captive in a Venetian prison.90 It was during this period that Isabella brokered the release of the marquis, by leveraging Federico II as a diplomatic hostage at the papal court of Julius II in Rome where he was held from 1510-1513. A gesture guaranteeing "that the Gonzaga would honor Rome's fragile new Venetian alliance" (Hickson, "Federico" 39). After a brief return to Mantua, the young Federico was made into a diplomatic hostage for the second time, now from 1515-1517 in France at the court of the "recently crowned Francis I" (40).91

From a young age, Federico II existed as a tool in the diplomatic machinations of life in the Mantuan court of Francesco II and Isabella. Born into an existence as a piece on the Gonzaga chessboard of expansionist hegemony, Federico's life-experiences always occurred within the context that balanced power with privilege, intertwining both with personal and domestic spheres. Through the elite, literate culture and "*atmosfera erudita*" (Barbieri, "Federico II" 50)92 that his parents cultivated at their court in Mantua, Federico lived and breathed an air in which art and literature occurred as demonstrations

90Sarah Cockram discusses Isabella's role as "co-ruler of Mantua" and illustrates how Isabella and Francesco II engaged in "power sharing in action, with shared human, material, and cultural resources; joint administration and exercise of authority and justice; and common diplomatic policy" (1), see Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court*.


91See also Tomalio, *Federico Gonzaga alla corte di Francesco I di Francia: nel carteggio privato con Mantova (1515-1517)*.

92"...*l'atmosfera erudita* della corte di Mantova, in cui risiedevano dotti del calibro di Mario Equicola (1470 - 1525), e che la sua educazione fu affidata, in particolare al precettore Giovan Francesco Vigilio (1446 - 1534), umanista locale di discreto livello e allestitore di spettacoli teatrali" (ibid – emphasis my own).

...the court of Mantua’s erudite atmosphere, in which resided experts of the caliber of Mario Equicola, and that his [Federico's] education was particularly entrusted to the preceptor, Giovan Francesco Vigilio, a respected local humanist and producer of theatrical performances (this and subsequent translations of Barbieri are my own).
of exceptionality, and where a literate and cultured upbringing was essential to future political workings. It was also an environment in which an exceptional woman held considerable power over the destinies of many of the significant male figures in her life – her husband and their sons.

Young Federico’s own education was tasked to renowned humanists such as Mario Equicola (1470-1525) whose pro-woman treatise, *De mulieribus (On Women – 1501)* was dedicated to Isabella’s close friend Margherita Cantelma of Mantua, wherein he positively declared women’s equality to men. Acknowledging physical differences, he asserts that there is no inherent inferiority as such, and attributes women’s “secondary role” in society as being the result of custom alone (Rabil 24). A similar such work written by Bartolomeo Goggio, *De laudibus mulierum (In Praise of Women – ca. 1487)*, attests that “women have no natural inferiority to men,” asserting elsewhere that there are certain qualities in women that are in fact superior to men (23). This work was dedicated to Isabella d’Este’s mother, the Duchess of Ferrara, Eleonora d’Aragona (1440-1493). Writing of his cultural formation at Mantua, as in Rome and France, Barbieri tells us that these experiences provided Federico with a privileged perspective from which he observed the evolution of international politics during the early sixteenth century (“Federico II” 50). His connections with the court in Ferrara as to his own in Mantua, had presented the future duke with an understanding for the role of elite women as potentially influential political figures.

Art and literature at the Gonzaga court and in the life of young Federico held important political functions, and chivalric epic poems were among the most popular forms. Barbieri tells us of the chivalric festivities held at the court of Francis I, such as tournaments, jousts, hunts, and sumptuous banquets, all

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93 James writes that, “it is no coincidence that it was around Isabella and her female relatives that the Italian defenders of women first rallied” (57). She describes the marchioness’s keen awareness “of the necessity to present herself as a traditional aristocratic wife who ably intervened in the larger forum of state affairs when called upon to do so, a version of the princely consort that had been successfully played out by her mother Eleonora d’Aragona” (ibid). She further elaborates that:

*It was indubitably the active administration and diplomatic role of dynastic wives in the courtly context, where private and public duties were confusingly blurred, that called into being texts that grappled with the challenges that the greater influence of elite women presented to traditional notions of their innate inferiority. Almost all the late fifteenth-century Italian defenses of women were dedicated to female members of the Neopolitan Aragonese dynasty: Eleonora and Beatrice d’Aragona, daughters of the king of Naples, and Eleonora’s eldest child, Isabella d’Este, (ibid) Isabella’s namesake, her grandmother Isabella di Chiaramonte (Eleonora’s mother) exercised an active role in the regency and local politics associated with her husband Ferrante’s reign over the Kingdom of Naples (58).*

94 *...dalla giovane età sia tramite i maestri che hanno curato la sua formazione sia tramite le esperienze maturate a Roma e in Francia, che gli hanno consentito di osservare l’evoluzione del quadro internazionale da una prospettiva privilegiata (ibid).*

*...from his youth, the teachers charged with his instruction along with his [culturally formative] experiences in Rome and in France [referring to Federico’s time as diplomatic hostage], provided to him [Federico] a privileged perspective from which to observe the evolution of international events in action.*
of which provided the young Federico with the context in which to demonstrate not only his exceptional culture and knowledge of chivalric texts (libri di battaglia) – the Furioso chiefly among them – but more importantly, his refined skills as a warrior and horseman (virtù guerrieresca) (53). Chief among Federico’s scholastic interests were chivalric works, pseudo-scientific texts, and to a lesser extent geography – all of which he carried forward along with his accession to power in 1519. Barbieri identifies the first decade of Federico’s rule, the years in which he was the fifth marquis of Mantua, as his most active period in terms of literary relations (relazioni letterarie) (54-55). During this period Federico surrounded himself with dotti e letterati (erudite specialists and literati), with whom he developed a range of relationships – commissioning works, having works dedicated in his honor, being written into works themselves, and serving as protettore (sponsor or patron) in publishing matters and private disputes (ibid).97

Returning to the genealogical context provided in the Bizarra and Federico’s commissioning thereof, we can better understand how such a poem would have had significant political and social

95 …poté partecipare a numerosi eventi mondani, tra cui tornei, giostre, cacce e lussuosi banchetti. I giochi e gli agoni cavaliereschi sollecitarono l’erede della dinastia mantovana sia a dimostrare concretamente la propria virtù guerresca sia alla lettura dei libri di battaglia, in primis l’Orlando furioso di Ludovico Ariosto, uscito in prima edizione a Ferrara per i tipi di Giovanni Mazzocco da Bondeno nel 1516. (ibid – emphasis my own)

…he was able to participate in numerous worldly events, among which tournaments, jousts, hunts and sumptuous banquets. The games and chivalric competitions stimulated the heir to the Mantuan dynasty to concretely demonstrate his own capacities as a warrior, as well as his knowledge of chivalric literature, in primis Ludovico Ariosto’s L’Orlando furioso, its first edition published in Ferrara at the press of Giovanni Mazzocco da Bondeno in 1516.

96 Si completa così il quadro essenziale della formazione di Federico II, all’interno del quale spiccano, dunque, gli interessi nei confronti delle opere cavalleresche; dei testi pseudo-scientifici e, più limitatamente, della geografia, tutti portati avanti anche dopo la salita al potere nel 1519, quando si aprì la stagione più feconda delle sue relazioni letterarie, coincidente con il decennio di governo come quinto marchese di Mantova e inaugurata dalle liriche di carattere encomiastico racchiuso nel ms. B.XXXIII.10 della busta 85 dell’Archivio Gonzaga, nell’Archivio di Stato di Mantova. (ibid – emphasis my own)

Thus the essential overview of Federico II’s [cultural] formation is complete, within which [certain] interests stand in sharp relief, [particularly] in regards to chivalric works; pseudo-scientific texts, and to a more limited extent, geography[. All of which [interests] are carried forward even following his rise to power in 1519, [the moment] when the most productive period of his literary relations was initiated, coinciding with the decade of [his] governing as the fifth marquis of Mantua [i.e. before his investiture as duke in 1530] and inaugurated in encomiastic lyrics held in ms. B.XXXIII.10 of busta 85 of the Archivio Gonzaga, within the Archivio di Stato di Mantova.

97 Federico II, in ogni caso, amò circondarsi di dotti e letterati, con i quali instaurò relazioni di vario tipo, commissionando loro dei testi o essendo il dedicatorio delle loro opere, venendo citato nei loro scritti oppure atteggiandosi a loro protettore in questioni editoriali o private. Esaminando più specificamente il mecenatismo del principe mantovano, si coglie immediatamente una costante: i lavori commissionati dal Gonzaga furono assai pochi, ma decisamente mirati. (ibid – emphasis my own)

Federico II, in any case, loved to surround himself with intellectuals and literati, with whom he established relationships of various types, commissioning their texts or serving as dedicatee in works, being cited within texts or attaching himself as their patron in publishing or personal matters. Examining more specifically, the Mantuan prince’s art patronage, one constant is immediately evident: the works commissioned by Gonzaga were considerably few, but decidedly targeted.
implications for the projected image of Federico as a ruler and the House of Gonzaga as a legitimate dynasty. Barbieri is explicit in refocusing the literary output surrounding Federico as not only “una semplice forma di trattenimento” (a simple form of entertainment) but also as “uno strumento di potere e di propaganda” (an instrument of power and propaganda) (56). While less is known about the now-obscure Dragoncino and the composition of the Bizzarra, we know that it was likely being composed around the same time that Aretino’s Marfisa disperata was underway, and that both poets were working from Venice. Milan tells us that Dragoncino was likely working most productively on the Bizzarra from 1527-1528, while Romei points to the first document dealing with Aretino’s Marfisa as a letter from Federico to the poet, his protetto (financial ward), dated 15 September 1527 (Romei 9). Federico was directly involved in the commissioning of Aretino’s Marfisa and was deeply concerned with the dynastic genealogy presented therein. The choice of Marfisa as progenetrix was intentional, and was approved – if not explicitly stipulated – by Federico himself, who provided the author with a summary of the Gonzaga genealogy from which to work in early 1528 (12).

As evidenced in the flurry of contemporary discourse surrounding the composition of Aretino’s Marfisa, we understand that the choice to deploy Marfisa in the role of progenetrix is not a casual one, and that Federico is simultaneously having himself written into the Furioso’s genealogical program on a number of levels. As Stoppino stresses in her work, the authorial stakes are high when it comes to the “genealogical perception of the dynasty and its poetry” and are further complicated by the central elements of: “hypergamy, exogamy, mixed lineages, and the crucial place of gender in their formation” (Stoppino 5). Issues that the figure of Marfisa in the role of singular dynastic progenetrix embodies and makes manifest, even prior to her portrayal within the texts themselves.

Returning then to the Bizzarra and the fictional history it proffers, the modern scholar can identify a direct link between literature and history – and see where gender enters not only into Federico’s own conception of dynastic heredity, but where it is further implicated in the founding myth associated with the

98È evidente, quindi, che Federico II concepì la letteratura non solo come una semplice forma di trattenimento, ma anche come uno strumento di potere e di propaganda” (ibid). (It is evident, therefore, that Federico II conceived of literature not only as a simple form of entertainment, but also as an instrument of power and propaganda.)

99Here, Romei cites a letter from Federico to Aretino dated 26 February 1528, published in Luzio, Pietro Aretino (xv p. 79), where the marquis informs the poet that he has instructed his former teacher (and author of a history of Mantua), Francesco Vigilio, to compose the Gonzaga genealogy to provide to Aretino: “...Ho fatto raccordare a quello che fu mio procettore il summario della genologia mia, il quale ha detto di darlo finito tra quattro o sei di, et havutolo vi lo manderò” (qtd at 12).
very city that gave rise to Gonzaga power in the late-thirteenth century. Virgil himself identified his birthplace, Mantua, as the city founded over the bones of Tiresias’s daughter, the soothsayer Manto (Aeneid X.198-201). Dante dedicates a significant digression to this founding myth in Inferno XX.52-99:

*Fer la città sovra quell’ossa morte / e per colel che ‘l loco prima elesse / Mantua l’appellar sanz’altra sorte* (XX.91-93; 308). In Dante’s telling he has Virgil consciously amend his own history, diverging from the *Aeneid* by making Manto *la vergine cruda* (harsh virgin) (XX.82; 308-09) as told in Statius’s *Thebaid*, where Virgil’s version had her mate with the river god Tiber, from which coupling their son Ocnus was born, who founded the city (314-15).

In the *Inferno*, gender is further implicated by explicitly recalling Tiresias’s own gender-bending mythology as described in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

*Vedi Tiresia, che mutò sembiante*  
*Quando di maschio femmina divenne,*  
*Cangiandosi le membra tutte quante.* (Alighieri XX.40-42; 306)

In Dante, Mantua appears as a city founded in a location defined by its harsh and inhospitable geography:  
*…trova una lama / ne la qual si distende e la ’mpaluda / e suol di state talor esser grama […]*  
*vide nel mezzo del pantano / sanza coltura e d’abitanti nuda* (XX.79-81 and 83-84; 308)103 by the future-telling daughter of Tiresias, the man-turned-woman and later changed back to his original form. A harsh virgin who sought to escape the judgmental eye of mankind, to practice her dark arts in the solitude of a disease-ridden swamp – it is for Manto that the city is named, and it is over her bones that the first foundations for that city were erected.

Beyond its mythologized beginning, the exact origins of Mantua remain unclear, but the city’s historical association to strong women would also occur in the eleventh century, in the figure of Matilda di

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101 They built their city over those dead bones; and,  
After her who first chose the place, they named it  
Mantua without any other augury (309)

102 See Tiresias, who changed shape when he turned  
From male to female, changing all his members, every  
One (307)

For more on Dante’s Mantuan digression, see Durling’s and Martinez’s notes to XX.40-99 (pp. 314-16) and Additional Note 8, “Dante and the Classical Soothsayers” (pp. 564-67).

103 “…finding a depression/in which it spreads out and becomes a swamp/and in the summer it is often noxious/ […] [she] saw land in the/midst of the fens, uncultivated and bare of people” (309).
Canossa (1046-1115), the first female ruler of that territory. Succeeding her father in 1076, Matilda was an “energetic and profoundly religious woman” (Furlotti and Rebecchini 7). In addition to sponsoring extensive building campaigns in Mantua, including the landmark church of San Lorenzo (still visible in the heart of the city), Matilda enacted numerous successful military campaigns and was an important figure in international politics. In 1077 her involvement in the conflict over lay investitures between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV led the emperor to stand barefoot in the snow in her courtyard in penance for several days, before she brokered the truce he sought (ibid). She has been identified as the Matelda of Purgatorio XXXVIII.34-148 and remains an important figure in the history of the Catholic Church as well. Following her death in 1115, Mantua came under a “brief but lively era of communal government” (ibid).

As the myth of Manto and the legends and history surrounding Matilda illustrate, powerful women who operate independently and whose sole influence has indelibly marked the city of Mantua, reflect a similar role played out in Dragoncino’s dynastic imagination for the house of Gonzaga. We know from the Bizzarra that Marfisa is to be the progenetrix of the Gonzaga lineage, but we are never presented with the resolution of that story. Despite her flight of folly, inspired by an irrational desire for the lovely and oh-so-inept, Filinoro, that relationship is never consummated – nor is it consecrated in marriage. At the conclusion of “Book One” of which Dragoncino tells us, there are to be more – none of which were manifest in his lifetime – the story is left characteristically open-ended, with very little sense for how the virgin warrior will eventually be contained in the role of wife and mother – seemingly necessary steps for the founding of a dynasty, no?

At the conclusion of the text, Marfisa is still absent from Charlemagne’s court, still wandering errantly in a state of bizzaria. The singular nobil radice of the Gonzaga family tree presented in canto one remains alone, a phantom of her initial presentation, no perceived “progress” having brought her into a generative union and far removed from any imaginable dynastic closure. Not presenting Marfisa’s lack of genealogical containment as an issue, the poet leaves his audience with the lingering sweetness on the tongue of a final stanza in praise of the Gonzaga family and Federico: Io lascio ogn’un con questo dolce in bocca (Dragoncino xiv.53, line 8). The poem concludes with the resounding memorialization of his

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patron and the final line: *sol risuoni Gonzaga, & Federico* (xiv.54, line 8), while Marfisa is simply – elsewhere.

A literal reading of canto one of the *Bizzarra* would appear to offer the standard authorial intention and accepted literary “purpose” for its genre, while neglecting the specific figurations that are presented in the work of its main character, dedicatee, and poet-narrator. From its title, the reader understands that Dragoncino’s work has re-gendered the chivalric epic, while a closer examination only dilates the potentially provocative presentation therein. Marfisa is unlike her literary predecessors or her previous portrayals in the *Innamorato* and *Furioso*. She seems to do the genealogical-dynastic work of Ariosto’s Bradamante, without a clear route to accomplishing such. There can be no doubt that she *is* intended as the progenetrix of the Gonzaga line – but how can this be read as either clearly positive or clearly negative? On the other hand, the poet’s slavish dedication to Federico II and extensive encomia can almost appear comic when viewed against the presentation of Marfisa – noble Regina who in no-way behaves as such in the work with which we are presented. Finally, the poet-narrator presents himself as nearly as obsessive as the titular character. His effusive passion for his patron seems to have rendered him a mad-man, manic with the urge to praise, to grovel, and to honor, the man whose genealogy he nonetheless leaves open-ended. Closing his work with the echoes of the Gonzaga name, and finally Federico’s ringing in his head – ambiguity abounds. Exactly what has been memorialized here?

This is not to say that Federico II did not see himself in the seemingly contradictory representation that Dragoncino’s *Bizzarra* entails. Recalling Federico’s motto – he is a man whose passions are others’ torments – and whose personal emblem, the salamander (an animal thought to be “impervious to fire”) have been considered in reference to his “vulnerability to the flames of love and the temptations of sex” (Hickson, “Federico” 42-43) – but what if it is not so simple? What if Federico II’s

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105 Federico adopted this emblem in 1530 upon assuming the title of Duke. This device was also used by Francis I with whom he had a close personal relationship in his youth (ibid). Francis’s motto: *Nutrisco et exstinguo*, (I cause good fire to grow and put out bad) (Koch 324).

106 The Salamander itself recalls the phoenix – Marfisa’s emblem – both were considered self-generating animals, born of fire – at the same time that it echoes the unelaborated and unexpectedly-gendered source of Gonzaga’s heredity ala Marfisa as *singular nobil radice*. Book X of Pliny’s *Natural History* tells us:

> For a number of animals spring from some hidden and secret source, even in the quadruped class, for instance salamanders […] Consequently some creatures are born *from parents that themselves were not born and were without any similar origin*, like the ones mentioned above and all those that are produced by the spring and a fixed season of the year. Some of these are infertile, for instance the salamander, and in these *there is no male or female*.

*(X.lxxxvi-vii; p. 413)*

Like his exceptional emblem, Federico II Gonzaga was also born in spring (17 May 1500).
tastes extended into the truly ambiguous? What if playing among the simulacra while maintaining a politically powerful position was something that the duke relished—something with which he deeply identified? Ever playing the game—living into his socially delimited roles—and yet, simultaneously living beyond the same? Is that not the definition of privilege: to make and to reinforce the same rules, that one’s own elevated status allows one to circumvent?

**Final Considerations**

As the midpoint in my discussion of gender, genre, and disease in textual healing at the sixteenth-century court of Federico II, I used this chapter to outline my approach to understanding the chivalric epic as a potent source of information regarding the treatment and function of gender and genealogy in Renaissance epic. In the first section (“Approach”) I discussed the inherent challenges and benefits of working within this genre, and within the literary canon more generally, and sought to provide an overview of my own scholarly subjectivity and the various considerations that influence my research and writing. In the subsequent portion of the chapter (“Guerriere” in Renaissance Literature), I contextualized the figure of the maiden warrior of Cinquecento epic according to her major literary predecessors and the models upon which she was fashioned, and from which she diverged, and situated the themes associated with her various portrayals according to contemporary issues related to the *querelle des dames*. I then focused on the stock character of Marfisa, tracing her development from Boiardo through Ariosto, and discussing her literary legacy and the specific genealogy for her character as established in the *Furioso*. Having laid the groundwork for my assessment of the *Marfisa bizzarra*, the chivalric epic poem written by Giovan Battista Dragoncino da Fano for his patron, Federico II Gonzaga, I then turned to the poem itself, which is the subject of the latter part of this chapter (“Your Grandmother Wore Combat Boots and Other High Compliments: Questioning Dynastic Encomia in Canto One of Dragoncino’s *Marfisa bizzarra*”), as well as the remainder of the present work. In this section, I explore the poet’s initial presentation of the three figures who comprise the poem’s subjective/ideological nexus: the poet-narrator, the dedicatee, and the titular character, Marfisa herself, and discuss how the opening canto to Dragoncino’s poem calls into question many of the assumptions about gender and genealogy that working within the chivalric epic genre seem to imply.
In my assessment of the *Bizzarra*’s representation of Federico II as an exceptional figure for his times, I foreshadow a number of themes that will be traced throughout the remainder of the poem in the following chapter. Chapter three elaborates upon the role of Marfisa as progenetrix for the House of Gonzaga that I established in chapter two, and merges this examination with my conceptualization of textual healing as elaborated in chapter one. In the following pages, I assess Marfisa according to the curative function that she plays in both the political/ideological and physical realms, and consider how Federico II’s literary and art patronage may have been directly influenced by his affliction with French Pox.
But while I sing, o my redeemer,
I see all of Italy on fire,
Because these French – so valiant! –
Come to lay waste who knows what land.
(Orlando innamorato III.ix.26 – emphasis my own)\(^1\)

It burst upon Italy in the wake of the sad wars
of the French and from that nation it took its name.
(Syphilis sive de morbo gallico I.5-6; p. 3)\(^2\)

Examining in more detail the intersection of the chivalric epic poem, literary patronage and the
onslaught of late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century French Pox brings us once again to the discussion
of textual healing in action at the court of Federico II Gonzaga, and to the poem La Marfisa bizarra
(1531). Geographically and politically situated at the strategic heart of the shifting power alliances
associated with the Italian Wars, the Gonzaga court at Mantua was also the home of what Sally Hickson
termed the first “sodality” of sufferers of syphilis in Renaissance Italy,\(^3\) and was closely associated with

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\(^1\) Taken from the final stanza to Boiardo’s poem, left incomplete at the poet’s death in December 1494. The third and final book of the
Innamorato, consisting of eight cantos and part of a ninth, were released posthumously by Boiardo’s widow in 1495 (Ross xxv).
September 9, 1494 marks the descent of King Charles VIII of France into Italy and the beginning of the so-called Italian Wars
between France and Hapsburg-Spain, the tumultuous foray over political control of the Italian peninsula that would persist well into
the sixteenth century. The first significant battle of those wars, fought at Fornovo on July 5, 1495, marks also the first recorded
descriptions of the European outbreak of mal francese (Quétel 10). When Charles VIII’s mercenary troops were demobilized later
that summer they carried the new disease back with them to their respective countries, while “instead of lasting conquest, the
French carried away with them the germ of the Renaissance” along with a “far less pleasant germ [acquired]
in the course of their
debauches [pillaging and general disorder], the germ of a new and terrible disease, so new that it was as yet nameless” (10, 11).

\(^2\) In beseeching the Gods to explain the wrath of Saturn in sending the disease, and Mars in further spreading its disorder,
Fracastoro explicitly references the Battle of Fornovo:
“Or should I tell of unspeakable carnage, of the blood of Frenchmen and Italian spilled in equal measure … Behold, sad
Italy, to what condition discord has reduced your ancient virtues and the far-flung empire of your ancestors! Is there any
corner of your land that has not suffered barbarous servitude, plunder and lamentable death?” (I.429-31 and 438-441; p.
29)

\(^3\) In her essay, Hickson describes the early-sixteenth-century court of Francesco II Gonzaga as the locus for what she terms a
“sodality” of sufferers of newly emergent syphilis.
From the end of the fifteenth century to the death of the Marquis Francesco II Gonzaga in 1519, the Mantuan court was a
locus for a society of humanists, musicians, and artists who all suffered from syphilis: the new disease of mysterious origin
that would eventually kill the Marquis himself. (“Syphilis” 155)
The author suggests that such a group of prominent and afflicted men formed around the Marquis of Mantua as a response to and
measure against the socially marginalizing effects of suffering from the physically debilitating disease. By surrounding himself with
other sufferers, the marquis was able to establish and support a culture of acceptance and congeniality based in the shared
experience of syphilitic infection. She writes that “Mantua is arguably the first Italian centre in which it is possible to trace the
activities of such a sodality” (ibid).
the Este court of Ferrara, as with the poet Ludovico Ariosto, whose *Orlando Furioso* (1516) would immortalize the Este name and bring international renown to the chivalric epic genre. A now less-known center of Renaissance humanism and artistic patronage, the Mantuan court of the Gonzaga family during the first half of the sixteenth century occurs as an historically and culturally significant marker for a society undergoing massive restructuring as the result – in part – of newly emergent epidemic disease. This chapter examines the function of textual healing in chivalric epic, a genre whose popularity exploded alongside *malfrancese* on the European continent, and whose point of origin – the Este court of Ferrara – was also an early witness to the calamitous emergence of that dreaded and incurable disease.

Immediately associated with the invasion of French forces at the onset of the Italian Wars (hence its evocative, if imprecise, name), *malfrancese* became an instant preoccupation of Duke Ercole d’Este whose own family suffered great losses. Familiar correspondence reveals the duke’s concern over the health of his sons Alfonso, Ferrante, Ippolito and Sigismondo, as well as that of his son-in-law Francesco II Gonzaga, all of whom were stricken with various unnamed and characteristically painful and intractable afflictions by 1497 (Arrizabalaga et al. 47-49). While medical historians consider the ducal family of Ferrara to have been among the first wave of sufferers of *malfrancese*, Arrizabalaga et. al. point out that:

> private correspondence remained strangely silent about the nature of the complaint suffered by the sons of Duke Ercole. This silence is highly significant, and is explained by the moral and

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4 The key figure linking the houses of Este and Gonzaga is the Marchesa of Mantua, Isabella d’Este (1474-1539). The wife of Francesco II and mother of Federico II, Isabella is considered among the preeminent female patrons of Renaissance artistic and literary production. Her international diplomacy, active engagement in Mantuan politics, demonstrated erudition and taste, along with her presence at the Este and later Mantuan courts all serve to distinguish her as an exceptional figure of her time. As the daughter of the duke of Ferrara, Ercole d’Este (1431-1505), who was the dedicatee of Boiardo’s *Orlando innamorato*, the poet gave her private readings of selections of his poem; while, as the sister of Cardinal Ippolito d’Este (1479-1520), the dedicatee of Ariosto’s *Furioso* she was “among the audience for Ariosto’s earliest cantos” (Ross lxxvi) reading portions as early as 1507 during a visit by the poet to her court in Mantua (Regan 50). Günsberg has suggested that the renowned “sparring abilities” of Isabella and her sister Beatrice, provided a model for Ariosto’s portrayal of noble warrior women within the *Furioso* (Günsberg “Donna” 11). Her active solicitation of and ongoing correspondence with the poet are reflected in her positive portrayal within the text of the *Furioso* where she is referenced on three separate occasions (Regan 50).

5 Cockram points out that among the writers, artists, and musicians with whom Francesco and Isabella established themselves as patrons are: “Mantegna, Costa, Leonardo, Francia, Pontano, Ariosto, Tebaldeo, Cara, and Tromboncino” and that they succeeded in “giving Mantua a reputation for culture that earned admiration and respect” (19). Through their various cultural initiatives “[t]hey projected magnificence that underlined their wealth and authority” (ibid). See also chapter two of the present work for a brief discussion of the humanist presence in Mantua.

6 Arrizabalaga et. al. suggest that Francesco was among the very first wave of those afflicted with *malfrancese*, being stricken while on the front-lines in Naples and arriving in Ferrara in October 1496 seriously ill with symptoms characteristic of the disease (44, 48). While the French sickness is not named in any of the documents attesting to the medical treatment of Francesco at Ferrara “the clinical features of the pain and its intractability to remedies from academic medicine strongly suggest that Francesco Gonzaga could well have been ill from Mal Francese” (ibid). Hickson on the other hand cites scholarship giving epistolary evidence referencing the marquis’s affliction with the disease as early as 1508 (“Syphilis” 156). See also Bourne, Molly, Francesco II Gonzaga. The Soldier Prince as Patron. Bulzoni, 2008.

7 Arrizabalaga et. al. identify late 1496 as the earliest documented account of the presence of *mal francese* in the city of Ferrara (43).
religious connotations of *Mal Francese* in late fifteenth-century Ferrara, which in turn had serious political implications, given that the ducal heir Alfonso suffered from such a stigmatizing disease. (50)

A center for academic disputations and humanist learning, the city of Ferrara and court of the house of Este was the site of one of the earliest medical disputes surrounding the new disease and:

> between late March and early April 1497, a number of men met to discuss the pox in a palace in Ferrara belonging to the dukes of Este. They included Leoniceno, Sebastiano dall’Aquila, who was another professor in the medical faculty of Ferrara, and probably the Estense court physician and former lecturer at the studio of Ferrara, Coradino Gilino. They all referred to the event as a *disputatio* and so recognized their discussion as similar to the more formal meetings within the universities. Undoubtedly they accepted academic procedures as proper for arriving at knowledge. (57)

During the period in which Ariosto was composing his *Furioso* in praise of the house of Este at the beginning of the sixteenth century, *malfrancese* was wreaking havoc across the European continent and had already established itself as an intractable presence among the courts at Ferrara and Mantua, as elsewhere. This medical event, as we now identify it, occurred in a context that considered it along with political upheaval and natural disasters, and those other “frightening events which the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini would later call *le calamità d’Italia*” (87).

In this chapter I examine *La Marfisa bizarra* as a response to *malfrancese* as to the other *calamità* besetting northern Italian courts, and consider how the silencing effects of the stigmatization of so-called “venereal disease” have resulted in a lack of scholarship surrounding the co-emergence of sixteenth-century popular chivalric epic and the socio-political issues associated with *malfrancese*.

Understanding contemporary framing of the disease as “the cultural product of a precise historical context” entails that we consider *malfrancese* as more than “a mere ‘medical’ event” as Arrizabalaga et. al. suggest (ibid). In so doing, we enhance our perception of the aesthetic work being produced during this period and can better assess the potentially propagandistic and/or therapeutic purposes thereof. How is the very real matter of self-fashioning and projection through art patronage navigated by an ailing body politic, and where can we identify areas in which the poet or artist employs innovation or adherence to tradition in order to heal that body politic – physically as well as socio-culturally? These are the guiding

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8 Nicolò Leoniceno, a professor at the medical school of Ferrara (57).

9 In a letter from 1498 Ludovico Ariosto mentions having attended a lecture by Dall’Aquila in Ferrara (Arrizabalaga et. al. 67).

10 For more on the dispute, see Arrizabalaga et. al. “The Medical Dispute at the Court of Ferrara” pp. 56–87.
questions that bring us back to the court of Mantua where Dragoncino’s *Bizzarra* sets out to immortalize Duke Federico II Gonzaga – art patron and sufferer of the malicious pox.

**Giovanbattista Dragoncino da Fano’s *La Marfisa bizzarra*: A Dynastic Aperture**

As discussed in chapter two, *La Marfisa bizzarra* is a poem that borrows from and builds upon the *Furioso* and *Innamorato* at the same time that it operates beyond the expected norms for the genre, particularly those associated with the portrayal of gender within the dynastic and genealogical functions of such works. At the heart of Dragoncino’s innovation is the character Marfisa, whose selection represents an intentional choice on the part of poet and patron, and whose un-characteristic deployment in the text disrupts established patterns for dynastic representation. This examination focuses primarily on the figure of Marfisa within the text, even as the storyline to the *Bizzarra* follows various narrative threads, and the exploits of a number of characters – both familiar to the reader (borrowed from the *Furioso* and *Innamorato* as from other chivalric epic predecessors) and novel.

The poem is constructed of fourteen cantos in *ottava rima* consisting of a varying number of stanzas (ranging from fifty-four stanzas in canto fourteen to seventy-nine stanzas in canto ten). Most cantos open with a dedicatory encomium or brief poetic digression in first person on the cruel nature of love or some similar theme, although several begin *in medias res*. The principal narrative thread follows the actions of a select group of Charlemagne’s renowned knights – Marfisa notably among them – from Paris to Gascony and back, while a secondary track is developed around a pagan-on-pagan struggle for power over Tartary, a prelude to an alluded-to assault on France and upcoming challenge to Charlemagne. Left unfinished at Book One, Dragoncino never concluded the central adventures of the plot, despite making numerous intimations of a future battle between pagan and Christian forces and insinuating at a dynastic coupling between Marfisa and the young Filinoro *il biondo* (the blond). Instead, the *Bizzarra* portrays only brief skirmishes between the Christian paladins and several wayward enemies they encounter between Paris and Gascony, while the war for Tartary is cut off at a moment in which the outcome is unsure. At the close of the poem the progenetrix for the house of Gonzaga is alone and

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11 Recursive naming within the chivalric epic allowed minor poems to profit from the popularity of better-known texts (Decoste 68). This is seen with the retroactive redubbing of Boiardo’s *Innamoramento de Orlando* as *Orlando innamorato* following Ariosto’s wildly successful *Orlando furioso*, and occurs again with Dragoncino as he inserts his epic into the genre popularized by his renowned predecessors.
wandering in search of Filinoro who has safely returned to Paris. How and if this match will be the
dynastic coupling that brings about the patron’s noble lineage remains undetermined.

The misadventures of Marfisa and the narrative of her descent into madness (bizzaria) takes her
on a solo journey that is reminiscent of Orlando’s mad pursuit of Angelica in the Furioso, while she
simultaneously embodies the role of progenetrix played by Bradamante. The dual-functionality of her
character goes unresolved in the text and the reader is left without a clear understanding of why
descending from such a figure would convey legitimacy or generate the kind of mythopoetics that
inscribed the house of Este with an indelible chivalric luster connecting that dynasty with both legend and
history. Where Ariosto’s title hints only at Orlando’s romantic folly, leaving the centrality of the dynastic
function of the text to the reader to discover, Dragoncino places his primary figure of dynastic importance
within the title itself – uniting the principal storylines together in a single, strange and errant figure, Marfisa
the Bizarre. Where the exploits of Ariosto’s Bradamante demonstrate the “progression”12 of her character
toward the resolution of her eventual dynastic coupling, Marfisa wanders around in circles in the woods,
getting stranger with every passing moment and losing the characteristic air of chivalric nobility that she
had achieved in Boiardo’s and Ariosto’s epic depictions of her. By and large, Dragoncino’s Marfisa is the
basest of characters – a wild creature beyond reason and incapable of “progress” – Marfisa’s adventures
are not only circumscribed, but seemingly pointless in the overall scheme that the poet has laid out for
himself at the start of the poem. Considering the explicit dynastic function of the text, the reader can only
ask themself why?

In Canto One, the action of the poem is ignited as Marfisa falls in love with Filinoro at the court of
Charlemagne in Paris. The young ambassador is presented in an obvious parallel – and gendered
reversal – to Boiardo’s presentation of Angelica in I.i of the Innamorato. Once again, the love-object’s
arrival occurs in the context of a great banquet and celebration where everyone in attendance is instantly
awestruck by the intense beauty and grace of this unknown figure:

Fra molti ambasciatori un di venuto
Un giovinetto, che dal sol nascente,
Al mar, che gli da morte & sepultura,

12 See Shemek’s discussion in Ladies Errant.
Non copria il ciel piu bella creatura (Dragoncino i.17) 

They saw far down the splendid hall  
Four fearsome and enormous giants  
Enter, a lady in their midst,  
Escorted by a single knight.  
She seemed to be the morning star,  
The lily and the garden rose.  
In short, to tell the truth of her,  
Never was so much beauty seen. (Innamorato i.i.21; p. 6)

A pagan, like Angelica, Filinord’s incomparable beauty is at once emphasized and dazzling to all who witness his arrival, and his physical attractiveness mirrors that of a donna angelicata of the stilnovisti.

Ma la bianchezza del sereno volto,  
Formato da l’angelica natura  
Haveva un’altro bianco in se raccolto  
Di Gigli & di Rose in si dolce mistura,  
Ch’ogni animo d’amor libero & scioltò  
Rimanea preso in quella sua figura,  
& la distesa & bionda chioma eguale  
Gli aggiungea gratia sopra naturale (Dragoncino i.19)

Il comparir di questo novo raggio  
Ingombro di stupor’a mille il petto  
& a guisa di Rosa, che nel Maggio  
Le Verdi foglie adorna in spino eletto,  
Il pagan vago bellissimo & saggio  
pien d’un meraviglioso alto diletto,  
ilumino tutta la sala intorno.  
Dove era di trophei Re Carlo adorno. (i.21)

In this and all subsequent transcriptions from the text of the Bizarra and other contemporary works that do not appear in modern editions I have opted to transcribe the text directly as it appears in the versions from which I was working rather than correcting the texts according to contemporary standards. In so doing I hope to preserve the intended sound of the language and also to provide readers with a more accurate and direct sense for the writing, rather than an "interpretive" version thereof. Common typographical variants within the Bizarra include: the universal lack of diacritical marks (è for e example), the frequent use of the ampersand in place of e, the suffix -tione in place of -zione, and the use of h before forms of the verb avere as well as the words ora and oggi. There are numerous other spelling irregularities throughout the text which I have left uncorrected but which do not present the reader with difficulty in interpreting, and I have only noted those cases in which clarification is necessary to understand the text as written.

Among the many ambassadors, there came  
A youth, who – from the sun’s birth  
To [its setting in] the sea that buries it upon its death –  
A lovelier creature is not to be found under its heavenly domain.

But the ivory color of his serene face  
Was formed with an angelic nature  
It had within itself another whiteness  
Of lilies and roses in such a sweet mixture  
That every soul free and willing to love  
Remained taken in by this, his figure  
and the long and blond tresses equally  
added to him a supernatural grace.

The appearance of this new ray of light  
Filled the hearts of thousands with wonder  
And, as the Rose, that in May  
Adorns the green leaves from its chosen thorn

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16
A natural wonder, like Angelica herself, Filinoro is the finest flower in the garden – embodying aspects of both lily (giglio) and rose (rosa; rosa). Like Angelica, Filinoro is characterized by idealized feminine traits: long blond hair (la distesa & bionda chioma), ivory skin (la bianchezza del sereno volto), and an angelic/supernatural beauty and grace (sereno volto formato da l’angelica natura; gratia sopranaturale).

He is so lovely, in fact, that all who are witness to his beauty remain taken in by it (rimanea preso in quella sua figura). Charlemagne himself has taken Filinoro as a trophy (era di trophei Re Carlo adorno).

And just as Angelica bows at the feet of the emperor having revealed her identity in lofty tones, so Filinoro moves to address the imperial court:

Condotto il Re Carlo a la presenza Quel vago serracin ch’io lod & canto, S’inchino con cortese riverenza Humil’a terra a guisa d’angel santo Seco un gigante havea di granpotenza Il damigel c’ha di bellezza il vanto. & dietro con gentil pompa leggiadra Di conti & cavallieri una gran squadra.

Ma non fu prima al Real spatio drento Che Marphisa gli pose adosso il sguardo E immota quasi fuor del sentimento Sentì nel petto l’amoroso dardo Cominciando fra se dolce lamento Dicea dove son’io, ch’agghiaccio, & ardo & mentre gli occhi havea nel novo sole Mosse ’l bel sarracin queste parole. (i.24, 25 – emphasis my own) 17

17 He was brought to King Charlemagne for an audience That dreamy Saracen about whom I sing and give praise He knelt down with courtly reverence Humbly to the ground with the semblance of a pious angel. Accompanied by a great and powerful giant The noble youth who has superiority of beauty. And behind him with courtly magnificence and refinement A great throng of counts and knights.

But even before she entered the royal ambit Marfisa locked her gaze upon him And immobile almost without conscious feeling She felt in her chest the arrow of love. Beginning within herself sweet lament Saying where am I, that I freeze and I burn and while her eyes rest upon this new sun She spoke these words to the handsome Saracen.

So the dreamy and gorgeous – and sensible – pagan Was imbued with a marvelous aspect of delight Illuminating the entire hall around him Where King Charlemagne was adorned by his trophies.
Flanked by a protective giant (seco un gigante havea), the parallels between Boiardo’s introduction of Angelica (Innamorato I.i.21) and Dragoncino’s presentation of Filinoro continue. Like the mighty Orlando, the fierce warrior maiden is instantly changed into a victim of love. Dragoncino employs language that echoes Petrarch and the stilnovisti before him, and yet the love-object here is no beloved lady … but a young man at court. Marfisa, who no man could dominate in battle, is rendered helpless and stunned (immota), burning (ardo), freezing (agghiaccio) and aching in the wake of love’s arrow (l’amoroso dardo). Through her eyes she has taken in the dreamily angelic face (a guisa d’angel santo) that has stolen her autonomy and her knightly identity in a single glance. The sweet lament (dolce lamento) that begins within the maiden will only grow through the following cantos of the poem, and the bitterness of a love not realized will drive her to unmeasured feats of rage – and absurdity.

Filinoro introduces himself to the court and pledges his fidelity and admiration to Charlemagne. Despite being a pagan, he and his father, King Branciardetto, are among the emperor’s loyal subjects, ruling over the territory of Prussia, a land that is now under threat by the vengeful forces of the King of Transylvania, Galerante, following the death of King Agramante (at Orlando’s hand in the Furioso). Charlemagne receives this information with a perfect soul, taking in the lovely visage of the pilgrim (Re Carlo con un animo perfetto / raccolsel nel bel fronte pellegrino – i.31). Marfisa is instantly ignited with jealousy that flows from her heart, aching with the desire to kiss Filinoro on the mouth (e in foco, e invidia ‘l cor gli tocca / & duolse non poter baciarlo in bocca – ibid). Entirely inappropriate and uncharacteristic behavior for the chaste maiden whose literary legacy has, until this moment, been marked by her unrelenting discretion, extreme deference to Charlemagne, and an absolutely asexual identity. The sudden onset of her burning desire has rendered her entirely unMarfisa-like.

The poet makes clear that Filinoro’s appeal is universal. His sweet demeanor and beaming feminine beauty make him irresistible to all:

Et mentre Carlo l’accarezza e honora,  
& vuol vendetta contra ‘l Re villano.  
Ingencchiosi il gran Martoldo [il compagno gigante del giovinetto] anchora  
L’imperador gli mostro ‘l viso humano.  
Ogni baron del giovan s’inamora,  
Ognun’abbraccia quell bel Prussiano.  
Li Re, li Duci, i conti e i cavallieri  
L’honor han come egli ogni gratia imperi.  

Sol Marphisa sta in dietro & se dipinge
Il volto hora di neve, hor di rosato. (i.32, 33)

A strange shyness has overcome the maiden, even as she watches her companions pay great deference to the young prince. Her face contorts involuntarily as her inner turmoil colors her semblance – draining it of blood and then flushing it (se dipinge / il volto hora di neve, hor di rosato). Much as Charlemagne and his entire court fell under the spell of Angelica’s graces in those first moments in her presence, so Filinoro has enchanted the mighty assemblage. Between the emperor’s caresses and the embraces of the barons, his loveliness has captivated everyone (ogni baron del giovan s’inamora). Amid tones of homoerotic admiration, and a gender non-conformist representation of the Petrarchan love frame, Filinoro emerges alongside Dragoncino’s Marfisa as a unique entity in a generic cast of manifold chivalric representations.

The presence of Filinoro at the court of Charlemagne may reflect the poem’s patron in unexpected ways. Considering Federico II’s youth, spent in part as a diplomatic hostage in Rome and later in France, rumors abound regarding the nature of the young Gonzaga’s time among courtiers and ladies at court. Known for his beauty as well as the particular favor that he curried with an aging pope Julius II, little Federico was an admired member of the papal entourage, and later that of Francis I. A portrait made not long after his arrival at the court in Rome by Francesco Francia gives the image of a young Federico, whose clear white skin, delicate features, lightly blushing cheeks, and smooth blond locks are highly reminiscent of the picture Dragoncino paints of Filinoro. Sent on behalf of his aspirational

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18 And while Carlo caresses and honors him,  
He wants revenge against the villainous king.  
The great Martoldo [the youth’s giant companion] is still kneeling  
And the emperor showed him his human face [congeniality].  
Every baron falls in love with the youth  
Everyone embraces that lovely Prussian.  
The Kings, Dukes, Counts and Knights  
Honor him as though he rules over every grace.  
Only Marfisa stays back, and her face is painted  
Now of snow, now of rose.

19 Hickson describes the Roman court in mourning following Federico’s return to Mantua in 1513 as documented in a letter to Francesco II from a Roman envoy (“Federico II” 39), and Barbieri describes the immediate and constant ingratiation of the young Gonzaga to the pope himself from the time of his arrival in Rome in 1510 (“La Cultura” 11). Federico became a fixture in the presence of the pope, both within his apartments, and at public and private events where he took part in the pleasures of court, the banquets and celebrations (ibid). She writes:  
Per circa due anni, Federico II rimase in catene dorate – ma pur sempre di catene si trattava – presso gli appartamenti pontifici, entrando ben presto nelle grazie di Giulio II, il quale, apprezzandone l’aspetto delicato, la vivacità intellettuale e la sagacia espressiva, lo volle spesso con sé in circostanze pubbliche e private, iniziandoolo ai piaceri della vita di corte, ai banchetti e alle feste. (ibid – emphasis my own)

20 Now held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
family, rulers of a smaller principality, the diplomatic mission that brings young Federico to Rome and to France, is not unlike that which brings Filinoro to the court of Charlemagne. An otherwise unlikely love-object upon which to found a patron’s dynasty, Filinoro seems to reflect Federico’s own introduction to international politics during his experiences as a youth “abroad.”

The love that Marfisa feels for the young dandy whose absolute lack of masculine characteristics make him a thoroughly unsuitable match for an established maiden-at-arms catches Marfisa off-guard. She struggles to come to terms with the change in her own character:

Marphisa comincio fra i denti a dire
Dove sei giunta misera a qual passo
Dov’e la forza tua, dov’e l’ardire
Con che volevi gia strugger Gradasso
& Re Agrican insieme far morire.
E ’l Magno Carlo roinar’ al basso
& fin che ’l ciel’al fondo non vedevi
L’arme di dosso trar non ti volevi.

Et hoggi un giovinetto disarmato
Mi fa l’arme & l’ardir cader per terra
& e l’altero tanto cruel stato
Che m’ha negato pace in questa guerra
Ma forse d’altra donna e innamorato
O Dio l’human pensier quanto spesso erra?
Ma si mai trovo ch’altra habbia ’l suo core
Disperata morir vo in questo amore.

Di pensiero in pensiero, di morte in morte
Volgea l’animo suo nel dolor saldo
Distillandosi in fiamma ardente & forte
… (i.35–37 – emphasis my own)\(^{21}\)

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\(^{21}\) Between gritted teeth Marfisa began to say
Where have you ended up, Wretched One,
Where is your strength, where is the boldness
With which you wanted to destroy Gradasso
& King Agrican killing them both,
And bring down Charlemagne,
And not until nightfall
You never wanted to remove your armor.

And today an unarmed youth
Has made my arms and my boldness fall to earth,
And the proud one has been so cruel to me
That he has now denied me peace in this war.
But perhaps he is in love with another woman
O God how often human thought errs?
But if I ever find that another has his heart
Hopeless I will die from this love.

From thought to thought, from death to death
Her tormented mind rolls in an unshakeable agony
Distilling itself in a strong and burning flame.
...
Marfisa’s inner dialogue occurs directly along the lines of Orlando’s own lamentation at the realization of his love for Angelica: “Ah, mad Orlando! – in his heart – / ‘how you let longing lead you off!’ […] ‘I, whom the whole world could not tempt / am conquered by an unarmed woman!’” (*Innamorato* I.i.30). Both warriors find themselves led astray (*dove sei giunta misera a qual passo*) by love’s temptation, and both are unable to defend themselves from the error they recognize in their own actions. Orlando recalls his former ability to resist all temptation, while Marfisa realizes that her characteristic oath to never lay down her arms or remove her armor has been tossed aside in the blink of an eye. Pitting herself against the strongest kings (*Gradasso; Agrican; Magno Carlo*) with the will only to prove herself to the world, Marfisa is now quaking before an unarmed youth (*un giovinetto disarmato*). In the case of the potent male knight’s defeat by an unarmed woman, the well-known trope of courtly love is familiar enough to be expected – even for Christianity’s preeminent paladin, while the warrior woman’s conquest by a *giovinetto disarmato* falls entirely outside the logic of the chivalric epic genre.

Marfisa’s tormented mind slips deeper and deeper into its ruminations, unable to free itself from the feelings that Filinoro’s unparalleled beauty has sparked within her. The agony only grows stronger and seeps deeper and deeper into her conscious mind as the flame of love roils (*volgea l’animo suo nel dolor saldo / distillandosi in fiamma ardente & forte*) within her tortured soul. Dragoncino’s move to reverse the genders of the established scheme for chivalric romantic love affairs occurs in vivid and exaggerated tones that extend for stanzas. He draws directly on his predecessors, going so far as to model the scene of Marfisa’s *innamoramento* (falling in love) directly upon that of Boiardo, and yet does not offer further explanation or justification of the gender reversal he so clearly is establishing. The re-gendering of the knight-errant falling suddenly in love with the ideal beauty occurs as a seamless continuation of the established norm – Marfisa falls in love, just as Orlando and so many other male knights have been known to do. The fact that the established love pattern for female knights has, until this point, been rendered distinct from that of their male peers is not remarked upon.

Dragoncino makes the bold move of normalizing his departure from the expected by following the pattern and extending it significantly despite its obvious re-gendering. Marfisa falls in love at stanza 25 and is driven further and further in love – and madness – until stanza 55 where the poet begins to switch narrative strands and registers. Orlando’s *innamoramento* occurs from stanza 29 until 32. Angelica’s awe-
inspiring entrance and beauty are presented in stanzas 21 to 23, while Filinoro’s begins in stanza 17 and extends to stanza 21, with each subsequent reference to the youth (of which there are many) inciting further emphasis on his stunning physical appearance. Filinoro is: *il vago Serracino* (the dreamy Saracen – i.31); *quel bel Prussian* (that lovely Prussian – i.32); *Filinoro di bellezza altero* (Filinoro of majestic beauty – i.40); *l’ pagano da le chiome bionde* (the pagan with the blond tresses – i.45); and *quel gentil Sarracin* (that courteous Saracen – i.54). By the time the storyline shifts definitively at stanza 56, the poet has made clear that Filinoro is characterized by his beauty and good-graces.

Marfisa, on the other hand, moves farther and farther from her established character until the point where she is thoroughly blinded by her love for the Saracen diplomat. She grows restless at court in Paris in the company of the irresistible golden-boy and desires to set out for Gascony, to visit Mont’Albano – a plan that she intends to use to grow closer to Filinoro rather than to pursue her typical errantry: *pensando che tal scorta poi menava / quel cavallier d’amor piu che di Marte / & la per Verdi boschi e oblique strade / far Filinoro tenero a pietade* (thinking that such an escort [as she had suggested to Rinaldo] would bring the knight love rather than war, and that there among the green forests and winding paths, she would render Filinoro less resistant to her devotion – i.39). Ruggiero, Bradamante, Rinaldo and Orlando are all game for the plan on its face, as Marfisa keeps her true intentions hidden from all, but the affectionate Charlemagne is reluctant to see his most favored paladins absent from court. Even Orlando’s interventions fall on deaf ears and it is only the lovely Filinoro whose supplication bends the emperor’s will and pierces Marfisa more deeply: *& supplicando in troppo dolce guisa / piego Re Carlo & saetto Marphisa* (i.42). The once powerful warrior is made helpless and blind: *si come vana inamorata & cieca* (such as one who is blind and hopelessly in love – i.43).

As her feelings intensify she is lost in romantic reverie: *ecco in punto dove Amor vien Verde / come una donna come un’huom si perde* (here at the point that Love becomes green, [where] a woman or a man loses themself – i.44). The once powerful and lovely warrior maiden, despite seeming of sound judgment (*benche para al suo giudizio saldo* – i.47), is now thoroughly out of her accustomed character and she begins to lose sight of what is right (*tal che Marphisa fuor di suo costume / comincia in tutto a

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22 The connotation here reemphasizes the Petrarchan and *stilnovisti* love-wound by arrow, as the verb *saettare* indicates wounding by arrow.
non veder piu lume – ibid). Maintaining her composure to the best of her ability (pur quanto puote piu nasconde & cela – i.48) she is torn from within, and begins to lament the very nature of her sex and its inherent limitations: Et duolse con Natura, che concesso / Non gli ha licenza del masculin sesso (she remonstrates Nature, the determining factor, that has not granted her the privilege that she grants the masculine sex – ibid). Why does God torture women – amongst all mortal beings – in this way:

Deh perche tanto crudelmente o Dio
Nel nostro sesso vien dannato amore
Ben piu infelice tengo fra mortali
Ogni altra spezie di vili animali. (i.49)

Neither the beasts in the wood (Per Verdi boschi le selvagge fere) nor the fish in the sea (Ne per il chiaro & marittimo suolo … di pesci le schiere) nor the birds in sky (Ne su per l’aria spatiosa a volo L’un senza l’altro auge si puo vedere) are made to suffer love in this cruel manner (non vanno disperate in duolo – i.50).

On top of her miserable condition as a helpless woman – the opposite of her former identity as a knight errant with its particular freedoms and unrestricted movement – she bemoans the difference in faith between herself and her beloved: io Christo adoro & costui Macometto (I adore Christ and he Mohammed – i.51). Her transition is complete, she is fully female and fully in love – lacking all power of reason and incapable of finding peace (Marphisa orbata fuor d’ogni quiete – i.52). Before the group departs on their mission, Filinoro nods at the warrior and she is rendered bashful:

Qual semplice donzella, ch’a ma & teme
L’arbitrio de l’austero genitore
Che si tal’hor contra ella irato freme
Gli spoglia ’l volto del vivo colore.
Si di sua gratia poi gli torna speme
Gli rende in viso il perduto vigore
Tal Marphisa dal giovvan reverita
Il spirto ritorno da morte a vita. (i.55)

23 Oh why in such a cruel manner, o God
Is love damnable in our sex
I hold [woman] most unhappy among mortals
[and] every other species of base animal.

24 The verb that characterizes Marfisa, orbare (here used as an adjective in its past participle form orbata), connotes not only the state of being blinded, but also that of being bereaved or deprived of a loved one.

25 Like a simple maiden who loves, and who fears
Her strict parent’s will
As he shakes before her in rage
Her face loses its bright color.
If then she regains hope in his good will
The lost vigor returns to her face.
Even so Marfisa’s spirit is revived
From fierce paladin, to miserable and lovelorn lady, to hopeful lover, Marfisa is carried every which way by her unreconcilable feelings for Filinoro. In a glance he breaks her heart and her mind runs away in agony, and in another she is revived and filled with hope. The extremes of Marfisa’s newfound personality seem to be the only static characteristic thereof, in a figure who, in her past literary lives, was unidimensional in her scorn of romance and her pursuit of glory. Since encountering Filinoro, glory has fled from Marfisa’s mind. The arms that she takes up before leaving Paris are worn in order to hide her inner feelings and the true aim of her plan to travel to Gascony. That which defined her within the chivalric epic genre, is no longer her banner and her emblem. The fiercest warrior maiden of them all has been won – not in battle by a man whose valor has overcome her own, but by a pretty face.

Love – or rather desire – has poisoned Marfisa and led her astray. Her longing for Filinoro is based in the flesh and the urge to be physically close to him. His courteous demeanor adds to his attractiveness, but it is his outward aspect that has knocked something loose within the maiden. Against her emperor’s wishes, she leads her friends into danger, using dissimulation to convince her peers that they should ride to Gascony. Her judgment is not only clouded, it is entirely absent, as a burning hot Marfisa can think only of her next steps to induce Filinoro to love her.

As the paladins’ narrative thread continues, we see that – as a result of her scheming over Filinoro – each of her companions comes into danger while in Gascony. She and Orlando are ultimately separated from the group, not to be reunited in Book I. When the remaining knights return to the court of Charlemagne without Orlando and Marfisa, Charlemagne is stricken at the losses. Rinaldo, seeing his emperor’s grief, offers to ride out again in search of the two, and the book ends with him alone on the road, going into battle against mighty Sacripante. In the context of the poem, Marfisa’s lust for Filinoro nearly costs the lives of her brother and sister-in-law (Ruggiero and Bradamante), as of Charlemagne’s favorite knight (Orlando) and his treasured cousin (Rinaldo), along with the court’s new favorite shiny object (Filinoro) – the very object of her own desire. Marfisa the Bizarre has rendered asunder the chivalric code and left Charlemagne with a much-weakened entourage. While no pagan threat has yet been mobilized, his court is bereft of three of its strongest knights – Marfisa, Orlando, and Rinaldo.

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When she is shown homage by the young man.
According to the logic of the dynastic genealogical function of the chivalric epic, as established by Boiardo and elaborated by Ariosto, Marfisa’s pursuit of Filinoro falls completely outside the realm of the acceptable. If the socio-cultural function of dynastic epic genealogies is to establish and reinforce the legitimacy of the ruling family’s hegemony, then disrupting this pattern represents either satire or the institution of a new code of interpretation. Given the positive reception of the Bizzara at the Gonzaga court, and Federico’s passionate involvement in the writing of not one, but two Marfisa epics intended to mythologize the Gonzaga genealogy around the figure of the warrior maiden gone mad for love, then I would suggest that perhaps what is intended is the foundation of a new “normal.” As I elaborated in chapter two, Federico’s representation within the poem, as well as his mode of self-fashioning suggest that Mantua’s fifth Marquis and first Duke, may have enjoyed pushing boundaries for the expected and the acceptable. Too well-versed in international politics and courtly etiquette to operate in the realm of art and literary patronage by chance, Federico’s anomalous progenetrix must then possess an intentional function. In the Bizzara, Marfisa is a monstrosity, an abomination of the chivalric epic model for genealogical patterning, but she was carefully selected for and deployed within this role.

It is at this juncture that textual healing can be further elaborated. The Bizzara takes the freakish and obscene and dresses it in the familiar. Marfisa’s textual debasement in the name of hereditary honor is intended to function both socio-politically, as well as personally. The text is written at the patron’s request and according to his stipulations. He is an avid consumer of chivalric poetry and is the first audience for whom the work is composed. The poem is not, however, destined for personal use only and the duke has the work published, ensuring a wider audience. For Federico, the Bizzara is a poem with the capacity to heal – his own, as well as the greater Gonzaga image, along with his ailing body – through the potent and curative effects of literary prophylaxis and the pharmakon. In the remainder of this work, I discuss these functions further and establish a rubric for understanding the Bizzara as a work of intentional textual healing at the Gonzaga court.

As discussed in chapter one, according to the prevailing medical model for the period – that of humoral or Galenic medicine – one of the ways in which illness is prevented or treated, is through the re-

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26See chapter two for my discussion of Pietro Aretino’s epic poem La Marfisa disperata at the behest of Federico II, and the drama surrounding that failed literary commission.
balancing of humors within the body. Accidents of nature, such as those corrupted airs which result in infection and disease are able to penetrate a body when a complexional imbalance within the individual renders them susceptible to further aggravation and an exacerbation of the imbalance leading to symptoms and illness. Among medical manuals and advice at the time, individuals are advised to engage in activities that re-stabilize the internal humoral balance, rendering one resistant to the effects of such contaminants. In addition to recommending specific dietary, sleep, and fitness regimens, it is suggested that patients engage in activities that do not result in heightened negative emotional states – such as those of a melancholic or choleric nature – and that help to expel excessive humors through laughing or other similar “releases.”

While vigorous activity may be recommended for certain complexional dispositions, over-exertion is generally to be avoided and especially in times of significant imbalance – such as when one is suffering the physical symptoms of a given affliction. The prescription of a visit to established bagni or spas is often recommended for a variety of physical ailments, and was among the favored remedies for both Francesco and Federico in the treatment of their pox.

In 1530, Malacarne tells us of Federico’s attempts to gain further insight into the treatment of his malfrancese when he sent his personal physician to Venice to participate in a colegio debating matters of particular interest to his health. Among the numerous communiques that were exchanged, the historian cites a letter in which the physician proclaims that there was nothing new to gain from the discussions. Among the remedies suggested – and already attempted by the doctor in his treatment of Federico in

27Gage points out that “Renaissance physicians promoted the idea of the salubrious effects of beautiful images, whether natural or artificial” (54) and underscores “the currency in humanistic thought of the therapeutic and preservative value of literature, music, and visual art” (ibid).

28Malacarne tells us of the particular affinity for baths among the Gonzaga family in seeking succor for their various chronic ailments. The Gonzagas were known to take refuge in pleasant resorts in order to enjoy thermal cures. Listing the Gonzagas’ favorite baths, Malacarne then goes on to describe a visit by Federico II to Caldiero in summer of 1524 in an attempt to seek relief from a physical discomfort. The marquis was suffering from a most troubling retention of urine, believing that the source of his trouble was having taken a specific cure against syphilis in the form of pills that had been prescribed to him by physicians in Pavia, in whom he had little faith:

Molti Gonzaga, nell’asprissima e infinita lotta contro le malattie, si recarono in amene località per effettuare cure termali: Abano, Porretta, Acqui, Bagni di Lucca, Montegrotto, Caldiero erano i luoghi più frequentati, dai quali una nutrita corrispondenza ci informa di molti fatti. Ed è proprio a Caldiero, località vicina a Mantova, che Federico II si recò, nell’estate del 1524, nel tentativo di porre rimedio a una situazione di disagio fisico. Egli sofritta del disturbo, fastidiosissimo, di ritenzione urinaria; credeva che questo accidente gli derivasse da una cura specifica contro la sifilide per la quale gli erano state prescritte certe pillole da medici di Pavia nei quali non riponeva eccessiva fiducia. (La Vetta 191)

29Malacarne further explains that these baths were places in which one sought cures at the same time the body and spirit were treated to various pleasures. Examining the list of expenses from Federico’s visit to Caldiero, the historian finds evidence of the exorbitant expenses used towards games, celebrations, banquets, and prostitutes (tra gioco, feste, banchetti e ‘puttane’ ammontavano a cifre invero esorbitanti) (192).
Mantua are engaging in an overall daily regimen, including vomiting and purgation, relaxing the various parts of the body and the head in particular. The list goes on to include the times at which the patient should eat, and suggests taking the waters of a spa (both ingested and used for soaking), as well as drinking plenty of water and engaging in coitus as necessary. The doctor signs off: *I hope that Your Excellency will remain satisfied with my actions, and I pray that you have a good vomit before my return to Mantua, because in this heat it is necessary to do so a bit more often.*

In a subsequent letter sent a few weeks later, the physician advises Gonzaga to avoid superfluous coitus – especially immediately after eating, and that in so doing and in following the various other regimental prescriptions, his youth and his robust complexion will win over this, and every other infirmity (they will not).

A 1558 Italian translation of a Spanish text composed for the Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) and compiled by his doctor Aluigi d’Avila di Lobero (201) written on the topic of the Courtly Diseases (*Il Libro delle Infermità Cortigiane*) provides a useful glimpse at some of the ways in which *malfrancese* was implicated and treated in men such as the Gonzagas:

*I segni, che pronosticano, o predicono quest’infermità, sono specialmente l’haver tenuto conversazione con donne, giacendo con quelle, o con huomini, che tengono tal infermità, o parlato a viso con quelli, o mangiando con loro in un piato, o bevendo in una tazza, o sudando insieme, sonovi altri manifesti de quali non ragionerò, per fermarmi in quello, che più importante, cioè nella sua cura la quale si fa in uno de quattro rimedi seguenti, o con unguenti, o perfumi, o bagni, o con l’acqua del legno santo, o dell’altro delle Indie. (182r, 183)*

*...è da notare, che universalmente in qualunque di queste cure … gli è necessario prima digerire la materia, cioè l’humore che causa tale infermità, & evacuarlo universalmente … quando l’infermità è nuova, la virtù forte, & la materia poca, basta solamente per sanare l’evacuatione, & l’esercitio (183)***

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30“Io spero che V. Ex. resterà satisfatta de la actione mia, la qual prego a far un bon vomito prima che sii a Mantua, perché in questi caldi bisognarà farlo un pocho più spesso” (ASMn, AG, b. 1464, cc. 591-92, 1530, 28 giugno, da Venezia) (qtd in Malacarne *La Vetta* 191 – the above and subsequent translations are my own).

31“Ricordare reverentemente a quella che si guardi dal coito superfluo et maxime immediate post cibum. … perché così facendo et continuando noi speriamo che V. Ex. in così verde età et in così robusta complexione vincerà & questa & ogni altra infirmità” (ASMn, AG, b. 1464, c. 595r-v, 1530 21 luglio) (qtd in ibid).

32In typical style for medical treatises of the period, the full title given on the frontispiece is as follows: *Libro delle quatro infermità cortigiane che sono catarro, gotta, artistica, sciatica: mal di pietre, & di reni: dolore di fianchi, et Mal Francese, & d’altri cose utilissime, composto per l’eccelentissimo dottore Luigi Lobero di Avila, Medico per sua maestà.* This title was printed “con privilegio” in Venice in 1558.

33The following translations are my own.

The signs that prognosticate or predict this disease are especially [as follows:] having conversed with women, having lain with them, or with men, who have this disease, or having spoken closely with them, or having eaten from the same plate, or drunk from a single cup, or sweating together, there are other signs as well, about which I will not discuss in order to focus on that which is most important, that is, the cure which can be executed in one of the four following remedies: [with unguents, perfumes, baths, or with water of holy wood (guiacum) or another herb from the Indies.}
In Lobero’s text we get an immediate sense for the ways in which humoral imbalance associated with *malfrancese* was identified and see that its symptomology was tied to the types of behavior that might lead to contamination. While sexual relations are not the explicit means of transmission, it is clear that this was acknowledged as one important way in which the “taint” could spread from one person to another. Unguents, perfumes, and baths could all keep one safe from the corrupting influence of bad air, and could help to moderate the complexion through purification and through relaxation. That the source of the disease was not a separate entity (as we now know through the acceptance of germ theory) but resulted from the corruption of naturally occurring humors, is evidenced in the universal need to destroy excess “material” in all instances of the disease. *Malfrancese* is not separate from the patient in which it manifests, but is rather, the manifestation of bodily systems that are out of balance and thus causing the outwardly recognizable “symptoms” that are evident in the sufferer.

As discussed in chapter one, reading could serve as a diversion to the mind of a sufferer, which, by pulling his attention away from the physical symptoms and stresses of daily life, could help to reinstitute a fortified complexional balance. Sixteenth-century physicians were adamant that “cheerfulness was crucial to those for whom there was no other cure” (Gage 52) and Marafioti terms this form of literature-as-medicine, *literary prophylaxis*, identifying the frame to Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as an influential example of this function of literature and reading. His examination of post-*Decameron* plague literature, in particular, cites a number of medical tracts which specifically prescribe this form of remedy in avoiding plague transmission. Gage’s assessment of the function of aesthetics and recreation in early-modern medicine indicates that “there can be no theoretical separation between recreative or preservative acts of pleasure and therapeutic ones” (ibid) where the imagination performs a critical function in “mitigating the [potentially dangerous] passions of the soul” (51). Citing work by Elena Carrera, Gage explains the important connection between cognition and physiology in maintaining health:

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34 The contemporary association of plague and pox has also been discussed in chapter one, where the onset of these two contagious epidemics in the span of two centuries heralded significant changes in medical thinking, as well as a crisis in the understanding of established natural philosophy.
the imagination, [...] performed an evaluative role upon external objects, judging whether they would produce good or evil effects. If the imagination judged an object negatively, giving rise to sadness, grief, anguish, or other negative passions, these quenched the body's innate heat, causing the spirits to retreat; by contrast, positive estimation of an object produced gladness or joy that would diffuse warmth from the core to the extremities. A healthy soul was tranquil and untroubled, moderately cheerful, and equipped to resist sudden or extreme passions. (51, 52)

When beset by the crippling effects of disease, reading represented a less-taxing diversion than other forms of courtly entertainment such as hunting or sport, and could be performed in private unlike banquets or theatrical spectacles which entailed a public element. Given the outwardly recognizable effects of pox with its myriad dermatological manifestations, reading would allow the pox patient to escape his reality without subjecting himself to public scrutiny or to the taxing rigors of physical exertion. As discussed in chapter two, chivalric poetry was probably Federico's most favored genre, and the composition of an epic in which he figured predominantly would have reinvigorated his flagging spirits in times of suffering (recalling the chronic nature of pox infection). An epic composed for his pleasure and adapted to suit his – particular – tastes, the Bizzarra would have allowed Federico to read explicitly laudatory exclamations over his achievements as duke, at the same time that the text itself functioned to normalize a highly irregular genealogical scheme. Any insecurities Federico may have felt over the death of his father from pox, his own affliction with the disease, and the ambiguous nature of the basis for the Gonzaga patrimony in Mantua, were tempered by the poem's unflinching representation of the bizzaria of the Gonzaga dynasty's legendary ancestor. By re-writing Turpin's "long-forgotten history" without creative embellishments (Turpin nol scrive & io pero nol canto ... Basta, che la mia historia sia verace – viii.7,8) Dragoncino's poem seeks to erase the inherent questions of legitimacy that the rulers
of the house of Gonzaga perpetually sought to obscure through patronage and mythologized
genealogies.

The Gonzaga family came to prominence following their financial success as ambitious rural
property owners beginning in the late thirteenth century (Furlotti and Rebecchini 25). The family then
gained political power on August 16, 1328, when they seized control of Mantua from the Bonacolsi family,
to whom they had been – up until that moment – “among the most faithful allies” (ibid). The bloody battle,
which was memorialized in Domenico Morone’s painting The Expulsion of the Bonacolsi from Mantua
(1494) in the Church of San Francesco38 marked the beginnings of the Gonzagas’ rapid ascension to
power, and of an ongoing campaign to legitimize Gonzaga hegemony in Mantua and its surrounding
territories. Furlotti and Rebecchini trace the aggressive deployment of art and architecture by the
Gonzaga in Mantua from their earliest days, as a means of asserting and expanding their political
influence within the territory:

Members of the Gonzaga family soon filled the post of capitano del popolo and were appointed
imperial vicars in Mantua, positions that allowed them to wield power without any interference
from the commune or its institutions. In a period of only a few years, they expropriated all of the
Bonacolsi real-estate holdings including the prestigious Palazzo del Capitano, which was
immediately enlarged, renovated, and redecorated. (ibid)

But maintaining power would require more than merely asserting themselves over the commune, the
Gonzagas wanted the city for themselves: “the Gonzaga strove to transform the civitas vetus into a true
princely stronghold: that is, into a vast representation of the power of the city’s new overlords” (30).

From their ascension to power in 1328, members of the Gonzaga family used art and architecture
to reconstruct Mantua around the image they sought to project of their own political potency. The
construction, renovation, and decoration of palaces (Castello San Giorgio 1395-1406) and churches (new

38Now preserved in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua (32).
facades for Santa Maria delle Grazie and San Pietro during this same period) – as well as public spaces – served to promote the Gonzagas’ image and to increase their influence throughout the region. By the fifteenth century the Gonzagas were firmly established in Mantua and its surroundings.

Aware of the crucial role that art played in promoting the image of the ruler among his subjects and in the other princely courts of Italy, the Gonzaga invested ever greater sums in their impressive artistic and large-scale architectural commissions … The time was also ripe for the family to legitimize its power over the city and to end the charade of having one of its members elected capitano del popolo, an office that no longer had any real substance. (33)

In 1433 Gianfrancesco Gonzaga became the first to hold the hereditary title of marquis of Mantua, as a result of his father’s active solicitation of the emperor. And so, over the course of a century, the Gonzaga family transformed themselves from private citizens into the hereditary lords of the city of Mantua.

During the fifteenth century the Gonzagas’ affinity for chivalric legend is recognized in a cycle of frescoes by the artist Antonio Pisano or “Pisanello” (1395-ca.1455) in the Palazzo Ducale, Sala del Pisanello (or Sala dei Principi), which deal with the Matter of Brittany. Treating various scenes featuring members of King Arthur’s knights of the round table, these images:

likely served as exemplars of knightly behavior as well as pleasant court entertainments. It is also true, though, that the Gonzaga were then, and would remain for more than a century, soldiers of fortune employed by the greatest powers in Italy; their prestige and their wealth were founded in the art of warfare celebrated in these paintings. (36)

As Furlotti and Rebecchini further point out, the achievement of a hereditary dynasty was only one piece in the Gonzagas’ plan for self-promotion and legitimization. In order to continue to expand their influential “strategy of dynastic consolidation” it was necessary that the family engage in carefully considered military alliances, shrewd marriages, and a broad, concerted effort to make Mantua a center of the avant-garde in culture and the arts. The latter brought prestige both to the city and to the governing Gonzaga family, and also helped to obscure the traces of their recent past: the violent usurpation of power from the Bonacolsi and the systematic weakening of the ancient institutions of the communal regime. (37)

The conscious effort to rewrite history according to an idealized image of chivalric valor and long-standing hereditary legitimacy through a carefully designed and executed artistic and aesthetic program predated Federico II’s rule by over a century. The novelty that Federico II and his father Francesco II introduced to this familial tradition was to focus also on the attenuation of the potentially stigmatizing effects of venereal disease through cultural production.

Given the patchy history of the Gonzagas’ rise to power and both Federico’s and Francesco’s well-known propensities for licentious behavior, furthering the longstanding campaign of dynastic
consolidation would now require eschewing the immediate association of pox with divine punishment. Gonzaga patrimony needed to be re-established or at very least, re-interpreted according to a new standard of acceptability. Hickson identifies this as a tactic of "reframing" the blame associated with pox, which she locates within Francesco's cultivation of a sodality of sufferers and the aesthetic works they produced for the marquis. She writes that "Francesco II Gonzaga in Mantua, and other princes infected with the disease, had to develop strategies for countering this propensity to ‘blame’ by ‘reframing’ their right to power" ("Syphilis" 154), a strategy that is echoed in Federico's own campaign of literary and artistic patronage. By generating a social network "born of a mutual utility in the cause of overcoming and equalizing the perceived ‘injustice’ of the contagion" Hickson explains that within Francesco's social group of sufferers "Syphilis added a new dimension to this male sociability and dissimulation in the context of the court, marking new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in evolving court networks" (155, 56).

Further delimiting the circle of "in" and "out" group communication, there evolved a culture of "double meanings" (in literature and visual art) that generated "messages that spoke to a widening community of individuals affected by the disease" (ibid).

Francesco's death in 1519 likely did not mark the end of this sodality, as there is epistolary evidence indicating that young Federico himself was included in the sodality's in-group culture of male-bonding based in the acceptance and display of explicitly licentious behavior – even among sufferers. Writing of young Federico's experience at the court of Francis I from 1515-1518, Hickson tells us that the heir to the Gonzaga dynasty was actively involved in the commissioning of a statue of Venus for the French king by Lorenzo Costa (at court in Mantua from 1506) at the request of his father, the marquis (161). The Venus, a work that Hickson interprets as reflecting both "a preoccupation with the subject of syphilis" and a "shared interest … in erotic subjects" (ibid) occurs as a gift from one sufferer to another, executed by the artistic hand of a third. Federico, meanwhile, stood by to expedite the exchange on his father's behalf.

Citing a letter from Costa to Federico, in which the artist speaks in terms, which, in their explicit nature and content reflect an obvious familiarity between the two men, Hickson points out that:

At sixteen, Federico was obviously considered old enough to be openly included in the sexual society of the men of the French court, and Costa, wracked with syphilis and no longer able to perform sexually, felt it appropriate to give the young prince fair warning of the dangers that lurked there (162)
In highly informal terms, Costa warns the young prince of the dangers of prostitutes, indicating that Federico was already a member of the in-group of his father’s sodality, despite not coming to power until after his father’s death. Along with his advanced preparation in international diplomacy and politics, his humanist education, and cultured upbringing at the Mantuan, papal, and French royal courts, Federico was raised in a familial culture predicated upon the assertion of hereditary legitimacy, and the mitigation of stigmatization through dissimulation and the generation of new codes of acceptability.

Through the chivalric epic, Federico was able to participate in the familial myth-making that characterized the duration of the Gonzaga dynasty and beyond. Malacarne tells us of the difficulty in tracing the true genealogical roots of the family owing to the perpetual efforts on the part of the Gonzagas to re-write family trees deploying invented ancestors and fictional associations. He points out that even into the twentieth century (specifically Federico Amadei’s Cronaca of 1954), scholars were citing an entirely fictionalized eighth-century relative, the supposed German-born “Ludovico” who came to Italy and built a palace that he named “Gonzaga.” Malacarne writes:

Ebbene, nulla di più falso: si tratta solamente di un personaggio leggendario totalmente inventato dalla immaginosa fantasia degli pseudo-letterati che vivevano all’ombra della corte mantovana negli anni dello splendore, quando riferirsi a gloriose e fascinose origini era un imperativo. (Gonzaga 28)

Without delving too deeply into the intentional blurring of myth and history at the Gonzaga court, it is worth noting that over the centuries, the family actively employed court “historians” to connect their members to such influential figures as Charlemagne and the royals of France, Emperor Otto, and Matilde di Canossa (whose regional and international significance I discussed briefly in chapter two). Likely having an actual – if tenuous – association to the latter, Malacarne points out that the Corradi da

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39 Nothing, however could be farther from the truth: we are simply dealing with a legendary character, totally invented by the imaginative fantasy of the pseudo-literati who lived in the shadow of the Mantuan court in the years of its splendor, when referring back to its glorious and fascinating origins was an imperative. (translation my own)
Gonzaga (the original family name) were mere vassals and soldiers for the countess and not familial relations (27), 40 41

Given this inherited familial insecurity regarding the origins and legitimacy of their dynasty, along with their propensity to self-aggrandize through art, literature, and “history,” Federico’s *Bizzarra* falls within the long-established Gonzaga family culture of generating “truth” through fiction. Dragoncino’s appropriation of Marfisa to the ends of legitimizing Federico as duke, and the Gonzaga family as lords of Mantua, is tailor-made to the specific needs and tastes of his patron. Marfisa, as bizarre as she is, grants Mantua’s first duke and fifth marquis the freedom to act outside of courtly norms, and to do so without seeming to. Hickson has proposed that Federico’s art patronage was specifically directed at constructing and reinforcing such an identity for himself, discussing the erotic and illusionistic decorations of Palazzo del Te by artist and architect Giulio Romano, she writes:

Federico’s driving military and political ambition were exceeded only by his talent for flouting social and sexual conventions in his private life, and these qualities would find their perfect expression in Giulio’s unique ability to create a highly eroticized iconography of power, a sort of sexually charged princely art. (“More Than Meets the Eye” 44)

If Marfisa’s monstrous behavior occurs in a context that yet allows her to go on to found the patron’s most noble and worthy dynasty, then it must be that less-than-noble action on the part of the duke – or certain of his predecessors – does not, as such, diminish the family’s claim to lordship over and possession of Mantua.

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40 In relazione all’origine della famiglia, gli storici aulici ebbero occasione di scatenare, nel corso dei secoli, le più sfrenate fantasie, attribuendo ai Gonzaga un capostipite sassone a nome Vitichindo, del quale permangono tracce presso l’Archivio di Stato di Mantova, e inventando parentela di volta in volta con i reali di Francia, con l’imperatore Ottone e con Matilde di Canossa, la grancontessa che ebbe ruolo di assoluta centralità nella storia della nostra terra e dell’Italia in generale, anche se, in verità pare che questi Corradi da Gonzaga fossero solamente dei milites della contessa Matilde. Storici illustri di un recente passato si sono preoccupati di demolire l’alone leggendario che gravitava intorno alla famiglia, isolando i fatti reali dalle ombre fantastiche e dalle banali, patenti falsificazioni; è però da rilevarsi come ancora non si sia addivenuti a una risposta univoca e definitiva in ordine a questo invasivo interrogativo. (ibid)

41 For an extensive assessment of genealogical mythmaking within the historical documents associated with the Gonzaga dynasty see Malacarne, Giancarlo. *Gonzaga Genealogie di una Dinastia i Nomi e i Volti*. Bulino, 2010; especially “Introduzione: Origini di una Schiatta senza Tempo tra Mito e Storia,” 25-45.
Marfisa Unchained: Madness at the Pleasure of the Duke

In the opening encomium to canto two, the poet addresses the two great patrons of Augustan poetry – Maecenas and Augustus himself. Here, he re-emphasizes the immortalizing function of his poem, at the same time that he elevates himself once again to the rank of Virgil:

O liberal Mecenate o largo Augusto
Tornate a sublimar li sacri spiri
Che vostri successor han perso 'l gusto
De l'immortal sapor di Lauri & Mirti
Di te non parlo invitto signor giusto,
C'honor di cortesia ben posso dirti
Ne le virtuti tue son troppo accesoo
Io ben m'intendo, et son da molti inteso.

Fusse ascoltata questa mia querela
Da color che l'orecchie tengon sorde
& che gonfiar potrebbon la mia vela
D'un vento che col porto va discorde
L'audace penna mia qui nulla cela
Un Drago scrive pero punge et morde
Van pelegrini mille ingegni chiari
Per le rapine di signori avari (ii.1, 2)42

The implicit comparison of himself to Virgil, and thereby of his patron to the great Maecenas and Augustus gives the poet a sense of grandeur in his mission to glorify and historicize Federico. While other nobility have failed to keep alive the poetic arts, not so with Federico whose love of art smacks of the immortal flavor of laurel and myrtle (l'immortal sapor di Lauri & Mirti). In referencing the crowning branches of Apollo and Venus, respectively, the poet has here made an oblique reference to the classical tradition of erotic poetry – hinting at the work's poetic undertone of lust-induced madness within a humanist context that grants an air of sobriety and refinement.

42 Oh liberal Maecenas, oh generous Augustus
Return to exalt the sacred spirits
For your successors have lost the taste
Of the immortal flavor of Laurel and Myrtle.
I am not speaking of you, just and unvanquished lord.
For I can tell that I am all aflame
With your honor, your virtues and your courtesy.
I understand this well, and by many I am understood.

If this my remonstration were heard
By those who keep their ears deaf
And who could fill my sail
with a wind that is in discord with the port
My daring pen will hide nothing
A dragon writes, however he stings and bites.
A thousand illustrious geniuses wander homeless
Because of the thievery of ungenerous princes.
Along with careful praise of his patron, the poet speaks out against those who would speak ill of the work, or of works done in the spirit that he has adapted. If only those who keep their ears deafened would listen to the wisdom he shares, but instead they know only to sow discord. As such, the poet is inclined to defend his position through the revelation of truth – his daring pen will hide nothing (L’audace penna mia qui nulla cela). Playing on his own name, the poet/dragon will write, but also attack – biting and stinging his detractors (un Drago scrive pero punge et morde) – in this deplorable age when many men of genius (mille ingegni chiari) are reduced to itinerant beggars because of the avarice of men of power (per le rapine di signori avari).

Despite the risk of being misunderstood, of not being heard, the poet insists that he will continue in his pursuit of giving life to his tale. He will not be dissuaded even as he takes a moment to decry contemporary court culture and the falseness of present-day conditions for an aspiring poet:

\begin{verses} &\end{verses}

\begin{quote}
\begin{verse}
Si cortesia piu non si trova in corte,
Ma insatiabil sete manifesta
D’offici, ricchi & ambitiosi honori
In bocca di malvagi adulatori

\end{verse}

& mentre havro questa mia voce viva
Non potro ragionar parlando ‘l vero?
& benche sia maligna questa etade,
A qualch’un piacera la veritade. (ii.4, 5)
\end{quote}

Where others may praise the duke in the hope of acquiring status and wealth (offici, ricchi & ambitiosi honori), the poet performs his duty in name of a higher calling. He is not one of the malignant flatterers (malvagi adulatori) that populate the court only in pursuit of furthering their own selfish aims, but is instead a speaker of the truth. The poet sees himself as a mouthpiece of the ages, working through divine inspiration and genuine respect for his patron. The result of his labors is that the world may one day know

\begin{quote}
\begin{verse}
Indeed courtesy is no longer found in court
Rather insatiable thirst is manifest
For titles, riches, and ambitious honors
In the mouths of malevolent flatterers

\end{verse}

& while my voice will be alive
Should I not reason by speaking the truth?
And although this age is spiteful
Someone will appreciate the truth.
\end{quote}
the truth (la veritate). And while he speaks against many, a select few will receive his message. The poet then turns his attention back to the story.

As discussed above, the narration of Marfisa’s bizzaria endures for the entirety of the poem, even as the poet weaves in and out of adjacent plot lines in characteristic fashion for the genre. Focusing once again on the central plotline surrounding Marfisa, we find that her love for Filinoro renders her ever more bestial as the poem progresses and she finds it increasingly difficult to perform the ritual and decorum appropriate to a knight of her stature. Her attempts at dissimulation grow ever weaker in the courtly context, and upon arriving at Mont’Alban with her companions, little time goes by before her mind is racing like that of a caged animal, even as she hides her true emotions from her companions:

Come fera astretta in chiusa valle,
Che non trova al suo scampo, selva o cava
Ma fa buon cor’, & entra a la ventura
Per la più aperta strada & più secura (ii.33)

Unable to maintain idle chit-chat about the errant life (parlando tutta via dei loro mistieri), of horses, helmets and swords (di caval … d’elmo … di brando) – Marfisa has a different sword in her heart (Marphisa ch’altra spada havea nel core) (ii.32). Love’s perpetual wounding drives her from life’s necessary pleasantries, and forces her to devise a scheme to break free. She suggests to Orlando that they organize a hunt because what is a better life, or sweeter than the pursuit of wild beasts (Qual’e piu dolce vita & piu suave / che seguitar le fere fuggitive) (ii.35).

Her companions persuaded, Marfisa is the first to mount and in her restlessness she has her horse bathed in sweat and dust before they have even left the grounds. The reader does not yet realize that this poor and faithful animal will suffer mightily at the hands of its master. In canto five, Marfisa will mercilessly stab the exhausted creature in a state of blind rage. Having understandably stumbled upon a rock, Marfisa, blind because she has lost all sense (cieca c’ha perduto ’l senno – v.7) gets up, pulls her sword and buries it in the stomach of the horse nine or ten times – despite having killed it with the first blow (Et disnudato ’l brando nove o diece / volte cacciol nel ventre a quell cavallo. / ma il primo colpo qui

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44 Like a beast constrained within a closed valley
Who cannot find a route of escape, forest or cave
But who is heartened and enters by chance
Into the most open and secure way.

160
morir lo fece – v.9). Now constrained to move by foot, she walks onward, and in stanza 20 in yet another highly unchivalric display she will, unprompted, steal another knight’s horse.

But before these uncharacteristic events occur, Marfisa and her companions engage in the hunt that will cause her to become separated from her beloved. It is this separation that leads to her absolute folly, the destruction of her horse, the theft of another and myriad other violent acts that occur as unmitigated chaos in the portrayal of Marfisa bizzarra. In the hunt scene enacted in canto two, Marfisa is fully occupied with tracking down Filinoro, while the rest of the group splits off after various wild animals. Tearing through the forest, the sounds of clashing armor and barking dogs bring out beasts of every type – wolf, fox, hare (il lupo & la volpe … la lepre – ii.39), ferocious boar, ill-tempered bear and even the threatening lion (‘l feroce cinghiale … ’l bizarro orso … ’l lione minacciando – ii.40). The paladins disperse, rushing this way and that (dispersi i paladin correndo altronde / in questa, in quella, e in altra parte vanno – ii.41) after their various chosen trophies. Killing beasts and tearing the trees apart (uccidon fere & gli arbori disfanno – ibid) each knight absorbed in their own conquest.

While the others seek trophies of the furious variety, Filinoro spots a capriol fugace (fleeing roe deer) and desires to bring back that graceful animal (quel leggiadro animal – ii.42). A target that reflects Filinoro himself, who represents Marfisa’s desired and elusive love-object throughout the poem. In a later scene in the following canto, the poet compares Filinoro directly to the capriolo making the comparison explicit in his description of the prince’s flight from a band of marauders in the forest. Filinoro is more adapted to love than to battle (che gentil’era / & piu servo d’amor che di battaglia – iii.57) and he quakes like a spring flower when his armor is stripped from him (rimase com’un fior di primavera / quando spogliato fu di piastra & maglia – ibid). Seizing his moment, he takes off (fuggendo – iii.59) and with lightness (leggier - ibid) of foot and alacrity (prestezza – ibid) he makes the horde of bandits seem a slavering pack of worn dogs behind a fresh deer (era da somegliar quella caterva / can stanchi dietro a riposata cerva – iii.60). He is so swift that a capriolo would not have been able to catch him (che giunto non l’havrebbe un capriolo – iii.62). While Filinoro embodies the delicate and agile capriolo in the poem,

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45A small species of deer, known for its grace of movement and agility.
as we will see shortly, the poet has chosen a much less feminine animal to characterize our love-sick Marfisa.46

Returning to the hunt scene, as Marfisa sees her prey – Filinoro – break off, she follows him and requests that he let her join him on his hunt. He responds graciously and she remains frozen and burning (rimane tutta ghiacciata et tutta ardente – ii.45). Taking his hand she reveals her love, and he reveals his own:

Rispose Filinoro io t’amo tanto
Ch’ in quei begi occhi son morto & sepolto
Tu di beltade & di prodezza hai vanto
Tu sola m’hai l’arbitrio donna tolto.
Ma perche ‘l suo pensiero e in altro canto:
Non ha nel cor quel che dipinge in volto
Simula & finge, et parla con inganno
Come hoggi al mondo tutti agli altri fanno. (ii.47)

… or he seems to. And Marfisa, like one who loves beyond all reason, believes that which the youth tells her (Marfisa crede cioche ‘l giovan dice / come persona suol ch’ama oltra ‘l segno – ii.48). Perhaps by cornering the young courtier alone in a foreign wood, she has taken his free will (arbitrio) and constrained him to tell a lie that will only drive her further down the path to madness, but the love that he reveals is only an illusion. Marfisa’s intellect is obscured, and searching for the answer she yearns for, she fails to recognize the deceit in Filinoro’s words.

The awkward encounter is interrupted abruptly by the sudden appearance of a savage leopard (fiero leopardo – ii.49) with Orlando in hot pursuit. Here the story shifts, and when the poet returns to Marfisa and Filinoro in the following canto, it is for Marfisa to take her leave, first kissing Filinoro’s face repeatedly (ben mille volte / baccio ‘l bel viso – ii.42) and uttering a series of sweet nothings:

Dicendo queste rose ove fur colte
& di qual vena questa chioma d’oro

46 Not to worry about Filinoro – by the end of canto four he is reunited with the remaining paladins, and will be in their able care for the duration of the poem. While Orlando is still lost in errant adventures that have taken him off course, Marfisa is searching the dark woods alone for Filinoro believing she will find her beloved dead (entrata gia ne la gran selva oscura / ritrovart morto Filinoro si crede – iv.74), as he and the other paladins take their rest back at Mont’Albano, peacefully dining on the game they have procured (cenor la preda di quell giorno in pace – iv.73).

47 Filinoro responds I love you deeply
In those beautiful eyes I am dead and buried
Of beauty and prowess you are unchallenged
You alone, lady, have taken my free will.
But because his thought is in a different place:
He does not have in his heart what is painted on his face
He simulates and pretends, and speaks misleadingly
Just as today, in our world, everyone does to one another.
Filinoro, having dissimulated to the warrior’s satisfaction, does not speak again in the encounter. Marfisa prays his donna angelicata-type beauty – his rosy cheeks, golden locks, shining eyes, and statuesque form – and swiftly departs, even as her grief at their separation is once more heavy on her heart. Riding off, she keeps her face turned toward him until he is gone from view (Marphisa sempre adietro tenne ‘l suo volto / fin che di vista il giovane si fu tolto – iii.54).

This is their definitive separation and for the remainder of the poem, Marfisa will search in vain for the young prince. The poet will not reveal how or if Marfisa will win his heart, nor whether Filinoro is indeed to be the capostipite of the Gonzaga family tree alongside Marfisa, its proclaimed progenetrix. We only know that Marfisa has lost her head for an entirely inappropriate love-object, and that the love that drives her to every sort of contemptible and violent act is entirely one-sided, and therefore illusory. Marfisa’s occurs much along the lines of Orlando’s hapless love for Angelica and yet, according to the poet’s dynastic encomia, it seems as though we should also hope to read it as a parallel to Ruggiero’s love for Bradamante – which we simply cannot.

Marfisa’s madness coalesces around pointless vendettas waged on unsuspecting and inappropriate “enemies.” As she wanders alone in search of her beloved, her rage is turned on a songbird that wakes her from a dream of Filinoro. In her blind rage she nearly drowns herself – repeatedly – and ends up running naked through the woods in an attempt to destroy the bird who seems quite unruffled by the whole event. When her wild flight arouses the attention of a nearby bear, we see Marfisa come face-to-face with the animal whose bizzaria matches her own. Like Filinoro’s flight of the capriolo, Marfisa is bizzarra like an orso and her battle with the beast ends with her plunging her sword into its heart – much as her love for Filinoro is characterized as a sword in her own heart. Following the slaying of her mount, Marfisa stubs her toe and wreaks vengeance on the offending stone by whacking it to bits. Finally, in seeking to reestablish her search, Marfisa collects the armor of a fallen knight (having stripped off her own to better chase the bird, and then lost it in her pursuit of the bear), as well as an abandoned horse,

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48 Saying from what garden these roses come from
And from what vein this lock of gold
And these blessed lights, from where were they taken
Who was the master responsible for such a lovely work
and when she is approached by a friendly stranger who adheres to all courtly manners for knightly introductions, she attempts to wage war upon him … only to be distracted mid-battle and running off.

Canto five opens after Marfisa’s first night alone in the woods. While she is yet to embark on the misadventures described above that occupy her for the remainder of the poem, already the poet compares her to an ill-tempered and bizarre bear: *lei se n’andava fuor d’ogni usanza / iraconda & bizarra come l’orso* – v.2. First believing that a stone is a man, and then that a cavern is a mountain and that a mountain is a field (*tal’hor crede ch’un sasso un homo sia / un speco un monte e un monte prataria* – ibid) – Marfisa is wandering hopelessly without any possibility of regaining her bearings, she is completely without sense. In short order her horse has its ill-fated stumble, she renders an offending stone dust, and she steals a stranger’s horse with no thought to recompense or chivalric order. The narration follows several other strands before turning back to our un-heroine and her *amorosa bizzaria* (vii.6) in canto seven.

Beyond the point of exhaustion, the love maddened warrior does not know if she is awake or asleep, nor where she puts her feet, stumbling on blindly (*quel cervel che vigilando sogna / vigila & sogna a un tratto & cieco vede / camina ne sa dove ponga ‘l piede* – ibid). Mumbling to herself all the while, she collapses in the grass and looks up at the stars. Half awake and half asleep she enters into a soliloquy against the cruel stars who delight in ruining her good name (*stelle crudel che del mio mal godete / concorde a la roina del mio nome* – vii.9), and *Fortuna pazza* (crazy Fortune – ibid) over whom she will never gain dominion. She bemoans her present state and curses Love and Cupid alike, daring them to show their faces in her presence lest she use Cupid’s own bow and arrows to undo them both and achieve her every vendetta (*col tuo proprio arco & tue proprie saette / io vorrei far tutte le mie vendette* – vii.13). Alas, to be mortal, Marfisa knows that she cannot hope to confront the gods – as much as she would like to.

Love, for Marfisa occurs as an incurable affliction. A horrific physical and mental torment for which there is no cure:

*Conosco ben che m’affatico indarno*
*Fondo ne l’aria & ne l’acqua dipingo*
& *ch’io cerco seccar lo Tibre & l’Arno*
& *che senz’arte i spiriti constringo*
& *che piu fuggo piu ‘l dolor incamo*
& *ch’abbraccio gran cose & nulla stringo*
Perche non purgarebbe 'l mal mio interno  
L'acqua del mare nel foco de l'inferno

Che mi val questa spada & questa Lancia  
E intorno haver quest'armatura fina  
Che mi val'esser del sangue di Francia  
& corona portar come Regina  
Che mi val questa mia giovanil guancia  
L'animo, la fortezza & la dottrina  
Che mi val col sudor temperare 'l foco  
Che contra Amor'ogni virtu val poco (vii.15, 16 – emphasis my own)49

For that which burns Marfisa, there is no remedy – no prescribed purgation can remove the taint within her body – no amount of cleansing waters can be drunk, nor decoction made, nor sudorific induced to provide relief from the contagion that she has acquired. As in a fever dream, Marfisa’s reality is corrupted and she is helpless to fight off the unrelenting pain of her condition. To languish in this reduced state she wonders what does anything matter?

The love-induced torment from which Marfisa suffers is characterized as an affliction not unlike the pox itself. Resistant to all known medical remedies – resulting from unreasonable lust – and characterized by a totalizing force that renders all socially assigned status-markers meaningless, Marfisa has met the only enemy that has ever been able to overpower her. Her youth and beauty, her Christian faith, her statuses as knight, as kin to Charlemagne, and as queen of a foreign land all mean nothing in a world dominated by untreatable and inexplicable physical and mental anguish. Marfisa’s frenzied lamentation reflects many of the early descriptions of the myriad sufferings and symptoms of the pox’s victims during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The same “cures” that failed to grant relief to

49 I realize that I deplete myself in vain  
I paint the depths of neither the air nor the water  
And I go seeking to dry out the Tiber and the Arno  
And without skill I suppress my thoughts  
And the more I flee, the more pain I embody  
And that I reach to embrace great things and hold onto nothing  
Because it would not purge the bad that is within me  
Neither the water from the sea nor the fire from hell.

What are this sword and this lance worth to me  
And having this fine armor enclosing me  
What does it matter to be of French blood  
And to wear the crown as a queen  
What good does it do this my youthful cheek  
My mind, my strength and my faith  
What use is it to me that I temper this flame with my sweat  
When against Love every virtue matters little.

50 Malacarne describes the enthusiastic prescription of drinking copious quantities of waters from specified thermal springs as among Federico II’s various treatments for malfrancese (La Vetta 191, 92).
an ailing Federico, are useless in tempering Marfisa’s own agony. There is no spa that can take away this pain, no expensive remedy to purchase. Cursing, crying, aching, groaning frantically, and sighing (molte altre lamentabili parole / disse Marphisa … fra lacrime si duole / & che gme, frenetica & sospira), the knight falls asleep fully armed, not even realizing that she is no longer awake (così com’era di tutt’arme armata: / non s’accorgendo si fu addormentata – vii.17).

Like a withered plant, its life-force drained, Marfisa is dragged into sleep:

Come sbattuta e ingiuriata Rosa
Da temerario vento o pioggia audace
Che contra la vita radice oscosa
Languida mira & scolorita giace.
Marphisa si vede stanca e angosciosa
Priva d’ogni speranza d’ogni pace
Di tal sonno dormir che da quell sciolta
Non l’havrebbe ogni voce in una accolta. (vii.18)

Languid and pallid, Marfisa’s love-sickness has rendered her defenseless and vile. She is overcome by the physical effects of her madness and she cares not what befalls her. Fortunately for her stolen mount, the stumbling, and mumbling Marfisa has fallen asleep without first securing it, and the creature takes the opportunity to wander off as the bizarre one sleeps, tormented, under the stars. Waking alone at daybreak, she walks off absentely without a specific direction, calling out for her graceful, young lover, Filinoro the blond (lest you forget it), at every step (chiamando ad ogni passo il giovinetto / leggiadro amante Filinoro il Biondo – vii.23). Devoid of all judgment (fuor d’ogni giuditio intero) she is no longer what she once was, no longer Marfisa but a pathetic woman for whom the sun has grown cold (non e Marphisa piu quel ch’esser suole / ma donna vil, c’ha per lei freddo il sole – vii.25). Love-sickness has robbed Marfisa of her identity, her intellect, her value, and made her into a beastly monster.

Marfisa’s monstrous transformation is underscored several stanzas later when she takes a nap in the most beautiful and secluded valley that the human intellect could construct (ne la piu lieta & piu remotta valle / chimaginar potesse human pensiero – vii.36). In contrast with the picturesque setting next
to a gurgling brook, Marfisa’s sudden rage against a nightingale whose very song makes the month of May a joy (quel Rosignol, che fa gioioso il Maggio- vii.41), serves to illustrate the senseless and violent change in her character. Being awaked from a dream of Filinoro’s golden locks and tender embrace by the bird’s gentle song she leaps up to wage an assault against the offending animal (contra l’uccel con furioso assalto – vii. 40). Alighting from tree to tree, the gentle creature seems unperturbed by the fury with which Marfisa pursues it, making the earth, trees, and plants tremble (fa la terra tremar gli arbori & fronde – vii.44) under the force of her arms. Even as Marfisa thinks only of destroying it (vuol de la sua morte il vanto), the bird returns ever to its sweet song (piu che prima torna al dolce canto – vii.45).

The sweetest of sounds, in the most tranquil of places has only served to send Marfisa further over the edge, as the poet compares her mad pursuit to that of an enraged bear (qual bizarro orso – vii.46) who lashes out against a swarm of bees. Just as that strange animal that chases after its enemy first in this direction and then in that one – ever in vain (animal strano / che segue hor questa hor quella et sempre in vano – ibid), so Marfisa wanted to put an end to that noise that the whole world covets (voleva … smorzar quel suon che tutto ‘l mondo brama – vii.47). The ridiculous scene continues for several stanzas with Marfisa growing ever more frantic in her chase, and ends abruptly when the bird flies to the other bank of the stream. With a reckless leap Marfisa throws herself into the middle of the water (Marphisa con un salto infuriato / se lancia in mezzo di quell’acqua viva – vii.48). Fully armed and thereby loaded down, the cursing, struggling knight clatters to the river bottom (Marphisa con tant’arme indosso / nell’acqua & poi nel fondo hebbe percossa – vii.50). A convenient place to pause her narrative, the poet again switches tracks.

Marfisa’s enraged flight after a passive bird, can also be understood in terms of its potential to carry underlying valences beyond the surface-level portrayal of the absurd and the violent. One may also interpret this particular choice of symbol according a decidedly erotic undertone whereby “it evokes a widely shared frame of reference in which virtually everyone, from the humblest peasant to the most refined humanist or patron of art knew, understood and could appreciate that a bird was not simply a bird” (Ruggiero 3). Interpreting the bird as a stand-in for the male member, serves also to emphasize the function of what Ruggiero terms “cultures of the erotic” within Renaissance society and artistic and literary production. Like the sodality of pox-sufferers that Hickson identifies within the cultural production
surrounding Francesco II Gonzaga, Federico’s father, reading Marfisa’s lust-induced fury and its symptomatic pursuit of a nightingale leads back to questions of a similar culture at the court of Federico and within the art produced at his behest. Ruggiero further describes the prevalence of the phenomenon:

This common culture [of the erotic] associated a rich nexus of emotions, deeds, imaginings and everyday practices with the erotic, and expressed these associations in ways often specific to the period. Within this shared frame of reference, there were also areas in which the erotic was adapted and played with in ways suited to particular social groups, genres of art or literature and particular places or spaces. This diversity demonstrates that – over and above the common, shared culture that spanned all levels of Renaissance society – there were also variant erotic cultures specific to subgroups or to precise locations. (ibid)

Looking again at work done surrounding Francesco II’s social network, Molly Bourne’s study of epistolary records reveals the ways in which the patron “and a select group of professional men attached to his court fashioned an elite masculine identity for themselves, using the practice of epistolary exchange to articulate sexual transgression, power relations and cross-class male sociability” (“Mail Humor” 201).52

In her work, Bourne also identifies instances in which the young heir to the Gonzaga marquisate, Federico II, was inculcated into the explicit practices of the erotic culture at the court of Mantua. Examining a letter from one of the marchesana’s “most trusted ladies-in-waiting,” Eleonora Brognina to a ten-year-old Federico who was visiting his sister at the court of Urbino in February of 1511, Bourne notes the use of sexual innuendo and double entendre to describe the bride in a recent wedding (211). In the missive, “the metaphors that Brognina uses to describe la sposa are filled with sexual double entendre derived from an erotic culture common to all social classes that was rich with metaphor and euphemism” (213). By employing a set of “conventional (although veiled) references to the male member” as well as to the vagina, Brognina’s letter demonstrates the crown-prince’s active inclusion in the erotic culture of the Gonzaga court. Her letter concludes with further allusions to sexual intercourse, and with a salutation from the prince’s mother, in which she and the other ladies-in-waiting state that “we kiss and touch your

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52 Bourne also points to letters documenting Francesco II’s sexual relationships with young boys including a flirtatious exchange with his own four-year-old cousin, Gianfrancesco Gonzaga (1493-1500), in 1497, as well as an epistle documenting his procurement of a young boy while dispatched as gonfaloniere in Julius II’s “papal crusade to expel the Bentivoglio from Bologna” in 1506 (“Mail Humor” 202). The letter from which she cites: implies a view that, in a pinch, young boys could serve as substitutes for women in circumstances of ‘hardship’ like a military campaign. On the other hand, it could even be suggested that such situations were endorsed as an acceptable alibi for same-sex relations between adults and adolescent males. (ibid)

Bourne further emphasizes that these exchanges “provide strong evidence that Francesco Gonzaga’s engagement in nonmarital sexual relations with women and boys was prolific enough to be discussed and even promoted by a cross section of his chancery staff” further indicating the marquis’s predilection for “lewd humour and male homosocial bonding” (203).
[little] chest and all those places we like best” (qtd in ibid). From the descriptive language and Isabella’s participation in the correspondence, Bourne concludes that:

it can be deduced that Isabella encouraged this sort of playful but suggestive language in letters to her primogenito. Such language functioned both as a celebration of his male gender and as a form of training for the eroticized atmosphere of the Gonzaga court where he would later come of age. (ibid – emphasis my own)

The erotic culture that Bourne and Hickson have described at the Gonzaga court was clearly a part of Federico’s upbringing from a young age, and as Bourne emphasizes:

it is clear that both allusive language and deliberate sexual transgression enjoyed a privileged position at the Gonzaga court, as much among the highest echelons of its princely rulers as among the less elevated circles of friends and counsellors with whom they exchanged letters. (214)

This erotic culture is reflected in both the literary output and visual works produced under Federico’s patronage, including Dragoncino’s Bizzarra. The connection between explicit sexual innuendo and Federico’s familial heritage is underscored in the ongoing scene of the chasing down of a bird by a lust-induced ancestor to the Gonzaga lineage. As Grieco notes in his study of ornithological double entendre in Renaissance culture, bird hunting occurs as “one of the more popular metaphors used to indicate a sexual act” (101). The list of birds used to imply the male organ includes “birds of prey, song birds and night birds” (99) among whom Marfisa’s rosignolo (known in contemporary parlance as the usignolo or Nightingale in English) is specifically included (126). Marfisa’s ill-tempered chase of the oblivious songbird occurs as the second hunt-scene of the poem. Having nearly caught her capriolo, only to lose him immediately, she now pursues another elusive figure – the winged phallus that torments her and seamlessly thwarts her violent attempts to dominate it.

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53 First-born male.
55 Maurer writes of Federico’s eroticized self-image as projected in the decoration of the Palazzo del Te: Federico II Gonzaga conceived of the Palazzo Te as a space which would embody his princely identity as a man aflame with love. Tormented, burning, and even erotic love were integral parts of Federico’s princely identity, and, I would argue, of courtly masculinity. The transmission of the salamander between Mantuan and French courts suggests that ardent and agonizing love was one strategy that men used to portray themselves as virile, witty, and victorious. Depicting themselves as tormented lovers, and thus as men subordinate to women and to one another, allowed men to form social bonds. (388)
Having left Marfisa alone at the bottom of the river in canto seven, the openings to cantos nine and ten introduce first an ironic ode to the glorifying power of love, followed by a description of the salvific and curative powers of poetry. In direct contradistinction to the portrayal of Marfisa’s bestial transformation, as well as to her lamentations in cantos one and seven on the destructive nature of love (i.48-51; and vii.9-17), canto nine’s opening occurs as an ironic reversal of the intrinsic message contained within the poem’s treatment of its titular figure.

O Faretrato Amor, che mille strali
Scocchi in un punto, e accendi mille fiamme
Ne i divin seni & ne i petti mortali
Quest et quel cor struggendo a dramme, a dramme
Ardi gli uccelli e in fochi gli animali
E in le freddre acque i muti pesci infiamme
Si sei gentil come odo apre ‘l mio ingegno
Perch’io canto la gloria del tuo regno.

Nasce da la virtu de la tua face
Il preggio d’arme & l’honor di dottrina,
sublimi ogni amoroso tuo seguace
giorni acutezza al foco tuo s’affina
ne le fatiche ogn’hor sei piu vivace
sacquista sotto te fama divina.
Morto vive, cieco opre & sordo intende
Gioioso Amor: chi di te non s’accende.

Li degni cavallier dal tempo antico
Fecero cose stupende & memorande
Che quel secolo Amor de te fu amico
Amor, ch’exalti & fai l’animo grande
Io provo tua virtute & pero il dico
& spero ancho per te verdi ghirlande
D’immortal fronde di famoso lauro
& crescer nome al mio nobil Metuaro.56 (ix.1-3)57

56 The Metauro river flows from the Apennine Mountains into the Adriatic Sea not far from the city of Fano, which is the poet’s beloved birth-place.

57 Oh, Love, armed with quiver, that one thousand arrows
You fire in a single shot, and you spark one thousand flames
In the divine spot and in the chests of mortals
Destroying every heart piece by piece
You burn birds and set fire to animals
And in the cold water the silent fish are aflame
If you are indeed courteous as I hear, open my mind
So that I can sing of the glory of your reign.

From the virtue of your light is born
The praise of arms and the glory of faith
You raise up your every loving follower
Each ingenious act is refined in your flame
You are always more lively in exploits
One acquires divine fame under you
The dead live, the blind function and the deaf understand
Joyful Love: who is not set afire by you.
Where Marfisa had cursed the plight of a woman-in-love as being worse than that of the lucky birds, fish and beasts who never suffer love’s torment, here the poet includes them among the universal catalogue of love’s subjects. Maintaining the Petrarchan and stilnovisti image of Love as Cupid (Faretrato Amor), the poet now praises love’s power to compel great deeds and to inspire virtue, honor, and miraculous occurrences. Marfisa’s repeated depiction as a deranged woman longing for death, out of her mind, and blinded by rage stand out against the vivid image of love’s capacity to bring back the dead, to make the blind function, and to make the deaf understand (Morto vive, cieco opra & sordo intende).

The second stanza in particular seems to attempt to negate everything about the love-sickened Marfisa that the poet has emphasized up until – and beyond – this moment. While she is certainly among those burning with love’s flames, no virtues are born to her of this suffering (Nasce da la virtu de la tua face), she prizes neither her chivalric duty nor her Christian faith (Il preggio d’arme & l’honor di dottrina), rather, she has utterly abandoned these two attributes which once characterized her within the chivalric genre. Her ingenuity is not refined in love’s flame (ogni acutezza al foco tuo s’affina) but seems instead to have been burnt to ash and long-since blown away by the time we reach this elaborate tribute in canto nine. In the final stanza, we recall that Marfisa was – until her current representation in Dragoncino’s poem – considered among those ancient and revered knights (li degni cavallier dal tempo antico), and we are left to wonder that love’s effect upon her is not to ennoble her and enlarge her spirit (Amor, ch’exalti & fai l’animo grande) but to beat her down, to remove her every trace of nobility, and to leave her tilting at proverbial windmills.

Before returning to the narrative of the water-logged and much-diminished progenetrix of the Gonzaga family line, the poet begins canto ten with a reflection on the power of poetry to heal, to succor, and to imbue a life with meaning.

…

The worthy knights of ancient times
Committed stupendous and memorable acts
During that age you were its ally, Love.
Love, you who exalt and enlarge the spirit
I experience your virtue and whilst I speak of it
And also hope through you [to earn] green garlands
Of immortal fronds of the famous laurel
And to grow the name of my noble Metauro.
Natura piu bel membro non n'ha dato
Che la lingua che puo nel ciel disporre
Et hoggi il cieco numero di sciocchi
Attende a contentare 'l ventre & gli occhi

Lingua Soave, che con dolce suono
Indolcisici l'amaro e 'l duro pieghi
Dentro a la tua virtu canto & ragiono
Tu m'apri & serri, tu mi sciogli & leghi
Tu del ben premio, tu del mal perdono
Ritrovi quando la tua gratia spieghi
L' oscuro illustri al mondo e l basso ascendi
E l freddo cor di caldo amor accendi.

…
Che valerebbe il ciel senza i suoi lumi
Questa [creatura umana] senza elegantia di parole,
Et quel senza le stelle & senza 'l sole,

…
Io la fatica mia publico & mostro
Perche del mio natal rimang el segno
Chi fara fede ch io sia nato & come
Sio non lascio di me qualche bel nome. (x.4-7)

Without the ornament of words, what does a life matter, what does a human matter if words are not left to preserve his name and his efforts for posterity? Just as the poet writes to grant immortality to his patron, he writes also to give meaning to his own mortal experience. Through poetry, the impossible is accomplished, and the mind flies free, carrying with it the soul. While the foolish masses live only for

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58 Nature has given no lovelier member
Than the tongue that she can place in the heavens
And today the blind number of fools
Care only to satisfy stomach and eyes.

Gentle Tongue, who with sweet sounds
You sweeten the bitter and you bend the hard.
Within your virtue I sing and I reason
You open and close me, you free and bind me.
You find reward for the good and forgiveness for the bad
When you reveal your grace
You make famous the obscure and uplift the lowly of this world
And you inflame the cold heart with hot love.

…
What worth is the sky without its lights
This [human creature] without elegance of words
And that without the stars and sun,

…
I publish and circulate my effort
In order to leave a sign of my birth
Who will testify that I was born and how
If I do not leave my good reputation?
immediate satisfaction – hunger they can feed and vision they can indulge ('l ventre & gli occhi), the poet knows the limitless power of human language to sweeten and to bend (Indolcisici l’amaro e ’l duro pieghi), to bring reprieve from the physical torment of the mortal condition.

With elegant words (elegantia di parole) the poet relieves mortal pains, pardoning the bad and emphasizing the good (Tu del ben premio, tu del mal perdon). Even a minor poet may leave his mark, surviving for centuries beyond the immediate impression of his brief life. Through words and through self-promotion (lo la fatica mia publico & mostro) he gives his own life meaning and defines the terms by which he will be remembered. His poetry ennobles the lowly (el basso ascendi) and shines a light upon that which would otherwise be forgotten (L’osuro illustri al mondo). The poet’s words generate reality and venerate humanity by engaging in an art that resists the bounds of time. By taking advantage of the special gift that Nature bestowed upon the human race, the poet sets himself and his patron apart from the masses, granting both figures the immortality of a curated image.

The poet does not return to our bedraggled and beastly un-heroine until the final stanzas of the twelfth canto. Here the knight emerges from the water while the “bird” pops out and then hides himself (l’uccel si mostra e poi s’asconde – xii.65), the poet taking the opportunity to remind readers of the pains to which the young maiden had been pursuing the Nightingale (debbe ognun ricordarse & con qual duolo / la donzella seguiva i Rosignuolo – ibid). The bird chirps merrily away, as Marfisa pulls herself to shore like a limp fish (un pesce molle – xii.66) and then reengages on her “hunt” (Marphisa torna a la prima caccia – xii.67). Seeing the bird flit back to the other side of the bank (from whence her pursuit began), the love-addled warrior drops her helmet into the grass and strips off her remaining armor (l’elmo, c’ha in mano sbatte contra l’herba / ne un pezzo d’arme intorno si riserba – xii.68). Without missing an opportunity to yet sexualize the manic Marfisa, the poet emphasizes her utter nakedness and characteristic lightness (tutta si spoglia a suo modo leggiera – xii.69) before she jumps into the water cursing once more. Running naked with only her sword, Marfisa resembles the very creature she chases (sembra un uccel che dietro a l’altro voli – xii.71), unleashing another series of curses. In her anger she damns all “Nightingales” (maledicendo tutti i Rosignuoli – ibid). The poet cuts off the chase abruptly to rest his voice, taking up Marfisa’s mad flight again in the following, penultimate canto.
Canto thirteen opens with the poet’s brief exploration of his own experience with the contaminating force of love. Here he reverses once more his previously asserted position on love as an ennobling force, stating that he himself has been subject to love’s power to blind reason:

Che cosa fa questo ribaldo Amore
Che contamina ’l casto pensier nostro
N’acieca ’l senno & ne spoglia d’honore
Per mille carte favola d’inchiostro
N’entra in desio che si puo dir furore.
Lo provato io quel che in Marfisa mostro
Ben ch alta bizarria qui di lei narro.
Io son stato gran tempo piu bizarro. (xiii.1)

As bizarre as Marfisa has become, the poet states that he himself has been many times more bizarre than she (Ben ch alta bizarria qui di lei narro. / lo son stato gran tempo piu bizarro). Love is no longer the ennobling force of canto nine but a rogue (ribald) who contaminates even pure thoughts and intentions (Che contamina ’l casto pensier nostro), rendering its victims blind and depriving them of their honor (N’acieca ’l senno & ne spoglia d’honore). As we see in Marfisa, this is the love that is manifest in the Bizarra.

At this junction, Marfisa’s love-blinded bird hunt is supplanted by her encounter with the animal to whom she is explicitly compared throughout the poem, the irate bear. Entering into some trees she loses sight of the Nightingale just as a bear comes rushing out. Marfisa’s rage renews and she pulls her sword.

La fera gli vien contra a la distesa
Che desia parimente la battaglia.
Drizzato in pie quell’animal feroce
La donna assalta con horribil voce. (xiii.4)

Just as Marfisa appears as a woman turned beast, the bear comes at her standing on two legs (drizzato in pie) like a monstrous human. The two occur almost as mirror images of one another’s rage, the animal

59 What does this roguish Love do
That contaminates our chaste thoughts
Blinding them of insight and stripping them of honor
For a thousand pages of ink recounting
Of the entry into desire that one can call fury.
I have felt that which Marfisa shows
Even as I narrate the heights of her madness.
I was once many times more furious.

60 The beast comes at her at full speed
It seems to equally desire the battle.
Standing upright, that ferocious animal
The lady assaults with an awful cry.
matching Marfisa’s bloodlust (desia parimente la battaglia). As the fight unfolds the poet makes the Marfisa/bear parallel explicit stating that in this new violent brawl, the advantage goes from one bizarre creature to the other (Io so ben dir ch’in questa nova sciarra / Il gioco va da bizarro a bizarra – xiii.6).

Dragoncino’s association of Marfisa and the bear is one that can be read in a number of ways, and takes on a peculiar significance when related back to her role in the author’s dynastic imagination. As Barbara Spackman noted in her essay on Teofilo Folengo’s epic romance Il Baldus (first published in 1517), the she-bear as a symbol of monstrous motherhood has a long literary legacy dating back to such authors as Aristotle, Pliny and Isidore of Seville. In particular, the she-bear was thought to give birth to “malformed cubs” (27) who emerged after a brief gestation in the form of shapeless lumps of flesh, which only through the mother’s continuous licking – would slowly take on their animal form. As Spackman aptly points out, “it was from this zoological ‘fact’ that Isidore drew his etymology of ursus: ursus was related to both mouth and origin since the mother bear shaped her offspring with her mouth (ore suo)” (ibid).

By connecting the progenetrix of the Gonzaga lineage to love-sickness and to monstrous birth, the poet has presented a highly disruptive dynastic mythology. Reflecting on the erotic culture of the Gonzaga court, on Francesco II’s sodality built on sickness, and on Isabella’s own participation in helping the young crown prince to develop into the highly sexualized figure we see represented in much of the art he commissioned, suggests that the self-image and familial identity that Federico sought to memorialize was both transgressive and normalizing. Rather than hide from the reputation his father and ancestors had acquired over time, the Bizarra indicates that Federico embraced the ambiguity surrounding his own legitimacy as ruler, taking ownership of the very source of criticism his enemies might seek to exploit.

Considering also the eroticized imagery discussed in the bird hunt scene, built into this violent spectacle are a number of terms that Fraccari identifies as carrying sexual valences. Both battaglia and assalto may serve as metaphors for sex, while animale can be understood as another reference to the male member (El Più Soave 342). Within which context, the description of the animal as disteso –

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*I Niccoli cites an anonymous text widely known since the 1400s, De secretis mulierum, “Immoderate coitus is a factor in many monstrosities […] Above all it is necessary to particularly avoid disorderly and violent copulation” (qtd at 7). For a discussion of the Renaissance embryological understanding of monstrous birth as a result of divine punishment for sexually trangressive behavior, see Niccoli, “Menstruum quasi monstrum.”*
extended – would carry obvious connotations of the prurient variety. As the scene advances, Marfisa buries her sword in the bear's chest up to its hilt: l'acuto ferro la donzella preme / che l'elzo\textsuperscript{62} tocca a la piaga le labbia – xiii.8. The poet's language here is decidedly sexualized as the maiden pushes the sharp iron until the handle of her sword touches the wound's mouth or lips. The beast roars and rushes off, carrying Marfisa's sword with it. Another absurd chase ensues, Marfisa's rage now inspired by the desire to reclaim her lost weapon (la bona spada sua perder non vole – xiii.9).

The description of the bear that follows is reminiscent of Marfisa's own love-sickened exploits in the poem:

\begin{quote}
Quell'animal bizarro & fuggitivo  
Corre, ne sa pero dove si vada  
Non e anchor morto ne si puo dir vivo  
E infilzato se porta via la spada (xiii.10)\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

Here the poet could well be describing Marfisa herself, whose bizarrìa has been described time and again in just these terms. Assailed by Cupid's arrows, and with the sword of love protruding from her bleeding chest, Marfisa has been wreaking havoc on the unoffending countryside since first losing sight of her beloved. Neither alive nor dead, it seems that she has been in search of Filinoro, while her blind wandering appears to be as much a flight as any pursuit. Wanting only to escape the torment of her condition, Marfisa has plunged ever deeper into the suffering she should want to avoid.

Just as Marfisa's "search" has taken her off course, separated her from her companions, and left her without any sense for who she is or where she is going, so the dying bear crashes through the underbrush. After smashing an oak to bits it runs straight on, and then in a geometric circle (hor per dritto, hor in cerchio di geometra), running lost it does not stop to rest a hair (corre smarito ne riposa un pelo – xiii.12). Here and there it twists and turns (di qua, di la tanto s'aggira & volta – ibid) before stumbling out of the thick woods and onto a plain. Marfisa the bizarre huntress (Marphisa la bizarra cercatura – xiii.13) reaches the ferocious bear as it falls, dying to the ground. She stands over it proudly as it draws its final breath and pulls her sword from its chest and is armed once more (fuor del petto de l'orso il brando tira /

\textsuperscript{62}This is most likely a variant of \textit{elsa} which appears in the \textit{Accademia della Crusca}'s first edition. A closer variant, \textit{elso}, appears from the third edition onward. This refers to the steel that goes around the handle of the sword to protect the hand.

\textsuperscript{63}That bizarre and fugitive animal  
Runs, not knowing however where it goes  
It is not dead, nor can we say that it is living  
And run through it carries away the sword
armata piu – xiii.14). Her mind immediately rushes back to her love-sickness (al pensier torna, ove col cor sospira) and she is overtaken by the urge to curse and to act out violently (a i crudi gesti, al lamentevol dire) demonstrating once more that love has driven her mad (dimostra ben, ch’amor la fa impazzire – ibid).

Her rabid pursuit ended, she sets out once again on her blind wandering, spurred on by the torment of love’s pain (nel cieco pensier, ch’al duol risponde). Her first thought is to reclaim her armor, though she knows not where she left it (benche la donna e per amor balorda / de l’armatura sua ben se ricorda – xiii.15). She wanders on contemplating suicide, lamenting the deaf world, the cold sun and the hot wind (sordo dil mondo, il sol freddo, & caldo il vento – xiii.17) and the various symptoms of her ill-begotten affliction. Before the poem’s abrupt end in the following canto, Marfisa will regain no stature and achieve no greatness, but will at least find some decent armor to cover her naked body. Dressed in a piecemeal composite of the armor remaining from a desecrated and dismembered corpse, the once noble Marfisa ends the poem mounted on a strange horse, rushing into battle unprompted against a friendly knight, and then flying from the battlefield at the sight of a possible messenger on the periphery.

**Marfisa bizarra, a Text that Heals**

Reading Dragoncino’s poem for its function as a dynastic mythology at the court of Federico II entails understanding the work in terms of its power as a pharmakon. The poem contains both the poison and the remedy for understanding the house of Gonzaga, and the disease-afflicted Francesco and Federico as the legitimate rulers of Mantua. The text possesses the power to normalize transgressive behavior (sexual as well as political) and to physically restore the ailing body of the duke by rebalancing his complexion through the consumption of literature particularly tailored to his tastes and explicitly centered on his glorification. Sparse documentation survives surrounding the sponsorship and publication of Dragoncino’s now little-known chivalric epic, that was formally approved for printing the year following Federico’s ascension to the title of duke in 1530. That this was a politically critical moment in the duke’s career cannot be overemphasized, as it was his passive participation in the 1527 Sack of Rome that ultimately led to Carlo V’s granting of that title.

Piecing together information about Federico’s illness, and about his sponsorship of Dragoncino’s poem is an effort that has required a significant amount of triangulating, looking at similar works and
considering the little we know about the chronic disease that took the duke’s life at the age of forty. Historians have tended to work politely around the question of malfrancesese and only recently have more texts emerged that deal explicitly with this significant aspect of the duke’s biography. We know more about Francesco’s illness because of his association with the much-examined Isabella d’Este, and perhaps because the Gonzagas had grown more protective over openly discussing the crown-prince’s health by the time that Federico came into power. Francesco’s public persona in many ways centered around his extra-marital exploits and presumed virility and as Hickson has demonstrated, his association with malfrancesese was actively incorporated into this image. By promoting himself as a man among men whose sexuality was in no way diminished by his affliction, Francesco managed to cultivate an image of virility in the face of physical weakness. Even still, a veil of obscurity exists surrounding exactly when Francesco acquired the disease, and less still is known about the affliction of his heir and first-born son, Federico.

As scholars such as Hickson, Bourne, Malacarne, and Maurer have illustrated, reading the history of the Gonzagas is necessarily a matter of reading between the lines. For the family whose power and money originated in mercenary enterprises and the violent usurpation of the then commune of Mantua from former allies, the Bonacolsi family, in the fourteenth century, the effort to mythologize and to self-promote the lineage through artistic and literary patronage was a dynastic impulse as critical to that family ethos as the re-writing of “history” itself. As the successful heir of the dynasty, Federico managed in his brief life to advance his family’s hegemony over Mantua from marquisate to duchy in only a few short years. The product of a unique upbringing in service to various international powers, always in the interest of the Gonzaga family’s political ambitions, Federico came into his own upon his father’s death from the same disease that would claim his life twenty-one years later.

Among the earliest sufferers of malfrancesese on the European continent, both Francesco and Federico faced the monumental task of redefining the affliction according to their own standards. Juggling stigmatization and the physical threat of a recurring disease with no known treatments, the lords of Mantua used art and literature to cultivate the image of potent leadership, at the same time that their failing bodies required new explorations in medicine. The love-sickness that renders Marfisa bizarr is a contagion that both Francesco and Federico knew well. Its intractable contagion penetrated both their
bodies and minds, ultimately reducing them from noble soldiers of fortune to mortal men overcome with the burden acquired in the indulgence of earthly vice. Despite the best efforts of physicians, astrologers, and lay-healers tasked with healing the fourth marquis and his son, the duke, malfrancese would prove too powerful an affliction to be tempered by known remedies. The textual healing that Dragoncino’s Marfisa bizarre did accomplish is restricted to the socio-political and cultural spheres. Through his words, the poet ensured a yet-to-be obscured immortality upon himself, as upon the duke he sought to memorialize. While the poem is considered among the myriad “minor” epics of the period, it persists today as a lasting voice from and insight into an increasingly distant past.
CONCLUSION

When I initiated this investigation into gender, genre, and disease at the sixteenth-century court of Federico II Gonzaga, first duke of Mantua, I thought that I would find evidence to prove that a poet hired by the court, Giovanbattista Dragoncino da Fano, had used his platform to launch a satirical critique of the duke using the figure of Marfisa the Bizarre in order to do so. I initially set out to collect such evidence as would reveal the duke’s ultimate displeasure with the results, and the poet’s relative freedom to compose a subversive text under the radar of the duke’s imposing eye. As I set out to do so, however, I was confronted with the reality that the limited archival evidence remaining to document Federico’s sponsorship of Dragoncino pointed to a decidedly positive reception on the part of the duke. Looking deeper into Federico’s interest in chivalric epic and in the figure of Marfisa in particular, I came to realize that the fifth marquis, and soon-to-be duke, had made considerable efforts to have a chivalric epic written in his honor and centered specifically around the figure of a love-sickened Marfisa.

As I strove to learn more about Federico’s struggle with malfrancese and to better understand the specific culture of art patronage that Federico, and his parents before him, Francesco II and Isabella d’Este, cultivated in Mantua, I began to adapt a very different view on the function of a poem such as Dragoncino’s Marfisa bizarra. Accepting at face value Federico’s approbation of the work, and in fact considering it a text executed according to his own particular tastes and perhaps specifications, has revealed the work as a component part in an elaborately devised program of self-promotion through the sponsorship of aesthetic works. Considering the Bizarra alongside Romano’s erotic decorations of the Palazzo del Te, and within the context of the sexually-charged ethos surrounding the Gonzaga lords of Mantua, provided me with a different perspective on the intended function of such works.¹ The

¹Federico’s interest in a Marfisa epic mythologizing the foundation of his family’s dynasty connects the Bizarra to the duke’s broader network of artists and authors known for their sexually transgressive tastes. Before coming to Mantua to work for Federico in 1524, Giulio Romano, together with Pietro Aretino (author of the unfinished Marfisa disperata) and Marcantonio Raimondi were involved in the scandalous publication of I Modi (or The Positions), a series of Romano’s pornographic sketches rendered into engravings by Raimondi, and accompanied by explicitly descriptive sonnets by Aretino “which were even more explicit than the engravings themselves” (Hickson, “More than Meets the Eye” 44). Talvacchia has suggested that Aretino’s poems for I Modi, the so-called Sonetti lussuriosi may have been written while in exile from Rome at Federico’s court in Mantua in 1525 (16). Hickson tells us that Baldassare Castiglione (author of Il Cortegiano) personally recommended Romano to the then-marquis (43), while:
transgression of sex and gender norms that we see in the *Bizarra* emerges as an intentional display geared at promoting the duke’s potency and virility despite his affliction with *malfrancese*—a disease that would have been impossible for him to hide.

With the *Bizarra* and similar works, Federico sought to take control of his image and to harness that which detractors and enemies could have used to weaken his public image. By reversing the potentially negative effects of having the reputation of being a lascivious and disease-ridden figure, Federico II effectively emphasized the potency that allowed him to overcome such obstacles. Through the *Bizarra* the patron is made whole and his image is effectively healed by re-elaborating the history associated with his dynastic legacy.

Before Dragoncino’s (and Federico’s) intervention, Marfisa had stood as the paragon of chastity within the female warrior archetype of Cinquecento epic, and it is upon this reputation that the Gonzagas’ honor is inscribed by the poet. The conflicting portrayal of Marfisa that we receive within the text does not diminish her standing in the elaborate encomia memorializing her legacy as the progenetrix of the Gonzaga family line. Just as the poet cannot rewrite known history about the Gonzaga ascension to power, nor can he erase the reality of Federico’s (and Francesco’s before him) chronic physical torments from *malfrancese*. The remedy that the poet can provide is that of redefining “reality” according to a truth that better serves his master. In composing a new myth upon which to anchor Federico’s image as an important and powerful ruler, Dragoncino heals some of the socio-political wounds that suffering from *malfrancese* would imply for a public figure at this time.

Textual healing within the *Bizarra* also occurs on the physical and psychological levels according to the prevailing “medical” models of the time. By stroking the duke’s ego, by presenting him with pleasing and distracting images, and by providing him with personal entertainment to be consumed in private or in public without requiring physical exertion, the poet has provided a tool intended toward the restoration of the duke’s disordered physical complexion— that which is the source of his affliction with *malfrancese*. As Talvacchia and others have pointed out in the decorations at the Palazzo del Te, the consumption of

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In Aretino’s mind, the [soon-to-be-] Duke and Giulio were made for each other. Federico’s driving military and political ambition were exceeded only by his talent for flouting social and sexual conventions in his private life, and these qualities would find their perfect expression in Giulio’s unique ability to create a highly eroticized iconography of power, a sort of sexually charged princely art. (44)
erotic material goes hand-in-hand with Federico’s projected self-image as a socially and sexually potent ruler, even during times of rest and recovery. The association of the two is expressed in the inscription that accompanies Romano’s Camera di Psiche where the walls are “completely covered with highly eroticized frescoes by Giulio Romano and his assistants” (110). Talvacchia goes on to point out that “Rumor has always had it that, perhaps influenced by the visual seduction of the paintings, the particular restorative pleasures indulged at the Te were of a worldly, if not lubricious, variety” (110, 11). As the viewers take in the sexually explicit renderings, they also read the expressed intent thereof:

\[\text{Federicus Gonzaga II Mar[chio] V S[anctae] R[omanae] E[cclesiae] et Reip[ublicae] Flor[entinae] Capitaneus Generalis Honesto Ocio Post Labores ad Reparandam Virt[utem] Quieti Construi Mandavit.}’ Which is to say that the room was constructed by order of, and in the name of, Federico Gonzaga, with all of his titles and rank, ‘for honest leisure after work to restore strength in quiet.’ (110)

Nestled among the various images in the room are four hexagons bearing the image of the salamander (111) and accompanied by the duke’s motto \textit{quod huic deest me torque} (that which he lacks torments me).

\[\text{I feed on my death and live in flames: strange food and a wondrous salamander!} \quad \text{(Petrarch \textit{Rime sparse} 207 lines 40-41, 358)}\]

\[\text{Di mia morte mi pasco et vivo in fiamme / stranio cibo et mirabil salamandra!} (359)\]
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