

**“I am like a child who of diverse / flowers intends to form a beautiful garland”:  
Moderata Fonte’s Revisions of Gender in *Floridoro***

by

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## Abstract

Sixteenth-century Venetian author Moderata Fonte's first literary work, *Tredici canti del Floridoro*, is compared to the epic romance of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* to suggest why and how a woman writer begins to model her literary work on such a patriarchal example. While entering a masculine dominated genre, Fonte combats issues of female oppression normally seen within treatises and other female dominated genres of the *querelle des femmes*. By mimicking and undermining the standards of the genre of epic romance, Fonte bends gender and genre boundaries to suggest that male knights and male writers inevitably disrupt their own male dominance paradigms. They adhere to strict dichotomous relations of the masculine and feminine, while female knights and writers reject dichotomous paradigms and turn the patriarchal tradition on its head. In so doing, Fonte reveals that with equal education opportunities for men and women, the male oppressive model for genre and society is false.

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## Introductions: Gender and Genre

In a self-portrait found in the epic poem *Tredici canti del Floridoro*, a woman poet stands amid a frieze of popular Venetian poets of the sixteenth century. Alone and humbled, this woman represents the real poet of the poem, Moderata Fonte, and women poets/authors of the time:<sup>1</sup>

On the last façade, which was sculpted  
in the back where there was little light,  
a solitary young woman stayed.  
She did not dare come out with the others into the light,  
quite ashamed that she, too bold,  
aspired to the way which leads to heaven,  
having as low and dull a mind  
as her design was clear and sublime. (10.36.1-8)

She is last and amid the shadows, standing alone. Like a child, she does not “dare” to move out of her reclusive position to join the men – “into the light.” Performing the common pose of humility, she is “ashamed” that having a “low and dull a mind,” she cannot match her “clear and sublime” intent. The “way which leads to heaven” is populated by male authors, and she has been “too bold” to assert herself among them. Yet she is among them.

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<sup>1</sup> Moderata Fonte is Modesta Pozzo’s pen name. Her choice to use a pen name was “not particularly common for women, who in any case were rarely members of academies at the time” (Finucci, “Moderata” 5). “In her fictitious name, the figuratively modest well (Modesta Pozzo) of the patronymic is turned into a mid-sized fountain (Moderata Fonte), that is, a spring of life, a source of knowledge, and a stream of learning” (5). For more information regarding the biography of Moderata Fonte (Modesta Pozzo) see Niccolo Giovanni Doglioni’s biography, translated into English and published with Virginia Cox’s translation of Moderata Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne (The Worth of Women)*. Good biographical information can also be found in Malpezzi Price’s *Moderata Fonte: Women and Life in Sixteenth-Century Venice*.

This portrait puts male/female poet dichotomy into place, as well as male/female gendered dichotomy.<sup>2</sup> First, there is only one female poet out of fourteen total poets listed in the catalogue.<sup>3</sup> Second, she is described in terms common in women's writing: self-effacement, virginity, and anonymity:

She wore a long white skirt,  
as for the virginal state is appropriate,  
and she seemed at an early and youthful age  
to have lofty thoughts kindled in her heart.  
This damsel had no caption  
to make her plain to the other senses,  
for the sculptor who fashioned her portrait  
did not wish that her name be known. (10.37.1-8)

Enveloped in a "long white skirt," the female poet demonstrates the virginal status "appropriate" for a young woman. While the male poets are given captions and named, the female poet is deliberately given no distinguishing features, and the sculptor gave her no caption. Characterized by her humility and virginity only, the portrait Fonte presents for the character Risardo and the audience is one that could apply to any female author. Several questions arise from Fonte's use of the image of the unknown female poet: Why is the female poet not named? Why must she be virginal? What purpose does this episode serve in conjunction with Fonte's literary endeavors? Lastly, to a larger extent, does this portrait reveal anything about the status of women writers as a whole?

These questions preface and shape the larger questions of gender and genre in this text. Fonte's portrayal of the female poet directly relates to her depiction of the knight through the

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<sup>2</sup> Part of the larger debate in this thesis is that gender obviously lies at the heart of the dichotomous world view – literary, political, cultural, religious – of patriarchal societies.

<sup>3</sup> The thirteen male poets are, in order of appearance: Domenico Venier (10.22-23), Maffeo Venier (10.24-1-8), Celio Magno (10.25.1-8), Bernardo Partenio (pseudonym for Bernardino Franceschini) (10.26.1-8), Orsato Giustiniano (10.27.1-8), Erasmo Valvasone (10.28.1-8), Vincenzo Giliani (10.29.1-8), Alberto Lavezuola (10.30.1-8), Bartolomeo Malombra (10.31.1-8), Cesare Simonetti (10.32.1-8), Giulian Goselimo (10.33.1-8), Cesare Pavese (10.34.1-8), and Cianmario Verdizzotti (10.35.1-8).

action of what Luce Irigaray terms mimesis. Mimesis is the process of resubmitting women to stereotypical views of women in order to call the views themselves into question, to make that which was supposed to remain invisible “visible” (Irigaray 76). Irigaray’s system of mimesis undermines the negative, repressive, and stereotypical views of women by illustrating that these views are fabrications crafted by the patriarchy. By highlighting that perceived reality is founded on and perpetuated by lies about women’s abilities and nature, Irigaray demonstrates that the woman has been excluded from reality and calls for her to speak, disrupting the original concept of female subjectivity. By using Irigaray’s definition of mimesis, I argue that Moderata Fonte mimics standards of feminine and masculine representation in order to disrupt them, to assert a literary and cultural paradigm shift. In *Floridoro*, Fonte mimics the genre of epic romance. While she presents the standard categories of male and female knights, she disrupts these categories by asserting that the fully educated male knight represents the grossness of the masculine, the young, uneducated male knight depicts effeminization, and the female knight, educated in the masculine arts, illustrates the ideal.

Why is the role of education Fonte’s solution to the gender problem?<sup>4</sup> Women were educated in sixteenth century Italy, but not to the same degree as men.<sup>5</sup> According to the Italian idiom, *maritar o monacar*, women were either destined for marriage or the convent, so advanced education was unnecessary and inappropriate. Based on Aristotelian notions of women’s

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<sup>4</sup> Fonte was particularly aware of this educational division. While Fonte received a customary education for young girls, she pursued broader ranges of education by tutoring herself in her brother’s studies. Even at a young age, she understood the necessity for education, especially male-characterized education (Finucci, “Moderata” 3). In the biography attached to Moderata Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne*, her uncle and friend Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni illustrated her zeal for knowledge: “At the same time (amazing to recount), when her brother came home from school (he was at grammar school by this age), little Modesta would come up and pester him to show her and explain to her what he had been taught that day; and she would so fervently impress what he said on her memory that she retained a great deal more of what he had learned than he himself did” (34-5).

<sup>5</sup> Customary education for young girls in Italy included the instruction by nuns in reading and writing. For more information regarding the educational regime for young girls, see, Paul Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (1989); Gabriella Zarri, “Le istituzioni dell’educazione femminile,” in *Recinti: donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna* (2000).

inferiority as a “dejected man,” women were considered, to some degree, incapable of high intellectual activity (Labalme 4). Despite the traditional notions of women’s inferiority, upper-class educated women existed within certain boundaries in sixteenth century Italy. Once they reached adulthood, they were required to reject their learning and marry or consent themselves to what Margaret King calls “book-lined cells,” where learned women were not fully accepted by men and were often rejected by women for their ambition (“Book” 75). Learned women, who chose the latter, argued for equal education for women, “insisting that better education would make women as esteemed as men” (Labalme 6). By arguing that education causes inequality, not natural law, these women assert that their sex does not determine their worth; instead, the socially constructed views of sex/gender by the patriarchy are the culprits behind women’s proscribed inferiority. Therefore, equal education is the key for the improvement of women’s situations. As such, the drive for equal education for women also suggests inherent inconsistencies in masculine education. If women’s inferiority is not based on their sex, but on man’s desire to maintain supremacy, then the whole educational system should be reformed. These radical views, however, were never fully accepted into early modern thought. While it became acknowledged that women were capable of learning in early modern Italy, they were still thought to lack the level of intellect available to men.

The argument for equal education by women, however, does open the door for the use of Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of the social construction of gender and subjectivity, which provides a lens into what the possible implications are for early modern women’s arguments about gender and education.<sup>6</sup> What this theory does, for my argument, is provide a framework of viewing the standards and norms of the social construction of the male and female knight,

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<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of the social construction of gender based on concepts of the “Other” are so well known that I will not summarize them. For her full discussion on this topic, see “Women: Myth and Reality,” *Second Sex* (1952): 267-78.

highlighting their oppositional structure and demonstrating what Fonte's revisions mean for this traditional, generic construction.

Before we can see what Fonte is doing with the role of the knight and education, we must understand why Fonte contends with issues of gender, and why she looks to the role of the knight as the ideal place to work with gender revisions. At the base of these questions lies the larger issue of gender and how gender contributes to the ongoing debate about women's roles, as society members and as emerging authors. The *querelle des femmes*, as an intellectual movement questioning the roles and worth of women, had a long sustained history prior to the rise of humanistic education and intellectual advancement of the late medieval and early modern period, where the debate took on a sense of immediacy brought about by the literary achievements of male and female writers alike, most importantly Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la cité des dames* in 1405. Several questions pervaded the debates about women: "Could a woman be virtuous? Could she perform noteworthy deeds? Was she even, strictly speaking, of the same human species as men?" (King and Rabil xxi). While these questions persisted, four areas consistently emerged in every debate: power, speech, knowledge, and chastity, which preconditioned the other three (xv). Through the portrait of the female poet Fonte gives in *Floridoro*, Fonte is, to some extent, asserting herself into the ongoing discourse of the *querelle des femmes*, questioning the roles of chastity, power, speech, and knowledge through the image of the woman poet.

The woman poet has no name because her literary endeavors do not afford her the status of fame, unlike with men. Cultural precepts based on a complex relationship of natural and divine law ensured that women had limited opportunities, in the late fourteenth-sixteenth

centuries,<sup>7</sup> for they were relegated to the domestic, private sphere: “The professions remained closed to them, as did most lucrative fields of work; with few exceptions, they were excluded from political life and their educational opportunities were – again, with some exceptions – far inferior to those of their brothers” (Cox, *Women’s* xi).<sup>8</sup> Separation of the private from the public became what Janet Levarie Smarr terms “gendered boundaries,” where women were to inhabit only the private sphere, while men freely inhabited and ruled all – private and public (9). Thus, in the frieze Fonte presents in *Floridoro*, the female poet remains confined within the traditional descriptions of virginity and self-effacement.

Yet, the female poet is amid the male poets, asserting that she too has a place within the revered temple of the god of poets and art, Apollo. She too has the knowledge and the ability of proper speech in order to write herself into this masculine dominated sphere. Her anonymity and virginity are essential to her ability to be present among them, because they are the approved modes of entering the literary medium for women.<sup>9</sup> So, Fonte models these modes in order to disrupt them. Her female poet is depicted as virginal and humble, with no demonstrative characteristics, but she is present as a poet and she asserts her power through mimesis. By disrupting normative gender boundaries in this key scene, Fonte reinforces what she does

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<sup>7</sup> This complex system of thought on women’s worth and roles is inherited from “a three-thousand-year history of women rooted in the civilizations related to Western culture: Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Christian” (King and Rabil xi). Such ideas “pervaded the intellectual, medical, legal, religious, and social systems that developed during the European Middle Ages” (xi).

<sup>8</sup> This view “reflects that society’s pre-supposed belief in women’s ‘natural inferiority’ to men, but it also reflects a society which desocialized the majority of women by relegating them to tasks like running a household or doing charitable works, thereby ‘cleansing’ women from any possible expression of ‘unbecoming’ desires such as the desire to be on an equal footing with men or to participate in the world of symbolic exchange” (Schiesari 71).

<sup>9</sup> The importance of virginity/chastity to the notion of womanhood in ancient and medieval Europe is one widely discussed and acknowledged. According to King and Rabil, “chastity was perceived as woman’s quintessential virtue – in contrast to courage, or generosity, or leadership, or rationality, seen as virtues characteristic of men” (xxv). Important to the patriarchy because it afforded the superiority of one sex over the other, the concept of woman’s virginity became the means to masculine power – in marriage arrangements and within marriage unions. For further discussion of virginity/chastity in medieval Europe, see Kelly, Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* and Ruth Evans, “Virginites,” *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*.

throughout the epic poem *Floridoro* –branching out from issues of gender and authorship to genre and even to characterization to highlight inconsistencies in gendered categories.

Fonte's working with gender proves to be unusual work for a woman writer of her time; however, it must be noted that she is writing within a culture that is highly controlled by patriarchy. It is useful to note here my distinction for this term "patriarchy" as it is a key element to this argument. First, I agree with Gerda Lerner that feminist scholars have had a tendency in recent years to reduce this term to its singular, traditional meaning, which refers to patriarchy as the system of male dominance in the household inherited from ancient Greek and Roman law. The problem with this definition is its restriction to a specific period (ancient Greece and Rome), when male dominance is a much older established tradition. This narrow definition also does not allow for the various nuances in familial, political, social, economical, and cultural depictions of male dominance and female subversion of the medieval, early-modern, and modern periods. Thus, I appropriate Lerner's broader definition of patriarchy, which refers to the "manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" (239). By defining patriarchy as institutionalized power, the term sets up the societal relation of power – men holding all institutional power, public and private, and women being denied access to this power, which is not to suggest that some women were not able to gain access to this power in degrees, but that it was generally denied to them.

The nature of Fonte's work specifically places her with the female writers of the *querelle des femmes*.<sup>10</sup> Despite her different approach to the question of gender, it is useful to note how

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<sup>10</sup> While the dates for the *querelle des femmes* range from roughly 1300-1700, Moderata Fonte comes at the latter end. She was born in 1555 and died in 1592, composing and publishing most of her works in 1581-2, with the exception of *Il merito*, which was finished in the year of her death and published posthumously by her uncle. As a precursor to Fonte's work, Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la cité des dames* in 1405 resulted in a "literary explosion

she does fit into this literary tradition. As scholars such as Constance Jordan describe the *querelle des femmes*, the protest against conventional patriarchal conditions became divided into two categories: the first attempted to dispel the misogynistic views that were based on “natural and divine law (woman as an inferior creature and prone to sin)”; the second combated contemporary social roles for women, including their limited roles in “education, courtship, marriage, and inheritance” (Jordan 56). Natural and divine law descends from the Hebrew and Christian traditions, where specific Biblical passages were used as proof of women’s inferiority (especially in Genesis and the Epistles). According to Genesis 2:21-23 in the *New Jerusalem Bible*, God created Eve from the rib of Adam. Thus, Christian theologians based their beliefs on women’s subordination that she was made from man. Genesis 3 is also the source of the common Christian belief that women are prone to sin because Eve was the one to give in to the serpent’s temptations and sin first.<sup>11</sup> Inheriting these old assumptions of women, Christian theologians looking to the New Testament also found many passages to add to their arsenal of negative attitudes towards women, giving rise to theologians of the medieval Christian church who perpetuated these negative views of women and sought to assign them proper conduct and dress in their works: Tertullian (*On the Apparel of Women*), Jerome (*Against Jovinian*), and Augustine (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*) (King and Rabil xv-xvi). Dispelling the misogynistic tradition completely requires not a remodeling of one form of thinking about women and their roles, but of all forms of thinking – social, ethical, political, and religious.

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consisting of works by both men and women, in Latin and in the vernaculars,” which argued for a redefining of the roles, education, and worth of women (King and Rabil xxi). This study is not so much concerned with the history of the *querelle des femmes* movement, but with Fonte’s distinction from this movement through her revisions of gendered categories, male and female. For this reason, I will not give a history of the movement, but for further information on the movement, see, Satya Datta’s *Women and Men in Early Modern Venice* (2003): 155-182; Benson and Kirkham, *Strong Voices, Weak History* (2005): 18, 26, 58-77; Patricia Labalme, *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (1984): 1-8, 129-175.

While certainly Moderata Fonte situates herself with the *querelle des femmes*, she does so quite differently from her famous predecessor Christine de Pizan and her Italian contemporary Lucrezia Marinella. She does not assert a mere equality of the sexes or even the superiority of women. By working with gender roles, Fonte in *Floridoro* moves towards a realization that mere equality of the accepted, socially contrived genders, or even the subversion of the masculine and the replacement with the feminine, will not adequately free either sex from its fetters. Denying patriarchy's claims for women's inferiority based on both natural and divine law and as seen through the construction of social/cultural roles, Fonte interrupts the normative modes of gender through her presentations of the grossness (Macandro/Risardo) and effeminization of the masculine (Floridoro), the woman as warrior (Risamante), and the duality of the feminine (Risamante and Biondaura).

Fonte's first work, the epic poem *Floridoro*, overtly contends with issues of gender and genre boundaries.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that Fonte's *Floridoro*, in comparison to her *Il merito delle donne*, has received limited critical attention, especially in connection with genre.<sup>13</sup> Modeling

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<sup>12</sup> Besides her epic poem *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581), Fonte wrote religious poems: *La passione di Christo: descritta in ottava rima* (1582) and *La resurrettione di Giesu Christo nostro Signore, che segue alla Santissima Passione, descritta in ottava rima da Moderata Fonte* (1592); a religious play *Le feste* (1582); and the well known dialogue *Il merito delle donne* (1600).

<sup>13</sup> Several scholars such as Stephen Kolsky, Valeria Finucci, Virginia Cox, and Malpezzi Price have brought Fonte's works to the scholarly arena, and while their influence in studies of Moderata Fonte has been great, key issues arise in bestowing Moderata Fonte with the proper recognition for her work with gender and genre. Stephen Kolsky's article "Moderata Fonte's *Tredici canti del Floridoro*: Women in a Man's Genre" focuses primarily on Fonte's modeling of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* as an incursion of a masculine dominated genre by a woman poet. Specifically highlighting Fonte's revision of the genre in order to undermine "the patriarchal ideology central to the epic," Kolsky does not make the connection beyond genre, and his narrow focus on Fonte's usurpation of the epic genre does not endow Fonte with all the credit she deserves for what she does with gender and genre. Like Kolsky, Finucci focuses on Fonte's incursion into a masculine dominated genre that requires "imitation" in her introduction to the 2006 translation of *Floridoro* by Julia Kisacky. Where Kolsky surveys all of *Floridoro*, Finucci focuses primarily on the women characters and how Fonte revises them in context of genre. She is also the first to denote the duality of identity between Biondaura and Risamante. While her discussion of twin sisters proves insightful to Fonte's handling of gender, Finucci does not recognize Fonte's revisions of other gendered categories, especially the masculine. Fonte does not solely concern herself with the feminine, but she takes on the whole range of the gender spectrum. Consistent with most scholar's focus on how women write women, the last two most notable scholars, Cox and Price, apart from their biographical/historical work, focus on how Fonte writes women. Cox

*Floridoro* on Ariosto's mixed genre of epic romance, Fonte was "one of the very few women who wrote in the epic genre, although romances were among the most popular works written and printed in Italy in the sixteenth-century" (Price, *Moderata Fonte* 19, 101). Ariosto's hybrid genre of epic romance sought to marry traditional, Virgilian epic material with the popular romance and its primary focus on the chivalric matter of knights and ladies. What makes *Floridoro* so important is its adherence to and departure from the epic romance genre. Fonte, however, was not the only woman to attempt incursion into this genre. Two women preceded Fonte's attempt at epic romance in Italy. Laura Terracina came first in 1551 with *Discorso sopra il principio di tutti I canti dell'Orlando furioso*; Tullia d'Aragona followed in 1560 with *Meschino ditto il Guerrino*, a text in which there are no women warriors (Finucci, "Moderata" 20-1). Terracina's work seems to be a direct copy of Ariosto's with no originality of her own, and Aragona deletes the warrior woman from the text. Even though female authors before Fonte attempted to enter the chivalric romance tradition of epic, "Fonte's *Floridoro* represents the first sustained effort on the part of a woman to pen a Renaissance epic on the model of Ariosto and Boiardo" (22). The most common genre for women writers of this period was the neo-Petrarchan lyric, with all of "its amorous, occasional, and spiritual variants" (Cox, *Women's* 135). Virginia Cox asserts that

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primarily focuses on Fonte's work with the woman warrior of chivalric poetry in her article "Women as Readers and Writers of Chivalric Poetry in Early Modern Italy," and Price focuses both on the woman warrior (Risamante) and on the woman seductress (Circe/Circetta). While their work on the female characters is important to the scholarship of Fonte's works, both merely see Fonte's rejection of the patriarchy in order to assert a feminine view. While this may seem to be true on the surface, and within the context of the women characters only, proves true, it does not take into account what Fonte does with the rest of her poem. She does not merely replace the masculine with the feminine or subvert one over the other; instead, Fonte moves away from gender and genre concepts. She demonstrates, through the male/female knight how gender is constructed based on education, and if the education is biased, then hierarchal constructions of gender will persist. But, if the male knight can retain some of his femininity and the female knight can be both masculine and feminine, then a more harmonious society can exist. Failure to take into account all of *Floridoro* has been the problem with past scholarship. Seen only through a lens to the later and more acclaimed *Il merito delle donne*, which specifically focuses on women, the true genius of what Fonte achieves in *Floridoro* is lost.

women's writing broadens after 1560 to fiction and drama due to the positive effects of the Counter Reformation:<sup>14</sup>

Looking solely at narrative and dramatic forms, we find women's engagement with these genres gathering pace fairly rapidly in the early 1580's onwards, when we find Moderata Fonte [...] publishing in rapid succession an unfinished chivalric romance, *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581), a dramatic *libretto per musica*, *Le feste* (1582), and an ottava rima biblical narrative, *La passion di Christo* (also 1582). (135, 150)

After Fonte, women writers such as Barbara Torelli, Maddalena Campiglia, and Isabella Andreini, began to experiment with pastoral drama.<sup>15</sup> At the end of Fonte's career, she literally finishes her treatise *Il merito delle donne* (1582) on her death bed, and her uncle Doglioni publishes it posthumously in 1600. Around the same time, Lucrezia Marinella, one of Italy's most celebrated and prolific contributors to women's writing, begins her literary career, eventually producing several hagiographic poems, a pastoral romance, mythological poem, an epic, and a woman's treatise.<sup>16</sup> The list of women writers continues and broadens in genre until the seventeenth century, roughly from 1620 to 1690, when recognition for women's writing disappears:

[...] women were effectively near invisible in Italian literary culture, publishing, if at all, mainly in provincial centers, in editions that disappeared without notice; in fact, aside from a few works from the first decade of the century, such as Marinella's *La vita di*

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<sup>14</sup> Cox argues that despite negative views of the Counter Reformation as a time of limits, strict boundaries, and severe restrictions for vernacular literature, it was not all negative. In fact, she argues that this shift in moral reform actually opened up genres for women writers, provided of course that they did not write licentious, seductive material (*Women's*, 135).

<sup>15</sup> For a list of the titles of Torelli, Campiglia, and Andreini's works, see Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400-1650* (2008): 150.

<sup>16</sup> Marinella's contribution to the Italian literary scene was a prolific one. For further information regarding her works, see Virginia Cox, *Women Writing in Italy: 1400-1650* (2008). For an in-depth discussion of Marinella's contribution to the *querelle des femmes*, as well as the Italian literary canon, see, Price and Ristaino, *Lucrezia Marinella and the 'Querelle des Femmes' in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (2008).

*Maria Vergine* and Sarrocchi's *Scanderbeide*, it is difficult to think of a single female-authored work that received a second edition in the seventeenth century. (222)

For roughly a hundred year run, women writers flourished and were seemingly well received in Italy, and Fonte's split from the traditional genres afforded to women writers spurs on a lively literary movement.<sup>17</sup>

By adopting the style of Ariosto, Fonte pens an epic romance that suggests a departure from traditional gender and genre concepts.<sup>18</sup> In the later fifteenth and sixteenth century, the epic romance became one of the most popular and widely published genres on the recently established printed book market (Everson 17). Because of the increasing availability due to the rise of printing presses and publishing houses, the epic romance became especially popular among women readers, most notably due to the fact that "the reception of chivalric fiction in Italy was enmeshed with the long-running debate on the nature and status of women [engaging] the attention of so many *litterati* of the period," especially Ariosto (Cox, "Women Writers" 135-6). Women appear to take a greater role in the chivalric narratives of Ariosto and his successors. Ariosto's slippery treatment of women, especially the woman warrior, became a central point of discussion between critics and readers (136). Regardless, the presentation of the woman warrior spurs on the expansion of the chivalric romance, among both readers and writers, especially women readers and writers.

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<sup>17</sup> While she suggests that the disappearance of women's writing from Italian literary circles is due to the rise of the Counter Reformation, Cox argues for a broader range of stimuli that created a return to predominately misogynistic traditions. This is not to suggest that misogyny had been absent prior to the Counter Reformation, but that it had not sustained its previous level of popularity among writers. To see her work on the decline of women's writing in Italy in the seventeenth century, see "Backlash (1590-1650)," *Women's Writing in Italy 1400-1650* (2008): 166-227.

<sup>18</sup> Ariosto is considered to be one of the "founders of the genre" of epic romance with his epic romance *Orlando Furioso*, which is a continuation and revision of Matteo Maria Boiardo's unfinished *Orlando Innamorato* (Finucci, "Moderata" 16). "The popularity of Ariosto's text went far beyond sales, as this romance was sung in squares, put to music, quoted in court gatherings, memorized in its entirety, cherished by 'country lasses and crude shepherdesses,' and even taught in school because parents asked for it, against the judgment of an array of well-meaning if out-of-touch educators" (16-17).

Besides the advancement of the woman warrior motif, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* suggests "a historical turning point between the forms and possibilities of late-medieval romance and the classicizing humanistic (re)turn to Virgilian epic" (Ascoli 5). Ariosto utilizes the medieval romance technique of entrelacement, interweaving of multiple story lines, and quests.<sup>19</sup> It is within the complex relationship of various quests that Ariosto represents the tension between epic and romance. A growing tendency emerged in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for the Carolingian cycles to impose an epic, unitary order upon the romances of the Breton cycles – a moving away from rambling *aventures* to goal oriented *quêtes* (Zatti 15-6). The epic of Homer and Virgil became the "appropriate way to correct the 'errors' of the romance code" (16). Ariosto, however, is unique in the way that he incorporates entrelacement of the quests. The multitude of quests and their complex overlapping and contest further the action of Ariosto's work. Yet, he desires closure: "In the final cantos of the *Furioso* the Boiardo model progressively gives way to more imposing ones, Dante (Astolfo's providential quest on the moon) and above all Virgil. It is this latter model that lends Ruggiero the appearance of Aeneas" (36). Ariosto's movement from Boiardo's model of entrelacements to epic closure is necessary to "limit the potentially infinite error of romance" (37). The mixture of the medieval romance with the classical epic renders Ariosto optimistic of the "possibilities of a pluralistic, subjective world compatible with the world of epic grounded in history" (37). Even though he imposes an epic closure to the *Furioso*, the two models of epic and romance harmoniously work together: one furthering the plot and the other bringing it to a resolution. Ultimately, epic romance emerges as a literary genre, utilizing both classical and medieval models and traditions.

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<sup>19</sup> For a further study of the use of these narrative techniques, see Sergio Zatti, *The Quest for Epic: From Ariosto to Tasso* (2006).

The method of entrelacement and quests also allows Ariosto (and Fonte through her adoption of Ariosto's style) to anticipate "the specifically modern institution of literature as the non-true domain of the 'willing suspension of disbelief' existing in dialectal relation to the practices of a 'new science'" (Ascoli 7). In other words, this narrative framework reveals "the purely fictive nature of romance representations" (6). The importance of Fonte's remodeling of Ariosto's epic lies in this idea of a fictional universe. For in a fictional universe, anything is possible: a dwarf can be praised for his faithfulness and beauty, a young knight can be satirized for his failing love, and a woman can become the ideal knight. According to Everson, the epic romance genre sustained popularity among readers and writers due to its openness – its fictive nature, where new possibilities in genre, plot, character, and even gender can be explored (353).

A fictional universe allows Fonte the opportunity to question the structures of gender, and she does so through the role of the knight. At the heart of any chivalric romance is the character of the knight. As overtly a patriarchal genre, epic romance focuses primarily on a male protagonist. He represents the ideal notion of masculine identity. Even though the male knight is the primary default, chivalric narratives of the fifteenth and sixteenth century saw an increase in the use of female knights. Far from becoming emblematic of women's power, the female knight became the tool patriarchal authors used to normalize women's domesticity. According to Finucci, the female knight, no matter how "man-like" she may appear, must eventually return to the appropriate role of wife and mother: "the ideological purpose of the epic is to show how necessary it is for women eventually to act as women, how important it is to the society that they understand their acceptable and praiseworthy role is that of being nurturing wives and mothers" (*Lady Vanishes* 230). Ariosto's model woman warrior Bradamante supports Finucci's argument; her quest, unlike the man's, is marriage. Thus, it is important how women read and then begin to

write characters such as the warrior woman/lady knight. argues that a complex relationship existed between women as readers and writers of chivalric romance and the traditions laid down by the patriarchy, especially in concert with the female knight. Some women readers and writers were critical of the roles assigned to them, while some reinforced those roles. The female knight came to be known both as an exception that proved the rule of timidity and weakness and as representative of the capacities of women for equality and supremacy. For some women, including Fonte, “the female knight was capable of taking on an emblematic significance that extended beyond the fabulous world of romance and touched on their own aspirations and experience” (“Women Writers” 138). For Fonte, the role of the knight is key to her discussion of gender. In *Floridoro*, the gender of knights fluctuates among men, women, and effeminate boys, disrupting the traditional, masculine-gendered role of the knight and asserting one where women or effeminate boys assume that of an ideal knight.

The critiquing of the role of the knight through Irigaray’s description of mimesis allows Fonte to construct new ideas of the masculine and feminine that move towards equality rather than supremacy. In order to determine Fonte’s construction of gender, a study of Fonte’s grossness of the masculine (Macandro/Risardo), effeminization of the masculine (Floridoro), “woman as warrior” (Risamante), and the duality of the feminine (Risamante and Biondaura) are juxtaposed against standardized modes of representing knights for epic romances, especially Ariosto. By studying Fonte’s representations of various kinds of educated knights, I contend that Fonte is proposing new concepts for gender and genre construction, concepts that do not remain confined within patriarchal standards of the supremacy, and even the misogyny, of the masculine, but instead become destabilized by the presence of the educated feminine.

### Fonte's Revisions of Gender: Masculinity

In order to disrupt established gendered concepts, Fonte presents and revises the traditional, patriarchal hero of the epic romance: the male knight. Her representations of the male knight revolve around ideas of the monstrous, satirical, and effeminate. With Macandro and Risardo's characters in contrast with Floridoro and Risamante, Fonte shows the wrongs perpetuated by those educated by and conformed to the traditional gendered roles for men, which is why Kolsky claims that "fully grown men are generally culprits in this poem. The males who have not completely repressed their feminine qualities are the ones who seem to have the approval of the poet" (178). But where Kolsky's argument revolves around the feminine and its overall importance to both male and female characters in order for Fonte to present a feminist view, I argue that the education of the masculine results in a subversion of the feminine, and Floridoro, while young and effeminate, is upheld by Fonte to illustrate that it is the institution of male education that causes the male to reject the feminine and embrace the masculine, resulting in a subordination of the feminine and exaltation of the masculine. Fonte works backwards, showing what the maturation in masculine heroics inevitably produces: a Risardo or Macandro. She does this also to present what comes before this maturation begins with Floridoro. Thus, through a critical depiction of the established gendered roles for men and the illustration of a new beginning in Floridoro, Fonte upsets patriarchal notions of male supremacy and female inferiority. The masculine must be tempered with the feminine, and vice versa, in order to produce the ideal knight. Fonte moves beyond the established gender concepts, with her ideal, ultimately, embodied within Risamante, who is, paradoxically, not male.

Before a discussion of Fonte's masculine characters can occur, I must preface what the institution of male education consists of. Fonte describes the unequal education of men and women, highlighting the inherent oppressive, patriarchal traditions that underlie the educational structure. According to Fonte, women are considered to have "different courage and wisdom" from men (4.1.8). Men's education includes training in "armed squads" and "liberal art[s]" (4.4.5-6). Separate from combative training and intellectual pursuits, women are "raised in other pursuits" (4.4.7). Mirroring the cultural/social distinctions of education present in sixteenth century Italy, Fonte illustrates the biased educational structure crafted by the institutionalized power of the patriarchy. With the distinction of institutionalized power, all aspects of educational pursuit, military or intellectual, are available to men; women, however, are denied access to the same education, perpetuating the cyclical concept of women's inferiority. If they are unable to learn as men, then there is no reason to afford them the same rights. The fact that they are not afforded the same educational opportunities as men also attests to their inferiority, and the education that they do have, "other pursuits," is perceived as inferior because it is not comparable to men's education.

Prefaced by the separation of masculine and feminine educational opportunities, Fonte demonstrates the inadequacies of the "courage and wisdom" afforded to men and denied to women through mimesis of genre norms and models. For Ariosto's hybrid genre of epic romance, a mature knight is educated by appropriating attributes from classical and medieval representations of the male hero, which includes not only a proficiency in arms, but also a heightened sense of morality, virtue, and honor. While approved models of heroic/knightly behavior are to be imitated, rejected models are to be avoided. Ariosto and Fonte's male knights must appropriate, to some degree, both epic hero and chivalric knight models of ideal

masculinity. For the epic, the classical models of Odysseus, Achilles, and Aeneas stand as models to be imitated. While Virgil's Aeneas is an obvious accepted source for the epic romance knight, Homer's Odysseus and Achilles are a bit more problematic. Everson argues that the original Greek Homeric poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* must be excluded as a direct source for early epic romance writers because they would not have access to a Latin translation.

Boiardo's use of Homeric concepts in *Orlando Innamorato* is a result of intermediary sources from Ovid or from medieval retellings (91-2).<sup>20</sup> The focus of medieval retellings is the Troy story of the *Aeneid*; as a result, these retellings pay little attention to the wanderings of Odysseus and the subject matter of the *Odyssey* (94). Odysseus then becomes a characterization of failure. Boiardo demonstrates the failed Odysseus model by finally suggesting that his Orlando is not an Aeneas, but an Odysseus, "not so much righting wrongs as constantly distracted from the task he has set himself" (256). Ariosto's Orlando is a different type of hero: "Orlando in Ariosto's reading is an exemplum, a warning of what to avoid, not a model to follow and to which to aspire" (345). Based on the Odysseus model, Orlando becomes the image of the failed knight – one not to emulate.

While Odysseus depicts the failed classical model, Aeneas represents the ideal for late fourteenth and fifteenth century epic romance writers. According to Everson, "The Aeneas model is even more clearly present in the Latin epics of the fifteenth century [...] But the same point could be made of the large majority of the romance epics and *cantari* of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" (225). Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso built their heroes on the basis of the Aeneas model. The classical Aeneas hero is characterized as "admirable, brave, warlike when

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<sup>20</sup> The two most popular vernacular retellings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* and Sicilian Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*. Both retellings were based on the supposed accounts of Dictys Cretensis and Dares Phrygius, two late-antiquity men who both claim to have been eyewitnesses or participants in Troy (Everson 92).

necessary, but not devoid of gentler emotions, protected and guided by divine powers, but not immune to the mistakes and weaknesses of human beings, a fiercely loyal friend and commander” (Everson 63). While the Aeneas character is hostilely treated by some medieval poetic versions as a traitor, “such modifications are not evidence of medieval romancing” (46). For superior epic romances, Virgil’s *Aeneid* becomes appropriated into the epic romance tradition. Instead of presenting a failed model, such as Odysseus, Aeneas “presents an undeniable ideal, or rather an ideal hero, morally perfect and hence worthy of imitation, through whose actions and character Virgil’s poem praises virtue and condemns vice” (224). Aeneas’ *pietas* (duty) sets him up as the epic heroic ideal. Leader of a scattered remnant toward a primarily social and political destiny, he is not the solitary knight errant of romance. Hence, Aeneas is concerned with more universal issues, such as being the “founder of Rome and so the bringer of a civilization to a barbaric and primitive world, but civilization is established through a violence that is equally, and often more, brutal and barbaric than that of the society it is replacing” (62). Aeneas’ imperialism does not comply with chivalric code. However, Ariosto uses the Aeneas model throughout the *Furioso*, measuring the worth of each knight against him: Orlando fails and Rinaldo falls short, leaving Ruggerio to fit the model.

Consistent with the hybrid nature of the epic romance, the male hero also finds models within the romance genre. According to Erich Auerbach, the knight is concerned with two things only, feats of arms and love:

Except feats of arms and love, nothing can occur in the courtly world – and even these two are of a special sort: they are not occurrences or emotions which can be absent for a time; they are permanently connected with the person of the perfect knight, they are part of his definition, so that he cannot for one moment be without adventure in arms nor for

one moment without amorous entanglement. If he could, he would lose himself and no longer be a knight. (140)

At all times, the knight must find himself within the throes of adventures, spurred on by his courtly love for a beautiful lady. Love and honor drive him forward. If at any time, the knight is not on an adventure because of or in search of love, then he ceases to exist as a knight.

For Ariosto and his successors, the chivalric knight moves away from the classical paradigms to one specifically grounded in the medieval romance from Chrétien de Troyes onward. According to Everson, the adoption and impact of the Arthurian legend in Italy can be associated with two characters: Lancelot and Tristan. Italy looked to the French *Prose Lancelot* and *Prose Tristan* works as sources for their depictions of the fantastical, ideal world of Arthurian legend. In Italy, Lancelot and Tristan depict the ideal chivalric knight: “Lancelot was, even in the French versions, already the knight of the Round Table par excellence, the supreme example of chivalry, the passionate lover, the noble yet fatally flawed hero, and so he remained in the Italian tradition” (40). Like the Aeneas model for epic, Lancelot illustrates the upheld model of the chivalric knight for romance. Tristan, likewise, is associated with the knights of the Round Table. His narrative, however, was modified in the Italian tradition of epic romance, losing his Celtic origins. He becomes just another knight errant.

While the epic model of Aeneas and the romance model of Lancelot and Tristan purport concepts of ideal masculinity seen through an exclusionary education of men in both military and intellectual pursuits, Fonte demonstrates with her male knights that the education of the masculine upsets its own idealistic program. Through mimesis of the traditions of the epic romance genre and its use of epic and romance models of male knighthood, Fonte shows that these patriarchal crafted models, upheld and rejected, do not maintain male dominance.

But how do the standards of an epic romance relate to gender? According to Susan Stanford Friedman, genre norms shape gender codes:

As various *écritures*, poetic genres have no overt gender norms. But the evolution of both theory and practice has established a covert set of expectations about poetic genres that reflects the larger gender system of western culture. A binary system in particular has shaped the expectations governing the reading and writing of epic and lyric poetry, a dualism that intersects with the cultural opposition of masculine and feminine. (203-4)

In adherence to this definition, the knight, as a marker of cultural ideology in western literature, must be a man, and he must uphold current, accepted standards of the masculine: “The epic hero represents the apotheosis of his age and its most exalted qualities” (204). This model requires that the mature knight understand the dichotomous relationship of the masculine and the feminine and uphold the former by subverting the latter. The mature knight understands the female in concert with the concept of the “Other.” His identity emerges as superior and the woman as inferior based on the recognition that she is the “Other.” Controlled by patriarchy, the traditions of genre perpetuate a cyclical relationship of cultural norms and traditional models, all bent on male dominance.

For Fonte and women writers attempting an epic romance, presenting male knights as the ideal presents a specific paradox: it perpetuates the male dominance model. If the poet adheres to the traditions set down by the genre, she perpetuates the dichotomous gendered view – the masculine has supremacy and the feminine is subverted. Fonte, however, utilizes the norms of the genre in order to demonstrate the inadequacies of the masculine models they present with the

giant Macandro and the mature knight Risardo, while illustrating the possible genre/gender bending with the effeminate knight Floridoro.<sup>21</sup>

Before Fonte begins to reveal the beginnings of an ideal masculine knight, she brings to light the grossness and brutality inherent in the traditions exemplified by the giant Macandro. As a mature knight, Macandro should model the ideal knights of classical and medieval tradition, shunning the improper models also inherent in the same traditions. Macandro initially depicts the traditional knight in that he is on an adventure to prove his love for Biondaura; however, he also deviates from approved classical and medieval models by his inability to be a proper lover for Biondaura, demonstrating his grossness and brutality. Macandro adopts the rejected model of the brutal and shameless warrior Achilles. The inability of a mature knight to achieve the approved patriarchal models demonstrates the inadequacies of those models. The one thing that Macandro does appropriately subscribe to is the concept of masculine superiority, seen through his constant attempts to subvert the feminine. It is through this subversion process that his grossness, brutality, and coarseness are seen. The education of the male knight undercuts its own program through its representation of ideals that cannot be obtained because the very idea of male

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<sup>21</sup> Since most audiences will be unfamiliar with this text, I will provide a brief summary of the plot here. Keeping with Ariosto's technique of entrelacement and quests, Fonte weaves together what seems a patchwork compilation of stories in thirteen cantos. She begins her epic with an invocation to the Muse to "Sing the glorious deeds and the sweet affections of illustrious knights and ladies" (1.2.1-2). One of the strings of the various stories about "illustrious knights and ladies" Fonte weaves involves the contest devised by giant Macandro in order to prove that Biondaura, Queen of Armenia and Macandro's beloved, is more beautiful than Celsidea, daughter of King Cleardo of Athens. It is this contest that brings to light the central conflict of the poem. The only knight able to defeat Macandro is Risamante, a female knight and sister to Biondaura. Taken away as a child, Risamante grew up with a man's education, and now is returning to her kingdom and demanding what is rightfully hers, half of the kingdom that Biondaura rules. Biondaura refuses and Risamante travels, for the most part of the epic, to find reinforcements for the war she intends to wage on Biondaura. At different intervals, Risamante appears, rescuing women and defeating men. Another string that Fonte weaves is the one involving the knight Risardo and his promise to the Dwarf to rescue his Egyptian princess. Risardo, however, defers from his promise to join the tournament presented by Alismond in honor of Celsidea. The knight for whom the poem is titled, Floridoro, does not appear until late in the poem. Regarded as a young and effeminate boy, he is banned from participating in the tournament; however, impelled by his love for Celsidea, he enters in disguise and wins. The poem continues with different strands of less developed characters: the knight Silano, Circetta, etc. In canto thirteen of the unfinished poem, Risamante and Biondaura's forces meet. Risamante wins the first battle, but the war is far from over. The poem closes with Risamante caring for one of Biondaura's captured knights.

superiority, which serves as the foundation of the educational regime, causes the mature male knight to inevitably resist those ideals in order to sustain dominance.

From the beginning, Macandro is characterized as a monster, a giant, a man to be feared. His monstrous masculinity is in constant competition with idealistic femininity in order to retain his superiority. Before Macandro is introduced, the focus of Canto I is on Celsidea, King Cleardo's daughter, who is famous for her beauty and chastity. As Macandro enters the scene, the gaze and thoughts of the people of the Greek state turn away from Celsidea to Macandro, setting up a comparison between the perfection of the feminine and the grossness of the masculine:

Now it happens that when they were in the hall one day  
with the Greek heroes, just as I've recounted,  
there appeared among them a great and fierce giant,  
to whom they all turned their eyes and thoughts" (I.9.5-8).

The stark shift in the Greek people's focus from the pure and beautiful Celsidea to the "great and fierce giant" Macandro begs a comparison of representation. Enthralled by extremes, the people of Greece spend all of their time praising Celsidea's femininity; however, when Macandro's brutish masculinity presents itself, the people turn their attention to him, the giant who threatens Celsidea's status as the ultimate female by proposing an alternative – Biondaura.

This comparison is heightened by Macandro's inability to rest his gaze on Celsidea: "By her extreme beauty, on which the fierce, crude man / did not dare to rest his gaze" (I.14.1-2). Still, "the fierce, crude" Macandro knows that his quest to prove the unsurpassing beauty of Biondaura, the Queen of Armenia and Macandro's beloved, is futile. Celsidea's beauty is so great that it "humiliated the sun" (I.13.6). Macandro recognizes his folly:

And he marveled greatly  
that, as he gazed on his own goddess [Biondaura] in his thoughts,  
she did not seem to him as fair and as beautiful as

this one [Celsidea], although he loved her very much” (1.14.5-8).

Yet, he decides to stay and fight for Biondaura’s honor. Fonte depicts the downfall of pride when Macandro continues to boast of Biondaura’s beauty even though he knows that Celsidea far exceeds her:

Despite this, in order not to have come  
in vain, and for the love that he bore her,  
and to prove evidence of  
his valor which he considered so great,  
he determined not to remain silent and mute.  
Turning to the king who waited attentively,  
he spoke with a loud and haughty voice,  
such that everyone heard his fierce speech. (I.15.1-8)

He decides to fight to prove himself and his love – his quest no longer is solely about Biondaura; instead, Macandro is looking for self-justification for his merits – martial skill and unwavering love. While the quest for honor and love is one emulated in epic romances, Fonte demonstrates that it is not honor that Macandro seeks, but gratification for his wounded pride. Before Fonte depicts Macandro’s defeat, she gives a brief epigram, warning of the dangers of pride: “Pride on the other hand is boorish and base. / It urges its followers on to their own detriment, / and it made Niobe and Pentheus and others perish / at the peak of their pride and brashness” (2.2.5-8). By aligning Macandro with the sin of pride, Fonte makes the comparison to the grossness of the masculine. If Macandro depicts pride, and pride is “boorish and base,” Macandro is “boorish and base.” Pride, merely a sin, does not denote masculinity or femininity. Macandro’s pride, however, specifically highlights his brutish character because it is the pride of male dominance.

Fonte further removes Macandro from the category of the ideal knight by demonstrating that he fails as a courtly lover. Even though Macandro loves Biondaura, she rejects his love based on his inability to love properly: “Not that the noble maiden [Biondaura] loved him, / he was too coarse a lover for her” (1.11.1-2). Characterized as a giant and monster, Macandro is

unable to be the compassionate, gentle courtly lover. His manner and appearance are “too coarse” for the delicacies of a lady like Biondaura. Biondaura’s rejection of Macandro demonstrates his brutish character, setting the stage for his inability to fit the courtly ideal of the knight. He cannot properly love or fight for his love.

His brutish qualities separate him from the ideal knight and set up Fonte’s ultimate rejection of Macandro - his death. Macandro’s defeat by the unknown knight clad in green and white reinforces his separation from the ideal knight category. The “trial” begins with Macandro asking for “lance and sword” to be the weapons of choice; weapons symbolically representing the sexuality of the male, which is important because lance and sword fail every other male knight and Macandro in the end (I.18.1). In order to defend her honor, the King assures Celsidea that a “perfect knight” will come and save her (I.21.5). The contest begins with knight after knight of renown challenging the giant Macandro. These male knights, however, are unable to defeat Macandro. There is only one knight who can defeat him – Risamante.

In the battle between the two, Risamante reverses the phallic weapons of lance and sword on Macandro. While traditional warrior women, like Ariosto’s Bradamante, utilize the phallic sword in battle, Risamante’s use of both the lance and the sword take on additional importance because these weapons fail other male knights in their attempts to defeat Macandro, and they fail Macandro in his attempts to defeat a female knight. Risamante is the only one, paradoxically a woman, able to wield these phallic weapons against the brute Macandro, who has tried to subvert the feminine: first, with Celsidea, and second, with Risamante.

The first blow Macandro receives from Risamante is by the lance, the death blow Macandro receives from Risamante is from the sword, and its power not only cuts out his life flow, but also his masculinity:

At the left shoulder a great downstroke  
which he would have delivered all the way to the saddle  
he aims, but the warrior [Risamante] immediately  
dodges with a jump the cruel blow.  
Then he [Risamante] drives his harsh and biting sword  
over the thigh of the impious and unruly soul;  
he passes its deadly point between his belly and his flank  
two spans deep, and deprives him of life. (2.21.1-8)

The death blow Risamante gives to Macandro by the sword is important in that, not only does she reverse the phallic weapon, but she kills him by injuring the source of his power and brutality – his phallus, “between his belly and his flank.” Fonte illustrates through Risamante and her phallic sword and lance that she, biologically a woman, dressed and acting as a man, is the ideal, and that Macandro’s brutish masculinity, seeking to subvert the feminine, is not acceptable. He dies having his masculinity severed.

To some extent, Macandro upholds both approved and rejected models: initially on a romance quest to prove his love, he inevitably becomes the rejected epic hero Achilles. Fonte demonstrates that the commonality and fault of the educational models is not the models themselves, but the concept of male superiority that underlies them. It is Macandro’s embrace of the dichotomous structure of gender that causes him to be gross, brutal, and coarse, which inevitable results in his death. Risamante’s defeat of Macandro by removing his afflicting masculinity reinforces the notion that the true fault of Macandro lies in his overweening masculinity, his desire to assert the superiority of the phallus. However, it is Macandro’s desire for supremacy that disrupts the very paradigm it tries to uphold.

Symbolically, Fonte suggests that male writers who attempt to model themselves on traditional patriarchal models of the literary genre of the epic romance, with its foundations based on concepts of male superiority and female inferiority, inevitably subvert the male dominance model that they attempt to assert. Fonte reveals that female writers are capable of

being a Risamante. Reversing the phallic weapons of literary traditions, the female writer can do what no other male writer can, turn the phallus against itself and deprive it of its power. Through mimesis of traditional masculine norms for the male knight and the epic romance genre, Fonte disrupts gender and genre norms to suggest their inadequacies through the woman as warrior and the female poet. In correlation with Fonte's critique of masculine heroics, she suggests that, by using the phallic tools associated with masculine writing, women poets can sever the masculine power structure.

While the mature Macandro's grossness and brutality deconstruct the traditional male knight model, Fonte demonstrates that the epic and romance models for the male knight errant produce a male knight unworthy of emulation, a failed knight. The wandering of the knight errant is institutionalized in the education of male knights through epic references to Odysseus and romance references to Lancelot and Yvain. In the epic romance genre of Ariosto and his successors, the wandering of Odysseus and Arthurian knights is rejected in favor of the goal oriented quests of Aeneas. The old examples of knights errant are condemned in the epic romance genre because the knight loses sight of his real goal, righting wrongs, and simply wanders. Through the presentation of the wandering Risardo, Fonte shows that adherence to the old model of wandering illustrates that the model of masculine education through quests realistically reverses the maturation of the male knight. Always desiring to assert his superiority, the male knight is readily willing to abandon each quest in the hopes of finding a new one that will allow him to ultimately demonstrate his superiority.

In romance, the knight errant proves his status as an ideal knight through adventure. In rapid succession, the knight faces trial after trial, for as Auerbach said, a knight can never be without adventure, or he loses his status as a knight. Adventure is also monumentally important

to a knight's masculinity: "the very essence of the knight's ideal of manhood is called forth by adventure" (Auerbach 135). In adventure, the knight proves the tenets of masculine education; the knight must be intelligent, strong, moral, unfailing, and propelled to rescue ladies in distress. The latter is of great importance, considering that by the very act of rescuing a maiden, the knight is asserting his power over that maiden, subverting the feminine and upholding the masculine. The other attributes of intelligence, morality, and constancy are equally important, in that they prove the worth of the knight by degrees. First, the knight must find himself on an adventure for love and honor. Second, he must find the right way, which is revealed through other knights' recognition that he is on the right way. According to Auerbach, Calogrenant, one of King Arthur's knights of the Round Table, knows he has "found the right way" because he is "received by his host – who is also a knight" (135). But finding the right way is not the sole factor in determining a true knight, it is also proved by a knight "capable of sustaining the adventure," such as Yvain (136). So, a true knight must find the right way and stay on it, even though it will ultimately take him through other adventures.

Fonte mimics this tradition in her rules for knightly conduct in canto three.<sup>22</sup>

The ideal knight Fonte presents is one who proves to be selfless: "Without obligation, courteous and agreeable, / always for innocents they wielded the sword" (3.1.3-4). The "knights of the past" are virtuous, and their sole goal is to go on journeys, quests, to save "strangers" with whom they have no personal or national ties (3.1.7). While Fonte mimics the standards of the tradition, she disrupts that tradition with the mature, male knight Risardo, who finds the right way, but does not remain constant to his initial adventure. Risardo forgets his pledge to save the Dwarf's

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<sup>22</sup> Kolsky makes much the same argument. Risardo, in comparison to the Dwarf, does not act like a mature knight. According to Kolsky, the only male character to really receive approval from the poet is the Dwarf. I, however, argue that Floridoro does as well. For further information on Kolsky's argument, see "Moderata Fonte's *Tredici canti del Floridoro*," *Rivista di Studi Italiani*. (1999): 176-79.

princess, and at the mere mention of a contest in the honor of a beautiful maiden, he abandons his promise: “no longer does he care to go to beautiful Alexandria” (4.17.5). A contest is the perfect place for Risardo to assert his masculine superiority, especially a contest that results in winning a woman as prize. This type of contest is common for the world of romance, and it literally is an assertion of masculine superiority over the prized feminine, relegating her to an inferior position.

The predicament Risardo finds himself in is one common for knights. Does he follow love or honor? Risardo, however, rejects both true love and honor for feats of masculine supremacy. Risardo’s initial quest places him on the “right way.” His father, the King of Thrace, acknowledges and grants his son’s request:

Risardo stood, and with his father’s  
leave, he said to the dwarf, “Now be at peace,  
for I promise and swear to you in the presence  
of my lord, and of all the Thracian people,  
to liberate this woman from such a sentence,  
if it is (as you say) unjust, impious, and false,  
and to see to it that she acquires that kingdom as well.”  
And he went to prepare instantly. (2.68.1-8)

Not only does Risardo’s father indicate that this is the right way, but Risardo even acknowledges the import of such a quest. Based on Fonte’s definition of a true knight, Risardo seems to comply, due to his quickness of response and knowledge of what is just. Further indicating that Risardo should remain on this quest, he “promise[s] and swear[s]” to his people and his king that he will complete this quest and “liberate this woman from such a sentence.” The nature of his quest is to right the wrong done against the Egyptian princess Raggiadora. Based on all of these indicators, Risardo is on the right path.

However, he fails to remain constant. Not only does Risardo turn away once from his initial quest, but twice, never to regain the quest again. On his way to the contest for Celsidea,

Risardo comes across the maiden Odoria, who is dressed as a knight. Her knightly garb, however, is not indicative of her ability to possess the attributes of a man, but to keep from men waging war over her beautiful looks: “The damsel went thus armed, / not because she had strength or courage, / but in order not to give those who traveled with her, / grounds to demonstrate their valor often” (4.43.1-4). Odoria’s helmet and armor is a disguise to protect her and her men because when other men look on her beauty, they cannot help but want to obtain her.

The same is true for Risardo. Risardo, smitten with her beauty decides to give up his quest to save Raggiadora in order to follow Odoria to the temple at Delphi to see if she “prizes him or shuns him” (4.41.5). When Risardo abandons the Dwarf’s quest a second time for his love-quest with Odoria, the Dwarf continues on alone, trying to find another knight to aid him. Once again, Risardo turns away from the “right way” in order to find an outlet for his desire to assert his masculinity. First, he decides to leave the Dwarf’s quest in order to assert his male supremacy in the contest for Celsidea; then, he leaves that course because he comes across a beautiful woman dressed in armor. The whole Thracian army is “profoundly amazed that a noble / young woman was going about in men’s clothing” (4.42.7-8).

Unlike Risamante, Odoria does not fit the role of the woman warrior. Thus, her armor is cast in striking contrast with her “noble young” character. A woman donning man’s garb is an attempt to don man’s power, and Risardo shows his dislike for Odoria’s dress. When she goes to put her helmet back on, he protests and “beseech[es] her to keep her face uncovered” (4.45.8). Posing more of a potential threat to male power, Risardo leaves his second quest to enter the contest for Celsidea’s hand to follow Odoria and see whether she will be “compassionate or

pitiless,” whether she will shed her masculine guise and renew her feminine garb, accepting her inferiority (4.41.4).

Risardo’s lack of resolve for completion of an adventure separates him from the ideal knight. His constancy is indicative of his maturation as a knight in the epic romance tradition. Ariosto moves away from the wandering adventures of knights characterized by the romance tradition to the more goal oriented quest of epic traditions. Fonte’s modeling of Ariosto should mirror Ariosto’s treatment of the quest motif, but she does not, at least not with her male knights. Instead, Fonte shows that the desire for masculine supremacy is so great that it disrupts the unitary quest and the traditional model, which is why Risamante, the female knight who does not seek male or female supremacy, is the ideal. Unlike Risardo, she remains true to her “right way,” the quest for her inheritance, while also helping other maidens along the way. As long as male supremacy resides at the base of masculine education and the epic romance tradition, then the male knight will always find himself caught in the predicament of upholding honor versus upholding male dominance.

While love is the most important force that spurs on knightly adventure, Risardo’s fickle nature, jumping from one quest to the other whenever a beautiful maiden appears, demonstrates Fonte’s satirizing of courtly love, a motif inherent in chivalric tradition. By depicting the inconsistencies of male love for women, Fonte subverts the idea of love central to the epic romance. If the chivalric world revolves around love and this love is brutish (Macandro) and inconstant (Risardo), then Fonte is able to unravel this world to reveal that the genre of the epic romance and the masculine knightly ideal exist around an unstable center, loosely held together by ideas of masculine supremacy and feminine inferiority. Only once this is achieved can Fonte

begin to revise the genre and gender constructions that shape the world of the knight and the woman writer.

After critiquing the counterproductive models for educated, mature male knights, Fonte turns her attention to the redemption of the male knight through the feminized heroics of Floridoro. While Floridoro is not the ideal knight, because he is, in fact, not a full knight, Fonte uses the character of the young, uneducated Floridoro to ultimately show where the chasm resides in masculine education's program for promoting male superiority and female inferiority. Not fully educated in the masculine arts of knighthood, Floridoro is at a critical juncture. As a youth, Floridoro is not depicted as masculine, but as feminine. While this would be inappropriate for a mature knight, it is praised for a youth. Floridoro is presented in highly feminine language, with overtones of eroticism, normally seen in the presentation of women<sup>23</sup>:

The expression of his comely face was so agreeable,  
so lovely the splendor of his beautiful, golden hair,  
and his appearance was so divine,  
that every heart, even a harsh one, was inclined to love him. (5.45.4-8)

In this way, "Floridoro is referred to as a 'damigel' (7.14) – a word subtly conveying the image of a young man dressed affectedly or, as in this case, expressing a subtly eroticized femininity" (Finucci, "Moderata" 15). A mature knight is educated in the concepts of male superiority and female inferiority, learning to shed the youthful feminine appearance for an appearance depicting male dominance: shield and sword. Floridoro, however, has not reached the stage where his feminine appearance would become a hindrance to his status as a male knight. Therefore, he is allowed to be presented as a damigel, but once he reaches the age of adulthood, he must shed this femininity in order to be a male knight.

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<sup>23</sup> As we saw with Macandro's objectified perception of Biondaura, this type of objectified gaze and effeminization of the masculine also occurs when Risamante meets the unnamed young boy following her defeat of the serpent-dragon in the cave (3.22-23).

The institutionalization of male centered education marks the shift between youth and femininity and maturity and masculinity. Moving from his feminized portrait, Fonte describes Floridoro as a “young nobleman,” who “had never yet practiced feats of Mars” (5.47.1-2). As the god of war, Mars is the standard for masculine aggression, whose sole purpose is to fight. With education for knights based on the feats of Mars, it is obvious how the oppositional view of male superiority and female inferiority thrives. While Macandro and Risardo have gone through this educational regime, Floridoro has not, which does not mean that he will not. The effeminization of Floridoro and the weight given to his youth demonstrates Fonte’s emphasis on how the socially constructed sphere of education shapes gender.

Kolsky suggests that Floridoro’s “femininity” threatens his identity as a male: “He has learned some of the tricks of the world, but love completely overwhelms him and his male resources are not enough to defend himself against it. It reveals the ‘feminine’ side of his character” (“Moderata Fonte’s *Tredici*” 179). While Kolsky is correct in his analysis that Floridoro is young and learning the ways of man, Fonte presents this paradox as indicative of her presentation of the pitfalls of masculine education and its subsequent effect on gender. Floridoro has the potential to represent the ideal knight, rather than Macandro and Risardo, because he has not been trained in the masculine arts, but he is still just a boy.

Fonte depicts the problems through mimesis of this educational system and demonstrates that a re-education needs to occur. Fonte’s rewriting of the Circe story through Circetta, Circe’s daughter, reveals that men “are transformers of themselves,” (8.3.4) transforming into “bears, wolves, and bulls” (8.3.2) because of their desire for supremacy. Circe narrates to Silano that men are to blame for their own transformations, and that they do not need “verses or potions” in order to change (8.4.6). They transform at will:

I would tell you how now this man, now that one,  
often takes on the semblance of a greedy wolf;  
others of the muddy and filthy animal;  
others of the stolid bear, fell and treacherous. (8.5.1-4)

The wolf and the bear are symbolic of the brutish animals that men become when they transform themselves. When the animals take over, they are “greedy” and “treacherous,” not selfless and honorable. Men’s desire for supremacy causes them to behave in a beast-like manner, because they have forgotten the feminine. They have shed it in order to enter the strictly male dominated society. Men are not reluctant to make this transformation either. Instead, “Each man is so eager to stray from himself / that he does not thereafter find the time to return” (8.4.5-6). Once the transformation has been made, it is impossible for a man to return to his balanced state, neither does he see the need for return nor does he desire it. After the transformation has occurred, man’s sole goal is to assert and maintain his superiority, perpetuating the beast-like state and making it impossible for him to adhere to the ideals of the hero/knight.

By working within the boundaries of the romance epic and its gender constructions, Fonte disrupts these boundaries, demonstrating that they do not work properly as they are traditionally defined. With patriarchal education, male knights learn to shed femininity and don masculinity. Education instigates and perpetuates the male dominance model. Men learn to fight, think, and assert power; they do not learn the domestic qualities of compassion and pity. Fonte’s work with the male knights breaks down the traditional modes for masculine gender and genre representation. She uses mimesis in order to disrupt the representation of the feminine, which leads to her assertion that the woman as warrior and the woman writer do what the male knights and male authors cannot: depict the ideal.

### Fonte's Revisions of Gender: Femininity

Just as Fonte mimics and disrupts the traditional role of the male knight, she also works through mimesis in order to disrupt common concepts of the female knight, essentially developing her “woman as warrior” as the ideal. Not only does she contend with normative modes of representation within the epic romance, but she also utilizes her deconstruction of masculine gendered concepts (Macandro/Risardo/Floridoro) in order to frame the assertion that Risamante is the ideal because she, to a certain degree, exists beyond the boundaries of the patriarchal system of female repression. While the traditional education models denounces the female sex/gender as inferior and uphold the masculine sex/gender as superior, Fonte's Risamante disrupts this paradigm. Educated in the arts of Mars, Risamante excels as a knight, finding the right path, keeping on course, and defending maidens. Through mimesis of the traditional, male knight, Risamante asserts herself among the male knights, and by exceeding their abilities as knights, she declares herself and dispels the mode of repression that the traditional system upholds. Constantly contrasted against other knights and even her own sister, Risamante illustrates the ultimate upsetting of gendered categories: she depicts both feminine and masculine qualities.

The “warrior woman”/active feminine archetype used by male authors in the epic romance reinforces the beliefs held by the patriarchy regarding women's natural inferiority. The warrior woman becomes a tool for male authors, and even some female ones, to show the dangers of women's behaviors if unchecked by social rules and regulations. Thus, the female warrior is allowed to initially exist in epic romances, but she is forced to either assimilate into the

patriarchy by shedding the masculine guise and appropriating the feminine, normally through marriage (Bradamante), or she is killed off (Marfisa) (Vitulo 62-3). The warrior or masculine aspect of the feminine is so strong that the feminine appears to cease to exist, threatening the patriarchy because it proves that a woman can transgress her inferior position and assert herself among the men, upsetting the oppositional relationship of male versus female: “Excellence in a woman was perceived as a claim for power, and power was reserved for the masculine realm. A woman who possessed either one was masculinized and lost title to her own female identity” (King and Rabil xxvii). By determining that women are incapable of obtaining masculine power, the patriarchy excludes the feminine. For a woman to hold power signifies her transgression of gender boundaries.

For patriarchy, the appropriation of power upsets the traditional, oppositional system of gender construction, threatening the male dominance model. The threat to patriarchal order is both an emotional and physical threat: “To arm women, then, would create a double threat to men: not only an emotional but also a physical danger. Women must be despoiled of arms and of rhetoric because they are disarming of male virility” (Schiesari 75). Armed, women not only upset the patriarchal model, but they have the potential power to overthrow that model. Nothing is more threatening to the patriarchy than the prospect of female dominance through force and male subversion. Price argues “that male authors impose this unity [masculine and feminine] by consciously accentuating the opposition between its [warrior woman’s] two parts and finally by obliterating the ‘warrior’ side of this character and recuperating its ‘feminine’ half into the system of relationships fostered by paternalistic societies” (*Moderata Fonte* 103). In order for the woman warrior character to exist in the patriarchal universe of the epic romance and remain unthreatening, male authors accentuate the contrast between the feminine, powerless side and the

masculine, powerful side of her nature. Cox asserts that the presentation of the warrior woman “ultimately reinforces the gender distinctions they ostensibly challenge” (“Women as” 140).

Male writers such as Ariosto ultimately force the oppositional male versus female structure upon the woman warrior, stripping her of her male guise and relegating her back to her inferior position.

In Ariosto’s epic romance model, the warrior woman finds its source in the *Aeneid*. Virgil presents an active feminine – the warrior woman Camilla, who subsequently becomes the model for Ariosto’s Bradamante and Marfisa and eventually, Tasso’s Clorinda. Marfisa and Bradamante, Ariosto’s two women warriors, depict the opposition between female powerlessness and male power. Marfisa is the masculine warrior woman. For this reason, she is killed because she cannot shed her masculinity. Bradamante, on the other hand, retains her femininity, even though she is in masculine garb. Her quest is for marriage, which will ultimately sustain the power to patriarchal rule. Both presentations, of course, lead women back to patriarchal rule and assert the gendered dichotomy in the epic romance.

The “warrior woman” used by Fonte’s male predecessors and even her female ones seems oxymoronic; the “warrior” is the masculine aspect, but this aspect, if successful, completely destroys the feminine until the end of her role in epic, where the woman either regains her femininity and sheds the masculinity or dies. Thus, the “woman” side of the term represents the ever-present feminine gender, even when that feminine becomes masculine. The compounding of the masculine terms “warrior” and “knight” with the feminine terms “woman” and “lady” presents a certain paradox. For at one time, these terms seem to suggest a blending of genders. However, male and even female authors who use these terms normally refer to a woman in the guise of a man, a woman who has shed her femininity in order to act as a man. Then, she is

forced to shed that masculinity in order to act as a woman. To go back to the example of Bradamante, she is initially characterized as a warrior; she dons a male guise to fight. While she is in her guise, her identity is subsumed by the masculine warrior; however, once she has finished her quest for marriage, she no longer needs the role of warrior and dons the role of wife and mother instead. There is a specific shift from the masculine to the feminine. She is never the woman and the warrior at the same time, because those two categories are in a strict dichotomous relationship with one another – the unfeminine warrior and the feminine wife/mother are as separate as the gender categories of masculine and feminine.

Fonte, however, presents her heroine in *Floridoro*, Risamante, as a “woman as warrior.” The key difference here is that Fonte’s portrayal of Risamante works in such a way that once the audience and characters are aware that the green knight with the white lily on the shield is a beautiful woman, there is never a moment when one gender takes over the other. Before she reveals her true identity, Risamante’s character is referred to with the masculine personal pronoun “he.” From this point on in the text, Risamante is known through the pronoun “she,” even when she meets people who do not know her feminine identity. This narrative move on Fonte’s part aligns her with that of normal epic romances, since the sex of the warrior is kept secret from the characters and the audience until they are revealed. However, Risamante does not cease to be a warrior once her femininity is exposed, and she never ceases to be a woman when she dons the helmet and shield.

The shield and sword represent masculine power and the lack of these items represents feminine distance from this power. While other women warriors, such as Bradamante and Marfisa, are characterized as moving from power to powerlessness based on their choice of clothing, Risamante does not make such a movement. Even when Risamante dons “feminine

clothes,” she does not cease to be the warrior (2.38.8). In celebration of her victory and Celsidea’s unsurpassed beauty, a party is thrown and Risamante is asked by Celsidea to sleep within her chambers. There is no awkwardness about Risamante dressing in “feminine clothes” for the occasion; however, once morning comes and she prepares to be on her way, she dons the “steel” again (2.40.4). While the shedding of armor for a traditional female knight is symbolic of her rejection of male power and acceptance of her subservient position as a female, Fonte demonstrates that this is not the case for Risamante. Able to wear both feminine and masculine garments, she upsets the traditional notion of opposition. Female warriors before Risamante were either characterized as strictly masculine, when in armor, or feminine, if they were able to be re-assumed into society. Risamante, however, never ceases to be both. She does not symbolically shed her masculinity for femininity and vice versa. In this episode, while in women’s garb, Risamante “possessed as much beauty / as she did valor as a warrior in the saddle” (2.39.3-4). Fonte works towards a complete representation of the feminine, breaking down gendered barriers to show that neither category can adequately hold Risamante because she inhabits both at the same time.

Risamante’s comparison with Bradamante and Marfisa draws our attention to the inadequacies of gendered categories. Fonte reveals that revision is necessary and that new categories must be created that will allow women the full extent of their potential. But how does Risamante break these categories? How is she able to present a “woman as warrior” instead of the traditional warrior woman? If Risamante, then, is not merely a woman trying to be a man, how has she been allowed to actualize her potential? In order for Fonte to do this, she shows that on the most basic level, women are not inferior:

Women in every age were by nature  
endowed with great judgment and spirit.

nor are they born less apt than men to demonstrate  
(with study and care) their wisdom and valor.  
And why, if their bodily form is the same,  
if their substances are not varied,  
if they have the same food and speech, must they  
have then different courage and wisdom? (4.1.1-8)

When Fonte claims that “in every age” women are not inferior to men, she attempts to dispel the foundations of the patriarchy. The basic tenet of male education is the oppositional structure of masculine supremacy and female inferiority. Fonte, however, argues that this tenet is false by disproving the idea that women are incapable of being equal to men because they do not have the same physical and intellectual makeup as men. Essentially then, natural law dictates that women are inferior. However, Fonte argues that in “nature,” women are not “born less apt than men,” which is a direct denial of Aristotelian and Pauline notions of women’s inferiority. By utilizing the conditional “if” from Aristotelian syllogistic rhetoric, Fonte asserts that the “if” is a given: women are human and made up of the same blood and bones, and they speak and eat, then the logical conclusion is that they do not have “different courage and wisdom.” She breaks down the gendered barriers here to show that on the most basic level, men and women are the “same.”

Like de Beauvoir, centuries later, Fonte demonstrates that society shapes genders:<sup>24</sup>

If when a daughter is born the father  
set her with his son to equivalent tasks,  
she would not be in lofty and fair deeds  
inferior or unequal to her brother,  
whether he placed her among the armed squads  
with himself, or set her to learn some liberal art.  
But because she is raised in other pursuits,  
for her education she is held in low regard. (4.4.1-8)

Fonte directly blames the patriarchy, the “father,” for women’s inferior status. Because society dictates that a woman cannot learn as a man, she is unfairly sequestered from masculine education, and feminine education is only held in “low regard” because it is different from the

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<sup>24</sup> de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 267-78.

masculine. Separate from men's education in "armed squads" and "liberal art," women are educated in "other pursuits." Excluding arms and intellectual study, women's education becomes confined to the domestic realm, away from institutionalized masculine power. However, by Fonte's acknowledgment that women can in fact learn the pursuits of men, Fonte is combating long standing beliefs regarding women's prescribed inferiority. In *Floridoro*, Fonte shows that a woman does not lose her status because she can perform the feats of men, and she is not required to shed male power in order to be a woman.

After dispelling the views that suggest women cannot learn, Fonte shows that they excel at masculine education. For instance, the wizard Celidante steals Risamante away from her family when she is young and gives her the opportunity to learn the masculine arts of the knight:

Not for this did Celidante cease  
with diligence and paternal love  
to raise the child Risamante,  
whose skill and valor he had foreseen.  
Consequently, afterward she surpassed all others  
in arms, and thereby gained eternal honor.  
She stayed with him a long time concealed  
in a castle founded in the middle of the sea. (2.32.1-8)

With "paternal love," Celidante educates Risamante in knightly conduct. He does this because he had "foreseen" her "skill and valor." By presenting Risamante as predestined to become a worthy knight, Fonte demonstrates that it is socially constructed institutions that shape gender: "The text implies that Risamante's potential would not have been fulfilled if she had remained with her family" (Kolsky 176).<sup>25</sup> Within the Armenian kingdom, Risamante would not have been able to learn the ways of a knight. Labeled as a princess, societal customs would have required a different path for her. Because of Celidante, Risamante is able to learn masculine education apart from institutionalized patriarchal systems. She must go somewhere else; she stays with him "in a

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<sup>25</sup> Moderata Fonte's *Tredici Canti Del Floridoro: Women in a Man's Genre.*"

castle founded in the middle of the sea,” apart from the oppressive patriarchal systems of male dominance.

Endowed with male and female knowledge/skills, Risamante is able to do what male characters are able to do; she can decide her own destiny. By submitting Risamante to the standards of a male knight education, Fonte illustrates that Risamante is, in fact, a better knight than any of the male knights in the poem. In comparison to Macandro and Risardo, Risamante finds the right path and stays on it. She also repeatedly takes up the defense of other women, as the male knights should do and do not. She also rejects the courtly love paradigm for the power afforded to her because of her inheritance, because courtly love only perpetuates the male dominance model.

Finding the right path is the key for a knight. Risardo initially finds the right path in his quest to save Raggiadora, the Dwarf’s Egyptian princess. His quest is sustained by his father and king and all of the Thracian people. Risamante, likewise, finds the right path, indicated by King Cleardo’s acceptance of her and offer of assistance to help in the war Risamante is planning to wage against her sister Biondaura: “he [Cleardo] offered her his gratitude, / and proffered his help to her in everything” (2.37.7-8). But where Risardo leaves his quest to never return, Risamante stays true to her course. It takes her through various other encounters, where she is required to help defend other women. Therefore, she mimics the role of the knight, but undermines that role when she demonstrates that the male knight fails while she succeeds in keeping true to the knightly model. For instance, not only does Risamante win the battle with the giant Macandro in defense of Celsidea’s honor, she also saves a woman who is trapped in underground with her son by a serpent-dragon creature.

Risamante's defeat of the serpent is similar to her defeat of Macandro, in that it represents a defeat of masculinity and an upsetting of gender roles. Wielding the phallic lance, Risamante defeats the ultimate representation of the phallus – the snake:

The greedy beast with mouth open  
rushed upon her, and yet it could not catch her.  
Rather, incautiously it swallowed the iron of the lance  
which the lady had wielded against it, and pierced and struck itself.  
The lady centered the point more and more  
so that in vain the dragon rolled and circled around.  
The dragon pierced itself, and in its dire distress  
as much as it could it shook itself and drew back. (3.15.1-8)

Characterized as lustful, “the greedy beast with mouth open” attacks Risamante. It, however, is unable to “catch her,” because Risamante is not an ordinary woman, devoid of power. Instead, the snake “pierced and struck itself.” Not only is the snake unable to assert its power over Risamante, but faced with the power that Risamante wields (paradoxically masculine power) the snake becomes self-destructive. What Fonte is doing here is vastly important. Her ideal knight, Risamante, upsets the masculine power to such an extent that it undoes itself. Not only does she merely defeat male power here, but she subverts it by freeing the lady and her son who have been held captive by male power, depicted by the snake. In comparison to her own masculine models, Risamante is a more successful knightly ideal than Macandro and Risardo.

Risamante also critiques the role of courtly love in romance epics. As a central theme to the romance, courtly love spurs on adventure and proves the worth of the male knight. Fonte, however, demonstrates through Risardo that the actual practice of courtly love does not uphold honor and faithfulness.

With Risamante as the ideal, Fonte disrupts the foundations of the epic romance by having her quest be for power, not love. Where marriage plays an integral part in the epics of Fonte's precursors, such as Ariosto, there is never an actual marriage in *Floridoro*. The lack of

the marriage plot continues to prove Fonte's revision of the genre. In Ariosto and Boiardo's epics, the woman warrior's, such as Bradamante's, quest was for a reuniting with a lost love and an eventual marriage. However, Risamante's quest is quite different. Instead of a journey that would subvert her own power, Risamante seeks to bolster her power and acquire her inheritance (2.34.2). Not only is she rejecting the courtly love ideal because it is false, but she also protects her power. The quest for marriage by a woman warrior upholds male dominance, because the woman must shed her masculinity in order to marry. Therefore, the movement of the woman warrior's quest is one from power to subservience. But, by a refusal to adhere to the preset formula of the love-quest, Fonte makes sure that Risamante's "masculine" side is never checked and subverted; instead, she remains outside the patriarchal definitions of gender.<sup>26</sup>

The question then remains: why is the ideal knight a woman in disguise? In order to even enter the knight category, the woman must don masculine apparel: armor and weapons. She must also be trained in the masculine arts of knighthood. She enters this male-dominated realm by mimicking its standards and norms. Consequently, she shows that the traditions on which the gender of the knight is based do not hold up. Her very inclusion in this sphere breaks the male dominance model on which it rests.

Similarly, Fonte is arguing that female writers do much the same thing. Using the tools of male authors and patriarchal genres, the female poet appropriates male power. She asserts her presence into the realm of men, and her very presence disrupts the male dominance model that the patriarchal traditions and authors attempt to uphold. To return to the female poet Fonte depicts in her frieze of Venetian poets, Fonte demonstrates the process of mimesis and the result, an upsetting of the traditional models.

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<sup>26</sup> Finucci claims that this move from the "love-quest" model represents Risamante's right to power and further indicates a female author's right to power ("Moderata" 25).

Fonte does not leave her argument concerning the ideal female knight in contrast to the male knight. Such an argument would lead to concepts of the supremacy of the feminine. Instead, Fonte ultimately compares Risamante and Biondaura – the twin sisters. This comparison is important because both sisters hold power: Biondaura holds the power of a king and Risamante holds the power of a knight. Both women upset the traditional power structure of patriarchal rule by their assertion of power; however, Risamante proves to upset patriarchal power more because she could ultimately replace the male dominance model. For instance, not only does she appropriate masculine power, but she proves to be not only an ideal knight, but a possible ideal ruler. While Biondaura fails as an ideal ruler because she lacks the compassion appropriate to sustain her rule, Risamante, with an education of arms and intellectual pursuits, possesses the strength, honor, courage, and compassion appropriate for a king.

How do the powers of the two sisters differ? And how does their education relate to their different displays of power? As a king, Biondaura acts as a sovereign, demonstrating the ultimate appropriation of power for a woman. While her power would seem to present a threat to patriarchy, it does not. The initial depiction of Biondaura in the poem is from Macandro's objectifying male gaze, as shown in his boast of her unsurpassed beauty and his love for her (1.17.1-8). To Macandro, Biondaura has nothing more to offer him than her beauty. She is not known (like Risamante) for her valor and strength; instead, she becomes the object of the male gaze. Biondaura seems to represent the opposite of Risamante; she "epitomizes the damsel-in-distress type for whom every knight will prove his mettle" (Finucci, "Moderata" 10). However, a closer look at the text reveals a departure from the damsel-in-distress characterization. She does not present uproar over Biondaura's sole rule. No kings or knights are trying to wage war on Armenia to take the throne from Biondaura. The only person questioning Biondaura's rule is her

sister, not a man. While not afraid of masculine rule, she is afraid of Risamante, since she is the only one who can take away her power.

Even though Risamante displays power as a knight, she does not have the same type of power as Biondaura; Risamante is not a sovereign, yet. Risamante has the capacity to be a king, but must assert her power over her sister in order to obtain her inheritance. What makes Biondaura and Risamante different is their education. While Risamante was separated from her family and her position as a princess and taught how to be a knight, Biondaura remained confined within the oppressive patriarchal system. Biondaura's education as a monarch would undoubtedly entail a broader education than that of non-monarchal women, but she is still educated and taught the same male dominance model of patriarchal rule, which is why she does not reciprocate Macandro or any other man's love. To accept the advances of a man would mean to potentially give up her power. For this reason, she does not show compassion for the knights who fight for her. Instead, they are expendable, because they could possibly pose a threat to her right to rule. Risamante, however, is unaffected by the male dominance model. Her very presence upsets that model.

Through the practical application of Biondaura and Risamante's power, Fonte upholds Risamante as the ideal and the approved ruler of Armenia, because she is the only one who can dispel the oppositional structure of male rule. Biondaura does not fight but sends knights out to fight for her, treating her knights as expendable by using them as shields against her sister. Biondaura's lack of compassion is not ideal for a ruler. Her rule is sustained by the loyalty of knights, and if she does not reciprocate that loyalty, then she will cease to have an army and be susceptible to ruin. Risamante, however, has compassion for her and Biondaura's knights.

In the climactic battle at the end of Canto 13, Risamante demonstrates her compassion by saving and sustaining one of Biondaura's fallen knights. Risamante does not treat Biondaura's knight like a "prisoner"; instead, she treats him like a "king." Why does she do this? Educated as a male knight, she possesses both masculine and feminine characteristics. She has the ability to fight and think like men, but she also has the ability to be compassionate. She does not treat the masculine or feminine as "other," which is what Biondaura does. Risamante represents the possibilities for gender boundary transgression if women are allowed masculine education, and Biondaura represents what happens to a woman who is steeped within patriarchal centered education.

In opposition to both masculine knights and her sister, Risamante, as a woman, figures as the ideal knight. Risamante persists as the ideal because she exists outside the boundaries of patriarchal rule and the oppositional structure of male dominance and female inferiority. The importance of the ideal knight's gender directly relates to the importance of the ideal writer. Through mimesis of the epic romance, Fonte disrupts gender and genre norms by arguing that the very presence of the female knight and female writer demonstrate the inadequacies of the patriarchal model. Fonte, however, does not present supremacy of the feminine; instead, she asserts that Risamante is the ideal, because as a woman educated within the institutionalized masculine arts, she is not susceptible to perceptions of the "other" that pervade and uphold injurious, oppositional power structures.

## Conclusions

Moderata Fonte sets up the foundations for a revisiting and revisioning of the gendered roles for both men and women in her poem *Floridoro*. Through mimesis, Fonte is able to disrupt gender and genre concepts inherent in the epic romance by illustrating how these concepts work against themselves. First, she shows that the traditional education sets up an oppositional relation of sex/gender: man as superior and woman as inferior. Second, through Macandro and Risardo, Fonte demonstrates how the patriarchal system works against itself by not adhering to its own definitions. Third, she shows with *Floridoro* that the patriarchal system goes wrong at the institutional level of education, proving that the source of gender concepts is constructed, not absolute. Finally, the very part the patriarchy seeks to subvert – the feminine – is capable of thriving in this tradition, turning the established gender/genre categories on their heads. All representations of the knight compare and contrast with Fonte's ideal characterization – Risamante, who is comprised of both the masculine and the feminine. Her strength as a warrior and her biology as a woman indicate that gendered categories are not reductive. For Fonte, the masculine and feminine must be educated with equal parts from the opposing gender. Steeped within the patriarchal educational system, young male knights will shed the feminine and don the masculine, while young women will shed the masculine and don the feminine.

With this in mind, it is important to return to Fonte's frieze of poets and the solitary woman poet. Fonte asserts women poets and herself within the frieze of popular male Venetian poets by inhabiting both genders. She is not the threatening unfeminine woman for she is dressed in the appropriate garb of virginity and humility, but she is among them. She is at once the

woman and the poet, with neither lessened by the appearance of the masculine or the feminine. Like the woman as warrior, she stands among male poets in the temple presided over the masculine god of poetry – Apollo.

The importance of Apollo as the god of the temple where the female poet resides takes on added significance now that we have seen Fonte's revolutionary concepts of gender, something we could not see at the beginning. Apollo is a twin; his other half is Diana, who is a feminine god skilled in violence. While she shared the violent aspect of her nature with her brother Apollo, Diana was widely known for her chastity and seclusion from the world of men. The female poet's incursion into the male god Apollo's temple, with his connections to male violence, power, and arts, instead of Diana's temple depicts the female poet's upsetting of male dominance. To be within Diana's temple would only remove her from patriarchal rule, but not challenge it, and certainly not upset it. Only in the male god Apollo's temple can the female poet challenge and upset the male dominance model, placing herself among male poets.

In connection with Fonte's characterization of the ideal gender, the female poet's presence becomes vastly important. Like Risamante, she enters this masculine dominated sphere through mimesis, but she also disrupts this sphere, because housed within her, she has the masculine qualities appropriate for a poet, while she remains a woman. Only a woman poet can dispel the oppositional gender model perpetuated by the patriarchy. With equal education, women writers are capable of dispelling the concept of women's inferiority because many do not subscribe to the same oppressive model as men educated in the traditional models. Fonte argues that women writers must enter literary genres held by men through mimesis to undermine the traditions that uphold those genres. In so doing, the woman writer creates her own subjectivity

and illustrates that gender is constructed and needs to be restructured. By so doing, the woman writer should not dwell in dark corners.

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