

# The Female Knight in Renaissance Romance Epic: The Grace of the Tigress

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The female knights in the romance epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser do not realistically reflect the lives and pursuits of women of their period, and yet they have been and remain attractive, popular literary figures. The gender roles of these female knights are complex, for they do not simply mirror the behaviour of the male knights of their texts. Instead, they project a type of womanhood that is possible rather than either realistic or fantastic. These Renaissance women warriors trace their literary genealogy to Greek and Latin forebears such as Virgil's Camilla and Quintus' Penthesilea and yet only a minority of the later figures suffer the tragic fate of Amazons in classical epic. This paper anatomizes the characters and narrative trajectories of Bradamante and Marfisa as they appear in both *Orlando innamorato* and *Orlando furioso*, Clorinda and Gildippe in *Gerusalemme liberata* and Britomart and Radigund in *The Faerie Queene*. It also pays attention to other warlike women characters in these texts, such as Armida, Belphoebe, and the communities of Amazon-like women that feature in both Spenser and Ariosto. The two main questions guiding the exploration of these figures ask why the female knights are so attractive and what precise gender roles they perform in their texts and contexts.

**T**he female knight is one of the most consistently charming figures in Renaissance romance narrative. And yet she is neither a reflection nor a simple role model for women. The texts in which she appears were not composed or, at least until recently, consumed during periods in which women were undergoing any striking emancipation in their societies in Europe; nor, in pre-twentieth-century modern times, have warlike or athletic pursuits been encouraged among girls—

and even today they are still widely regarded as less suited to female than to male bodies and temperaments. Knightly activities have always been perceived as essentially masculine endeavours. During the Renaissance as in other times, gender roles were tightly regulated, especially in the case of women, whose behaviour and movements were relatively more constricted than men's. Thus, the question arises why this anomalous female figure has for so long seemed attractive to readers of the Renaissance romances. This paper will explore the question of the female knight's popularity, while also asking what exact gender roles she is enacting, given her textual and historical context.

Most of the women knight characters belong to the Italian literary tradition, both oral and written. Appearing in popular *cantari* from the late Middle Ages, the *guerriera* had become a commonplace figure in Italian romance by the end of the Renaissance. Margaret Tomalin shows that literally scores of women knights feature in Italian texts from the minstrel songs of the fourteenth century to the sententious written epics of the seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Many of these female knights are stock characters, going by fixed names and featuring in similar if not identical roles in various narratives. However, the women knights in the most famous of the classic *ottava rima* texts of the period are no stereotypes but fundamentally inimitable, idiosyncratic literary characters.

In English-language romances of the same period, only Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, written not in *ottave* but in its own more complex nine-line stanzas, includes female knights. These are clearly adapted from Spenser's Italian models but, forming part of an essentially British and royalist discourse, they are used to slightly different ends.<sup>2</sup> Spenser's poem sets out not just to compliment but to legitimate a female monarch. His portrayal of warlike women characters in his text shows, according to Susanne Woods, that 'he finds potential for rule inherent in women, not exceptional to them.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Tomalin, *The Fortunes of the Warrior Heroine in Italian Literature: An Index of Emancipation* (Ravenna, 1982), pp. 15–18 and *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Joseph Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, PN, 1992), p. 257; Robert M. Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge, MA, 1965), p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Woods, 'Spenser and the Problem of Women's Rule,' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 48 (1985): 140–58 (p. 146).

This paper will focus on these vibrant and heroic female knights: Bradamante and Marfisa as they appear in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and, to a lesser extent, in Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*; Clorinda and Gildippe in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*; and Britomart and Radigund in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. It will also consider other warlike and Amazonian women characters from these texts. Even though Ariosto wrote his *Furioso* as an intentional continuation of Boiardo's unfinished *Innamorato*, the characters of Bradamante and Marfisa are naturally not identical from one poet's work to the other, and the differences between the two texts go beyond distinctions of period and dialect. The paper will anatomize all of these warrior women from all four texts in terms of their possibly deviant gender identities and their attractiveness to their narrators and readers.

It should be mentioned that the popularity of female knights in the late Medieval and Renaissance periods is not unparalleled, even excluding the predilection for female superheroes of our own time. Women characters who perform swashbuckling roles in another, less highbrow English-language genre, who persisted until much later periods than the women knights, have proved equally appealing to their readership and audiences. Dianne Dugaw writes about the cross-dressing soldier and sailor heroines of popular ballads from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry*, and she discovers these female characters to be almost universally successful in both love and war.<sup>4</sup> In scores of ballads that recurred and reproduced themselves for over 200 years, the stories of women who dressed as men and had heroic adventures in this role remained bestsellers of the popular (lowbrow and middlebrow) entertainment market.

Considering the restrictions placed on real women's behaviour in Europe since time immemorial, the handful of girls and women who have actually disguised themselves as men to take up masculine roles notwithstanding, the popularity of such tales must be seen as a kind of wish-fulfilling fantasy in the minds of their female audiences. Nevertheless, as with many fantasies, this one expresses in rather melodramatic form an aspect of human potential that is

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<sup>4</sup> Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650–1850* (Chicago, 1996), p. xii and *passim*.

generally repressed. As in the case of the women knights, the daring and adventurous soldier girls of the ballads represent a variant but viable female gender role that has been largely unacknowledged and inexpressible by the women inhabiting the world in which these fictional characters were received.

The attractiveness of the female knights in the romances is at times almost uncanny. Camille Paglia, focusing specifically on Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, sees the women warriors in this text as so glamorous as to emit a kind of radiance generated by their beauty, freedom and impenetrability. Though she views the characters of Belphoebe and Britomart as exemplary of the 'Apollonian androgyne', she claims that even malevolent Radigund gives off a 'glittering quality'. However, in Radigund's case this quality is a 'source of disorder' because she uses her power to curtail the freedom of others.<sup>5</sup>

The female warrior's widely recognized attractiveness is probably related to the surprising lenience that many gender-prescriptive societies exercise toward tomboys, young girls who behave and often dress as boys. (Boys who behave or dress as girls are usually much less freely tolerated.) This one concession to female boldness and adventurousness seems safe to the reigning patriarchy because the girls involved are not yet of child-bearing age. But Judith (now Jack) Halberstam speculates that what societies are prepared to accept in the pre-adolescent tomboy is a rejection of adulthood, not womanhood. When tomboyishness persists into adolescence, s/he says, the young person gets into trouble: 'as soon as puberty begins . . . the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl'.<sup>6</sup>

However, Halberstam does not take into account all of society's attitudes toward girlhood. In classical times, for example, a young virgin, even after she must technically have reached puberty, was regarded as not yet fully female but androgynous or even physically masculine.<sup>7</sup> Hence, boyish behaviour was appropriate to her. Her hard, angular, closed body made her into a slightly uncanny, liminal figure,

<sup>5</sup> Camille Paglia, 'The Apollonian Androgyne and the *Faerie Queene*', *English Literary Renaissance* 1 (1979): 42–63 (pp. 49, 53).

<sup>6</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC, 1998), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Ellis Hansen, 'The Hippocratic *Parthenos* in Sickness and Health', in Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (eds.), *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body* (Toronto, 2007), pp. 40–65 (pp. 41–47).

standing between childhood and adulthood, between manhood and womanhood. Halberstam overlooks the esteem in which this figure has been held. Because the virgin's body is unpenetrated, she has been regarded as magically resisting penetration.<sup>8</sup> The closed bodies of the Vestal Virgins, who served as priestesses in Rome from the seventh century BCE until the fourth century CE, were supposed to have had the ability to keep the city itself intact, impervious as they were to penetration by an enemy.<sup>9</sup> Far from being bullied into conformity with adult womanhood, the virgin girl has often been revered, even worshipped,<sup>10</sup> and thus allowed to act out the fantasy of physical courage and action excluded from the official version of the female gender. Virginity was an important aspect of several Olympian goddesses,<sup>11</sup> Artemis/Diana being the most important. Boyish in appearance and dress, and usually seen as engaging in the masculine pursuit of hunting with a bow and arrow, she is a model for Spenser's free and independent Belphoebe.

But Belphoebe, who among the armed women characters in the four texts under investigation most clearly represents the independent virginity of this goddess, is not exactly a female knight. She keeps to herself in the forest and hunts on foot, whereas the true knight-errant is mounted on a war horse, wears armour and uses several different weapons with deadly effect on human enemies. True knights include all the women characters of special interest to this discussion: both Boiardo's and Ariosto's Bradamante and Marfisa, Spenser's Britomart and Radigund, and Tasso's Clorinda and Gildippe. Two other women characters who appear in Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, Armida and Erminia, are also associated with this type of knighthood but, as will be explained, Armida's involvement in battle does not conform to the knightly model and Erminia only pretends to be a knight, riding out in women's armour that does not belong to her. Though virginity is

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<sup>8</sup> Bonnie MacLachlan, 'Introduction', in MacLachlan and Fletcher (eds.), *Virginity Revisited*, 3–12 (pp. 7–8).

<sup>9</sup> Holt N. Parker, 'Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State', in MacLachlan and Fletcher, *Virginity Revisited*, 66–99 (p. 69).

<sup>10</sup> Michael R. Allen, *The Cult of Kumari* (Kathmandu, 1975), pp. 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Eleanor Irwin, 'The Invention of Virginity on Olympus', in MacLachlan and Fletcher, *Virginity Revisited*, 13–23 (p. 15).

certainly emphasized as a feature of most of these warlike women, and those who later marry tend to exchange their warrior status for a much more domesticated identity, not all of them rely on the virginity myth for their prowess and attractiveness.

The female knights are surprisingly seldom reprimanded for remaining tomboyish into adulthood. They not only engage in what are universally regarded as male pursuits but they also dress in what one may call drag for much of the time. In full armour with the helmet's visor closed, a woman knight is just a knight—in other words a male knight—to all onlookers. However, with the exception of Britomart, the *guerriere* do not seem to be impersonating men intentionally and do not make a secret of their gender. Britomart, who perhaps like Joan of Arc uses male clothing as protection:<sup>12</sup> 'her sexe vnder that straunge purport / Did vse to hide, and plaine appaurance shonne'.<sup>13</sup> The other women knights, except Radigund, are epicoene simply because of the necessity for a knight to wear armour. Radigund, who rules a realm of women who behave as outright Amazons, manages to integrate her 'Camis light of purple silke' and other feminine adornments with her knightly outfit (*FQ* 5.5.2). The epicoene knights tend to be revealed as women only when they take off their helmets. Their long, usually blond hair is the main giveaway,<sup>14</sup> as in the following passage from *Orlando furioso*:

*La donna, cominciando a disarmarsi,  
s'avea lo scudo e dipoi l'elmo tratto;  
quando una cuffia d'oro, in che celarsi  
soleano i capei lunghi e star di piatto,  
uscì con l'elmo; onde caderon sparsi  
giù per le spalle, e la scopriro a un tratto  
e la feron conoscer per donzella,  
non men che fiera in arme, in viso bella.*<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (Berkeley, CA, 1981), p.155.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, rev. 2nd edn (London, 2007), 3.1.52.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (Brighton, Sussex, 1981), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* (Milan, 1964), 32.79.

And Bradamante, taking off her shield,  
 Had next removed her helmet from her head.  
 In doing so, the golden coif, which held  
 Her tresses coiled and flat, she likewise shed.  
 They fell about her shoulders and revealed  
 Her unmistakably as a young maid,  
 Who was as beautiful in countenance  
 As she was skilled with horse and sword and lance.<sup>16</sup>

The combination of fierceness and beauty, suddenly observed in the last lines of this stanza, is the signature contrast, or fusion of features that marks all of the women knights in the romances. It is what creates the aura of 'glamour' that Paglia notices in *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>17</sup>

At Castle Ioyeous, the home of Malecasta, Britomart stays in armour—therefore remaining epicoene—even during dinner, rejecting pleas that she make herself more comfortable. She is revealed as a woman only after the love-struck Malecasta has stolen into her bed in the middle of the night, causing her to leap up and show herself as female by means of the conventional 'locks [now] vnbownd'. In her virginal 'snow-white smocke' she threatens Malecasta with her phallic sword and is answered by the male knight Gardante with an even more phallic arrow, 'Which did her lilly smock with staines of vermeil steepe' (*FQ*, 3.1.63, 65). This sexualised act of violence causes Britomart to become 'enrag'd' and in that almost supernatural fury admired by Paglia 'she fiercely at them flew':

But one of those sixe knights, *Gardante* hight,  
 Drew out a deadly bow and arrow keene,  
 Which forth he sent with felonous despight,  
 And fell intent against the virgin sheene:  
 The mortall steele stayd not, till it was seene  
 To gore her side, yet was the wound not deepe,  
 But lightly rased her soft silken skin,  
 That drops of purple bloud thereout did weepe,  
 Which did her lilly smock with staines of vermeil steepe.

<sup>16</sup> *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Barbara Reynolds, 2 vols (London, 1975), 32.79.

<sup>17</sup> Paglia, 'The Apollonian Androgyne and the *Faerie Queene*', 61.

Wherewith enrag'd, she fiercely at them flew,  
 And with her flaming sword about her layd,  
 That none of them foule mischief could eschew,  
 But with her dreadfull strokes were all dismayd:  
 Here, there, and euery where about her swayd  
 Her wrathfull steele, that none mote it abyde;  
 [...]

(*FQ*, 3.1.65–66)

Her fury in this passage is indeed that ‘terrible vision of outraged purity’ which Paglia describes; but her ‘self-preserving ... will’ is not, as Paglia claims, masculine in nature.<sup>18</sup> It is an integral part of Britomart’s own unique female nature, an indignant response to a threat to her virginity, which many other woman aspire to, not always with the same success.

If, as Judith Butler asserts, gender is essentially performative rather than expressive of a clearly observable and physically determined sex,<sup>19</sup> then the women knights perform a femininity that is much less restrictive than that of their more domestic sisters. Despite appearances, the gender of the *guerriere* is not a performance of masculinity. Defence of one’s own virginity is very often a female endeavour, as is protection of the young. It is a commonplace to claim that that the female of a species is fiercer than the male. In Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, Clorinda’s emblem is a tigress, not a tiger. Fierce and warlike femininity is not oxymoronic, at least, as with a female tiger, not in Clorinda’s case.

Even Boiardo’s narrator in *Orlando innamorato* recognizes and accepts the performance of different kinds of femininity. He draws a contrast between the warrior Marfisa and the more conventional femme fatale Angelica quite graphically, but without apparent preference:

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), pp. 192–93.



*Lei senza l'elmo el viso non nasconde:  
 Non fu veduta mai cosa più bella.  
 Rivolto al capo avea le chiome bionde,  
 E gli occhi vivi assai più ch'una stella;  
 A sua beltate ogni cosa risponde:  
 Destra ne gli atti, ed ardità favella,  
 Brunetta alquanto e grande di persona:  
 Turpin la vide, e ciò di lei ragiona.*

*Angelica a costei già non somiglia,  
 Che era assai più gentile e delicata:  
 Candido ha il viso e la bocca vermiglia,  
 Suave guardatura ed affatata,  
 Tal che a ciascun mirando il cor gli empiglia:  
 La chioma bionda al capo rivoltata,  
 Un parlar tanto dolce e mansueto,  
 Ch'ogni tristo pensier tornava lieto.<sup>20</sup>*

Her [Marfisa's] helmet off, her face not hidden,  
 She's lovelier than any maiden.  
 She wore her blond hair up, and her  
 Eyes were more lively than a star.  
 Everything answered to her beauty:  
 Her dextrous movements, confident  
 Speech, her long legs, her tawny colour—  
 That's what Turpino says, who saw her.

Angelica is not like her.  
 She is more delicate, and milder.  
 Her mouth is scarlet, her skin white;  
 Her silky glances fascinate  
 And steal the hearts of those who gaze.  
 Her blond hair's coiled around her head.  
 Her speech is gentle, and so sweet  
 It gladdens minds possessed by grief.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando innamorato* (Turin, 1974), 1.27.60.

<sup>21</sup> *Orlando Innamorato*, trans. Charles Stanley Ross (Oxford, 1995), 1.27.60.

This narrator appreciates both Marfisa's confidence, liveliness and dexterity and Angelica's delicacy, mildness and sweetness. The male gaze is of course more evident in his description of Angelica with her fascinating glances and her enticingly red mouth; but he also emphasizes Marfisa's '*beltate*' (beauty) and is attracted by her bold physical presence.

Butler is wary of interpretations of performativity that veer towards 'voluntarism' because these may 'undermin[e] a more general theory of agency'.<sup>22</sup> The women knights may not all be born as tigress-like as Clorinda, but those whose adolescence is recounted spend their time learning the arts of equitation, hunting and war with their male peers. In other words, both nature and nurture contribute to the women's knightly identities. Significantly, Bradamante is suckled by a lioness, Clorinda by the tigress who becomes her emblem. Nevertheless, choice guides them as well—choice which extreme gender regulation would obviously prohibit. In Clorinda's youth,

*Costei gl'ingegni femminili e gli usi  
tutti sprezzò sin da l'età piú acerba:  
a i lavori d'Aracne, a l'ago, a i fusi  
inchinar non degnò la man superba.  
Fuggí gli abiti molli e i lochi chiusi,  
ché ne' campi onestate anco si serba.*<sup>23</sup>

She scorned the arts these silly women use,  
Another thought her nobler humor fed,  
Her lofty hand would of itself refuse  
To touch the dainty needle or nice thread,  
She hated chambers, closets, secret mews,  
And in broad fields preserved her maidenhead.<sup>24</sup>

For this narrator, Clorinda's avoidance of the confined and secretive space of '*i lochi chiusi*' (closed places) is altogether admirable, and her free and public existence thoroughly consistent with preservation of

<sup>22</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxvi.

<sup>23</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata* (Milan, 1957), 2.39.

<sup>24</sup> *Gerusalemme Liberata*, translated in 1600 by Edward Fairfax as *Jerusalem Delivered*, introd. Roberto Weiss (London, 1962), 2.39, to be referred to parenthetically as *Jerusalem Delivered*.

her 'onestate' (chastity). Daintiness and niceness are seen as trivial in the light of a higher calling. The 'ago' (needle) refused here by Clorinda's 'man superba' (proud hand) is metonymic for the normally separate sphere of womanhood—a sphere that one might expect to be regarded as compulsory for a girl in Renaissance times.

But very few characters in any of these texts seem to regard the women knights as subverting a compulsory order, despite the shame experienced by some male knights after they discover that they have been defeated by women.<sup>25</sup> In fact, those few who rail against female knighthood are often thereby labelled as monstrous. The terrible pagan prince Solyman, for example, utters the following as he kills another woman knight, Gildippe, during the final battle of *Gerusalemme liberata*:

*chi costei fosse: 'Ecco la putta e 'l drudo:  
meglio per te savessi il fuso e l'ago,  
ch'in tua difesa aver la spada e 'l vago'.  
(Gerusalemme liberata, 20.95)*

'See, see this mankind strumpet, see,' he cried,  
'This shameless whore, for thee fit weapons were  
Thy needl and spindle, not a sword and spear'.  
(*Jerusalem Delivered*, 20.95)

This verbal abuse specifically mentions the metonymic 'ago' (needle) rejected in this same text by the admired Clorinda. Solyman's view of women clearly contradicts that of the narrator, who has just been describing Gildippe as 'magnanima' (noble) and full of 'virtude' (virtue) (*Gerusalemme liberata*, 20.94–95) and who continues into one of the most moving of his elegies. Solyman here also betrays the honour of Clorinda, who, until just before her death a pagan, has been one of his own most powerful and trusted warrior companions. Solyman is soon to be killed by Rinaldo and this speech is in fact strategically placed to give readers the right amount of indignation to enjoy the bloody spectacle. The narrator, in other words, is using the sympathy that he knows he can rely upon for the *guerriera* to blacken the name and fame of this pagan prince.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Ariosto 20.128–130.

Tasso is alone among the authors of these romances in following the classical model and killing off of his true women knights. Amazons are not uncommon in ancient literature, but they do not survive in the epic tales in which they feature. Camilla in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Penthesilea in Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica* are killed after rather brief appearances, as if they were merely superfluous attractions, irrelevant to the great male plan of epic nation-founding or city-destruction. (Virgil dispenses with the superb young city-building Queen Dido in a similar manner.) Nevertheless, even in the ancient texts a reader can feel the authors' grief for the death of these brave women. Virgil's narrator lingers on the concern of the goddess Diana for her favourite Camilla and appears to endorse the divine vengeance by which Opis, handmaid of the goddess, slays Arruns after he has hunted and killed Camilla.<sup>26</sup> In *Posthomerica*, Achilles himself may be seen in a moment of remorse as he gazes on the face of Penthesilea, the Amazon queen whom he has just killed.<sup>27</sup>

Tasso had a habit of killing the thing he loved; he rewrote his wonderful *Liberata* as the stuffy and unreadable *Gerusalemme conquistata*. Moreover, he saw in the death of Clorinda an opportunity for creating one of the great moments of sentiment in the Western canon. Her death is particularly poignant because it occurs after a long and gruelling combat with Tancredi, who is passionately in love with her. Tancredi has previously avoided doing battle with Clorinda because of this love, but in their final duel he fails to recognize her because she is clad in anonymous black armour. She is not wearing her usual silver tigris-marked suit for two reasons: she is in the middle of a secret mission to destroy the Christian siege towers and her friend Erminia has in any case stolen her armour in order to impersonate a *guerriera*. Tancredi's moment of recognition is extremely dramatic, and it is for once narrated without mention of womanish embellishments such as long hair. He removes her helmet and is stunned into silence by the revelation of her actual face:

<sup>26</sup> Books XI. XII of the *Aeneid* of Vergil, ed. F. Storr (London, 1876), 11.532–43, 836–67.

<sup>27</sup> Quintus of Smyrna, *The Trojan Epic: Posthomerica*, trans. Alan James (Baltimore, MD, 2007), 1.671–78.

*Tremar sentí la man, mentre la fronte  
non conosciuta ancor sciolse e scoprio.  
La vide, la conobbe, e restò senza  
e voce e moto. Ahi vista! ahi conoscenza!*  
(*Gerusalemme liberata*, 12.67)

With trembling hands her beaver he untied,  
Which done he saw, and seeing, knew her face,  
And lost therewith his speech and moving quite,  
Oh woful knowledge, ah unhappy sight!  
(*Jerusalem Delivered*, 12.67)

Tancredi's loss of speech and the narrator's own exclamation of sorrow make this a moment of great poignancy for a reader. The attractive pathos of the scene is heightened when Clorinda requests that Tancredi baptise her before her death, an act that seals her virtue for a Christian readership. Thereafter, the narrator is free to describe her in almost saintly terms:

*D'un bel pallore ha il bianco volto asperso,  
come a' gigli sarian miste viole,  
e gli occhi al cielo affisa, e in lei converso  
sembra per la pietate il cielo e 'l sole;  
e la man nuda e fredda alzando verso  
il cavaliere in vece di parole  
gli dà pegno di pace. In questa forma  
passa la bella donna, e par che dorma.*  
(*Gerusalemme liberata*, 12.69)

As violets blue mongst lilies pure men throw,  
So paleness midst her native white begun;  
Her looks to heaven she cast, their eyes I trow  
Downward for pity bent both heaven and sun,  
Her naked hand she gave the knight, in show  
Of love and peace, her speech, alas, was done,  
And thus the virgin fell on endless sleep,—  
Love, Beauty, Virtue, for your darling weep!  
(*Jerusalem Delivered*, 12.69)

But this virginal perfection, finally unfit for our world or the vagaries and despoilment of erotic love, is not the only image by which Tasso depicts the female knight. His second *guerriera*, Gildippe, has no model in classical literature—or anywhere else in the ancient or early modern world for that matter. She is interestingly omitted, too, from Tomalin's otherwise encyclopaedic book, perhaps because she is not a virgin but a happily married woman. Inseparable from her husband Odoardo, she appears to enjoy complete equality with him, riding next to him in arms and fighting at his side. In fact, the couple have a routine of mutual defence on the battlefield:

*Arte di schermo nova e non piú udita  
a i magnanimi amanti usar vedresti:  
oblia di sé la guardia, e l'altrui vita  
difende intente a quella e questi.  
Ribatte i colpi la guerriera ardita  
che vengono al suo caro aspri e molesti;  
egli a l'arme a lei dritte oppon lo scudo,  
v'opporria, s'uopo fosse, il capo ignudo.*  
(*Gerusalemme liberata*, 20.36)

The noble lovers use well might you see,  
A wondrous guise, till then unseen, unheard,  
To save themselves forgot both he and she,  
Each other's life did keep, defend, and guard;  
The strokes that gainst her lord discharged be,  
The dame had care to bear, to break, to ward,  
His shield kept off the blows bent on his dear,  
Which, if need be, his naked head should bear.  
(*Jerusalem Delivered*, 20.36)

When Solyman deals Gildippe her mortal blow, Odoardo tries to protect her and is himself fatally wounded. Their death, on which the narrator expends several grieving stanzas, is like a marriage-bed, but unlike Cleopatra's, on the mundane side of the grave:

*cosí cade egli, e sol di lei gli duole  
che 'l cielo eterna sua compagna fece.  
Vorrian formar né pòn formar parole,  
forman sospiri di parole in vece:*

*l'un mira l'altro, e l'un pur come sòle  
 si stringe a l'altro, mentre ancor ciò lece:  
 e si cela in un punto ad ambi il die,  
 e congiunte se 'n van l'anime pie.*

(*Gerusalemme liberata*, 20.100)

So fell he mourning, mourning for the dame  
 Whom life and death had made forever his;  
 They would have spoke, but not one word could frame,  
 Deep sobs their speech, sweet sighs their language is,  
 Each gazed on other's eyes, and while the same  
 Is lawful, join their hands, embrace and kiss:  
 And thus sharp death their knot of life untied,  
 Together fainted they, together died.

(*Jerusalem Delivered*, 20.100)

This perfect matrimonial reciprocity, too, Tasso apparently needs to expel from his fictional world. The two important women who remain alive after the successful breaking of the siege of Jerusalem are Erminia and Armida, both of whom are flawed beings, who attempt warrior status without success. Perhaps Tasso believed living women to be essentially more flawed than men, some of whom could achieve the status of heroic virtue and yet survive.

The lovesick Erminia escapes from the Saracen-held city in search of Tancredi, wearing Clorinda's armour, but she is no *guerriera* underneath it. When challenged, she flees in terror, escaping only because of the fleetness of her horse (*Gerusalemme liberata*, 6.81–7.18). After being saved by shepherds, she manages to find Tancredi and cure his wound, winning her man in a traditionally feminine way in the end (*Gerusalemme liberata*, 19.104–110). But, in comparison with the magnificent Clorinda, she will surely be only second-best for him, as she is for the reader.

Armida, a *femme fatale* with magical powers, actually goes into battle in a chariot drawn by unicorns and she does some effective killing with bow and arrow; however, she is protected by an array of Saracen heroes, including the giant Adrastus. Her heart is not really in the warrior performance and she runs away and tries to commit suicide, defeated not so much by the battle, which is going in favour of the Christian enemy, as by her love for Rinaldo, which she believes to

be in vain. When he prevents her from piercing her breast with one of her own arrows and declares his love for her, she immediately consents to baptism and presumably conventional marriage (*Gerusalemme liberata*, 20.61–70, 117–136). Though a reader may develop sympathy for both Erminia and Armida as their stories progress, neither appeals to the imagination as Clorinda and Gildippe do.

Although in *Orlando furioso* and *The Faerie Queene* communities dominated by Amazonian women are destroyed, the only named woman warrior who is killed off is Radigund. Both Ariosto and Spenser appear to have harboured a classic male fear of matriarchal dominance despite their creation of women knight characters of such boldness and valour. Tomalin points out that these authors admire the power of individual female knights-errant, but fear it in female groups.<sup>28</sup> According to Eleonora Stoppino, Ariosto's depiction of the *feminine omicide* (killer women) whom Marfisa encounters taps into a stereotypical male fantasy of Amazons, in which the 'thrill of their menace' is balanced by the 'comfort of their subjugation'.<sup>29</sup> Marfisa herself astonishingly transcends this stereotype, remaining independent, beautiful and heart-free to the end. Bradamante is less unsettling because she is a woman warrior only temporarily. As in certain mediaeval texts in which women warriors are married off at the end of their story in order to solve the 'subversiveness' of their 'crossing [of] gender boundaries' (according to Peggy McCracken),<sup>30</sup> Bradamante eventually assumes a more conventional female role, marrying Ruggiero and becoming an ancestress of the Este dynasty.

Spenser distinguishes quite clearly between the value of the single *guerriera*, Britomart, and a plurality of Amazons led by the warrior Radigund. His partiality for the individual nobility of the one as against the perversity of the many is not as simply based on a fear of the female group as it may be with the poets of the Italian romances. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* was explicitly written in adulation of Queen Elizabeth, who was for him a brilliant, and legitimate, exception to male rule,

<sup>28</sup> Tomalin, *Fortunes of the Warrior Heroine*, 47–48.

<sup>29</sup> Eleonora Stoppino, *Genealogies of Fiction: Women Warriors and the Dynastic Imagination in the Orlando Furioso* (New York, 2011), p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Peggy McCracken, 'The Amenorrhea of War', *Signs* 28 (2003): 625–643 (p. 633).



who would hand power back into male hands eventually.<sup>31</sup> As Woods puts it, ‘The Queen’s authority gave no particular impetus to any systematic revision of the usual assumption of women’s inferiority to men.’<sup>32</sup> In fact, according to Mary R. Bowman, ‘To a woman in power, other powerful women are dangerous.’ A reigning queen (as opposed to a queen consort) was, like Britomart, a ‘God-given exception’ who was implicated in the patriarchal ‘attitudes and structures that limited [other] woman’s abilities to act autonomously.’<sup>33</sup> Spenser’s allusion to queenship thus to some extent distinguishes the identity and relationships of his female knights from those of the Italian poets.

As Bowman points out, Radigund has been identified by various commentators as a representation of Mary, Queen of Scots, that “other” queen whose death eventually appeared essential to the success of the “true” queen of the realm.<sup>34</sup> When Radigund is killed, her illegitimate female rule ended ironically by a woman champion,<sup>35</sup> the reader does not grieve for her as Virgil’s and Quintus’ audiences do for Camilla and Penthesilea, or as Tasso’s readers do for Clorinda and Gildippe. Radigund dies in the heat of a ferocious one-to-one battle with Britomart. The fact that she has just delivered both a jeering message about Britomart’s love for Artegall and a ‘cruell’ blow that ‘bit / Vnto the bone’ makes Britomart’s ‘wrathful’ retaliation, which ‘with one stroke both head and helmet cleft’, seem quite justified to a reader, even though Britomart’s action deprives everyone else present of ‘sence’ and causes them all to run away from the scene (*FQ*, 5.7.32–34). For Radigund is quite unlike the other named *guerriere* in the romances: she is an evil character. She takes male slaves and rules them tyrannously, provisioning them with only bread and water and cruelly putting them to death for insubordination (*FQ*, 5.4.21–32; 5.5.20–25). The fact that she subverts official gender roles not only by

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<sup>31</sup> Mary R. Bowman, “‘She There as Princess Reigned’: Spenser’s Figure of Elizabeth,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990): 509–28 (p. 509); Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women*, 29; Brian C. Lockey, “‘Equitie to Measure’: The Perils of Imperial Imitation in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*,” *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10 (2010): 52–70 (pp. 63–64); Benson, *Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, 251–52.

<sup>32</sup> Woods, ‘Spenser and the Problem of Women’s Rule’, 154.

<sup>33</sup> Bowman, “‘She There as Princess Reigned’”, 520.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 519.

<sup>35</sup> Woods, ‘Spenser and the Problem of Women’s Rule’, 154.

wearing armour and fighting as a knight herself but also by making all her male captives wear women's clothing and work at traditional women's chores is a reassuring sign for Spenser's (especially male) readership that the author's tolerance for gender flexibility has fairly short limits.<sup>36</sup> Spenser includes no Marfisa in his magical realm; Britomart is a knight only temporarily.

The Italian poets in this tradition have less motivation to restrict their approval to only some of their female warriors. Tasso, as mentioned, kills off his *guerriere*, but grieves for them with his readers. The female knights in the two *Orlando* romances survive as Britomart does to the end of their stories, living on to fight another battle or to found a noble line, thus proving themselves transformations or, rather, falsifications of their classical forebears.

Spenser's Britomart and Ariosto's Bradamante are the focus of their narrators' attention for long passages in their respective texts. (Boiardo's text ends before the relationship between Bradamante and Ruggiero has had a chance to develop.) These female knights are important to their poets' real lives of patronage. Britomart is, as indicated, one of Queen Elizabeth's avatars in *The Faerie Queene*, and Bradamante is the fictional matriarch of the Estes, Boiardo's and Ariosto's ducal benefactors. A striking feature of the two Italian poets' compliments to the Estes is that the family appears most honourably descended from a female hero. Though Ruggiero, Bradamante's destined husband, is also represented as heroic, like Britomart's Artegall he wanders more than his warlike beloved and has to be rescued by her.<sup>37</sup> Early in *Orlando furioso*, Bradamante overcomes the magician Atlante, using both force and guile, and releases Ruggiero from the enchanted castle in which he has been held captive (*Orlando furioso*, 4.16–42). In *The Faerie Queene*, Britomart's ascendancy over Artegall is established in a similar manner. After dispatching Radigund, Britomart liberates Artegall and all of Radigund's male captives, famously replacing the Amazons' female rule with a masculine regime (*FQ*, 5.7.26–45).

<sup>36</sup> Clare Carroll, 'The Construction of Gender and the Cultural and Political Other in *The Faerie Queene* 5 and *A View of the Present State of Ireland: The Critics, the Context, and the Case of Radigund*', *Criticism* 32 (1990): 163–92 (p. 184).

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Adams Groesbeck, "'Tra noi non restò più di differenza': Men, Transvestites, and Power in *Orlando Furioso*", *Annali d'Italianistica* 16 (1998): 65–83 (p. 68); Thomas P. Roche, Jr., 'Ariosto's Marfisa: Or, Camilla Domesticated', *MLN* 103 (1988): 113–33 (p. 114).

Of course Britomart and Bradamante belong to the warrior world only provisionally, for each has the transformed life of a wife and mother of greatness ahead of her—prophesied for and pursued by both. Unlike Gildippe, they are destined to enter the conventional life of domesticity after marriage. *The Faerie Queene*, being unfinished, does not show Britomart in her final state of femininity, but earlier in the narrative she is revealed as suffering from a very maidenly bout of lovesickness. After seeing an image of Artegall in Merlin's magic mirror, she is rendered almost pathetically 'Sad, solemne, sowre, and full of fancies fraile' (FQ, 3.2.27).

Bradamante, too, suffers torments in consequence of falling in love and she is sometimes a comic figure in her lovesick state. Riding disconsolately away from a castle where she has defeated three knights on the previous day, for example, she absent-mindedly unseats them all again, completely oblivious to their distress and humiliation (*Orlando furioso*, 33.68–75). Interestingly, this gentle humour never makes her ridiculous, but endears her to the reader:

*Bradamante ricusa, come quella  
ch'in fretta già, né soggiornar volea.  
Pur tanto e tanto fur molesti, ch'ella,  
che negar senza biasmo non potea,  
abbassò l'asta, ed a tre colpi in terra  
li mandò tutti; e qui fini la guerra:*

*che senza più voltarsi mostrò loro  
lontan le spalle, e dileguossi tosto.  
Quei che, per guadagnar lo scudo d'oro,  
di paese venian tanto discosto,  
poi che senza parlar ritti si foro.*

(*Orlando furioso*, 33.69–70)

At first she scorned their challenge and began  
To gallop off, unwilling to delay;  
But after her insistently they ran.  
For honour's sake she had to turn and stay.  
Couching her lance, three monarchs with these blows  
She floored, and brought the conflict to a close.

For, riding off, she did not turn again,  
 But from their sight she disappeared at speed.  
 The kings, who came so far in hope to gain  
 The golden shield by some heroic deed,  
 Rose to their feet in silence.

(*Orlando Furioso*, trans. Reynolds, 33.69–70)

Bradamante's reluctance to fight, her realization of the obligation and her getting it over as quickly as possible are both amusing and understandable; the shamed silence of the three defeated male knights is also sympathetic but less dignified.

Towards the end of the *Furioso*, Bradamante is compelled to change into the feminine '*vesti ricche e leggiadre*' ('rich and graceful clothes') that her mother provides for her (45.25). Although Bradamante does briefly resume armour for a battle with her intended husband (Ruggiero disguised as Leone, whom her family and Charlemagne want her to marry), she resumes female dress and becomes a very woebegone young woman for a time. Instead of resolutely mounting her horse and going out on a quest to find Ruggiero, she sits idle and grieves over his absence in traditional maidenly passivity:

*Oh come ella sospira! oh come teme,  
 sentendo che se n'è come fuggito!  
 Oh come sopra ogni timor le preme,  
 che per porla in oblio se ne sia gito!*

(*Orlando furioso*, 45.28)

Oh, how she sighs! Oh, how distraught she is!  
 Oh, what misgivings aggravate her plight!  
 This is the worst of her anxieties:  
 That to forget her he has taken flight.

(*Orlando Furioso*, trans. Reynolds, 45.28)

Bradamante's final marriage to the man whom she loves requires the intervention of her energetic future sister-in-law, Marfisa, who puts things to rights by pleading Bradamante's cause with King Charles and appealing to the court on behalf of Ruggiero. The last time that the reader encounters Bradamante, she is newly married and once again in a state of trembling anxiety because of the challenge that the monstrous Saracen Rodomonte has offered her bridegroom Ruggiero (*Orlando furioso*, 46.113).

Marfisa, the wonderful tomboy hero of *Orlando furioso*, is in fact the exception among the women knights of these texts. Not only has she been widely admired by contemporary feminists,<sup>38</sup> but Thomas P. Roche sees her as the exemplary, non-tragic revision of the classical woman warrior, Camilla.<sup>39</sup> Just as Boiardo seems to have intended, Ariosto neither kills nor marries her off to reduce the challenge that she poses to the ideology of limited and separate gender spheres.<sup>40</sup> Pamela Joseph Benson claims Marfisa as 'extraordinary' but dismisses her as 'masculine' and an 'outsider', unlike Bradamante whom Benson sees as relevant to 'contemporary thought about women' because she is essentially 'feminine' and 'chooses love over her duty to Charlemagne'.<sup>41</sup> But Benson misses the point about Marfisa, who is influential precisely because she is exceptional: strikingly consistent, loyal and sympathetic, she is the woman warrior who awakens and holds the reader's imagination in *Orlando furioso*. During the course of her story Marfisa is successful in nearly all her enterprises and quests; and she never suffers the humiliations of the love-struck maiden nor gives any indication of wanting to marry or settle down, desires which might suggest conflict or dissatisfaction with her way of life. She is not only still cheerfully alive and single at the end of the *Furioso*, but her final appearance shows her typically trying to take up arms on behalf of a sympathetic cause. Together with her comrade and rival Dudone, she is seen importuning her newlywed brother Ruggiero to let her answer the challenge offered him by Rodamonte.

Ita MacCarthy agrees with Benson about Marfisa's masculinity. MacCarthy claims Marfisa as the archetypal virago, her virginity a sign of manliness rather than an indication of marriageability or attractiveness to men.<sup>42</sup> Marfisa certainly does perform a gender role that resembles conventional masculinity more than ordinary

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Tomalin, *Fortunes of the Warrior Heroine*, 113; Ita MacCarthy, *Women and the Making of Poetry in Ariosto's 'Orlando Furioso'* (Leicester, 2007), p. 74.

<sup>39</sup> Roche, 'Ariosto's Marfisa', 115; also J. Chimène Bateman, 'Amazonian Knots: Gender, Genre, and Ariosto's Women Warriors', *MLN* 122 (2007): 1–23 (p. 12).

<sup>40</sup> See Julian Vitullo, 'Contained Conflict: Wild Men and Warrior Women in Early Italian Epic', *Annali d'Italianistica* 12 (1994): 39–59 (pp. 49, 51).

<sup>41</sup> Benson, *Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, 124–126, 134.

<sup>42</sup> MacCarthy, *Women and the Making of Poetry*, 77–78. See also Benson, *Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, 124.

femininity. She has an exaggerated sense of personal honour and, for example, creates mayhem at a tournament, fighting everyone left and right without waiting on ceremony (*Orlando furioso*, 18.110–13). This is because she has discovered that the arms to be presented to the winner are in fact her own, stolen from her earlier (to be precise, in Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, 5.41). When she is burdened with the ancient hag Gabrina, she carries out her obligations to the letter, despite annoyances and derision (*Orlando furioso*, 20.106–28). Even when the lot falls to her to defeat ten knights and then pleasure ten ladies, she does not shrink from the task, though she luckily ends up not having to solve the problem of how to pleasure the ladies (*Orlando furioso*, 19.73–75). (This was a problem indeed: Ariosto does not seem to have had any concept of non-phallic sexual pleasures, as the Bradamante-Fiordispina episode [*Orlando furioso*, 25.26–44] abundantly demonstrates.)

However, Marfisa displays many traditionally feminine characteristics as well, illustrating what Deanna Shemek identifies as Ariosto's extremely 'complex and discerning' approach to gender in this text.<sup>43</sup> Marfisa is beautiful, as Ariosto's narrator emphasizes (*Orlando furioso*, 30.89) just as Boiardo's has done (*Orlando innamorato*, 27.59). She is also very affectionate. Once she discovers that Ruggiero is her twin brother, she is diligent in her pursuit of his and Bradamante's happiness. Involved in violent battles against both of them before the prophetic voice of Atlante pronounces on her origins, she is quicker than Ruggiero to embrace the Christianity of their father and to fight side-by-side with Bradamante, her sister-in-law to be. The sight of two female knights doing battle together is clearly an even more attractive picture than that of one, and the narrator dwells on it for several stanzas, including the following passage:

*così le due magnanime guerriere,  
scorrendo il campo per diversa strada,  
gran strage fan ne l'africane schiere,  
l'una con l'asta, e l'altra con la spada.*  
(*Orlando furioso*, 39.15)

<sup>43</sup> Shemek, Deanna, 'Of Women, Knights, Arms, and Love: The *Querelle des Femmes* in Ariosto's Poem', *MLN* 104 (1989): 68–97 (p. 87).

hus these two sisters, valiant warriors,  
 Redoubtable Marfisa and the Maid,  
 Divided now to devastate the Moors,  
 One with her spear, the other with her blade.  
 (*Orlando Furioso*, trans. Reynolds, (39.15))

Here Marfisa is seen as complementing, not opposing, Bradamante; their gender, like their martial technique, is not in discord. Marfisa's identity is never the stone butch that Halberstam sees as developing in adulthood from the tomboy child.<sup>44</sup> On one occasion she puts on '*veste da donna et ornamenti*' (woman's dress and jewellery) simply to please her knightly '*compagni*' (*Orlando furioso*, 26.69)—though she quickly goes back into armour and mounts her destrier when Mandricardo appears, overcomes her male friends and attempts to take her as booty (*Orlando furioso*, 26.79–82). When her parentage is magically revealed to her, she is elated to discover that her mother was Galiziella, a warrior woman, too: '*una donzella . . . tanto valorosa, / che molti paladin gittò di sella*' (a young lady so valorous that she had knocked many a paladin out of the saddle, *Orlando furioso*, 36.73). In Butler's terms, Marfisa's delight at this discovery is partly a recognition that her own performance of gender derives not from a simple, perhaps perverse voluntarism so much as from a natural hereditary disposition.

In the world of the romance epic, Marfisa does not seem to be an ideal fantasy or a monstrous exception so much as the performer of a perhaps unusual but possible and admirable type of femininity.<sup>45</sup> Simon Shepherd makes the same claim for Britomart: that her anomalous gender is a version of womanhood.<sup>46</sup> Even if the female knight has not often been encountered in the real worlds of the past, she remains a conceivable character, capable of integrating virtues of both men and women, affection and chastity as well as chivalry and courage, in ways that are unrealized in the male knight. It is no wonder that such characters have remained popular for so long.

<sup>44</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Gerry Milligan, *Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature* (Toronto, 2018), pp. 61–62.

<sup>46</sup> Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women*, 10.

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