Heiress of Fiction: Marfisa and the Macabre Legacy of Chivalric Ferrara

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This essay traces parallel developments in the myths and legends associated with the historical noblewoman Marfisa d'Este (1554–1608) and her literary counterpart Marfisa, the warrior knight from chivalric romance epic poetry. Through the Este princess's embrace of her cross-dressing fictional double in courtly performance, alongside the evolution of the figure "Marfisa bizzarra" in Italian mock epic, the intermedial afterlives of these two figures reinterpreted the women's brazen, autonomous agency as nefarious, destructive desire. Fantasies of decadent-turned-grim Ferrara, Marfisa's native city in poetic and historical terms, guided overlapping acts of reception and transmission between the fifteenth and twenty-first centuries.

INTRODUCTION

The Palazzina Marfisa d'Este on the Corso della Giovecca in Ferrara, not far from the towering Castello Estense erected at the heart of the historic city center, may be unknown to many visitors to the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. Built after 1559 at the behest of Francesco d'Este (1516–78), son of Alfonso I d'Este (1476–1534) and Lucrezia Borgia (1480–1519), the palazzina earned its title in 1578 when it was inherited by Francesco's daughter, Marfisa

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d'Este (1554–1608), the noblewoman and patron of the arts who turned her home into a veritable haven for leisure and spectacle. The structure has undergone a number of changes and renovations since the sixteenth century, the most extensive of which received commemoration in 1938 with a plaque that hangs on the building's garden-facing exterior walls.[1] Here in this outdoor space, a fixture of peculiar significance has long remained. Standing in Marfisa's garden is a fifteenth-century stone well that plays an iconic role in the myth concerning her legacy-turned-legend. The ghastly details of what has come to be known as the "Ferrarese legend" ("leggenda ferrarese") proceed as follows: each night at the stroke of midnight, a green light flashes within the palazzina's walls. Marfisa emerges from this radiant flash, riding naked atop a fire-stoked chariot. The Este princess sallies forth with her cavalry escort: skeleton jockeys mounted on red-eyed horses. Together they coordinate a lethal manhunt for sensual prey, luring their chosen victim back to the palazzina for nocturnal delight. After Marfisa tires of her temporary lover, she will lead him to the stone well in the garden—its edges lined with razors—and throw him over, leaving him to bleed to death. The following night, at the sign of the green flash, Marfisa's sexual-skeletal conquests crawl out of their stone grave, transformed into lustful bones mad to do her bidding, and join the princess's quest for her next unsuspecting target.[2]

Seductively visual language pervades this myth, which has led various artists to fantasize about its possible means of depiction. Take, for example, Gabriele Turola's (b. 1945) *Marfisa arriva a mezzanotte* (Marfisa arrives at midnight) (fig. 1) and its striking juxtaposition of macabre chaos in the painting's foreground and symmetrical Renaissance architecture figured in the top left background. The palazzina is recognizable by its three central arches, painted in colors that complement Marfisa's exposed skin and the miserable remains of her howling ex-boyfriends. The tale's transformative green flash—a mirage-like, flickering illumination evoking the visual phenomenon of actual green flashes occurring on the horizon in the final seconds of a setting sun—blurs the viewer's perception of time and prompts a series of metamorphoses that extend across Turola's canvas. The artist's Bacchante-like princess chaperones three skeletal huntsmen, and is herself represented threefold: as the stripped driver reining in her errant conquests, as the blushing face of the chariot upon which she sits, and as the combined human-animal figure charging ahead of the pack. This sequence of Marfisas transmits Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895–1975) carnivalesque

[1] See Agnelli; Bombardi; Lazzari; Visser Travagli; and Masetti Zannini, 231–39.

[2] The precise date when the myth entered into circulation remains unclear, though its earliest visual renderings date to the second half of the nineteenth century. See Bombardi, 5; and Cavicchi, 333–34.

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Figure 1. Gabriele Turola. *Marfisa arriva a mezzanotte*. Cover image of Giovanni D'Onofrio's *Marfisa d'Este Cybo: Storia e leggenda* (detail). Ferrara: Este Edition, 2004.

body as it refuses to submit to typical forms of categorization, whether human, machine, or animal. Observing each of these bodies in unison, it becomes impossible to settle on whether Marfisa is a runaway from or conspirator with Death. The Bakhtinian grotesque, species-confounding image darting across the garden manifests Marfisa's entanglement in the processes of "negation and destruction . . . affirmation [and] the birth of something new."[3] This hybrid form will prove to be a pertinent conceptual reference not only for the woman

[3] Bakhtin, 1984, 62.

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captured by Turola's imagination but for the many macabre Marfisas of interest to fiction and history, and the porous cracks between the two.

The legend's fantastical grammar and equestrian imagery of (k)nightly escapades cannot but call to mind the boundary-crossing and category-defying virago Marfisa from chivalric romance epic poetry. Indeed, it is no accident that there exists a perceivable overlap between these two figures: one a libidinous manslayer, the other an abstinent champion of women. The productive tensions that inhabit these identities constitute the core of the analysis that follows. The contradictions between "woman as an historical being and as a symbolic instrument" collapse and multiply around the Marfisa figure.[4] This essay traces the ways in which Marfisa d'Este embraced the behaviors and reputation of her cross-dressing fictional double from *Orlando furioso* (The madness of Orlando) (1532) by Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), the bestselling poem of the Italian Renaissance, and its widely popular precursor, *Orlando innamorato* (Orlando in love) (1495) by Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441–94).[5] The genealogy of Marfisa personalities patterned in the reception of Boiardo's and Ariosto's poetry, evolving alongside that of the *querelle des femmes*, is unique in its many intersections and contradictions.[6] The inability to locate fixity in Marfisa's character, despite her name's messaging as *fixed* on Mars (Mar-*fisa*), resonates with Bakhtin's conception of unfinalizability, or the consistently inconsistent flux of an unfinishable, inconclusive self. Bakhtin's language of "the chain of meaning [that] continues infinitely" applies to the many configurations of Marfisa, who are "renewed again and again, as though [she] were being reborn."[7] This phenomenon is apt for a figure crafted in an era named for rebirth. The series of prismatic Marfisas under analysis here embodies the unfinalizable as a signifier unchained to an enduring signified, an enigma of representations impossible to conclude.

The many adoptions and adaptations of the Marfisa figure reveal a tension between her mutable afterlives and the stubbornness with which poetry first inscribed her character's unshakeable grip on the code of chivalry. Despite or perhaps because of chivalric Marfisa's dedication to this pact's social universality, her very placelessness excites a "cosmopolitan" mobility, as suggested by Jo Ann Cavallo.[8] The inability to place Marfisa geographically, religiously, or as

[4] Robinson, 3.

[5] For these poems' popularity and canonization, especially the *Furioso*'s, see Javitch.

[6] For Ariosto and *querelle des femmes* discourse, see McLucas; Shemek, 1998; Finucci, 1992, 107–254; Finucci, 2003, 159–88; Ascoli, 2010, 2011; and Lucioli.

[7] Bakhtin, 1986, 146. For readings of Bakhtin that engage with other aspects of chivalric poetry's women, see Segre, 61–84; Shemek, 1998, 7–8; and Stoppino, 149.

[8] Cavallo, 2013, 70.

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decidedly Eastern or European aligns with her mobile, intermedial reception. Following Lars Elleström's observation that "intermediality [is] the precondition for all mediality,"[9] my reasons for describing Marfisa's reception as rooted in intermedial complexity are threefold: first, to consider the mutually informing relations, explicit and implicit, inherent within and which emerge from literary, historical, artistic, and musical examples beyond the institutional framework of interdisciplinarity and its largely tradition-informed comparative methods; second, to insist on the bridge prefix *inter* and its role in the horizontal genealogies that stimulate dialogue and reciprocity, since it applies equally to the interconnected media that sustained Marfisa's protean transformations and to her character's self-conscious relationship to such change over time;[10] and, finally, to suggest that intermedial dynamics are precisely those which catalyzed Marfisa's polysemous mutations across fiction and history, just as they did for the varied modes of remembering that still haunt Renaissance Ferrara today. To be sure, just as "there are no media borders given by nature, but we need borders to talk about intermediality," Renaissance interactions across media antedate the need for disciplines to talk about interdisciplinarity.[11] The models and modes of thinking required as part of disciplinary discussions, the majority of which do not travel far from the enclosed circuits within academic scholarship, relate to formal institutional structures whose histories have only recently become more receptive to the intermedial relations through which they were first formed. For this reason, intermediality is a productive frame for questioning the very disciplinary divisions that have determined scholarly interaction with media over time, and for embracing alternative comparative methods more widely applicable to and evidenced in one's period of study.

If scholars have cast Marfisa in opposition to her defeated or expired counterparts in works by classical and other early modern poets, it is her ability to persevere that sets her character apart.[12] As Catherine Bates has observed, "it is a quintessential if not defining characteristic of epic to refer back to and revise what went before."[13] In this respect, Marfisa may be seen to operate as a microcosm of the epic form and its effects. As sites of intertextual interplay, the epic genre and its Marfisa character are alike in the genealogical reflections they produce.[14] It is epic's project to transform, so as to efface, the perceivable boundaries between history and legend, a methodology at work in Boiardo's and

[9] Elleström, 4.

[10] My understanding of "horizonal" and "mixed" genealogies follows Stoppino, 178.

[11] Elleström, 27–28.

[12] See Robinson, 179–88; Roche, Jr.; and Cavallo, 2013, 70–82.

[13] Bates, ix.

[14] See Roche, Jr.; and Chimène Bateman.

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Ariosto's interweaving of historical fiction and fictional history.[15] The edges between these categories wear thin when considering the confirmed forgery that lent authority, however contrived, to both the *Innamorato* and the *Furioso*. Cast as an eyewitness account of Charlemagne's military campaigns against pagan armies, the twelfth-century chronicle *Historia Caroli Magni et Rotholand* by Turpin (d. 800), Archbishop of Rheims, may have partly authorized early modern "Orlando matter," yet it denotes a product of authorial-historical ambiguity.[16] In a genre so carefully invested in the stitchwork of fact and fiction, yet deeply aware of and surely dependent upon its very unreliability, where do characters lie who play no substantial role in a poem's dynastic trajectory?

Enter Marfisa. Often celebrated with less enthusiasm than the woman-warrior Bradamante, Marfisa has been more frequently recognized as an icon of chivalric observance rather than a character of profound emotional and psychological development. And yet, as Pio Rajna suggested, the Marfisa of Boiardo's imagination "deserves . . . to be declared the most ingenious creation that Italian romance poetry has produced in this genre."[17] Within chivalric epic's genealogical pull, Marfisa occupies a unique position. Unlike Bradamante, the legendary founder of the Este dynasty and eventual sister-in-law of this essay's protagonist, Marfisa is not responsible for any genealogical act. Rather, it is in the genealogical patterning of the Marfisa figure and its intersections with that of Marfisa d'Este that dynastic work upon her character is performed. Marfisa serves as essential fiction to epic's history. Her ability to evade mortality, whether through military prowess or spectral preservation over time, is a metaphor for fiction itself, its survivability, and its capacity for renewal. This ability coheres with the experiences of many women from epic poetry—classical and Renaissance: they are often subject to mutating "metamorphoses" that underscore, by way of rendering more complex, their ambiguous status.[18]

In the reconstructions of her figure across media, the tension between Marfisa's fixity and fragility grows increasingly more taut. As evidenced in Turola's artistic example, her body escapes indexing, yet it is distinct from the

[15] See Ascoli, 1987, 2001; Casadei; Quint; and Pavlova, 17–65. While not the principal focus of this present study, for the long history of the generic debates that came after Ariosto's poem, see Parker, 16–53; Zatti, 1990, 1996; and Cavallo, 2004.

[16] See Zatti, 1990, 173–212.

[17] "merita . . . d'essere dichiarata la creazione più geniale che abbia prodotto in questo genere la poesia romanzesca italiana": Rajna, 48. The critic treats Ariosto's Marfisa with considerably less zeal. For Rajna's reading of this character as "a reprehensible hybridisation of literary types . . . precisely what makes Marfisa (and Bradamante) so interesting to modern readers," see Mac Carthy, 76. All translations are the author's except where otherwise noted.

[18] Suzuki, 1.

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symbols of death that surround her. If the macabre defines the Marfisa on the canvas as a "site of anxiety," she appears similarly in poetry through her androgynous status.[19] Such stylization guided new questions as part of the *querelle des femmes*, the salty strands of which subjected some early modern women's legacies not only to textual and visual transformations but to grotesque misfigurations. In forms not dissimilar to the profoundly anti-woman sentiments expressed at the height of the *querelle des femmes*, the negative reception of the real-life Marfisa d'Este aligns with the stories of scandalous ruin that shadow other *femmes fatales* of roughly the same period. Among the most notorious examples is Lucrezia Borgia, Marfisa's grandmother, whose life and legacy has reached popular audiences across a variety of media from opera to television. One might further think of Parisina Malatesta (1404–25), beheaded by her husband, early Este noble Niccolò III (1383–1441), for an affair she maintained with her illegitimate stepson.[20] Beyond Italy it was not uncommon for women in power to absorb vocabularies of bitter criticism: one needs to remember only the piercing accusations by John Knox (ca. 1514–72) against the "monstrous regiment" of Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603).[21] To be sure, neither of the Marfisa figures under analysis here held measurable political sway. Though Boiardo labels her a queen, the Marfisa of poetic fiction wields minimal jurisdiction over others, just as Marfisa d'Este's cousinship with Duke Alfonso II (1533–97) kept her securely at bay from the court's diplomatic and military maneuverings.[22] A sixteenth-century portrait that may be of Marfisa d'Este depicts a modest, perfectly appropriate—austere, even—noblewoman (fig. 2), her every detail frozen in time, preserving her excellence.[23] It is clear that these specific Marfisas did not radiate an overwhelmingly alarming political presence; among the principle interests here is what prompted such fear in their critical reception later on.

Exemplary scholarship by Eleonora Stoppino rightfully prioritizes Bradamante as the woman knight central to Ariosto's weaving of history into

[19] Binski, 126.

[20] Authors and artists discussed later in this study (D'Annunzio; Magrini; Tumiati; and Veneziani) engaged similarly with Parisina's figure in artistic and dramatic representations.

[21] See Robinson, 114–90.

[22] Marfisa's involvement in courtly life differed considerably from that of her great-aunt, Isabella d'Este (1474–1539), whose strong hand shaped courtly politics in Mantua. See Shemek, 2017, 1–19. For Isabella's patronage of Ariosto, see Regan.

[23] The original portrait was loaned to the Palazzina Marfisa for its public opening in 1938. When it returned to Mantua's Palazzo Ducale, the Cassa di Risparmio di Ferrara—the institution that sponsored the palazzina's twentieth-century renovations—commissioned Mario Capuzzo (1902–78) to make a copy of it. The question of the sitter's identity continues to spark scholarly debate. See Visser Travagli, 210–12.

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Figure 2. Anthonis Mor. Copy of (?) *Ritratto di dama con fiore in mano*, ca. 1570–80. Mantua, Palazzo Ducale. Oil on canvas. Inv. gen. 6870. Courtesy of Palazzo Ducale, Mantua.

legend and vice versa, responsible for bearing "honest women, mothers of emperors . . . defenders and solid pillars of illustrious houses" ("pudiche donne, / madri d'imperatori . . . / reparatrici e solide colonne / de case illustri").[24] Emphasis in this study inclines toward Marfisa and her role as—I will

[24] Ariosto, 2006, 1:440–41 (*Orlando furioso* 13.57).

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argue—Ferrara's patron character. If, as Stoppino carefully explains, Ariosto "attached a profound importance to the role of women in perpetuating [the Este] dynasty," the joint projects of history and fiction would assign Marfisa the role of making and unmaking it.[25] To better contextualize this proposal, it is useful to recall Roland Barthes's (1915–80) critical notion of myth. When the complexities of unique contexts are simplified (or overlooked), Barthes argues, myths enter into circulation, accommodating a naturalized semiological system that "transforms history into nature."[26] The myth of Greta Garbo (1905–90), as addressed by Barthes, closely mirrors the circumstances facing Marfisa. The powerful "fascination of perishable figures" that emanates from "Garbo's face . . . when the clarity of carnal essences [gives] way to a lyric expression of Woman" applies to Marfisa's pendulating sway between abstraction and human, fiction and history.[27] The "passage from terror to charm" Barthes identifies with the twentieth-century Hollywood starlet is one from "terror to charm" and back again in the figure of Marfisa.[28] The cross-pollinating processes of preservation and distortion turned the historical and fictional Marfisas from emblems of exemplarity into unrecognizable icons of demonic decadence. While mock epic's parodic translation of an independent virago into a distressed devotee of Cupid's arrow plays swiftly into the predictions of the literary imagination, that of a dance-adoring mother into a diabolical murderess on the loose raises perhaps more scrutinizing brows. Yet such contrasts are indeed essential to the many Marfisas and their rampant effects. Encompassing what Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood have labeled the "anachronic" quality of time-tested images, Marfisa acts as the site of convergence for "incompatible models [held] in suspension without deciding."[29] Valiant Marfisa thrives alongside her henchmen-hiring counterpart, with no need for a winner to come out on top.

The Marfisa figures in this study are a kaleidoscope of dashed expectations and juxtapositions: to whatever extent Marfisa's reputation precedes her, she is a character unrestricted by her past. Constantly shifting, she becomes recognizable in her very unrecognizability. That Marfisa's genealogy of textual and historical transformations begins from the pages of chivalric romance epic calls to mind Barbara Fuchs's framing of romance as a "strategy of errancy and multiplicity."[30] An errant and multiplicious figure herself, Marfisa embodies the three distinct parts that constitute chivalric romance epic, just as she does the

[25] Stoppino, 12–13.
[26] Barthes, 240.
[27] Barthes, 74.
[28] Barthes, 74.
[29] Nagel and Wood, 18.
[30] Fuchs, 72.

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very metamorphoses that animate their ambiguities. The arguments that follow locate Marfisa's errancy and multiplicity within the contrasting contexts that saw in these traits proof of either admirable exemplarity or aberrant corruptibility, at times in ways that even her poetic creators had anticipated.

THE MATTER OF ORIGINS, OR WHICH MARFISA IS IT?

The reason for studying Marfisa d'Este through the lens of poetic fiction is that her origin derives from poetry itself. First cousins of Duke Alfonso II, Marfisa and her sister Bradamante d'Este (d. 1624), whose girlhood portraits appear on the walls of the Ferrarese palazzina (figs. 3 and 4), were named after two of the most popular female characters in Italian literary history.[31] Marfisa and Bradamante d'Este, whose family sponsored chivalric poetry, became embodiments themselves of that patronage's fictional production. The girls' images appear within the remodeled palazzina, not far from scenes inspired by classical myth. These include the rapes of Persephone and the huntress Diana, and two eighteenth-century depictions of the Battle of the Amazons. Myth, fiction, and their figural overlaps speak to and across one another in Marfisa's modern home, as they do in Ferrara itself. In addition to its rulers named after classical heroes, Ercole (Hercules) d'Este (1431–1505) among them, the city has long witnessed thematic continuity with the story of Phaethon, whose descent upon the nearby Po River created a series of motifs linking Ferrara to its land's fertile production. Yet, as Dennis Looney has demonstrated, elements from this myth reflect in the Este family's struggles to sustain its position in the tide-turning political climate between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The uncertainty at court quickly bred anxieties regarding "issues of paternity and the legitimacy of succession."[32] Marfisa's privileged belonging to the Este clan, yet sheltered distance from its responsibility to endure, granted her the latitude to behave at court as she most pleased.

Before historical and artistic fantasy would rewrite Marfisa d'Este's unconventionality as unacceptable, sixteenth-century poets for whom she served as a patron, such as Torquato Tasso (1544–95), applauded her alternative attitudes in encomiastic poetry. Tasso's sonnet *Questa leggiadra e gloriosa Donna* (This elegant and glorious woman), featured in his poetic commemoration of a recent portrait of the Este princess, likens her feminine

[31] Francesco d'Este, the girls' father, had collaborated on theatricals with Ariosto himself earlier in the sixteenth century, performing the prologue of the poet-playwright's *La Lena* when it premiered in 1528, and that of the *Cassaria* the following year. Their association no doubt contributed to Francesco's choice of names for his daughters. See Bertoni.

[32] Looney, 2. See also Bestor.

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Figure 3. Portrait of Marfisa d'Este as a girl, ca. 1560, attributed to Camillo Filippi (ca. 1500–74). Fresco. Loggetta dei Ritratti, Palazzina Marfisa d'Este, Ferrara, Emilia-Romagna, Italy. © A. De Gregorio / © NPL - DeA Picture Library / Bridgeman Images.

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Figure 4. Portrait of Bradamante d'Este as a girl, ca. 1560, attributed to Camillo Filippi (ca. 1500–74). Fresco. Loggetta dei Ritratti, Palazzina Marfisa d'Este, Ferrara, Emilia-Romagna, Italy. Author's photo.

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appearance to the iconic military garb of her perceivably more masculine counterpart:

> This elegant and glorious Woman,
> of lofty name and sharp mind,
> does not arm herself with lance nor shield,
> but triumphs and combats in braids and in a dress.
> And, majestic, she enchants every heart
> with her beautiful hand and head unveiled;
> reflecting upon this, I realize
> that she is the firm column for poetic flight.
> Yet, she is not unarmed, but her chaste bosom,
> which holds in disdain vain love,
> shields her with a most lucid diamond.
> Now who can depict her with true insight?
> What human artisan may convey the truth so that
> he would be worthy of such a divine work?[33]

Tasso's reference to Marfisa's "lofty name" ("nome altero") in his second verse recalls at once the noble status of the Este family and the personality trait (*alterezza*, or arrogance) with which Boiardo inaugurates this virago character.[34] Yet Tasso's Marfisa no longer has to take up arms to be seen as a chivalric figure pining for immortal glory; she is triumphant and beloved without asking permission.

Tasso includes mention of Marfisa d'Este elsewhere in his works, such that a certain friendship or professional partnership may be seen to have existed between the two. Marfisa d'Este fostered a similarly supportive relationship with the Lucchese poet and singer Leonora Bernardi (1559–1616), in whose *tragicomedia pastorale Clorilli* Marfisa features as an idol worthy of emulation. In act 2, Bernardi bestows upon her—code-named Cellia in the play—verses of encomiastic acclaim

[33] "Questa leggiadra e gloriosa Donna, / di nome altero e di pensier non crudo, / non ha per arme già lancia ne scudo; / ma trionfa e combatte in trecce e 'n gonna. / E imperiosa d'ogni cor s'indonna / con la man bella e co'l bel capo ignudo, / del caro velo, onde fra me conchiudo, / ch'ella sia di valor salda colonna. / Pur inerme non è, ma'l casto petto, / lo qual si prende il vano amore à scherno / copre d'un lucidissimo diamante. / Hor chi ritrarlo puote à l'occhio interno? / Qual fabro humano à divin'opra eletto / d'assomigliare il ver fia che si vante?": Tasso, 7. Though the portrait by Filippo Paladini (1544–1614) has since gone missing, archival documentation confirms that it was sent to Vincenzo Gonzaga (1587–1612) for inclusion in his "gallery of beautiful women" ("Galleria delle Belle Dame"). See Visser Travagli, 211; and Masetti Zannini, 22.

[34] See Boiardo, 1:305–06, 312 (*Orlando innamorato* 1.16.28–30, 55). While the Este princess herself never rode to battle, women echoing the Marfisa character were active in various Italian military campaigns. See Tomalin; and Milligan.

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through the mouthpiece Licasta, who titles her "glory of Love, prize of the world, in whose beautiful visage lies eternal spring, . . . Cellia, in whose proud and honest gaze chaste love sparkles forth."[35] The perpetually renewing effects of "eternal spring" ("primavera eterna") inscribed upon Cellia's brow proleptically anticipate the renewing transformations of her figure over time. Yet fixity as a theme returns with some variation. When Licasta finds her gazing upon the Ligurian Sea, near the property owned by real-life Marfisa's second husband, Alderano II Cybo-Malaspina (1552–1606), Cellia's concentration reveals her historical double: "she fixed her lofty gaze upon the sea" ("in mar fissa tenea l'altere luci").[36] The language of haughtiness ("altere luci") has not traveled far from Marfisa's image, yet Bernardi arrays this trait for collective concerns.

Cellia-Marfisa's lofty gaze spurs philosophical musing about female solidarity. Assessing the affective tides that govern women's experiences of love, she critiques men's wavering attentions that only guarantee harmful repercussions for women. As she explains to her interlocutor Licasta, "no sooner does a guileless nymph unfurl the sails of her fine desires upon this sea . . . than, in an instant—unleashing the reins of the infinite horde of their voluble volitions—[men] throw her into such turmoil that she seems now to rise to meet the stars; now to tread the lowest point of the abyss, until finally she is miserably devoured by the unholy depths."[37] Echoing *querelle des femmes* rhetoric that cautions against the strategies of male deception, Cellia's words capture the heights and depths women (like Marfisa) can expect for trusting too much in men's constant inconstancy.

The interpretative flexibility that surrounded Marfisa's figure made her especially ripe for dramatic purposes. Her character's suitability for sixteenth-century actresses reveals itself everywhere in her figural legacy on stage. The identification between actress Barbara Flaminia and her literary-dramatic alter ego Marfisa, as Eric Nicholson has shown, lasted from onstage shows to offstage street fights. An eyewitness account of the nighttime brawl between groups of tussling actors in Manuta in 1566 compares Flaminia's stone-throwing to the

[35] "gloria d'Amor, pregio del mondo, / nel cui bel volto è primavera eterna, / . . . / Cel[l]ia, nel cui pudico altero sguardo / Amor casto sfavilla": Bernardi, 2023, 232–33 (*Clorilli* 2.5.85–89). All translations of *Clorilli* are by Anna Wainwright and appear in Cox-Sampson.

[36] Bernardi, 2023, 234–35 (*Clorilli* 2.5.126). For Marfisa's life in Massa and Carrara, see Masetti Zannini, 145–53; and Cox-Sampson, 18–24.

[37] "non sì tosto mal accorta ninfa / spiega le vele de su[o]i bei desire / per questo mar . . . che in un momento [gli uomini] allentando il freno / all'infinita schiera / delle volubil voglie / la travolgon in guise / che di toccar le stelle ora le sembra, / or del profondo abisso / la più profonda parte / premer col piede; alfine / in quell'empie voraggini assorbita / resta miseramente": Bernardi, 2023, 236–37 (*Clorilli* 2.5.155–67).

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"amazing feats" ("cose stupende") executed by the virago Marfisa.[38] Although the behavioral overlap between the dazzling *commedia* actress and the heroine from chivalric epic meant, as Nicholson notes, "to some extent, their own lives imitated art," this did not always generate positive responses.[39] In a letter dated June 1609, Giovan Battista Andreini (1576–1654), son of the famous diva Isabella Andreini (ca. 1562–1604), hostilely referred to Orsola Posmoni Cecchini (d. after 1620), an actress in a rival troupe, as a "Marfisa bizarra" (bizarre Marfisa), a dominant strand of Marfisa types to which I will return.[40]

The *Furioso*'s "valiant women" ("valorose donne") may have been especially attractive to *commedia dell'arte* actresses precisely because the warrior woman's fate avoided subservience to men.[41] The relative independence with which chivalric epic poetry inscribed Marfisa as a love-eschewing knight named for her fixedness on the Roman god of war proved especially influential for Venetian women writers intent on subverting social limitations. The unmarried women of the all-female dialogue *Il merito delle donne* (The worth of women, written in 1592, published in 1600) by Moderata Fonte (1555–92, born Modesta Pozzo) consider Marfisa an impeccable model of self-preservation.[42] Propelled by "encyclopedic meanderings," as Virginia Cox has noted, Fonte's interlocutors model intellectual freedom in ways that cohere with Margaret Tomalin's notion of the warring woman as an "index of emancipation."[43] In Marfisa's character, Tomalin suggests, one sees the "prime example of the independent woman: . . . she is tough, dedicated to a life of martial activity and still allowed to be beautiful."[44]

Leonora, the young widow who prefers death by drowning to the prospect of remarrying, wishes that contemporary women would conduct themselves in the manner of the Amazons, even dressing in the style of her preferred literary heroine: "I'd like to see us women arming ourselves like those Amazons of old and going into battle against men. . . . I'd wear an image of a phoenix on my helmet."[45] The swooning bride Helena, another interlocutor, moves promptly

[38] See the letter transcribed in Nicholson, 246n1.

[39] Nicholson, 249.

[40] Nicholson, 255. See also Denzel, 99–100.

[41] This is not to disregard the profoundly prolific early modern actresses who did pursue a life of marriage. See Laiena.

[42] The radiating influence of both of Ariosto's women warriors, Marfisa and Bradamante, reveals itself in commanding ways in Fonte's chivalric romance, *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (Thirteen cantos of Floridoro). See Finucci, 1994a; and Kolsky.

[43] Cox, 1997, 9; Ray, 73–93.

[44] Tomalin, 16.

[45] "Vorrei che noi donne tutte si armassimo come quelle antiche Amazzone ed andassimo a combattere contra questi uomini. . . . Porterei sopra l'elmo la Fenice": Fonte, 1988, 163; Fonte, 1997, 230.

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to guess for whom Leonora expresses admiration: "so you'd be emulating that great Marfisa, who had the phoenix as her emblem."[46] An attentive reader of the *Furioso*, Helena cites the reasons for Marfisa's choice of emblem from the poem: "the crest on her helmet was a phoenix, which she either wore out of pride, to communicate her unique martial prowess, or else to congratulate her chaste intention to live forever without a spouse."[47] The self-generating potential of Marfisa's avian symbol ensures a life of self-sufficiency desired by the independent minds of Fonte's circle.

Intertextual dialogue with Ariosto's poem gives the cue elsewhere to women's rejection of subservience. In canto 26 of the *Furioso*, the only occasion where Marfisa appears clothed in feminine attire, she makes clear her right to autonomous movement to the knight Mandricardo, who otherwise assumes her to be his personal possession. Defending the self-guided elections of sovereign desire, the virago bites back against Mandricardo's presumptions: "I am not his, nor am I anyone else's, but my own alone: therefore, let him who desires me, take me from myself."[48] Marfisa's arguments for self-preservation are modeled on the claim to negative liberty, or the freedom from subservience to others.[49] In Fonte's dialogue, this principle appears widely at play in Marfisa's exemplary status, which excites authorial aspirations in others. The group's scholarly Corinna composes and recites a sonnet, guided (it would seem) by the virago's air of defiance: "The heart that dwells within my breast is free: I serve no one, and belong to no one but myself."[50] Marfisa's anthem of autonomous self-governance amplifies Fonte's rhetoric of women's right to independence.

The role of the singularly independent woman was one Marfisa d'Este played in her city "that was itself a stage."[51] Marfisa and Bradamante d'Este were frequent performers in the court's chivalric entertainment culture that extended

[46] "Voi vorreste imitar quella gran Marfisa, di cui era la Fenice insegna": Fonte, 1988, 163; Fonte, 1997, 230.

[47] "sopra l'elmo una fenice porta; // o sia per sua superbia, dinotando / se stessa unica al mondo in esser forte, / o pur sua casta intenzïon lodando / di viver sempremai senza consorte": Ariosto, 2006, 2:1248 (*Orlando furioso* 36.17–18). For Marfisa's capacity to self-fulfill as linked to her supreme impenetrability, see Chimène Bateman. Although Ascoli reminds readers that "the twinship of Marfisa and Ruggiero undermines Marfisa's claim to phoenix-like uniqueness" (1987, 370n190), she appears nevertheless unique in this regard from her female counterparts.

[48] "Io sua non son, né d'altri son che mia: / dunque me tolga a me chi mi desia": Ariosto, 2006, 1:928 (*Orlando furioso* 26.79).

[49] Castiglione, 151–60.

[50] "Libero cor nel mio petto soggiorna, / Non servo alcun, né d'altri son che mia": Fonte, 1988, 18; Fonte, 1997, 49–50.

[51] Clubb, 345.

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from literary pages to musical-theatrical stages. With the arrival of Alfonso II's third wife, Duchess Margherita Gonzaga (1564–1618), occasions for women's performances greatly multiplied. Marfisa collaborated with Margherita—her cousin by marriage—in the all-female ensemble of dancers, the *balletto delle donne*, a complement to the court's internationally esteemed *concerto delle donne*.[52] The group's choreographed performances typically featured half of its members cross-dressed.[53] Marfisa and Bradamante stood out among the *balletto* stars, eager to sport virile attire that would identify their bodies with their poetic other halves. The Este women danced as "fighting female warriors" ("guerriere combattenti") in the wedding festivities held for Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613) and Eleonora d'Este (1561–1637) in 1594. One eyewitness account of the celebratory performance records the audience's reaction:

> Night fell and there appeared a number of masked ladies dressed in armor made of plaster, with twirls of tinsel, befitting of their roles as fighting female warriors. In step with the music of the viols and violins, the women danced among themselves and brandished darts. . . . It was a most delightful experience not only for the Theater but for the Bridegroom Prince himself, who had never witnessed such combat performed by ladies.[54]

That these "fighting female warriors" stunned their audience is not surprising when considering the extravagance of their wardrobe. It is tempting to wonder whether the spectacular headdress (*copricapo*) Marfisa likely donned in choreographed performance (fig. 5), designed by Domenico Mona to fit like a crest atop a helmet, ever featured her character's phoenix emblem nested among its radiant feathers.[55] By assuming the guise of her cross-dressing fictional self during carnival, diplomatic ceremonies, and state visits by foreign ambassadors, Marfisa d'Este courted her own fictionalization—if not with pen and ink, then with her body and its various capacities to signify.

Because the Este noblewoman danced along the fragile lines—literally and figuratively—between fiction and reality, *La gloria delle donne* (The glory of women) (1590) by Giulio Cesare Croce (1550–1609) looked to her as the

[52] See Newcomb; and Durante-Martellotti.

[53] Treadwell, 29.

[54] "la notte, che venne comparvero quivi, alquante Dame in maschera, vestite d'armature fatte di talcho, co' girelli di tocca, convenienti alla loro conditione di guerriere combattenti, quali a tempo di suono musicale, de' viole, e violini, ballarono fra di loro, vibrando certi dardi. . . . cosa, che fu di grandissimo diletto, non pure al Teatro tutto, ma all'istesso Principe Sposo, che simil combattimento fatto da Dame più non havea veduto": Faustini, 92. Cited in Treadwell, 36–37n22.

[55] Masetti Zannini, 90.

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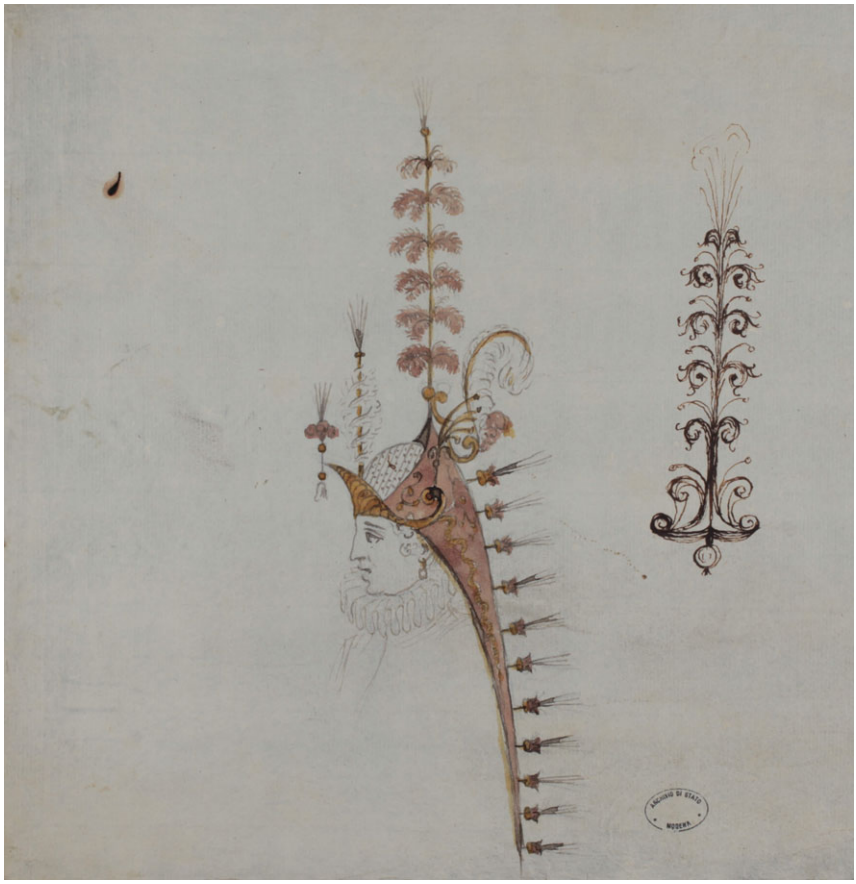

Figure 5. Headdress design for the Este court's *balletto delle donne*, worn by a female dancer. Mappario estense, Stampe e disegni, nn. 89/34. Courtesy of the Archivio di Stato di Modena.

embodied exemplar of female defiance. The "valiant women" ("valorose donne") of the *Furioso*'s canto 37 figure in Croce's "donne valorose" of historic and contemporary fame, whose genealogy, like poetic Marfisa's, stems from the Amazons.[56] Croce's criticism of the "evil agenda" ("odiosa operatione") insidiously at work in the late sixteenth-century misogynist literary current recalls Ariosto's reproof of men's "evil tongues" ("odiose lingue") used to spread lies about women.[57] When the narrator of the *Furioso* predicts that women's

[56] Ariosto, 2006, 2:1269 (*Orlando furioso* 37.1); Croce, 13.

[57] Croce, dedicatory letter; Ariosto, 2006, 1:699 (*Orlando furioso* 20.3). For the production and circulation of misogynist literature toward the end of the sixteenth century, see Cox, 2008, 166–227.

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reputations, when preserved in writing, will one day surpass his Marfisa's fame, he may have anticipated *La gloria*'s dedication to Marfisa d'Este. The title page of Croce's poem-treatise recognizes its noble dedicatee as the marchioness of Massa, the position she earned through her second marriage to Alderano II Cibo Malaspina. *La gloria*'s composition in ottava rima, with frequent mentions of the poet-narrator figure, his struggling canto, and his Ferrarese dedicatee, reveals its indebtedness to the form that originated the Marfisa character.

Responding to Ariosto's demand of modern poets,[58] Croce adapts and emulates the *Furioso* thanks to Marfisa d'Este's piloting hand. Marfisa's patronage guarantees the poet the "more powerful arms" ("armi più forti")—that is, her name ("il nome vostro") wielded as a shield ("scudo") and shelter ("ripar[o]")—that allow thought to be put to ink.[59] Croce's verses and Marfisa's reputation unite to silence the modern-day impersonators of "Momus and Zoilus, and other slanderers" ("I Momi, i Zoili, e gli altri maldicenti").[60] These and other villains emerge not only as defamatory but as intertextually significant. Whereas Ariosto's *Cinque canti* (Five cantos) (begun 1519, printed 1545)[61] had compared Marfisa's hawkish sword-wielding to "a Fury out of hell" ("Marfisa parve al stringer de la spade / una Furia che uscisse de lo inferno"),[62] Croce assigns this same metaphor to male offenders of women: "Men—iniquitous, treacherous, and villainous— / who are guilty of a thousand disgraces and a thousand evils, . . . and who, like furies out of the depths, / time and again have spoiled and ruined the world."[63] After reviewing a catalogue of Greco-Roman antiheroes whose actions accord with Croce's denouncement, the narrator shifts his attention to more recent literary history.

The last lines of *La gloria delle donne* predict that Marfisa d'Este will triumph over contemporary denigrators, just as fictional Marfisa had overthrown male miscreants. The poet's advice for women readers to "let these Birenos and Marganorres vent and carry on" ("lass[are] pur sfogare, e far processo/questi Bireni, e questi Marganori") disarms the threats that spill from men's angry mouths.[64] A discourse that once spouted noxious lies is now barely equipped to handle breathy, hot air. Croce would have struggled to make his point any clearer: if the real-life equivalents of Ariosto's deserting men ignite any

[58] Ariosto, 2006, 2:1271 (*Orlando furioso* 37.7).

[59] Croce, 5.

[60] Croce, 5.

[61] On the issue of the *Cinque canti*'s dating, see Quint's introduction in Ariosto, 1996, 3n2.

[62] Ariosto, 1996, 242 (*Cinque canti* 4.6).

[63] "huomini, iniqui, perfidi, e villani, / c'han fatto mille oprobri[i], e mille mali, . . . e che qual furie uscite dal profondo, / più volte han guasto, e ruinato il mondo": Croce, 28.

[64] Croce, 32.

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reaction in women, then it is not in their capacity to betray and abandon them, as Bireno had done to Olimpia, nor to exile and humiliate them in the likeness of the tyrant Marganorre. Rather, women dress for combat whenever men are delinquent. The hazards of injury these figures once represented become neutralized and miniaturized in *La gloria*'s final line, whereby men's aggression amounts scarcely to a "flea" ("pulce") poised to tackle an "elephant" ("elefante").[65] Holding up Marfisa d'Este as the guarantor of his text's aspirations, Croce tips the scale of gendered triumph not one ounce in men's favor.

If Ariosto had commissioned the Marfisa character to ensure respect for poetry's women would be maintained over time, Croce solicits Marfisa d'Este to do the same for their historical counterparts. Virago Marfisa succeeded in overturning the law of Marganorre's that had made refugees out of female citizens. Her institution of a law in its place—indeed, "her law" ("la legge sua")—promises to extend beyond the pages of the poem's fiction.[66] Marfisa pledges her return to the land the giant once ruled before the close of the year; should she witness any inhabitant breach her command to obey one's wife, the town can expect "fire and ruin" ("fuoco e ruina") in response.[67] Marfisa's cluster of associations with truculent behavior—no matter its defensive or offensive design—would catalyze her transformation into a wholly bizarre figure more undefinable than ever.

BIZARRE, UNTAMED, BOOKISH, LEGENDARY: THE VIRAGO'S GENEALOGIES

Much of how Marfisa developed as a more comic figure over time has to do with her increasingly eruptive temper. While Boiardo's Marfisa appears without an ancestral tale rich in any great detail, the *Furioso*'s canto 36 imparts the virago's Amazonian descent: she and her twin brother Ruggiero are the orphaned children of Galiziella.[68] At the time of her baptism Marfisa discloses her parentage in a manner that verges on confession. She details her deadly rejection of a Persian king's unwanted advances, and how she was forced to fend him off when a slave at age eighteen. In an act of self-preservation, Marfisa chose death before sex, murder before surrender. Regicide marked Marfisa's first act of "fury" ("furore"), a lethal trait born in her to combat male hostility.[69]

[65] Croce, 32.
[66] Ariosto, 2006, 2:1306 (*Orlando furioso* 37.120).
[67] Ariosto, 2006, 2:1305 (*Orlando furioso* 37.117).
[68] See Stoppino, 33–43.
[69] Ariosto, 2006, 2:1314 (*Orlando furioso* 38.16).

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Yet Marfisa's renunciation of her wrath after baptism does not spill over to Ariosto's other writings. The *Cinque canti* paint the virago's submission to folly in colors that evoke Orlando's frenzy. Not unlike the count's senseless slaughter of shepherds and forests, Marfisa moves "per follia" (out of madness) to extinguish innocent townsfolk.[70] If the *Cinque canti* emphasize, as David Quint has shown, "the dark underside of the imaginative world [Ariosto] had created in the *Furioso*," their Marfisa embodies bizarreness, menacing and without reins.[71] It would be to this character trait that philologist Orazio Toscanella (1510–80) later wed Marfisa's figure in his allegorical reading of individual names from the *Furioso*, wherein she takes on the representation of "pride and bizarreness" ("significatrice della superbia, et della bizzarria").[72] Whatever trace remained of Marfisa's sober chivalric obedience had all but vanished by the late sixteenth century.[73]

Virago Marfisa's developing associations with *bizzarria* did not, however, emerge out of a stylistic vacuum. The vogue for the literary bizarre and its adoption by unconventional early modern women, as Jessica Goethals has deftly demonstrated, built upon the popularity of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century experiments in carnivalesque poetry.[74] In the decades before Giambattista Marino (1569–1625) would famously establish rule-breaking as the only rule poets ought to follow, appetite for the bizarre gained in momentum in carnival songs, or *canti carnascialeschi*, versed by such prominent figures of the lyric canon as Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92). Francesco Berni (ca. 1497–1535), from whom bernesque poetry gets its name, transformed this repertoire in his sampling of chivalric romance epic. Amending Boiardo's minstrel narrative style and varying his language "in the direction of Tuscanization," Berni's *Rifacimento dell'Orlando Innamorato* (Reworking of

[70] Ariosto, 1996, 236 (*Cinque canti* 3.111). For Marfisa's murderous rampages, see Ariosto, 1996, 234 (*Cinque canti* 3.105–112) and 238 (*Cinque canti* 4.5–8). The *Innamorato*'s early role in anticipating the behavioral kinship between mad Orlando and mad Marfisa reveals itself threefold, the second instance of which labels her a proper "Marfisa furïosa" (Boiardo, 1:362 [*Orlando innamorato* 1.19.52], 1:375 [*Orlando innamorato* 1.20.38], 1:449 [*Orlando innamorato* 1.25.23]). The doubling effects of these two characters are evidenced visually in a woodcut housed in Modena's Galleria Estense (sch. 223). See *I legni incisi*, 180.

[71] See Quint's introduction in Ariosto, 1996, 2.

[72] Toscanella, 4.

[73] My focus on Marfisa's afterlives as bizarre is not to eclipse her appearances elsewhere in post-*Furioso* romances with alternative foci. See Tomalin, 126–45.

[74] Goethals, 59–62.

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Orlando in love) (posthumously published in 1541) freely redistributes octaves, even episodes.[75] Berni carried out these editorial decisions in the name of legitimizing chivalric literature as worthy reading material. Even under the guise of moralizing refinement, zest for the sexually irreverent still found its way into circulation, as Berni scratched some erotic passages from the original—while unable to resist introducing others of his own making.[76]

Similar to Marfisa's art of categorical evasion, attempts to define *bizzarria* only render the term more undefinable.[77] An umbrella signifier today that ranges from the whimsical, fanciful, and fantastical to the grotesque, eccentric, odd, and weird, *bizzarria* appealed to early modern writers to describe instances of capriciousness and unpredictability.[78] The suite of associations that orbit the *bizza*, a tantrum or scene, evoke the earliest uses of *bizzarria* in vernacular Italian literature. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) pair *bizzarria/bizzarro* with irascible figures and incensed encounters.[79] Despite the term's near-custom labeling of each of the hot-tempered, snappish knights of Boiardo's and Ariosto's fictions, neither *bizzarra* nor any of its variants ever appear in the *Orlando* poems to describe Marfisa; they denote instead an object's extraordinary brightness, or a character's martial—and strictly masculine—fury.[80] No mention of bizarre Marfisa appears in either the *Innamorato* or the *Furioso*; it was in mock epic that she learned to behave so.

Similar to the reactive force of *bizzarria*—understood as either provoked or unconventional behavior—this "antigenre" names a literary practice executed in response.[81] Mock epic balances in its purview sustained regard for classical and Renaissance precedents with opportunities to exaggerate their seriousness to subversive effects. The textual examples studied thus far locate in Marfisa attributes and attitudes worthy of emulation by others. This would change, however, when a more sardonic take on her overstated qualities in arms and love began to appeal to authors. Standing before the world of mock epic as an

[75] Weaver, 123.

[76] Weaver, 127.

[77] For measures taken by Florence's Accademia della Crusca to define *bizzarria*, see Goethals, 239n56.

[78] An inviting reconceptualization of the links between the bizarre and the weird appears in Ross, 349–53.

[79] See Dante's reference to Filippo Argenti as "the bizarre Florentine spirit" ("'l fiorentino spirito bizzarro") in Alighieri, 1996, 128 (*Inferno* 8.62), and Boccaccio's use of "bizzarria" at the end of day 1, story 6 in the *Decameron* (1980, 99).

[80] See Boiardo, 1:95 (*Orlando innamorato* 1.4.66) and 2:743 (*Orlando innamorato* 2.12.52); Ariosto, 2006, 1:354 (*Orlando furioso* 10.85), 1:602 (*Orlando furioso* 18.3), and 1:612 (*Orlando furioso* 18.36).

[81] Robertson, 5.

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unmarried, pugnacious quibbler hungry for bloodshed and celebrity, Marfisa was ripe for comic reinterpretation.[82] While the *Innamorato* and the *Furioso* had depicted the virago's austerity not without some amusing touches—her choosing to remain in armor for five years without ever taking it off indicates just one example—in mock epic Marfisa becomes more bizarre the more self-conscious she is of her displaced, relational status to chivalric epic romance. In the shift from the *serio* to the *ludere*, Marfisa's textual genealogies emerge as multidirectional: forward-facing in showing off her new behaviors and desires, while backward-glancing in transforming and redefining the tradition from which she came.

Venetian poet Giovanni Battista Dragoncino da Fano (1497–d. after 1553) was the first to cast a bizarre Marfisa as the titular heroine, in his longest experiment with chivalric poetic fiction.[83] Comprised of fourteen cantos, *Marphisa bizarra* (1531, revised 1532) narrates the maddening experience of unrequited love and its protagonist's surprise, even distress, at having to confront it for the first time. Adopting Boiardo's spelling of the virago's name, Dragoncino recalls Marphisa as the transliteration of the Amazon warrior Marpesia, the "snatcher" or "seizer" of classical historiography.[84] Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (On famous women) (ca. 1361) narrates Marpesia's sprawling imperial successes, alongside her legendary sister Lampedo, won for their militant sorority. Boccaccio does not fail to mention Marpesia's overly confident strides in territorial expansion, echoes of which resound in Ariosto's Marfisa implicitly hoping to inherit from Alexander the Great all rule in Asia, or, as Plutarch would have it, all the world.[85] Although as a character Marfisa is distinctly the making of Renaissance chivalric epic poetry, Boccaccio's heroine attests to the classical and medieval implied heritages that shaped her development in the sixteenth century. Textual study of Dragoncino's bizarre

[82] For Marfisa's comic qualities, see Finucci, 1994b, 81; and Mac Carthy, 75.

[83] In print, Marfisa appeared not only bizarre but in love. Examples that followed Dragoncino's poem include Marco Bandarini (n.d.), *Marfisa innamorata* (1550), and Danese Cataneo (ca. 1512–72), *L'Amor di Marfisa* (1562), which was sent to Ferrara as a gift for Marfisa's cousin, Alfonso II, and dedicated to her eventual father-in-law, Alberico I Cibo Malaspina (1534–1623).

[84] Stoppino, 83. For the editions of Dragoncino's poem, many of which substitute "Marphisa" for "Marfisa" and some of which omit the city, printer, and year, see Warren, 108n61.

[85] For Boccaccio's sources for the Amazon's story from late antiquity, see Baldan. For early treatments of Queen Marpesia from the second to the sixth century, see Mayor, 435. For the similarities between Marpesia's swiftly secured imperial triumphs and Marfisa's rapid command of seven kingdoms, see Ariosto, 2006, 2:1314 (*Orlando furioso* 38.15); and Stoppino, 75–76. For Marfisa's ambitions as tied to the prophetic Alexandrian legend of the Gordian Knot, see Ariosto, 2006, 1:686 (*Orlando furioso* 19.74).

Figure 6. "Marfisa Bizara" woodcut. WA2003.Douce.2111. 37.5 x 27.1 cm. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Marphisa can be best anticipated by visualizing precisely the woman he sought to construct.

An Italian woodcut by an unknown artist (fig. 6), housed at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, depicts the virago riding astride a rearing horse with hairs raised along its mane. "Marfisa bizara," the title indicated by the woodcut's

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inscription, appears unstirred, indeed perfectly balanced, her penetrating eyes pinned on the viewer.[86] Her ornately patterned skirt and lion-hide armor—a visual cue tying her to Cybele, the mother of gods friendly to the Amazons and, per Vergil, the Trojans—convey at once the androgyny and genealogy with which chivalric romance epic supplies her figure.[87] The sumptuous plumes that sprout from her decorative helmet put the final touch on this truly extravagant image.[88] While the representation of "Marfisa guerriera" ("woman warrior Marfisa") by Antonio Tempesta (1555–1630) (fig. 7) similarly depicts the equipped maiden riding an elegant, lavish destrier with battle arms hanging securely by her side, she is moving away from the viewer and the artist reveals only Marfisa's profile.[89] This angle allows the decorum of her two strands of braids to reflect in the horse's orderly tied tail. The difference in each Marfisa's weaponry, however, is certainly suggestive. While Tempesta's engraved figure rides astride a trotting mount clearly under her control, holding a lowered shield at a distance from her viewers with no offensive weapons visible, her "bizara" counterpart arrives thirsty for combat: she is kitted out for war, ready to lose her lance through using it and continue fighting with her deadly battle sword. Bizarre Marfisa is surely more penetrating, immediate, and daring than her "guerriera" other half. The stunning color version of this same image (fig. 8), though it appears without the "Marfisa bizara" inscription, is included in the sixteenth-century collection *Libro del Sarto* (Book of the tailor) (ca. 1540–50). This image is practically identical in composition to the Ashmolean woodcut, apart from one significant detail. The figure's face in the color image conveys little that announces itself as alarming about her presence. In contrast, with

[86] A reduced and slightly modified version of the Ashmolean woodcut appears on the seventeenth-century edition of Dragoncino's poem printed in Padua by Sebastiano Sardi.

[87] See Mayor, 165–66, 187. Infant Marfisa's suckling by a lion is discussed further on. The animal doubles as an homage to Marfisa's twin, Ruggiero, who "roars like a lion" ("rugge come un leon"), thus enacting the meaning of his name. See Ariosto, 2006, 1:943 (*Orlando furioso* 26.132).

[88] There is a series of images owned by the Galleria Estense in Modena and the British Museum that appear strikingly similar to the Ashmolean woodcut. These images feature intricately dressed knights and horses (some of which appear rearing like Marfisa's), with occasional inscriptions such as "Il Paladin Astolfo" ("The Paladin Astolfo") or "Riciardetto fratello di Rinaldo da Monte Albano" ("Riciardetto brother of Rinaldo from Montalbano"). The British Museum's copy of this latter image includes an alternative inscription: "Maximilliano re di Bohemia figlio di Ferdinando novo imperatore" ("Maximilian king of Bohemia son of Ferdinand the new emperor"), https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1927-1008-252). See also *I legni incisi*, 180–81.

[89] This coheres with how Tempesta depicted the other chivalric women in his series: "La bella Doralice" (beautiful Doralice), "Isabella Gratiosa" (pretty Isabella), and "Bradamante valorosa" (valiant Bradamante).

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Figure 7. Antonio Tempesta. "Marfisa guerriera," 1597. 139 mm x 96 mm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Accession number A 96173 (in KB A 838,2, Bl. 031r.). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

tightened, upturned lips, hand theatrically popped on her left hip, Marfisa bizara dares onlookers not to miss her entrance, lest they risk inciting her further.[90]

[90] My thanks to Mercedes Cerón for kindly exchanging her insights with me about the woodcut.

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Figure 8. *Il Libro del Sarto*, 1540–50. Fondazione Querini Stampalia Onlus, Venice, fol. 24r.

The subtlest exposure of skin in the Ashmolean woodcut and its color version, just above where the figure's mid-calf hose ends and the fastenings on her skirt begin suggests a spicy provocation. For Marfisa bizara, this hint of flirtatious challenge suggests a more sensual side of this typically aromantic figure. But while readers familiar with Boiardo's and Ariosto's Marfisa would have recognized her in Dragoncino's Marphisa, "bold and wise as she is haughty

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and beautiful ("gagliarda, e saggia quanto altera, e bella"), as the *Innamorato* introduces her character with these same attributes, her newfound smitten lovesickness would have struck them by surprise.[91] Reeling from her sudden fluency in love's torturous vocabulary, Marphisa strains to grapple with her unwelcome circumstance:

> Where have you ended up, wretched one?
> Where is your strength, where is the boldness
> with which you wished to lethally destroy
> Gradasso and King Agricane,
> and bring Charlemagne to ruin?
> You once desired never
> to remove your armor until nightfall,
> yet today an unarmed youth
> causes my arms and boldness to fall to the ground.[92]

Rivaled against one another and forced into dialogue through alternating pronouns are Marphisas from two very different worlds: one of literary tradition, who had expertly avoided both love and limitation, and a reinvented literary other, driven mad by lust at a premium price.

A Marphisa cornered by epic's political teleology would also have been new to readers. Ariosto's mythopoetic choice to designate a woman warrior as the recipient of a genealogical prophecy reflects in the similarly dynastic design of Dragoncino's poem. *Marphisa*'s prized dedicatee is the first Duke of Mantua, Federico II Gonzaga (1500–40), whose genealogy takes origin in Dragoncino's titular heroine, "that singular noble root" ("quella singular nobil radice"), the narrator tells Federico, "which was your ancestors' progenitrix" ("che fu degli avi tuoi progenitrice").[93] Though neither Boiardo nor Ariosto ever destined her character for chronicle, Marfisa/Marphisa's significance for the Gonzaga family is unexpected but not unimaginable: she is, after all, the long-lost twin sister of the cofounder of the Este clan. The close ties between the two powerful

[91] For Marfisa's introduction in the *Innamorato*, see Boiardo, 1:305–06 (*Orlando innamorato* 1.16.28–29).

[92] "dove sei giunta, misera, a qual passo / dov'è la forza tua, dov'è l'ardire/con che volevi già strugger Gradasso / e Re Agrican insieme far morire, / e'l magno Carlo roinar' al basso / e fin che'l ciel'al fondo non vedevi / l'arme di dosso trar non ti volevi. // Et hoggi un giovinetto disarmato / mi fa l'arme e l'ardir cader per terra": Dragoncino, 3^{r} (*Marphisa bizarra* 1.35–36).

[93] Dragoncino, 1^{v} (*Marphisa bizarra* 1.7). The first two cantos of the mock epic *Marfisa* by Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) similarly appeared in 1532, originally designed as a dynastic poem for the same Gonzaga family. When Aretino's relationship with his patrons soured, culminating in threats of the author's assassination by dagger on the Rialto in Venice, the project was left (understandably) unfinished. See Cabani 206n16; and Delcorno Branca, 228–29.

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families—Marfisa d'Este's great aunt, Isabella, was indeed Federico's mother—ripened the potential for overlap in poetic accounts of their dynastic origins. More than simply a double of Bradamante reimagined for Mantuan rulers, Marphisa comes to represent and even replace Orlando as the central figure in Carolingian fiction. In doing so, she unravels and resews the poetics of *entrelacement* that had kept the protagonist's story separate, as in Boiardo and Ariosto, from poetry's genealogical thread.

Further dismantled are the size and scope of the narrator's purview. *Marphisa bizarra*'s multitextual blend of Ariostan- and Virgilian-style incipits makes clear its romance-epic heritage:

> The arms and love of a Queen I sing,
> the noble courtesies, ire and peace
> among hope and fear, laughter and tears,
> the daring enterprises of female fury,
> and the worth of ancient warriors, and the pride
> that followed fame and virtue
> when Charlemagne, by force of lance,
> was Emperor of Rome and King of France.[94]

Echoing "the courtly chivalry and daring deeds" ("le cortesie, l'audaci imprese") from the first stanza of the *Furioso*,[95] the plurality of Ariosto's "ladies, knights, arms, loves" ("le donne, i cavallier, l'arme, gli amori")[96] is reduced in Dragoncino to a single body. Such narrowed attention renders more immediate the intertextual dialogue with the beginning of Boiardo's *Innamorato* and its emphasis on "the immeasurable deeds, stupendous feats and amazing labors carried out by Orlando, the Frank."[97] Notably, Dragoncino's regal subject emerges as the very source of arms of love ("l'arme, e l'amor d'una Regina"), not their object. Such terms represent a liberated state from subjected positioning not always afforded chivalric epic women and one that inverts the direction of its very genealogy. As the titular character framed by a rhetoric of opposites (arms/*arme* vs. love/*amor*, ire/*ire* vs. peace/*paci*, hope/*speme* vs. fear/*timor*, laughter/*riso* vs. tears/*pianto*), Marphisa embodies the bitter contrast between

[94] "L'arme, e l'amor d'una Regina io canto / l'i[n]clite cortesie, l'ire e le paci; / fra speme e timor, fra'l riso, e'l pianto / di feminil furor l'imprese audaci, / e d'antiqui guerrieri il p[re]gio e'l vanto, / che fur di fama et di virtù seguaci, / alhor che Carlo per forza di lancia / fu Imperador di Roma e Re di Francia": Dragoncino, 1[r] (*Marphisa bizarra* 1.1).

[95] Ariosto, 2006, 1:83 (*Orlando furioso* 1.1).

[96] Ariosto, 2006, 1:83–84 (*Orlando furioso* 1.1).

[97] "i gesti smisurati, / l'alta fatica e le mirabil prove / che fece il franco Orlando": Boiardo, 1:6 (*Orlando innamorato* 1.1).

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love and fury, *amor* and *furor*, reflected in the thematic sequence from the *Innamorato* to the *Furioso*.[98]

Throughout the poem, Marphisa's obsessive affections for the male knight Filinoro take their cue from Orlando's errant frenzy.[99] Chasing after Filinoro's absent body in a wood where paladins and pagans alike go missing, Marphisa weathers the count's experience of self-alienation. Just as Orlando had dissolved into a spirit divided from the man he once was,[100] "no longer is Marphisa what she once was / but a pathetic woman."[101] Haunting traces of the virago's once independent life multiply the effects of her aching self-diffraction. Marphisa's transformation into Orlando's boiling shadow prompts her to emulate his storming naked and senseless through the trees. Choleric that a nearby nightingale would interrupt her "blissful dream" ("beato sogno") with a song, Marphisa lunges toward the creature with a "furious assault" ("furioso assalto"), speedily sawing down trees as improvised weaponry.[102] The virago's destruction of her woodland environment is caused not by the stinging realization that her beloved pines for another, as prompted Orlando's fury, but that he escapes her clutches even in dreamlike fiction.

Marphisa's encounters with other animals peel back further layers to her bizarre temperament. In her attempt to track the forest for mislaid Filinoro, the *Innamorata* adopts the likeness of a bear prowling for its prey: "she went about abandoning every custom / wrathful and bizarre like a bear."[103] Beast and woman merge in the mirroring effects of canto 13's combat between Marphisa

[98] To be sure, my intention is not to suggest that the *Furioso* should be reduced to a mere sequel to the *Innamorato*, as this would be a false and unproductive conclusion. Rather, I consider it fruitful to read Orlando's dual experience as *innamorato* and *furioso* as the intertextual groundwork upon which Dragoncino's heroine develops.

[99] Just as comparisons between Orlando and Marphisa are many, so, too, are those between Angelica and Filinoro, who emerges onto the scene at the Christian camp like his female counterpart "formed by angelic nature" ("formato da l'angelica natura"). See Dragoncino, 2^{r} (*Marphisa bizarra* 1.19).

[100] Ariosto, 2006, 1:831–32 (*Orlando furioso* 23.128).

[101] "non è Marphisa più quel ch'esser suole / ma donna vil": Dragoncino, 28^{v} (*Marphisa bizarra* 7.25). Following the narrator's sympathies expressed with Orlando in Ariosto's *Furioso*, *Marphisa*'s narrator confesses to having similarly submitted to lovesickness-induced "bizzarria" in Dragoncino, 52^{v} (*Marphisa bizarra* 13.1). See Warren, 174; and Tagliani.

[102] Dragoncino, 29^{r} (*Marphisa bizarra* 7.35), 29^{v} (*Marphisa bizarra* 7.40).

[103] "lei se n'andava fuor d'ogni usanza / iraconda e bizarra come l'Orso": Dragoncino, 19^{r} (*Marphisa bizarra* 5.2). The single comparison between a bear and a female creature in the *Furioso* concerns venomous Erifilla, resident of Alcina's island (Ariosto, 2006, 1:239 [*Orlando furioso* 6.78]). References to bears appear elsewhere at 19.7, 27.119, 29.46 (Ariosto, 2006, 1:665, 2:982, 2:1040).

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and an actual bear, risen up like a human to stand on its hind legs. Synonymous language binds these two figures' characterizations, when "in this new brawl, the upper-hand passes from one bizarre creature to the other."[104] The comparison between the "bizarre creature" ("bizarra creatura") and the bear brings into relief elements from the myth of Calisto, transformed into a she-bear and the celestial body Ursa Major after Jove violated her sacred vow of chastity.[105] In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the nymph struggles because she retains her human intellect while shapeshifting into a beast.[106] Dragoncino, however, divides the woman-bear combination into two warring figures. In this way, the already self-split Marphisa seeks to extinguish the symbols and body associated with her former autonomous self.[107]

Essential to reading Marphisa and the bear as opponents is the close kinship that huntresses have shared with this animal since antiquity, as evidenced in the earliest myths of the Greek heroine Atalanta and Venus's account of her story narrated in Ovid.[108] Raised like a cub by a she-bear in Arcadia, Atalanta shares Marfisa's defiance of men and marriage.[109] Atalanta's fabled footrace, a requirement she levied as a prerequisite to handing herself over as a bride, resulted in a metamorphosis that would become suggestive for the origins of Ariosto's character. Hippomenes, the youth whose slick trickery with Aphrodite won him the race, conquered Atalanta's heart. Yet the couple's premarital passions swiftly met serious consequences. Chastised for their sacrosanct lovemaking in a temple dedicated to Cybele, Hippomenes and Atalanta witnessed their bodies change into lions.[110] It would be one of these animals that suckled infant Marfisa, as told by the sorcerer Atlante.[111] If Atalanta's genealogy proceeds from an ursine past to a leonine future, Marphisa's evolves

[104] "in questa nova sciarra / il gioco va da bizarro a bizarra": Dragoncino, 52^{v} (*Marphisa bizarra* 13.6).

[105] Dragoncino, 53^{r} (*Marphisa bizarra* 13.13).

[106] Ovid, 1916, 1:94 (*Metamorphoses* 2.485).

[107] Links between Marfisa and bears appear twice in the *Furioso*. Her actions on the island of the "man-killing women" ("femine omicide") (Ariosto, 2006, 1:681 [*Orlando furioso* 19.57]) evolve under the sky of Calisto (as constellation) when it rises over Alessandria (Ariosto, 2006, 1:722 [*Orlando furioso* 20.82]). Very soon after, Marfisa admires the bear's solitary habits as an honorable model for the quest-bound knight (Ariosto, 2006, 1:728–29 [*Orlando furioso* 20.103]).

[108] For a list of sources for Atalanta's myth, see Barringer, 71.

[109] Atalanta has been suggested as a key figure for the rituals of the *Arkteia* that initiated young Athenian girls in the cult of Artemis at Brauron. See Mayor, 8.

[110] See Ovid, 1916, 2:104–14 (*Metamorphoses* 10.560–707).

[111] Ariosto, 2006, 2:1261 (*Orlando furioso* 36.62). Although Bradamante's rearing is described in different terms from Atalanta and Marfisa's respective nursing by a she-bear and a

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in reverse order between Ariosto's and Dragoncino's poems. A veritable opponent in every sense, the bear in *Marphisa bizarra* descends from an ancestry from which the protagonist must sever herself. She is forced to carry out her "amorous bizarreness" ("amorosa bizaria") to the bitter end.[112]

The passion-scorched queen slays her feral rival by plunging her sword into its chest, suggesting an ability to kill off *bizzarria* in others even as it continues to consume her.[113] The animal escapes just barely alive, zigzagging her way across the blood-soaked forest floor: "That bizarre and fugitive animal runs, knowing not where it is headed. It is not yet dead, nor can one say that it lives."[114] Yet is this animal the beast or the maiden? Wounded herself by Cupid's pointed arrow, Marphisa disappears into the edges of the poem's conclusion, tracking still the dusty footprints of her fleeing beloved. She lingers on, bizarre and blinded by a quest that has lost sight of its end. Unlike the wedding ceremony that draws the *Furioso* to a close, Dragoncino's poem stops short of fully realizing Marphisa in the role of a dynastic heroine: she is last seen astride a purloined horse, dressed in the borrowed arms of a fallen knight, errant within a fiction whose promise to become history remains ever at a distance.

"Bizarre Marfisa" would return in the eighteenth century as a similarly spellbound lover racing after an absent beloved. By this time, twinned ideas about aesthetics and morality had doused *bizzarria* in sourly admonishing terms, with language guided in no small part by the bitter reception of the Baroque as an era of "bad taste."[115] This character's stationed residency at the publishing houses of Venice provided, however, some interpretative wiggle room.[116] The Venetian literary circles that saw *Marfisa bizzara* by Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806) come to press in 1772 extended their "incessant fascination with educated, independent-minded, and socially unconventional women" to this daring heroine.[117] Marfisa's dexterity in the autonomous application of rules, which dovetailed nicely with the resonant attitudes of Marinist poetics, resonated with the theatrical and satirical currents in vogue throughout

lion (see Ariosto, 2006, 1:123 [*Orlando furioso* 2.32]), Stoppino compares Bradamante and Atalanta as experiencing "marriage by duel" (24–33).

[112] Dragoncino, 27^{v} (*Marphisa bizarra* 7.6).

[113] I am grateful for my conversations with Tessa Bullington about this very point.

[114] "Quell'animal bizarro e fuggitivo / corre, ne sa pero dove si vada / non è anchor morto ne si può dir vivo": Dragoncino, 53^{r} (*Marphisa bizarra* 13.10).

[115] Goethals, 58–59.

[116] Although the first editions of Dragoncino's and Gozzi's poems were issued in Venice, not all subsequent prints remained within the city. See Delcorno Branca, 222–23.

[117] Findlen, 18. See also Rebecca Messbarger's introduction in Agnesi et al., 6 and 11–15. On the chronology of *Marfisa*'s composition and revisions, see Fido, 109–11; and Ruini.

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Settecento Venice. With Gozzi's poem, readers return to Carolingian Paris to find a familiar cast of chivalric names, each endowed with new tastes and tricks: the English Duke Astolfo is a fussy stylist, Rinaldo a guzzling smuggler, the emperor is aging and gluttonous, and Bradamante schemes as a seedy landlady. Marfisa stands out among this crowd of comic miscreants as a petite, short-tempered shopaholic with a harrowing fear of growing older. Yet there is a deeply intellectual side to this coquettish gambler. Learning that the more she reads the more mad she becomes, Marfisa loses herself in the pages of literature and philosophy. She assumes the role of a proper *Donna* Quixote, bewitched by the same soluble lines between fiction and reality that had seized Cervantes's protagonist.[118] As Gozzi makes clear, "ancient romances" ("romanzi antichi") might have given Marfisa a history but "new romanzi" ("nuovi romanzi") will dictate her future.[119]

Caught in the fold between these two categories are poems like Dragoncino's *Marphisa bizarra*, where readers had already met the paramour Filinoro. A chivalric Casanova tailed by a sex-parched redhead in Gozzi, Filinoro and Marfisa make for a most unusual couple.[120] While these two are almost too much alike to be truly compatible mates, Marfisa appears in stark contrast to her sister-in-law Bradamante, who has "remodernized her mind" ("rimodernato avea il cervello") from a "woman warrior" ("guerriera") and "jouster" ("giostrante") to a domestic caretaker.[121] She and her husband Ruggiero have grown tired of Marfisa's tomfoolery, and are resolved to find *la bizarra* a proper husband. Terigi, a former squire for Orlando who has become a tremendously wealthy tax collector, rises to the top as the most eligible bachelor. The married duo's plot falls to pieces, however, when handsome philanderer Filinoro catches Marfisa's eye, dispatching the rest of the poem's adventures across Europe and back again to Paris.

While comprehensive analysis of Gozzi's poem and its "restless and excessive" ("inquieta e eccessiva") heroine cannot be included here, its portrayal of Marfisa's carnivorous appetite for pleasure is worthy of some reflection.[122]

[118] See Ricaldone, 122–26. For other burlesque poets recalled intertextually in Gozzi, see Fido, 112–13. Given *Marfisa bizzarra*'s 1772 publication date, it is possible that Gozzi was inspired by *The Female Quixote, or the Adventures of Arabella* (1752), written by Charlotte Lennox (1730–1804).

[119] See Gozzi, 250–51 (*Marfisa bizzarra* 2.5–6).

[120] Their pairing confirms the satirical and burlesque style that characterizes this "poema faceto" ("facetious poem"), per its original subtitle.

[121] Gozzi, 251 (*Marfisa bizzarra* 2.7).

[122] Cerruti, 78. Curiously, restlessness returns in one history of the Este house that describes Marfisa d'Este as "extroverted, bizarre, restless, mad about entertainments" ("aperta, bizzarra, irrequieta, pazza pei divertimenti"). See Solerti, xxxvii.

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Marfisa might have become a bookworm by the eighteenth century, yet she excels in the bedroom. She has no fewer than one hundred lovers, and gratifying them all is the art only she knows best. Intimate relations in Gozzi have little to do with founding dynastic families and everything to do with feasting on euphoria. "In terms of the art of making love" ("quanto all'arte di far all'amore"), readers learn, "there will never be a woman on par with Marfisa" ("non verrà al mondo una pari a Marfisa").[123] Intent on expanding her count of sexual conquests, Marfisa juggles ten times the number of bodies in need of satisfaction that she had faced in the *Furioso*.[124] This exaggerated version of Marfisa's erotic odyssey curiously recalls court gossip surrounding the death of Marfisa d'Este's first husband, Alfonsino di Alfonso di Montecchio (1560–78). Accounts of the engaged pair's clashing physiques had circulated two years before their wedding in 1578, pitting the "tender, frail . . . and small-framed" ("tenero, gracile . . . e sparuto") prince against his "robust, full, blushing" ("durotta, piena, colorita") fiancée.[125] Three months into their marriage, Alfonsino's sudden death raised inquiries among Este house chroniclers. They assumed the prince's lack of equally exuberant energy behind closed doors quite literally drained the life from him.[126] In other words, they claimed, Marfisa's sex killed.

The parallel imaginaries of enterprising sexuality that span historical and poetic Marfisas have targeted other Ferrarese women. Bradamante d'Este, Marfisa's sister, has similarly found herself twisted into fantasies of lust, treachery, and assassination, while her poetic doppelgänger remains relatively unspoiled over time.[127] Bradamante's status as fabled Este

[123] Gozzi, 265 (*Marfisa bizzarra* 2.23).

[124] See Ariosto, 2006, 1:685–96 (*Orlando furioso* 19.74–108), in which Marfisa (whom everyone assumes is a man) accepts a challenge to vanquish ten knights in duels and sexually satisfy ten women.

[125] Solerti, lv.

[126] Cavicchi, 336; Masetti Zannini, 67–68. Such notorious details regarding Marfisa d'Este's legend were recalled as recently as in a February 2022 Italian news article (Sgarbi). It is unfortunate that the author of this piece fails to cite the source (Foà) from which it largely borrows its wording about Marfisa's relationship with Tasso.

[127] Married to Bradamante d'Este in 1576, statesman and soldier Ercole Bevilacqua (1554–1600) caused a stir at court when his affections for beloved singer and *concerto* star Anna Guarini (1563–98) became known. Though Anna had married Ercole Trotti in 1585, Bevilacqua's unchecked passions led him to plot a poisoning that would rid him of Bradamante and Anna of Trotti. Upon learning of this deception, Trotti arranged for his wife's assassination. Bradamante d'Este was not left out of the resulting gossip, however, when in 1596 news circulated of her supposed role in Bevilacqua's attempted murder. Malagutti Domeneghetti reports these and other details with novelistic allure. See Solerti, xxxvii.

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progenitrix, her marriage, her motherhood, and her "immun[ity] from the otherness of . . . paganism" safeguarded her from Marfisa's fate, regardless of the latter's conversion.[128] While Gozzi's Bradamante appears abnormally comical, she is not undone by any *bizzarria*.

Even if promiscuity rules the majority of Marfisa's actions, she consistently desires to live the life of another. Charmed by the prism of alternative existences modeled by the heroines included in her library, Marfisa aims to immortalize her capriciousness, to leave behind a legacy ("memoria assai famosa") of all she is or could be: "Now she would like to be a Ballerina, / now she wishes to become a Singer / now an Actress, now a Peasant / now a Gypsy [*sic*], and to run away into the world."[129] Like the versatile *commedia dell'arte* divas who embraced the virago as their dramatic alter ego, bizarre Marfisa longs for the generative potential of fiction. By the poem's final canto, the tensions between Marfisa's fixity and adaptability seem to settle. An "unsurmountable" ("insuperabil") cough and fever have compromised her health (for three decades, no less), bringing Marfisa indoors to dress as a "pinzochera" and profess vows of chastity and obedience.[130] A *pinzochera* was a well-known figure, a woman who "lived within a complex dual status, neither canonically religious nor wholly lay."[131] Her reformed behavior colors within the lines of the code of religious chivalry, yet *bizzarria* has not quite given up. Indeed, Marfisa's freshly acquired sanctity takes on the role of the "bizarre and strange" ("una santità bizzarra e strana").[132] In her final role as a domestic saint ("santa in casa"), veiled and deemed charitable by her neighbors, Marfisa fulfills her desire to embody versatility—an outcome that defies most expectations.[133]

A figure bound to transformation over time, Marfisa carried *bizzarria* in her valise when she eventually returned to Ferrara in the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the Este family's inability to produce a legitimate male heir and the ensuing papal takeover in 1598, the city that once hosted a utopia of secular playgrounds became a labyrinth of haunted houses. Within this eerie echo

[128] Stoppino, 179. The erotic proclivities of Ferrarese women found their way to the operatic stage later in the century. See the diva pair of "Ferrarese sisters" ("sorelle ferraresi"), one of whose names (Fiordiligi) stems from the poetic memory of chivalric literature, in Da Ponte-Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (1790).

[129] "Or vorrebb'esser stata Ballerina, / or Cantatrice divenir vorria, / or Commediante, ed ora Contadina, / or Zingara, e pel mondo fuggir via": Gozzi, 255 (*Marfisa bizzarra* 2.21). For the potential literary sources that correspond to these roles, see Vanore, 611–12.

[130] Gozzi, 586 (*Marfisa bizzarra* 12.152).

[131] McFarland, 242.

[132] Gozzi, 586 (*Marfisa bizzarra* 12.152).

[133] Gozzi, 587 (*Marfisa bizzarra* 12.155).

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chamber of Ferrarese cultural patrimony, Marfisa and Marfisa d'Este collided in the *longue durée* of the chivalric city, expired, reborn, and imagined anew.

HEIRESS TO FICTION: MARFISA AFTER MARFISA

Nineteenth-century accounts of Marfisa's city illuminate its silent streets as a lifeless wasteland. Charles Dickens's (1812–70) travelogue *Pictures of Italy* (1846) laments the "grim" fate of "old Ferrara," where sites like "Ariosto's house" and "Tasso's prison" stand out amid the "dismantled palaces, where ivy waves in lieu of banners."[134] Dickens's hollow portrait recalls Goethe's (1749–1832) ominous vision of this "large and beautiful, flat, depopulated city" ("groß[e] und schön[e], flachgelegen[e], entvölkert[e] Stadt"),[135] what the English author names the "city of the dead, without one solitary survivor."[136] Their woven convergence of death and romance would reappear in the legacy of Marfisa d'Este. She was the last standing member of the Este family living in Ferrara at the time of the dynasty's dissolution. The image of Marfisa as a fallen ghostly woman thus collapsed neatly into the memory of Ferrara, the fallen gothic city.[137]

In his autobiographical chapter titled "Marfisa e la vecchiezza" (Marfisa and old age), Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938) constructs Marfisa d'Este's image as inextricably linked with death. Phantom traces of Marfisa's passion for choreography populate the author's recollections of visiting her "house of . . . pleasure" ("casa della . . . voluttà").[138] D'Annunzio stumbles upon Marfisa's "theater of the *danse macabre*" ("teatro delle danze macabre") where "death dances with poetry" ("la Morte danza con la Poesia"), encapsulating the contradictions of her legacy: she is a deathly figure defiant in the face of death itself, a memento mori intent on living.[139] Like her character's phoenix emblem, Marfisa d'Este prevails as a symbol of renewal, as bound to the fate of ruin as she is to that of rebirth. Macabre imagery saturates Gabriele Turola's depiction of Marfisa as a hair-to-the-wind princess flanked by skeletons, forming a visual dialogue with medieval and early modern representations of the triumph of death.[140] If "repetition, trauma and voyeurism are central features of macabre

[134] Dickens, 74–75.

[135] Goethe, 105.

[136] Dickens, 75. See Gundersheimer.

[137] See Guerzoni.

[138] D'Annunzio, 82.

[139] D'Annunzio, 83. I am grateful for my conversations with Kristen Keach about this series of associations.

[140] See Muyo.

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Figure 9. Giovan Battista Crema. *Marfisa, leggenda ferrarese*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 92 x 99 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of the Galleria d'Arte Athena, Livorno.

images," as Paul Binski has shown, they serve to quelch and rejuvenate Marfisa's legendary status.[141]

Ferrarese visual culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries further realized intermedial dialogue between the city's uncanny palace and its heroine's unsafe potential. Completed in 1921, *Marfisa, leggenda ferrarese* (fig. 9) by Giovan Battista Crema (1883–1964) envisions a rapturous encounter with the dead. Skeletons clad in relics of Ferrara's elegant courtly past float above a naked Marfisa, who writhes in erotic ecstasy. Crema paints a skeleton intruder in the top right-hand corner of his canvas, much as Turola does almost a century later. It bears observing that Turola's skeletal figure pinches the top of Marfisa's right breast, accentuating the perceived availability of her already fully displayed body. This recalls the "death and the maiden" ("Der Tod und die Frau") motif,

[141] Binski, 126.

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Figure 10. Photograph of Adolfo Magrini. *La principessa Marfisa scompariva, stretta fra i suoi rimorsi*, 1897. Fondo Vecchi e Graziani, n. 471. Courtesy of Ministero della Cultura – Direzione regionale Musei dell'Emilia-Romagna. No further reproductions permitted.

originating in German Renaissance art and the work of Hans Baldung (ca. 1484–1545), who later modulated this tradition to accommodate "death and lust."[142] Crema conveys these layers of death and seduction in his painting and his writing. He, like D'Annunzio, experienced a chilling visit to the Palazzina Marfisa, describing the sounds of "fantastic, lustful affairs and hellish traps" ("vicende fantastiche di lussuria e di trabocchetti infernali") emanating from within the walls.[143]

Skeletal courtiers looming in close proximity to Marfisa and her Ferrarese home occupy a long history. One example, by a fellow student of Domenico Morelli (1823–1901), appears to have influenced Crema's work. *La principessa Marfisa scompariva, stretta fra i suoi rimorsi* (The Princess Marfisa disappeared, gripped by her regrets) (fig. 10) by Adolfo Magrini (1876–1957) captures the bizarre errancy of Marfisa's moonlit manhunt. Depicted inside a carriage drawn by wild horses, three transformed lovers clinging to its back (a detail conveyed similarly by Turola), Marfisa embarks on her quest for male prey. Though it is initially hard to spot her, the distinctive facade of Marfisa's cursed palazzina is immediately identifiable. While the photograph of the painting reproduced here (the original work is kept in an unidentified private collection) does not clearly show the other

[142] On the persistence of this motif, see Bennett.

[143] Crema, 243. The full text of Crema's "Memorie inutili di un sopravvissuto" (Useless memories of a survivor, 1960) is published in the exhibition catalogue *Giovanni Battista Crema oltre il divisionismo*. My thanks to the curator, Manuel Carrera, for generously sharing it with me.

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figures that ride in Marfisa's carriage, the catalogue entry from when Magrini displayed this work at the 1899 Biennale in Venice supplies tantalizing details. The entry describes Marfisa as accompanied by her two husbands, "one lying on a bed of pillows from the poison his wife gave him, the other with a dagger plunged into his heart."[144] These visual elements, as riveting as they are, have oddly escaped attention in previous scholarship. This comes as a surprise since, to date, no other visual representation of Marfisa exists that imagines her as an assassin twice over.

Over time and across media, the Este woman has become increasingly more mortal as part of her immortality. Magrini's literary interlocutor, Domenico Tumiati (1874–1943), penned a libretto for men's voices ("a voci d'uomini") that would expand Marfisa's legend into musical registers.[145] The cover art for Tumiati's *Marfisa* (fig. 11) features a miniature representation of Magrini's painting, with one important change: morphed into the skeletal shape of her mad horsemen, this fatal Marfisa now appears in the likeness of death itself.[146] The unnerving soundscape of this "choral poem" ("poema corale"), with music by Vittore Veneziani (1878–1958), unfolds with "errant voices" ("voci erranti") that praise Ferrara's chivalric past, paying homage to the "errant knights" ("cavallieri erranti") so essential to its fiction.[147] Like Dickens and Goethe, Tumiati's "deceased poets" ("poeti morti") mourn a lost but not wholly forgotten city.[148] Boiardo and Ariosto seek in vain the characters they once created, in "the silent palaces, looking for the shadows of ladies and heroes," just as their poems' protagonists wandered through illusory palaces searching after the same.[149] Yet among all that the palazzina indexes as dead, Marfisa returns alive. At the end of Tumiati's short poem, the sign of the green flash stirs Marfisa into action, charging forth into a city that has given her both life and death.

If already by the nineteenth century the Renaissance itself had become a *lieu de mémoire* (place of memory), the next hundred years would see an even greater surge in the number of "fragmented, multiform, contradictory" images of both Marfisa and Ferrara.[150] The early twentieth-century stitching of Marfisa's many transformations occurred within the broader context of the city's attempts to appropriate Ariosto for Fascist cultural propaganda. As Alessandro

[144] "l'uno riverso sui guanciali pel veleno che la moglie gli ha propinato, l'altro con un pugnale immerso nel cuore": Mentessi, 86. In an unexpected twist, Marfisa's second husband here suffers the fate the Gonzaga patrons threatened against Aretino.

[145] Tumiati, title page.

[146] *Marfisa*'s first version, printed in Ferrara in 1930, does not feature Cisari's woodcut. My thanks to Liz Ridolfo for her kind assistance confirming this.

[147] Tumiati, 3.

[148] Tumiati, 5.

[149] "i palagi muti, / cercando l'ombre di dame e d'eroi": Tumiati, 5.

[150] Bolzoni and Payne, 17.

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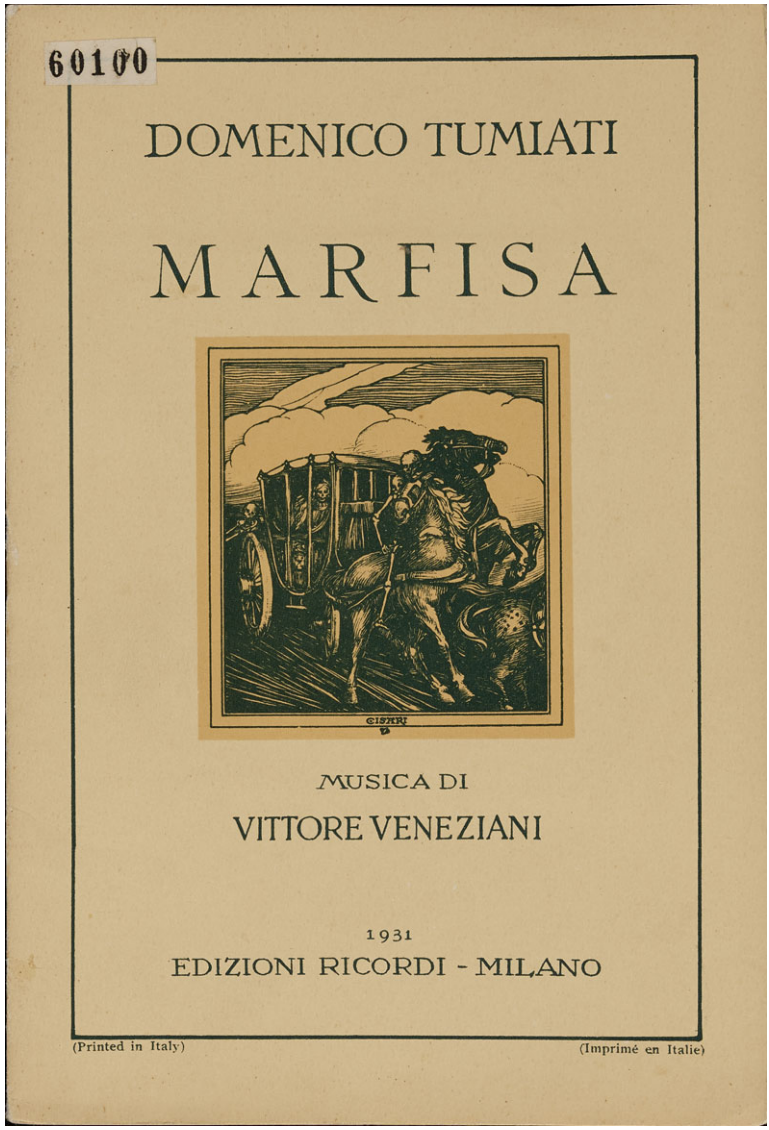

Figure 11. Giulio Cisari, woodcut for Domenico Tumiati. *Marfisa, poema musicato per coro a voci d'uomini*, 1931. Archivio Storico Ricordi, Milan, Italy. Courtesy of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Wilson Special Collections Library.

Giammei has thoroughly demonstrated, the 1933 quatercentenary of the great poet's death revitalized the image of the Este golden age. Fascist intellectuals pursued a "monologue in the present," as Giammei describes, that sought to liberate Ariosto from bookish philological study and submit his image in service to the

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regime as "a relic, a trophy, a fetish, a revenant."[151] In his description of encountering Ludovico along the freshly restored city streets, a journalist from a Ferrarese newspaper, Nello Quilici (1890–1940), saw in the poet's return the "resurrection of the city of Ferrara from its ashes" ("la . . . risurrezione dalle ceneri della città di Ferrara").[152] Risen like a phoenix, Fascist Ferrara used Ariosto in an effort to banish the city's ties with "the Romantic nightmare" ("l'incubo romantico") that had so consumed the images of Ariosto, Tasso, and their poetry.[153] Marfisa's nightly return to conduct her legendary flight embodies cyclical resistance to the regime's manipulation of this past. She preserves the strong independence of her phoenix emblem, despite Fascism's attempt to adopt this symbol for its idealized city. Gendered dynamics of perceivable danger are surely at play in Quilici's vision. While he imagines peacefully walking alongside Ariosto in ways that confirmed Ferrara's restored splendor, the idea of confronting a noble huntress, hungry and loose on the prowl, would no doubt have signaled urban precarity. Quilici smoothly sidesteps any mention of the character Marfisa in his essay on Ariosto, where he evokes "the eternal feminine" ("l'eterno femminino") to offer up praise for Angelica, Fiordiligi, Bradamante, and other moral guardians.[154] This evasion confirms that the regime had to not only misremember virago Marfisa —it had to forget her entirely. Quilici championed Ariosto as "The Poet of the Eternal Renaissance" ("Il Poeta dell'eterno rinascimento"), yet he seems to have cowered at Marfisa for her ability to authorize the same.[155]

This friction was apparent more than a decade before Ariosto's quatercentenary. In 1921, the same year Crema completed his *Marfisa, leggenda ferrarese*, Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) delivered a speech on the very grounds of the Palazzina Marfisa d'Este, and newspaper coverage reported D'Annunzio's presence in the audience. Rallying the "Ferrarese people" ("popolo di Ferrara") with inflammatory patriotic discourse, Mussolini aligned the Corso della Giovecca, the Este princess's street, with the "greatness of the nation and the collectivity's wellbeing."[156] If one part of Ferrarese society saw in

[151] Giammei, 196.

[152] Quilici, 43. Cited in Giammei, 245.

[153] Quilici, 44. Cited in Giammei, 246.

[154] Quilici, 45. The irony is not lost that Quilici reverts to this Romantic-era term ("das Ewig-Weibliche"), inaugurated by Goethe in his *Faust, Part Two* (1832), where it amasses a similarly select cohort of female role models.

[155] This served as the title of the script Quilici published in *Corriere Padano* in October 1933, based on a public lecture he had given in Palermo earlier in the spring. The text appeared the following year in the author's first book of essays. See Giammei, 245.

[156] "[la] grandezza della patria e [il] benessere della collettività." See the sections "Alla Palazzina" (At the Palazzina) and "Il discorso di B. Mussolini" (B. Mussolini's speech) in *Gazzetta Ferrarese*.

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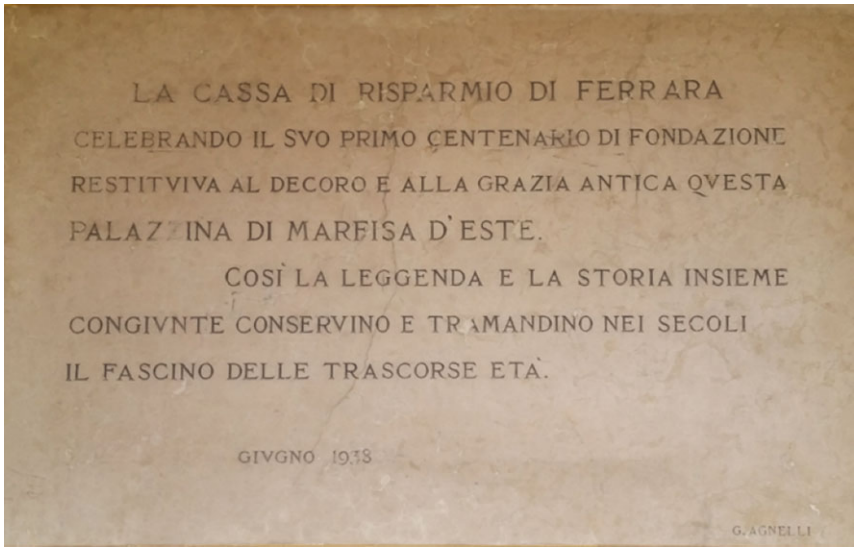

Figure 12. Commemorative plaque on the exterior archway of Palazzina Marfisa d'Este, 1938. Ferrara, Italy. Author's photo.

Marfisa's gardens the rosy future of a nation transformed under Fascism, another part conserved and celebrated her image as the city's surviving fiction, rebellious against the regime.

Named the UNESCO World Heritage City of the Renaissance in 1995, Ferrara has cycled through deaths and rebirths alongside a woman anchored to a similar fate. Although the Ferrarese palazzina fell to ruin at the end of the eighteenth century, when Marfisa's Cybo descendants lost jurisdiction over it, city leaders in the 1930s sought to restore the building and repurpose it as a museum.[157] The reconstruction of Marfisa's gardens in 1930 inaugurated the Tennis Club Marfisa d'Este, home to the Ferrarese bourgeoisie that had frequented these grounds' sprawling sport complexes since 1905.[158] The restoration's artistic director Nino Barbantini (1884–1952) explained the project's aim to make the palazzina "the representative palace of the city of Ferrara."[159] When contemporary visitors enter the garden immediately behind the Palazzina Marfisa d'Este today, they encounter a plaque (fig. 12) mounted on the exterior archway. Affixed to the building when it reopened to the public in 1938, the plaque celebrates the joint project of legend and history ("la leggenda e la storia insieme congiunte") to "conserve and pass along to future

[157] Barbantini; Visser Travagli, 169–90.

[158] Visser Travagli, 173–74.

[159] "il palazzo di rappresentanza della città di Ferrara": Barbantini, 7.

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Figure 13. Nino Nanni. Cassa di Risparmio di Ferrara, 1938 calendar. Courtesy of the Archivio Storico BPER Banca. Modena, Italy.

centuries the fascination of bygone times" ("conserv[are] e tramand[are] nei secoli il fascino delle trascorse età"). The wording of the memorial reappeared that same year in the Cassa di Risparmio di Ferrara's centenary calendar (fig. 13), wherein flaxen-haired Marfisa leads a vibrant parade of stylishly dressed horsemen, a possible allusion to the city's revamped palio race of five years prior.[160] Marfisa's retinue evokes the courtiers who would have listened to

[160] See Giammei, 257–75.

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chivalric poetry sung at court, and appears lifted from the Palazzo Schifanoia's Sala dei Mesi (Hall of the Months) frescoes, commissioned by Borso d'Este (1413–71) in the 1460s and admired by young Marfisa when she lived at the palazzo as a child. At the same time as her palazzina's doors are opened to the public, Marfisa's chivalric-civic image rides forth into Ferrara, the glistening Este castle surging from the clouds behind her.

Continuing to transgress—only to dissolve—the edges between fiction and history, the many versions of Marfisa and Marfisa d'Este converge in the production of the Ferrarese cultural imagination. The re-elaborations of her character, literary and historical, negotiate epic's twinned task of transforming myth into history, and to do so along genealogical and gendered lines. But as Dragoncino's experiment with the bizarre demonstrates, it is Marfisa's very inconclusiveness that renders her incompatible with epic's extratextual ends. Rather than bear responsibility for one genealogy, Marfisa has given rise to many. As an heiress to and progenitrix of fictions of several kinds, Marfisa is an Este woman in every sense: a figure unfettered with more stories still to tell, forever a knight-errant mounted and ready at arms.

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