Masculinity, Sexuality, and Orientalism in the Medieval Italian Epic

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At one point in the Franco-Italian epic *Aquilon de Bavière* (1379-1407), a debate occurs between Roland, the exemplary western knight, and the Duke of Carthage, his Saracen counterpart. The Easterner makes an unusual comparison by equating the Carolingian hero's rhetorical skills to those of Muhammad:

"Sire de Clermont, se estes tant saze che cum paroles pansés soverrir les homes, lasés les armes e alés predicant por le monde cum fist Macomet!" (1: 159,ll. 4-5).  

["Sir of Clermont, if you are so wise that with words you think you can convert men, drop your arms and go preaching throughout the world as did Muhammad!"]

This challenge from a powerful Saracen warrior displays the ideological significance of transforming an epic hero into an orator, who often relies on words rather than arms. Although Roland is praised for his rhetorical skills, those same abilities threaten his position as the ideal knight and question traditional notions of both masculinity and ethnicity. How the anxiety over ideal masculinity converges with Orientalism in the medieval Italian epic is the subject of this essay. By using the term Orientalism, I am referring not only to Edward W. Said's thesis.
that the West has attempted to use its knowledge of eastern cultures to contain and dominate them (40), but also to Homi Bhabha’s notion that the stereotyping involved in colonial discourse is a kind of fetishism (26). According to Bhabha, ethnic stereotypes must be repeated over and over again so that those mythologies of "racial purity" and "cultural priority" are not exposed as cultural constructions rather than part of a universal order (26-27). In a similar fashion, the stories of male superiority over women need to be constantly reiterated in order that they are not unmasked as historical discourses rather than accurate representations of a natural hierarchy. This is particularly true in the late Middle Ages, when economic and social changes not only made the boundaries between the West and East more fluid, but also made it more difficult for many western men to achieve the qualities that had been associated with the ideal masculinity of the early *chansons de geste*.

Late Carolingian epics, both in France and Italy, redefined ideal heterosexual masculinity to include not only the art of war but also of rhetoric. With long scholastic arguments, Christian knights attempt to prove aspects of their faith, such as Mary's virginity and transubstantiation, to their eastern counterparts (Bancourt 1: 474-76). In the late thirteenth century a new hero starts to develop in Carolingian epics whom Marguerite Rossi, in her analysis of *Huon de Bordeaux*, has labelled the "preudome" or gentleman. She describes Huon as a knight who avoids violence whenever possible in an attempt to balance his military prowess with reason and diplomacy (477-81). The epic hero of the late Carolingian epic, then, often embodies the skills necessary to achieve success among the new mercantile and administrative classes, since the epic writer instills the rhetorical talents associated with his own work into the Carolingian paragons of ideal masculinity. Combining the arts of a warrior and of a rhetorician, however, can create curious contradictions. While critics like François Suard have noticed the uncertainty surrounding the Carolingian heros of the late epics (455), they have not analyzed the role that Orientalism and homophobia play

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in the changing definitions of heroism. I will use three early fifteenth-century Italian epics to examine these issues: Guerrino il Meschino by Andrea da Barberino; Aquilon de Baviere by Raffaele da Verona; and an anonymous Florentine epic whose protagonists include a wild man, Aquilante, who becomes a knight, and his sister Formosa, a warrior woman.

Florentine Andrea da Barberino (ca.1371-ca.1431) is perhaps the best known of the late medieval Italian epic writers. Because of his prolific production, it is easy to compare Andrea's own rhetorical style with the discursive habits of the heroes he creates. Several scholars, most recently Gloria Allaire, have noted how Andrea presents himself as an historian sorting through various sources to present the most rational version to his audience (243-44). His epics are also extremely detailed: when heroes such as Guerrino il Meschino travel in the East, Andrea is careful to list the exact names of cities, rivers, and other geographical landmarks.

Telling the story in an orderly fashion, or as the text phrases it, "seguendo per ordine," is another important part of Andrea's rhetorical strategy. At the beginning of his epic tale, Guerrino il Meschino, Andrea explains that although he is of humble origins, he lives better than many of "magore nazione" or greater birth. Andrea then states that we are all created by one maker who gives us more or less of his grace depending on whether we earn it in our particular profession (Rice. 2226, f. 1r). In other words, Andrea portrays himself as having earned a certain social station, through his own rational and systematized storytelling, as well as by the grace of God.

Andrea also portrays his epic hero, Guerrino, as having earned his status as a Christian knight. Guerrino, the son of Mellone, Prince of Taranto, is kidnapped as a baby. He is then sold to and raised by a wealthy merchant from Costantinople, Pidonio, and rebaptized Meschinello because of his poverty. The text mentions that Pidonio has Guerrino learn several different languages so that the Meschinello can aid his master in business dealings:

21.1-2
... [Guerrino] inparò turcho e latino. Anchora gli faceva
Pidonio inparare molti linguaggi perché erano utili all'arte
della mercantantia per lo navichare. . .. (f. 5r)\(^4\)

[Guerrino learned Turkish and Latin, and Pidonio still made
him learn many languages because they were useful
for mercantile shipping.]

Guerrino is of such good character, however, that the son of the
emperor befriends him, frees him from slavery, and teaches him
the chivalric arts. When Guerrino enters his first tournament he
is simply known as *il villano*, or the peasant. As a young man,
Guerrino decides to leave Constantinople in search of his
biological heritage. While travelling he often uses his linguistic
skills to gather information that would be of particular interest to
Andrea's merchant class readers; in Africa and Asia he not only
describes the exotic populations and monstrous races he
encounters, but also catalogs the merchandise they produce or
trade. As Guerrino moves closer to discovering his aristocratic
genealogy, however, he uses those same skills to defend
Christianity against the Saracens, transforming himself from a
merchant into God's knight.

Together with rational thinking and order, Andrea also
highlights rhetorical skills in the actions of the epic heroes; reason
replaces courage as the most important virtue for the mythic
Carolingian knights. It is also what separates western warriors
from their Saracen counterparts. Andrea frequently depicts
eastern races as wild men—more bestial than human, more wild
than orderly. They are often gigantic, hairy, and carry crude
weapons. He comments on the lack of "ordine" in their
appearance, table manners, military operations, and even their
battle cries.\(^5\) The epic hero, Guerrino, ends up the captain of both
the Persian and Arab armies against the Turks, precisely because
they cannot properly organize themselves. The portrayal of
Easterners, particularly Muslims, as primitive and inept created

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one of the most consistent sources of humor in the epic, beginning in the Italian tradition with earlier Franco-Italian texts like the *Entrée d'Espagne* (Limentani 63).

Just as reason and order are associated with the great Christian hope Guerrino, so the Saracens—in this case the Persians, Arabs and Turks—are frequently labelled lustful sodomites. Like many earlier western writers, Andrea attributes the Easterners' unruly sexuality to their dry and sterile climate as well as the influence that the astrological sign Scorpion wields over the regions they inhabit. When Guerrino first enters Persia he describes its citizens as infertile "per la forza dello segno di schorpio" [because of the strength of the sign of Scorpion], which encourages the vice "chontro a' cieli e chontro alla natura humana" [against Heaven and human nature] (f. 38v). Guerrino then goes on to explain the etymology of the term sodomite, telling the biblical stories of Sodom and Noah's Ark. As soon as Guerrino meets the realm's king, Pantinfero, the ruler notices Guerrino's beauty and questions whether the Christian hero is a man or a woman:

... vedendo sì bello il Meschino il domandò s'egl'era maschio o femina, ed egli [Guerrino] molto si vergognò e rispuose, "io sono più che huomo e non fenmina" (f. 38r).

[... seeing how beautiful il Meschino was, he asked whether Guerrino was a man or a woman. And Guerrino felt ashamed and responded:
"I am more than a man and not a woman."]

The reason for the king's interest in Guerrino's gender becomes explicit at the dinner table when Guerrino is forced to protect himself from his host who tries to contaminate the epic hero with the "vizio di sozza lussuria" [vice of dirty lust] (f. 39r). Andrea associates the Persian's sexuality with other Saracen habits that his epic hero had already experienced on his travels and denounced as uncivilized. Like other Saracens Guerrino had
encountered, the Persians dine sitting on the floor and eat off a communal plate. The Christian dismisses the Easterners with such queer table manners as disgusting pigs. He also compares their dining posture to that of tailors as they sew, thereby suggesting that Saracens, like workers, represent less than ideal masculinity.

Andrea then allows Guerrino to show that he is "more than a man." Although the Persian king accepts that Guerrino will not give into his advances, he orders under pain of death that the Christian have sex with his daughter, and as the text states, "... perde il Meschino la sua verginità per chanpare da morte" [il Meschino loses his virginity in order to escape death] (f. 40r). Here Andrea reproduces a narrative situation common to the late medieval epic in which the virginal Christian hero is forced to have sex with a debauched Saracen princess. By assigning traditionally feminine attributes to a male hero, epic authors like Andrea first accentuate and then ease the anxiety created by weakening the bond between ideal masculinity and physical violence. Notwithstanding the threat of death, both Guerrino and the princess enjoy their lovemaking, and the episode ends up underscoring the protagonist's manliness, which earlier had been called into question by the Persian king:

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presono insieme grande druderia e piacere perché avea
ischosso sei volte in pocho tenpo e poi ella si partì molto
allegra...(Ricc. 2226, f. 40r)
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[they enjoyed great passion and pleasure because he had banged her six times in a short period and then she left very happy . . . .]

The Christian hero, therefore, proves his masculinity in bed, yet still remains God's knight, who is morally superior to the lustful Saracens.

Later in the narrative, Andrea explicitly links the lower body with Islam and reason with Christianity. He makes fun of Muslims for covering their face while praying when he says:

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... egli naschondono a Mao<meo>metto la più bella chosa che Idio facessi al mondo inperò ch'egli naschondono il viso e monstrògli il chulo ch'è la disonestà parte della persona, (f. 61v)

[. . . they hide from Muhammad the most beautiful thing that God made in the world as they hide their face and show him their ass, which is the dishonest part of the person.]

This description creates a concrete image for the theoretical opposition that Christian theologians had already developed: while Christianity was a religion of asceticism and sacrifice, Islam was the religion of physical indulgence. Christians sought spiritual pleasure through reason, whereas Muslims sought pleasure through the flesh (Daniel 135-61). Norman Daniel, in summarizing Jacques de Vitry's notion of Islam, writes that "especially in the hot regions of the East 'rough and lustful' men found the straight way . . . intolerable, instead it was the fatal wide and broad way that they chose to follow" (154).

Medieval theological descriptions of Islam's errant path of self-indulgence included numerous other vices, most notably gluttony and greed. Islamic men were often portrayed as a homogeneous group with a distinct lifestyle. In Andrea's depiction of homosocial behavior among Saracens, he describes men aimlessly luxuriating together:

. . . Lionetto insu uno letto di seta a giacere, e nel padiglone era molti tappetj in terra e molti signorj, dove tre e dove quattro a sedere. Chi giuchava a uno guocho e chi a uno altro. Non si potre' dire lo scellerato modo chome egli istavano. E Lionetto Meschin avia le ganbe alta e mostrava le disoneste parte della sua persona; chosi molti altri. (f. 182v)
[... Lionetto was lying on a bed of silk, and in the pavilion were many lords, here three and here four, seated on carpets on the ground. Some played one game and some another. One should not mention the disgraceful manner of their positions: Lionetto Meschin had his legs up high and was showing the shameful parts of his person, and so were many others.]

The Muslim’s fondness for finery and games in this description points to the important role that prejudice plays in the construction of Orientalism and sodomy. Western writers not only associated the dangers of physical pleasure and leisure with women but also with eastern men and sodomites. From Andrea’s perspective, the idle lifestyle of the Saracens blinds them to reason, encourages the desires of the flesh and renders them distastefully effeminate or passive in the process. Like the imaginary Saracens, northern and central Italian men were also described as having an unnatural appetite for sex and money: their queer sexuality was associated with the mercantile economy, or the unnatural accumulation of wealth. Florentines in particular had a reputation for both sodomy and usury. The common practice of pairing these two sins as "unnatural" in theological discourse led to the representation of Florentines as both the paradigmatic usurers and sodomites of the West. One of the most famous examples is in Dante's *Inferno* where usury is categorized together with sodomy as a sin of violence against nature, and thus, against God (*Inferno* 11, 97-111). Dante later places three prominent politicians among the sodomites of Cantos 15 and 16. It is not by accident that in 1376 Pope Gregory XI condemned the citizens of Florence for the same "abominable" sins (Rocke 3).

In addition, the leisure time necessary to become *litterati* posed the threat of weakening men, making them passive like women. This popular medieval notion is illustrated in at least one Florentine *cantare* that narrates the story of Rinaldo da Monte Albano (Melli 338-56). The followers of the rebellious vassal *Olifant*
succeed in stealing Charlemagne's standard, and shaming Roland, because the great barons had been reading "con diletto" [with delight] a book about the ancient heroic deeds of Trojan and Greek warriors rather than preparing for such feats themselves (338, 21: 1). After the surprise attack, Rinaldo shows off his trophy by raising Charlemagne's standard on the top of his own tower in Monte Albano. As soon as the king sees the flag flying over his enemy's palace, he wants to know why Roland has not successfully defended an important symbol of power. Roland and the other barons do not dare explain to Charlemagne that they had been reading a book.

Because of their access to young boys, as well as the association of their work with leisure, clerics and scholars in late medieval Europe were often assumed to be sodomites (Richards 137-38). Dante follows a long textual tradition when he has his old teacher, Brunetto Latini, point out that the sodomites being punished in hell were "cherci e litterati" [clerics and scholars] (Inferno 15: 106-07). Since Florentines had a reputation as men who made a living with books and money rather than arms, they were by extension considered sodomites. Moreover, some Florentines also condemned their compatriots for sodomitical tendencies, and starting in the early fourteenth century enacted laws that transformed it from a sin into a crime with heavy penalties. Michael Rocke—acknowledging that the repression had probably little to do with the sexual act itself—describes two possible reasons for this late medieval campaign against sodomy: 1) Florence's transformation into a regional state run by a new managerial class, which developed a centralized and efficient administration to control public order as the city-state expanded its territory; and 2) a demographic crisis caused by the plague, which "nourished perceptions that the nonprocreative sins 'against nature' posed a threat to the very foundations of human society" (27-28). I would like to emphasize that the new wave of polemics and legislation against sodomy had as much to do with discursive patterns as institutional practices. The habit of labeling mercantile, scholarly and sodomitical activities as "unnatural" or
queer forced the Florentines to defend their ability to achieve the ideal of heterosexual masculinity; they did this by both refiguring that ideal and persecuting those who did not or could not live up to the new gender norms.

During the early fifteenth century, when the epics under discussion were written, San Bernardino of Siena, a Franciscan preacher, repeatedly preached in both Siena and Florence against the sin of sodomy. The queer practices he described among the Tuscan youth are quite similar to the behavior attributed to Saracen knights in the epics. San Bernardino chastises wealthy, young Florentines who do not need to earn a living like most men and instead indulge in the "vita oziosa" or idle life. He goes on to explain that this leisure time, which was traditionally associated with women, could easily tempt men to enjoy the pleasures (both natural and unnatural) of the flesh. In order to learn how to live as real men, the Franciscan preacher suggests that listless young Florentines study rhetoric, a discipline which would help them to strengthen the "patria" (Cannarozzi 2: 46).

Like San Bernardino, Andrea da Barberino also redefines ideal masculinity to include traits associated with his profession as a writer. One of the ways in which he presents his work as rational and authoritative is by systematizing a great deal of information that he had accumulated from other written sources including travel accounts, bestiaries, astrological manuals, and saints' lives. For instance, he was perhaps the first western chivalric writer to describe a mosque (Allaire 252-53). Despite the accuracy of the mosque's physical description, Andrea uses it to reinforce the truth of old stereotypes. Inside the mosque Guerrino finds Muhammad's legendary floating coffin. The epic hero proceeds to berate the Saracens for their ignorance; unlike the rational Christian, they believe that the floating coffin is miraculous, while Guerrino concludes that it levitates because of magnetic force: the top half of the mosque is made of lodestone (f. 61v). Guerrino's heroic masculinity is assured by his rational argument about the Saracen, while at the same time he uses it to contain Muslims within the "dominating frameworks" of western culture (Said 40).
Epic writers not only try to prove the fallacy of Islam through reason, they also attempt to establish the truth of Christian doctrine. Raffaele da Verona, the author of the fifteenth-century Franco-Italian epic Aquilon de Bavière, begins with a prologue in which he states that the epic's purpose is to defend the Christian faith against the fraudulent religion of Muhammad. This story narrates the deeds of Aquilon, the son of the Duke of Bavière, who as an infant is kidnapped and raised as a Saracen by the powerful Amirant. The narrator traces Aquilon's adventures in the East and West as he discovers his true Christian origins and biological father.

Although the narrative centers on Aquilon, the model Christian knight of the story is Roland. Throughout the evolution of the medieval Italian epic, Roland, rather than his uncle Charlemagne, emerges as the ideal secular leader. In this epic he also takes over Archbishop Turpin's role as the ideal religious leader (Wunderli 759-81). While Roland's part as theologian is more pronounced in this epic, he first uses rhetoric to convert Saracens in the earlier *Entrée d'Espagne*, which was clearly patterned on the theological debates of the *Chronique de Turpin*. In the *Entrée*, the debate of over 400 lines (vv. 3610-4050) between Roland and the Saracen Ferragu establishes a model followed by several Franco-Italian and Tuscan epics, including *Aquilon*. As mentioned above, this same tendency had also developed in the late epics of medieval France: armed conflict gradually gave way to religious disputations, allowing the writers of late medieval epics to show off their knowledge of theology and raising the cultural capital of these popular adventure tales.

On several occasions in *Aquilon*, it is Roland, rather than Turpin, who explains points of Christian theology to his Saracen opponents. In each of his explanations of Christian doctrine, Roland relies on empirical proofs to demonstrate his religious truths, including the virginity of Mary. The Virgin Mary is a constant presence in *Aquilon*. The author honors her in both the prologue and the epilogue, and she performs several miracles throughout the narrative. For instance, urin...
adventures, Roland and the Christian army encounter a witch married to a Jew (1: 180). The Christians quickly dispose of this evil pair by allying themselves with the couple's only son; he had converted to Christianity after having been visited by the Virgin Mary. In another tale, the Virgin Mary appears in a vision to help an African princess, Carsidonie, avoid marriage to a man she despises; in return, the eastern princess promises to convert to Christianity (1:242-43). Out of gratitude to the Virgin, Carsidonie later pledges chastity and even vows to enter a monastery (1:421). Throughout the epic, the Virgin Mary performs miracles to restore order and reinforce the social norms.

Several of the theological debates in Aquilon also center on the Virgin Mary's purity. In one dialogue between Roland and the Duke of Carthage, the Saracen questions Christians' belief in the *immaculata conceptio* and the *parturitio virginalis* on the grounds that these phenomena cannot be observed in nature. Roland then defends Mary's virginity by using "voire sperience," or empirical evidence for proof (1: 159, 1. 14). He compares the conception of Christ in Mary's womb to light coming through glass without breaking it. The Duke responds that Roland had explained his faith "por raison" or through reason (1:159, 1. 21). Although this analogy is common in both Latin and vernacular religious poetry (Warner 44), the epic presents it as a fact of empirical science. In his book about the increased anti-Semitism of the late Middle Ages, Gavin Langmuir suggests that the persecution of Jews escalated when Christians tried to explain their non-rational belief system with rational empiricism. He believes that the doubts and conflicts which arose within the Christian world because of the contradictions created between empirical knowledge and religion led to the greater persecution of Jews and other minority groups (127-33). The irrational fantasies about the dangers of Jews, which were supposedly based on empirical evidence, helped unite the Christian social body fragmented by rational empiricism and the heresies it spawned.

Empirical reason, and its threat to the Christian belief system, clearly plays a similar role in the Orientalism of the late Olifant
medieval epic. Saracens repeatedly challenge Christian dogma claiming that it is irrational, and Christians respond that Saracens are so self-indulgent that they no longer understand reason because they have subjected themselves to the tyranny of the flesh. For instance, in one passage Raffaele da Verona suggests that it is the Saracens' earthly desires that keep them from understanding Christian faith; talking about Saracen priests and clerics, he says "... che tot le trexor de cist segle non li porent contenter, tant est lor cupidités e lor avaricie" [. . . that all the treasure of the world could not content them, so great is their cupidity and avarice] (1:116,ll.13-14). Reason is so closely tied to the Christian cause, that in a moment of divine communication, the greatest epic hero of them all, Roland, learns that the first letter of his name stands for "raixon" or reason (1: 398,ll.13-14).

In her research on the rise of the eucharistic cult, Miri Rubin has shown how the host was used to symbolize the transcendental unity of the Christian community and to encourage the expulsion of impure elements—Jews, heretics, and witches—from the social body (56-57). Likewise, the Virgin's body, particularly its purity and incorruptibility, is used as a symbol of transcendental unity in the late medieval epic to explain away the variation and diversity of experience.

A community's fear of bodily pollution derives from either an external threat to the social order or from its own internal conflicts and contradictions. The ubiquitous presence of the Virgin in *Aquilon* not only represents anxiety over the possible blurring of boundaries between West and East, but also between the categories of the West's own social system. Mary Douglas discusses both "a kind of sex pollution which expresses a desire to keep the body (physical and social) intact," and "[a]nother kind of sex pollution [that] arises from the desire to keep straight the internal lines of the social system" (140). The real hero of this epic is the Virgin. Her impenetrability is a response to the ambiguity created by the text's multiple hybrid figures and cultural cross-dressers; even Roland disguises himself, first as a merchant and later as a woman, to deceive his enemies. To quote Douglas again:
"Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise" (162). It is the role of the Virgin Mary, then, to reestablish the social hierarchies that had been disrupted, making everyone subservient to aristocratic, heterosexual Christian men.

These texts describe ideal masculinity as embodied in an elite class of aristocratic, heterosexual Christian knights. Yet during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the institution of chivalry in Italian communes undergoes important changes. For instance, although Florence had always expected knights to cover the expenses of maintaining a horse for combat, they did not necessarily need to ride it into battle, but could instead pay someone to fight for them (Cardini 25-26). This substitution of men of lower socioeconomic status for tided patricians in the art of warfare threatened the elite masculine ideal that the knight represented. It also exposed chivalry as a performance of professional cross-dressing that did not necessarily correspond to a coherent, internal identity. Epic writers face this threat by refiguring the characteristics necessary for ideal masculinity. Because rhetorical skills are the talents necessary for the new mercantile and administrative classes, including the epic writers themselves, those skills in epic heros such as Roland and Guerrino become external signs of a chivalric identity to which other social groups must submit.

In late medieval epic, the Saracen knights play the pleasure-seeking sodomites to the rational Christians, but the descriptions of queer sexuality in the imaginary East and in contemporary Florence share several tendencies. According to San Bernardino, Tuscan sodomites, like the Saracens depicted in the epic tradition, were also guilty of gambling, drinking, and gluttony. He even tells the druggists that they should stop selling sweets such as marzipan to young men so they will not share in the sin of creating "bad" adolescents (Cannarozzi 2: 45-46).

As noted earlier, the Franciscan preacher also argues that Tuscans are famous for sodomy because their culture encourages young men to remain single and idle. He suggests that delaying marriage and a professional career leads to the sodomitical

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lifestyle. This same explanation of queer sexuality exists in another early-fifteenth-century Italian epic that narrates the story of Formosa, an Amazonian warrior: Ms. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Med. Palat. 101, vol.2. Despite her impressive military and rhetorical skills, Formosa winds up advocating the subordinate status of women in the heterosexual couple. As a young woman, Formosa learns that the Sultan of Babylonia has created "el giardino senza femine" [the garden without women] (f. 14v). No woman is allowed to enter it under the threat of death. Formosa is clearly outraged by this prohibition and takes it upon herself to open this exclusively masculine space to women. All this seems like a direct threat to the naturalized gender order until Formosa reaches the garden, enters in disguise as a knight, and is propositioned by a dirty old Saracen who, the text explicitly tells us, does not like women and believes Formosa is a man:

Molti si maravigliavano della sua belleça ..
Luchanfera, il quale era u[n] saraino che pocho
a grado avea il sesso feminile . . . l'andò a vedere
e pavegli una bella chosa . . . . Allora il vechio
lusurioso, credendo lui fusse maschio, lo prese
p[er] la mano e menòllo alla sua tavola . . . (f. 16r)

[Many of the Saracens marvelled at his (Formosa's) beauty . . . Luchanfera, who had little regard for the feminine sex . . . went to see him (Formosa) and he seemed a beautiful thing . . . . Then the old lustful man, believing that Formosa was a man, took him by the hand and led him to his table.]

This proposition makes clear that Formosa's upcoming battle is not just to support "l'onore delle donne" or the honor of ladies but also to defend the heterosexual couple, threatened by the Saracen sodomites who frequent the garden (f. 15v). Queer sexuality, therefore, is described as misogynistic; the Saracen sodomites seek out men because they despise women. Such
constructions of both sodomy and Islam distract from the misogyny and homophobia of Christianity, that is, the notion that queer sexual or religious practices render men effeminate and weak like women. Sodomites are portrayed as enemies of women, and the heterosexual couple as their liberation. San Bernardino also encourages this antagonism in at least one of his sermons when he compares sodomites to the snake that separated Adam and Eve. He goes on to say that:

... è la natura de le donne, di volere male
a' sodomitti, come i sodomitti vogliono male
a le donne. Inimicizia è fra loro: l’uno odia l’altro. . . .

(Bargellini 910)

[... it is woman's nature to dislike sodomites, just as sodomites dislike women. Enmity exists between them: one hates the other.]

He then concludes by encouraging women to help in the purging of sodomites from their homes and city.

As this sermon suggests, San Bernardino often preached about the importance of marriage, depicting it as the divinely sanctioned institution that bolsters the new mercantile economy. Men should go out and collect masserizia or household goods, while women should maintain it (Cannarozzi 1: 419). If men do not marry, not only will they be attracted to the sodomitical lifestyle, but their homes and possessions will deteriorate.

While San Bernardino describes the heterosexual couple as the base of the new mercantile economy, the new socioeconomic order paradoxically discouraged men from marrying early. Young men living in the city often did not marry until they were between 26 and 30 years of age because they first needed to accumulate a significant amount of capital to establish a household. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber's research on the Florentine catasto or census of 1427 showed that Tuscan cities had a large population of unattached young men, many of whom
seemed happy to be living without the responsibilities of a wife and family (222-23). In addition, Michael Rocke's work on the "Office of the Night," the court created in fifteenth-century Florence to investigate and punish sodomites, suggests that Florentines did not conceive of homoeroticism as an exclusive orientation but rather as "part of distinct stages in their life course, above all adolescence and the long period of youthful bachelorhood" (121). In a similar vein, Maria Serena Mazzi states that young men in Florence matured in such a homosocial community that they developed a group identity "in cui l'elemento femminile appare come qualcosa di sconosciuto e di lontano" [in which the feminine element appears like something unknown and distant] (130; my translation). Research on sexual practices in Venice illustrates a similar pattern. As in Florence, there existed a large population of unmarried men: nearly half of adult male nobles were bachelors (Chojnacki 78). In the patrician culture of Renaissance Venice, men who did not take on the responsibilities of husband and father could not take on leadership roles, but instead "were locked into the lower echelons of the patriciate's official activity" (Chojnacki 81). Although at times young men seem to have chosen to abdicate familial responsibilities in exchange for greater freedom, often they were forced to remain bachelors so that the family's patrimony could be passed on intact to a brother. Thus, these men could never achieve ideal masculinity, but at the same time "the denial (or rejection) of patriarchy could loosen the tethers of conformity to the requirements of mainstream patrician manhood" (Chojnacki 83).

The Italian epics analyzed in this essay depict young unmarried men in search of an identity within a patriarchal hierarchy. These epics follow closely the model established by an Old French subgenre, the *enfances chansons de geste*, which describe the youth of epic heroes. The protagonist of such narratives participates in a series of highly conventionalized adventures: the noble child is exiled from his homeland and raised by non-noble or Saracen parents, he then reveals his true aristocratic character
through service to a foreign prince, reunites with his biological parents, and eventually regains control of his homeland (Wolfzettel 325-27). Such biographical tales first became popular in France at the turn of the thirteenth century and then were copied in several countries, including Italy (Shen 182-86).

Besides the exploits described above, many of these heroes also fall in love with a Saracen princess before returning to their native cities. Marriage is often an important event in these narratives because in order to revitalize his lineage, the hero must produce children. In her exhaustive study of this subgenre, Lucia Simpson Shen concludes that *enfances* epics focus on the success of the family, rather than on just the individual hero: "The social situation is unstable, and the fundamental theme of the action is that the hero must establish a rightful place in society not only for himself but for his family—his parents, on the one hand, and his children, on the other—in a word, for his *lignage*" (201). She hypothesizes that this type of *chanson de geste* was particularly popular around the turn of the thirteenth century in France because it expressed the anxieties and desires of "a coalition of lesser nobles and those who sought enoblement" (233). These were young warriors who had not inherited land, and, thus, were forced to leave home in order to acquire or maintain a noble status.

Shen characterizes the *enfances* epics at the height of their popularity in France as optimistic texts because they represent how young warriors succeed in establishing a lasting lineage. She attributes the happy endings of these tales to their production during a time of great prosperity in France. On the other hand, she finds that the *enfances* epics of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century change in character, as the protagonists seem more "helpless" and depend on the supernatural to achieve their goals (265-66). *Aquilon* is a particularly good example of this tendency since both the success of the Christian cause as well as of the tide hero depend less on the knights' accomplishments than on divine aid. Despite their different endings, both the early and late *enfances* narratives in France focus on the obstacles
presented to young men as they try to achieve their culture's notion of ideal masculinity. As mentioned above, like late medieval France, both fifteenth-century Florence and Venice, the areas in which Guerrino and Aquilon were produced, also had significant populations of young bachelors who faced difficulties in joining the state's patriarchy. The great appeal of enfances narratives in late medieval Italy, therefore, also had to do with how these epics expressed the anxieties created in a culture where young men dream of controlling their own destiny, but know that their future success will be largely determined by their place in the family hierarchy and their clan's status in the community.

Both Guerrino and Aquilon attempt to prove their masculinity with arms and rhetoric while searching for their biological fathers and birthrights. In order to achieve such ends, however, they must first free themselves from the queer practices of the decidedly effeminate Saracens, and from the homosocial relationships of bachelorhood. While Aquilon renounces his sword, pledges chastity and decides to join a religious order to expiate the sins he committed against Christianity as a Saracen, Guerrino marries before he takes over his role as family patriarch. Guerrino's destiny is not surprising considering that on several occasions he uses his rhetorical skills to deliver sermons about the importance of family as he searches for his own patrilinear birthright. In each case, the epic hero's ambiguous social status as bachelor ends when he takes his place within the Christian social order.

Both San Bernardino's sermons and the Italian epic suggest that queer sexuality exists because of social forces—young men living in exclusively male spaces. Yet, at the same time these texts also posit the notion that heterosexuality alone is natural. The incessant condemnation of sodomy as contra naturam reiterated by epic writers, preachers, and even local governments in late medieval Tuscany was a response to the socioeconomic conditions that permitted, and at times obligated, young men to spend a great deal of time outside the ideal of heterosexual marriage. The need to continuously redefine sodomy as
unnatural emerged because the Tuscan social customs exposed both heterosexuality and sodomy as cultural, rather than natural, practices.  

As participants in the "queer" mercantile economy that bore fruit without physical labor, men of northern and central Italy had a reputation as effeminate cowards who could not live up to the masculine ideal of chivalry. By extension, these stereotypical merchants and administrators were also known as sodomites. Boccaccio plays on this stereotype in the famous story of the depraved notary, Ser Cepparello (Dec. 1,1). The Italian epic writers responded to these accusations by helping to redefine the traits necessary for ideal masculinity to include not only reason and rhetorical skills, but also marriage to either a religious order or a woman. Orientalism plays a role in this modification of gender roles, since the effeminate and at times queer Saracens provide the contrast needed to highlight the new intellectual and domestic ideal of masculinity embodied in the Christian heroes.

R.I. Moore's book on the "persecuting society" of the late middle ages includes a chapter entitled "Power and Reason" in which the historian discusses how the centralization and systemization of legal, administrative and religious powers not only represented the victory of reason over superstition, truth over custom, or centralization over particularism, but "were also triumphs of the expert, of the clerks over the illiterate" (138-39). He goes on to state that the persecution of oppressed groups, which increased in this period, stemmed from the litterati's fear of contamination by the rustici. At the beginning of his epic tale of Guerrino, Andrea stated that, although of humble origins, he had earned a certain status through his work as a litterato. As the new administrative and mercantile classes gained power both in France and in the Italian city-states, the myths that had defined and bolstered ideal heterosexual masculinity changed to reflect the characteristics of these new, powerful social groups. The narratives needed to justify some social mobility, while maintaining strict dichotomies between litterati and rustici, real men and sodomites, and Christians and Saracens. Reason and
order, what Jacques de Vitry had referred to as "the straight way," sustain these ideal dichotomies despite the blurring of their boundaries in the new social structure.

NOTES

1. Reprinted with permission of the University Press of Florida. A longer version of this essay appears in The Chivalric Epic in Medieval Italy.

2. All citations are from Raffaele da Verona, ed. P. Wunderli.

3. Ms. Riccardiana 2226, f. 41 r. All subsequent quotations of Guerrino il Meschino will be taken from the same manuscript. I have added accents and punctuation following modern usage to make the quotations easier to read. I am indebted to Gloria Allaire for allowing me to read her transcription of this lengthy manuscript. All translations from the manuscript in this essay, however, are my own.

4. Punctuation and capitals are added to the transcription here (note of editor, LZM).

5. For example, Andrea describes their war cries as "bestiali più che ordinate" (f. 3v).

6. Although many medieval definitions of sodomy included all non-procreative sexual practices, by the High Middle Ages the term meant homosexual activity in everyday language. See Boswell 66.

7. Since the medieval exegetical tradition often conflated sodomy with other types of "unnatural" behavior, including the misuse of rhetoric, several critics have suggested that the sinners of Inferno 15 and 16 are guilty of non-sexual sins: see, for example, Kay, Dante's Swift and Strong and Vance, "The Differing Seed."

8. Jeffrey Richards says that sodomy was seen "almost exclusively as a sin of the city, the court, and the upper and professional classes" (138).
9. For details about the long history of this legend among Christian theologians, crusaders, and poets, see Eckhardt 77-88.

10. See Thomas's edition of the *Entrée* (1: 133-49). Antonio Franceschetti traces they development of this famous debate from its appearance in the *Entrée*, through later versions in *Li Fatti de Spagna* and *La Spagna* (205-06). For an analysis of the Roland/Ferragu debate, see Bradley-Cromey 149-54.

11. This same debate appears in the *Entre d’Espagne*. See Bradley-Cromey 150-52 and Adler 107-09.

12. In a sermon to the Florentines, San Bernardino says that men who do not marry become sodomites: "Guai a chi non toglie moglie avendo el tempo a cagione legittima! chè non pigliandola doventano sodomiti" (Cannarozzi 1: 416). He repeats the same notion in a sermon to the Sienese, saying that husbands should not spend time away from their wives because they might become sodomites: "Non si díe partire il marito dalla donna, come molti fanno, the stanno' tre o quattro o sei anni di fuore... e tu stai con disonestá e in peccato, e talvolta in vizio di sodomia . . ." (Bargellini 402). Jeffrey Richards notes "that the medieval popular perception of homosexuality was that it was something that occurred in the absence of women or marriage . . ." (138).

13. All quotations are taken from this manuscript.

14. I have added punctuation and accents to the quotation.

15. Steven Kruger discusses "how medieval anti-Semitic and homophobic discourses... operated through an association between the (religiously or sexually) queer and the feminine, misogynistically conceived" (33).

16. While explaining why he will not rest until he finds his true lineage, Guerrino insists that all parents should be respected for having followed God's divine commandments (f. 81 r).

17. For a brief summary of the Florentine government's persecution of sodomites in the first half of the fifteenth century, see Trexler 379-80.
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