Renaissance art is rooted in imitation, which Martin McLaughlin calls the “dominant critical concept” (275) of the early modern period, imitating both contemporary works and works of antiquity. One paramount example of this imitation is Ludovico Ariosto’s highly influential epic romance *Orlando Furioso* (1516), which led to countless imitations and was in itself an imitation. Ariosto, expanding Matteo Maria Boiardo’s epic *Orlando Immamorato*, incorporates elements of Boiardo’s poem in addition to common themes present in classical epic. The male figures of *The Furioso* draw upon the knights of courtly romance present in Boiardo’s work and the epic heroes such as Achilles and Aeneas. These male figures of epic were understood by Renaissance literary critics, including Sir Philip Sidney in his *Defense of Poesy*, to be models of virtue to be imitated in practice by early modern readers. This concept of imitating virtue is famously captured in Sidney’s celebration of poetry as a means “to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses” (79). Yet *The Furioso*, in addition to centering on his male heroes, also prominently features female characters and is admittedly written for a female audience, “[his] ladies” (93) who he describes as “[his] sharp, clear-headed listeners” (60). Epic virtue was understood to inspire virtue through male figures, yet Ariosto extends this concept to incorporate feminine virtue for his readers. This “master-piece of the century” (154), as Neil Dodge puts it, led to countless imitations that address this issue of feminine virtue, including Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590).

Scholars such as Chimene Bateman, Thomas Roche, and Melinda Gough have examined the issue of ethical imitation in *The Furioso*’s debt to epic tradition. Bateman focuses specifically on Ariosto’s female warriors Bradamante and Marfisa, connecting these women to Virgil’s Camilla and the epic myths of the Amazons. Both Margaret Tomalin and Thomas Roche also

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1 Cyrus is the hero of Xenophon’s prose romance, the *Cyropaedia* (C4 BCE).
explore the connection between Ariosto’s Marfisa and the classical figure Camilla. Tomalin argues that this link between Camilla and Marfisa emphasizes Marfisa’s “virago” role in the poem (540). Melinda Gough extends this inquiry by studying Tasso and his imitation of Ariosto in *Gerusalemme liberata*, focusing on how Tasso plays upon and breaks epic tradition with his Circe figure Armida. Finally, in “Spenser’s Imitations from Ariosto” Neil Dodge extends this scholarship by exploring the changes Spenser makes in *The Faerie Queene* by infusing allegory into Ariosto’s classical connections. For these scholars, the key to understanding these epic romances is the texts’ link to epic tradition.

Other scholars, however, have studied these texts in terms of gender and sexuality, focusing on the differences between the poets’ representations of the masculine and feminine. Jean Howard’s work centers around proto-feminism in the Renaissance, arguing that romantic conventions like cross-dressing possessed a “powerful denaturalizing potential” in literature (647). Lawrence Rhu studies Tasso’s intentions behind his injection of allegory into Ariosto’s poem, focusing particularly on the implications Tasso’s female characters have in regard to religion. Likewise, Martha Craig examines the gendered language used by Spenser, the “‘etymological’ rationale” (Craig 701) in his descriptions of female figures. For these critics, the issue of imitation in these poems rests in gender and sexuality.

Building upon the work of these scholars, in the following pages I closely examine arguably the three most influential epics of the sixteenth century to explore the question of feminine virtue. My study involves both an exploration of classical imitation and a critical look at the portrayal of gender in these poems. Beginning with Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, my analysis will explore *The Furioso*, *Gerusalemme liberata*, and *The Faerie Queene*, highlighting key passages and tableaux that seek to define and redefine feminine virtue. Although these poets
imitate one another and incorporate common tropes and motifs of epic tradition, each poet uses these motifs and reoccurring themes to different ends. While Ariosto defines and exemplifies feminine virtue through pluralism as associated with the freedom of choice, both Tasso and Spenser redefine it in much more structured, moral terms. Tasso attempts to consolidate feminine virtue into Christian virtue in terms of epic versus romance and paganism versus Christianity, and Spenser provides readers with a guidebook for men that encourages virtuous living. These poems offer a valuable window into Renaissance conceptions of feminine virtue, which were developed and challenged by the very sources under imitation. This comparative analysis of these poems highlights the variety and dynamism of views of feminine virtue in the early modern period. It also shows how poetry, imitation, and the classical tradition all play into this variety and dynamism.

I. Ariosto's *Furioso*: A Spectrum of Feminine Virtues

**Bradamante: Romance’s Female Warrior**

First published in 1516, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*) is an epic romance detailing the chivalric adventures of Orlando, Charlemagne, and other knights in the Christian Crusades. This poem continues the story of Orlando recounted in Matteo Mario Boiardo’s 1494 poem *Orlando Immorato*, originally written as a fabled ancestry of the Este family—one of the most powerful Italian families of the time period. Although loosely based on historical events, *The Furioso* is often described as a “phantasmagoria”\(^2\) because it involves hundreds of interwoven episodes with dozens of characters. Sectioned into octaves in the original Italian, it was first translated into English by Sir John Harington in 1591.

\(^2\) In his book *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, Gilbert Highet refers to *The Furioso* as a “huge and delightful phantasmagoria telling of the adventures in love and war of Roland and other champions” (145).
The representations of feminine virtue in *The Furioso* are complicated by conflicts stemming from its complex episodic structure. This phantasmagoria of events has led some critics to view Ariosto as lacking a clear moral purpose. Comparing Ariosto and Spenser, Neil Dodge argues that Ariosto “has not thought for grand themes,” believing that Ariosto does not wish to focus on in-depth moral allegory (155). Although critics such as Dodge and Anthony Esolen question Ariosto’s moral focus, the poem’s structure does allow for an issue or virtue to be explored in a broad, and sometimes contradictory, spectrum. Ariosto’s pluralistic representation of feminine virtue speaks to his sense of the dynamism of feminine virtue. Feminine virtue can even present itself in multiple ways within a single character. This plurality is particularly evident in Bradamante (Ariosto’s main heroine and knight errant), for although she is celebrated as a strong female warrior, her relationship with Ruggiero, her beloved, and her ultimate marriage resulting in the Este lineage complicates the iconic warrior image.

Although the narrator frequently praises her battle prowess, Bradamante’s embodiment of feminine virtue extends beyond the battlefield and ultimately complicates Ariosto’s representation of the female warrior. Bradamante’s initial depiction as the quintessential female warrior is altered to incorporate her relationship with Ruggiero. It is important to remember that the narrator first introduces the reader to Bradamante as the “remarkable maiden who swept King Sacripant to the ground” (14). Chimene Bateman interprets this powerful skill in battle as an expression of Bradamante’s “ira (the paradigmatic emotion of epic)” (3). Beginning *in medias res*, Ariosto presents Bradamante in search of Ruggiero, her betrothed, thus traveling and battling knights on her own to find her lover. The narrator highlights her independence and battle prowess in these

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3 All quotations of Ariosto refer to Guido Waldman’s 1983 English prose translation.
opening canti, noting that “her great strength and courage made her as popular with Charles and all the French as did the much-applauded valour of Rinaldo,” another famed knight (14).

Bradamante's initial association with conventionally masculine military virtues is later complicated, however, by the nature of her relationship with Ruggiero. Although this primary description celebrates Bradamante as a knight errant, later in the poem Ariosto introduces a more demure and conventionally feminine side of her virtue in the context of this relationship. This mix of both epic glory and romantic love leads Margaret Tomalin to describe Bradamante as a “guerriera,” the tradition Renaissance figure who “combines delicate beauty with epic strength” (540). Opposing her initial active search for Ruggiero, in canto 30 Bradamante anxiously waits for Ruggiero to return to her. Mirroring the complex structure of the poem itself, here Bradamante’s sudden passive vigil for Ruggiero introduces complexity into her performance of feminine virtue. The narrator depicts “the love-pangs endured by Bradamante as she waited” (Ariosto 368) or, in the original Italian, her "amorosi tormenti” (30.76). Unlike previous episodes in which Bradamante acts as a valiant knight, here the narrator describes Bradamante “lamenting” and resentfully blaming Ruggiero for his delay—all out of love and dismay for him (369). Bradamante as a “lovesick damsel wait[s] for him all that time and long[s] for him in vain” (369), playing here the role of the “innamorata giovane,” or young female lover (30.87). This representation of Bradamante does not celebrate independence or battle prowess as before but, on the contrary, loyalty, devotion, and hope—stemming from her belief in love.

Set against the image of the independent female warrior in the opening canti, Bradamante’s passive vigil for Ruggiero’s return could be read as a failure of the virtue she earlier demonstrated.

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All citations of the original Italian Furioso refer to the Turchi and Sanguinetti edition.
Margaret Tomalin interprets this vigil as a moment of confusion, arguing that Bradamante is torn between the roles of knight and lover and “unsure of what role she wishes to play” (540). This powerful attachment is neither a failure nor a moment of confusion, however, because Ariosto perceives no conflict between warrior and lover, between military virtue and the virtues of romance. Rather than diminish the significance of Bradamante’s love, the narrator’s comments reveal Ariosto’s celebration of this powerful emotion and invite the reader to celebrate it as well.

In the introduction of the following canto, the narrator gives his own commentary on the “blissful state” of being in love (371). He compares Bradamante’s separation from Ruggiero to a desperate need that must be filled with reunion, just as “water tastes the better for thirst” (371). By comparing this love sickness to thirst, Ariosto not only venerates Bradamante’s love but also shows that it is a necessity for life—a form of sustenance. Ultimately, this love sickness is not presented a flaw but as a virtue that Bradamante has cultivated through her relationship with Ruggiero. Even the term "sickness" is misplaced because it connotes weakness—an error which the narrator himself corrects: “she [is] sick, though not of fever or bodily ill—it [is] her desire which blight[s] the spirit within her and [makes] her distracted with love” (370). Although this sickness stands in opposition to the conventional representation of the knight errant the reader first encounters, in this tableau Ariosto celebrates the softer spirit of feminine virtue nurtured by love.

Bradamante’s romantic vigil for Ruggiero’s return represents on a larger level the romance genre as a whole. As an epic romance, *The Furioso* in its phantasmagoria of events combines elements of both the romance and epic genres in its characters’ behavior. Rosalie Colie’s study of genre in *Resources of Kind* relies on this concept of “genera mista,” a term she uses to describe the “clear and frank mixtures of genre” (22). We can apply this same terminology to *The Furioso*. Bradamante’s actions—her epic battle scenes versus her demure actions associated with
romance—reflect Ariosto’s *genera mista*. One pivotal example of Bradamante’s more romantic actions is in canto 30 in the episode in which she receives a letter from her nurse Hippalca telling of Ruggiero’s delayed return to her:

[Bradamante] looking no little perturbed, took the letter and read it: she would have appreciated it better had she not been expecting to see her beloved in person. To see herself fobbed off with a letter, after expecting Ruggiero himself, clouded her lovely face with anxiety, sorrow, and pique. She kissed the letter ten and twenty times, her heart fixed on its writer; the tears she dropped on it prevented its catching fire from her sighs (Ariosto 368-369).

This passage reflects the romantic aspects of Bradamante’s character because she yearns simply to see Ruggiero. She experiences physiological reactions of “anxiety, sorrow, and pique,” wondering why he would not return to her. According to Chimene Bateman, this letter brings about “reproachful monologues addressed to her absent lover, repeated kissing of a letter from him, intense jealousy of a perceived woman rival” (4). Just as the poem itself involves complicated and often opposing aspects of genre, even in Bradamante herself we witness this complexity as Ariosto strives to intermingle romance with epic.

Using Bradamante as a bridge between romance and epic—reconciling their apparent oppositions and molding them into a hybrid genre—Ariosto attributes her strength to love in order to celebrate feminine virtue as a marriage of love and independence. When Ruggiero fails to return to her, Bradamante musters the courage to go seek him out herself, especially after hearing rumors that he is gallivanting with the beautiful and powerful Marfisa, Ariosto’s other female knight errant. Bradamante challenges him to a joust and anxiously prepares for battle, only to have Marfisa come out and challenge her in Ruggiero’s place. Marfisa, driven solely by glory, takes Ruggiero’s place because “she realized that to let him go first would be to deprive herself of the victory” (Ariosto 433). When the Bradamante first attacks, however, this desire for glory—a
representation of epic—is no match for Bradamante’s burning jealousy driven by love sickness. Bradamante recognizes Marfisa as “the one whom she detested so passionately she saw herself dying if she did not requite her grief in vengeance upon her” (433). Here romantic passions fuel epic virtue, and this passion spurs Bradamante to strike Marfisa, and with “one thrust, and Marfisa ha[s] to test for herself the hardness of the ground—a thing so much outside her experience that it [drives] her almost wild with rage” (433).

Ariosto celebrates the flexibility of feminine virtue by establishing Bradamante, a female knight in love, as the primary heroine of the text. The “trial by combat,” which, as Snodgrass points out, recalls one-on-one battles of The Iliad (574). In Ariosto’s poem, this trial by combat between Bradamante and Marfisa in canto 36 quickly becomes an all-out skirmish involving knights throughout the camp. Spurred by her jealous love strengthened by her battle skills, Bradamante “[wins] the battle that day single-handed, alone she rout[s] the Moorish host” (435). In this episode, Ariosto calls upon the classical concept of aristieia, a scene, according to Anna Stetlow, in which the hero experiences his or her finest moments in battle (198). The narrator highlights Bradamante’s epic glory to emphasize both her victory in battle and Ariosto’s combination of both the epic and romance genres. It is this mixture of genre that, as Bateman has argued, links to the mixture of gender—seemingly polar opposites like “masculine and feminine, epic and romance [that] are profoundly intertwined” (1). Ariosto revels in Bradamante’s complexity just as he revels in his phantasmagoria, for both involve a complex intermingling of genre that reflects key aspects of feminine virtue. The many complex and even contradictory representations of feminine virtue in The Furioso suggest that Ariosto is not making virtue out of aesthetic necessity. With each episode, facets of feminine virtue come together to emphasize the freedom of choice Ariosto associates with virtue.
The Role of the Narrator

Throughout *The Furioso*, Ariosto’s narrator prominently includes asides and introductions to produce a critical voice to guide the reader. According to Sellene Scarsi, the narrator is one of the most distinctive features of *The Furioso* and allows Ariosto to express his interpretations through another voice (37). At the beginning of each canto, Ariosto uses the narrator to set the scene for the following tableaux, providing an opinionated view that frames and guides the readers’ interpretation. The narrator’s opinions help the reader not only understand the upcoming episode, but also the characters’ motivations within it. At the beginning of canto 31, for instance, the narrator briefly discusses the tumultuous state of love—highlighting its importance even when it brings hardship. The narrator explains that “to suffer merciless bondage (so long as hope remains alive) can be endured; the reward for faithful service will surely come, however much delayed” (Ariosto 371). In this case, the narrator not only foreshadows Bradamante’s eventual reunion with her beloved but also emphasizes the positive aspects associated with love—even when it brings pain. In this way, he persuades the reader to support Bradamante and celebrate her loyalty and hope. In this introduction, like with many others, the narrator helps the reader see Ariosto’s goal in the coming canto, and he also helps the reader understand each character’s motivations and virtues.

To underscore the importance—and sometimes the complexity—of characters’ virtues, the narrator often alludes to classical figures of virtue. Dennis Looney believes that “humanistically inspired poets” like Ariosto sought to adapt classical epic to “modern literary culture to establish the value” of their own ideologies (1). In this way, by introducing into the poem illustrious classical women as embodiments of certain virtues, Ariosto through the narrator establishes a tradition of virtue leading from antiquity to the women of *The Furioso*. Looking specifically to the classical
figures of Harpalice, Camilla, Sappho, and Corinna, the narrator argues that "women have proved their excellence in every art in which they have striven" (229). Ariosto through the narrator uses these four women to define the different arts women “have striven” in. Harpalice and Camilla are described by the narrator as having “achieved fame for their practiced skill in battle,” acting as viragos similar to Ariosto’s Marfisa (229). In contrast, the narrator presents Sappho and Corinna, famous Greek poets who “shine on account of their learning, with a radiance that night will never darken” (229). Here Ariosto establishes the wide range of his spectrum of feminine virtues. By bringing in such a diverse array of classical women, the narrator implies that feminine virtue comes in many forms, an idea borne out in *The Furioso*. Rather than present one monolithic definition of feminine virtue, Ariosto provides a complex definition strongly rooted in the classical tradition.

Although these classical figures all happen to be female, throughout *The Furioso* the narrator further complicates the idea of feminine virtue by transcending gender. Ultimately, heroic virtue in *The Furioso* is not restricted either to men or to women; it is a trait shared by all of his heroes, both male and female. As I argued earlier, Bradamante is celebrated not only for her skill in battle but also for her love and dedication to Ruggiero. Along the same lines, Ariosto’s other female warrior Marfisa presents the reader with another example of this gender-transcendent virtue. Although she is female and considered very beautiful, Marfisa also exhibits the kind of epic virtue that pursues glory in battle. Tomalin points out that even in the structure of the lines dedicated to Marfisa, Ariosto’s “short, simple sentences” reflect her “direct and positive personality” (544). Here once again, Ariosto complicates virtue by associating masculine virtues with his female figures.

*Marfisa: Ariosto’s Camilla*
Through the knight errant Marfisa, Ariosto further explores the idea that sex does not limit one’s capacity for virtue. Rather than split virtue into conventionally gendered traits, such as beauty for women and battle skill for men, in Marfisa the narrator celebrates the capacity of women to embody a variety of apparently contradictory virtues. Throughout the poem, the reputations of Ariosto’s characters are conveyed in stories, told by the narrator and other characters, that underscore the virtues that define the character. In Marfisa’s case, these stories express her reputation in the world of the poem through conventionally masculine and feminine virtues. For instance, when discussing Ruggiero’s whereabouts with Bradamante, Richardet—Bradamante’s twin brother—notes that Ruggiero is traveling with Marfisa, a female warrior known for “her eminent valor and her beauty” (Ariosto 370). That she is praised simultaneously for exhibiting both conventionally feminine and masculine virtues implies that her particular virtue transcends the qualifiers “feminine” and “masculine.” This gender-transcendent quality of her virtue reemerges in the narrator’s introduction of Marfisa in canto 18. He anecdotally notes she had “once brought the perspiration to the brow of Orlando,” emphasizing that she is not just an accomplished female knight but a knight capable of besting Orlando, the most powerful knight of the poem (205). Ultimately, Marfisa’s actions undo the narrator’s gendering of masculine virtue.

Ariosto draws directly upon Virgil’s account of Camilla's childhood and the key characteristics noted by Virgil and others in designing Marfisa to clearly establish her classical legacy as a female warrior. In De mulieribus claris, a collection of the lives of the most illustrious women of history and myth, Giovanni Boccaccio dedicates a chapter to Camilla that highlights the virtues of Virgil’s famous warrior. The narrator’s account of the childhood of Marfisa in The Furioso conspicuously mirrors the childhood of Camilla as described by Boccaccio. Boccaccio explains that Camilla, raised by Diana “on the milk of wild animals,” “cover[ed] her body with the
swords of animals, hurl[ed] the spear, use[d] a slingshot…and disdain[ed] all womanly work” (157). Like Camilla, Marfisa was separated from her family at birth and was “suckle[d]…for ten months and another ten” by a lioness before being taken away and raised by Arabs (Ariosto 438). From these harsh beginnings, both warriors learned to fend for themselves and to pursue independence, traits that both Boccaccio and Ariosto praise. By drawing upon the familiar Renaissance account of Boccaccio, Ariosto traces a tradition from Virgil through the early Italian Renaissance to the sixteenth century. He links Marfisa to the female warriors of antiquity not only to celebrate this legacy but also to complicate it with his idea of gender-transcendent virtue.

Although in fashioning Marfisa Ariosto borrows certain elements of Boccaccio's account of Camilla and her virtues, he also deviates from that account in significant ways. Just as Boccaccio urges women to aspire to Camilla’s image of “curbing wanton desire…refusing the pleasures and luxury…and steadfastly rejecting…young men” (Boccaccio 157). With Boccaccio’s example of Camilla, Marfisa’s feminine virtue reflects Camilla’s rejection of “idleness, feasting…and consorting with young men” (Boccaccio 159). Indeed, Marfisa is the only main female character lacking a romantic plotline; in fact, the only romantic tumult she is involved in is when Bradamante mistakenly takes Marfisa for Ruggiero’s mistress when in reality she is his sister. Bateman notes that Marfisa “is one of the few characters in The Furioso who never has to wrestle with the classic dilemma of love…versus the demands of duty” (9). Boccaccio stresses the importance of Camilla’s “precious virginity” as being virtuous (159); for Ariosto, however, the physical state of being a virgin does not equate to virtue. The Furioso is so filled with enticing, sexual moments that imply, as I will argue at length below, that the physical state of virginity is not an inherently or exclusively feminine virtue, as we will see in Angelica’s story. In this way, Marfisa should not be admired because of her virginity; she should be admired because of her expressions of epic virtue that tie
her to Camilla. Ultimately, Marfisa’s performance of feminine virtue, contrary to Bradamante’s more complex portrayal which involves a *donna* role, reflects that, for Ariosto, there exists a spectrum of feminine virtue which ultimately transcends gender.

To further exemplify this gender-transcendent virtue, in canto 19 Ariosto presents a society in which traditional gender roles are reversed, leaving a group of strong, independent women free to explore the epic virtue displayed by Bradamante and Marfisa. During this encounter, Marfisa and other male knights are shipwrecked on an island controlled by women and must agree to the women’s rules in order to survive. All men that come to the island must kill ten men and bed ten women successfully in one day to survive. If the selected knight succeeds, then his party is free to leave, but he must stay and act as a husband to ten women on the island. By chance, Marfisa is chosen as the knight who must complete these tasks successfully in order to save their party. Marfisa, whose feminine form is concealed by her armor, parallels the independence of the island women, whom the narrator describes as "haughty damsels, their dresses tucked up, riding through the streets and tilting at each other in the public square like so many Amazons" (225). Bringing in elements of cross-dressing, and thus highlighting the reversal of conventional gender roles on the island, Ariosto exposes the dynamism and flexibility of these roles. For example, the narrator notes that "here no man was permitted to wear sword or spurs or any armour,” and in fact the “menfolk were all busy at their shuttles and spindles, their reels, combs, and needles; they were dressed in feminine attire falling to their feet, which gave them a soft, languorous air” (225). By describing the men readily performing tasks conventionally assigned to women, the narrator emphasizes the sheer conventionality of the gender divide.

The island women embody the same gender-transcendent virtue as Marfisa through their role reversal. Jean Howard sees a “denaturalizing potential” at work in such moments of cross-
dressing and gender-reversal in Renaissance texts, which invite us to see that “custom, rather than nature, determines not only what clothing should be worn by each sex, but also in what activities each should engage” (647). The island women’s engagements in typically masculine activities supports Howard’s point that custom, rather than nature, establishes common associations with the masculine and feminine. Therefore, this island tableau presents an alternate view of feminine and masculine virtue, for like Marfisa, here the women are celebrated for their leadership and fighting abilities. The election of Marfisa as the warrior of their party creates a connection between European culture and the foreign culture of the island women. As a European, Marfisa acts as a familiar character readers can be comfortable with. Roche argues that the isolated location and uniqueness of the island women’s rules separate them as the Other in the eyes of Ariosto’s readers (116), but Marfisa helps show that the island women’s traits do not have to be fully foreign and unfamiliar. Marfisa therefore is a connection between the island women’s exhibition of independence and the culture of the reader. In this way, Marfisa acts as a connection back to antiquity and a lateral connection to an alternative society in which gender has been transcended.

In fashioning the island of killer women, Ariosto once again draws upon classical tradition. This tableau is his nod to the Amazons, a mythic nation of powerful, independent female tribes written about by such classical writers as the Greek geographer Strabo. In his Geographica, a text revered by the classical humanists of the early modern period, Strabo describes the Amazons as “an army of women…organized without men” (11.5.3, Jones 235). By describing the inhabitants of his island as “Amazons” (225), Ariosto continues his project of rooting the legacy of the female warrior in the classical tradition and legitimizing the gender-transcendent virtue of his heroines. Howard regards these allusions to classical figures and sources as elements of Renaissance humanism, which, she argues, altered conventional views of women by incorporating both
medieval and classical ideologies (645). Ariosto’s allusions to Camilla and the Amazons exemplify this “humanist logic” by employing illustrious classical examples of powerful female warriors to shape and redefine the idea of female virtue in his own early modern world.

Although Marfisa lacks the equipment necessary to fulfill the women’s challenge of bedding ten women, her confidence and skill in battle shine through to accent her equality among the male knights. When first tasked to decide which knight should face these two challenges, all of the knights—including Marfisa—are eager to test their strength. The narrator points out that although Marfisa is female, “[she] did not lose heart; she may have been ill equipped for the second performance, but where Nature left her unaided she was confident of making good with her sword” (Ariosto 224). Marfisa evidently does not see her sex as a hindrance; it is simply a biological distinction irrelevant to her self-identification as a knight, her virtue, and her pursuit of epic glory. Her confidence proves to be well founded, for in the battle against the ten foes she stuns the crowd and her opponents with her skill, causing the narrator to note, “I have seen bombards splits ranks apart the way Marfisa tore through the enemy” (Ariosto 226). Marfisa’s success in battle on the island of killer women cements her glory as a knight and clearly demonstrates the capacity of women to perform the conventionally masculine virtue of epic glory without sacrificing her female identity.

**Bradamante, Richardet, and the Fluidity of Gender**

Ariosto presents the gender-transcendent quality of heroic virtue from yet another perspective in the relationship of fraternal twins Bradamante and Richardet. Ariosto accentuates their physical similarities, and ultimately their similar virtues, by making them virtually unmistakable. Winifred Schleiner acknowledges that many early modern romances contain episodes in which a male dons female clothes and thus “baffles the bystanders by his beauty”
(607), thus accentuating the fluidity of gender and physical appearance. We find this same concept in the episodes containing Bradamante and Richardet. For example, the physical appearances of Bradamante and her brother confuse even close friends and family. When first meeting Richardet in canto 25, even Bradamante’s beloved Ruggiero first mistakes the male twin for his lover. Ruggiero notes that he is “looking at the comely face and beautiful figure of [his] Bradamante,” yet he does not “hear the dulcet tones for her voice. And her words are not appropriate to thanking a faithful lover” (Ariosto 298). From a physical perspective, Bradamante in her armor can appear as masculine, and likewise her brother’s beautiful bone structure makes him physically appealing and almost feminine in appearance. The narrator notes that Bradamante's "noble mien" suggests "that of a gallant warrior" (15), emphasizing the fluidity of the twins’ apparent gender. This fluidity goes beyond just suggesting a woman in armor can look like a man. The suggestion that Richardet, a virtuous man, can look like his virtuous sister encourages the reader to not only associate Bradamante with masculine virtue, but also see that Richardet can be linked to feminine virtue.

Ariosto’s emphasis of the physical features shared by the twins prepares the reader to recognize the virtues they share. As knights, both twins "wander the world seeking high adventure" (Ariosto 298). Both seek glory in battle and strive for chivalry, virtues that cause “neither [their] father, nor [their] brothers, nor even [their] mother who bore [them] [to be able] to tell [them] apart” (298). Added to their physical similarity, this deeper level of resemblance implies that sex is merely a physical, biological difference with no impact upon virtue. Females and males alike, whether it be Marfisa, Bradamante, or Richardet, can possess and perform the same virtues.

These noted similarities lead to confusion when Fiordispina falls in love with Bradamante. Although Bradamante, like Marfisa on the island of killer women, is “ill equipped” (224) to pleasure Fiordispina sexually, her virtue nevertheless captures the woman’s heart. Because of her
short hair and armor, Bradamante appears to be male when Fiordispina comes across her with her hunting party in the woods. Fiordispina finds Bradamante “clad in armour all except for her face, and with a sword in place of a distaff, [Fiordispina] though she was looking at a knight. After gazing awhile at her face and manly build she felt her heart stolen” (Ariosto 299). By juxtaposing Bradamante’s sword with a distaff used for spinning, Ariosto points to the conventional definition of gender in terms of occupation and attire. Bradamante, recognizing that Fiordispina has mistaken her for a male knight, immediately seeks to rectify the situation “and reveal [herself] as a member of the gentle sex rather than to have [herself] reckoned an ignoble man” (Ariosto 299). Her gracious reason for revealing her gender reflects her commitment to chivalry and honesty, traits commonly associated with male knights. These virtues, however, leave Fiordispina pining for Bradamante even after her gender has been revealed. The narrator explains that “to Fiordispina [Bradamante’s] face seemed no less beautiful for this, her eyes, her movement no less graceful; she did not on this account retrieve mastery over her heart” (299). Ultimately, Bradamante’s virtue shines through her female form and becomes a more important consideration than sex. Fiordispina laments her adoration of Bradamante not because it is “evil or virtuous” but simply because she cannot “hope to see it consummated… [her] desire alone can have no fulfillment” (Ariosto 300). Shakespeare will later testify to the familiarity of this idea in his sonnet 20, in which he laments the male form of his beloved, the "master-mistress of [his] passion" (2). 5 Both poets thus imply that physical form, if it inhibits consummation, in no way inhibits love or desire.

Fiordispina’s examples of poor love matches from antiquity shows Ariosto once again appealing to classical tradition while differing from it. Fiordispina gives several examples of these poor matches and cries that her "love is greater folly than any of theirs" because she loves the

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5 Excerpts from Shakespeare’s sonnet come from the 1937 Walter J. Black, Inc. edition.
perfect woman and yet cannot consummate the relationship (300). Fiordispina claims that “King Ninus’ wife was evil and profane in her love for her son; so was Mirra, in love with her father, and Pasiphae with the bull” (300), yet even compared to these examples of incest and bestiality her love is more cruel because her desire can never be fulfilled simply because of Bradamante’s sex. Fiordispina notes that these classical women all “made designs upon the males and achieved the desired consummation...Pasiphae went inside the wooden cow, the others achieved their end by other means” (300). On the one hand, these allusions contextualize Fiordispina and Bradamante's relationship as hopeless—a pair that could never work. On the other hand, it suggests that just as nothing prevented Pasiphae from consummating her relationship with the bull, so too here, only custom stands in the way. Fiordispina's love for Bradamante points to the relative irrelevance of sexuality and physical form. This irrelevance is further explored when sharing a bed with Bradamante, Fiordispina has “dreams in which it seemed to her that Heaven had allotted to her a Bradamante transformed into a preferable sex...she would wake and reach out, only to find that what she had seen was but an empty dream” (Ariosto 301). Reaching out to find emptiness—particularly between Bradamante’s legs—leaves Fiordispina desiring a man not for his masculine virtues but simply for the physical male form. Fiordispina's humorous yearning for consummation highlights how ridiculous it is to use gender as a separating barrier between masculine and feminine virtues. Ariosto cheekily points out that the difference between Bradamante and Richardet, or any other chivalrous male knight, is just a penis.

The confusion continues when Fiordispina mistakes Richardet for Bradamante. Bradamante returns to Richardet and her family and tells them of her encounter with Fiordispina. Richardet, who has heard of Fiordispina and her beauty, decides that “a little deception would procure an easy success” so he poses as Bradamante, only transformed by magic into a man
Doty 20

Using cross-dressing, as Schleiner points out, was a common way for male protagonists in Renaissance romance to pursue "intrigue, love stratagem, or escape from danger" (607). In this case, pretending to be Bradamante, Richardet seeks love and thus goes to see Fiordispina while wearing Bradamante's armor. Thinking Richardet is his sister, Fiordispina “sent for a dress of hers, richly ornate, which she herself spread out and put on [him] as though he were a woman” (302). Richardet confesses to Fiordispina that he (as a Bradamante) has been transformed by a nymph into a man, feeling “that [he] was changing from woman to man” (303). The host of phallic references used in this episode indicates that the only change required by such a transformation is the addition of a penis. Richardet tells Fiordispina to “command [his] faculties...and [she] shall find them now and ever more alert and bestirred for [her],” thus emphasizing the erection formerly missing from Bradamante’s form (303). In this way, the comedy of the passage is rooted in just how insignificant a difference in sex is because Fiordispina never recognizes a change in virtue or action when Richardet poses as Bradamante.

Ultimately, however, the difference between Richardet and Bradamante may amount to more than a phallus. Bradamante actually exhibits more virtuous chivalry than her brother despite her female form. While Richardet lies about his identity to bed Fiordispina, Bradamante wishes to immediately divulge her gender so as not to appear “ignoble” (Ariosto 299). Bateman argues that although both twins are highly reputable knights, Bradamante is ultimately the true hero of the poem while Richardet is “far from establishing his heroic status” (16). In this way, although, from a conventional, patriarchal perspective, Bradamante may be limited physically because of her feminine form, her virtue nevertheless allows her to surpass her male counterpart. Ariosto presents his readers with two virtually indistinguishable examples of chivalric virtue to compare, and ultimately in this comparison the woman triumphs.
Jean Howard argues that the exploration of “the spiritual equality of men and women” in early modern literature served as a means of questioning patriarchal authority (645-646). In this sense, Ariosto’s introduction of Bradamante’s twin into *The Furioso* and his exploration of their similarity serves as a means of exposing the limitations of gendered thinking. The comedy of these scenes does not compromise this effect. By presenting Bradamante as superior to her twin in terms of virtue, Ariosto challenges the assumption that men naturally make better knights. As a cross-dressing, “denaturalized” knight, she transcends the categories of gender and establishes not just her equality to her brother and other male knights but her superiority.

**The Complexity of Femininity in Ariosto's Patriarchal Society**

The pursuit of Angelica provides the structural backbone of *The Furioso*’s phantasmagoria of events and also presents a damning portrait of patriarchy and a complicated representation of femininity that cannot be reduced to a polarized set of virtues and vices. Known throughout Ariosto’s world for her beauty and virginity, Angelica is hunted by both Christians and Saracens because they view her as a war trophy or “the victor’s prize” (Ariosto 2). Her beauty is so bewitching that knights abandon their quests and begin to follow her after seeing her face. In the opening canto, Angelica sparks this reaction in several knights, including Rinaldo, “son of Aymon, lord of Montauban, and a doughty paladin” (2). The narrator’s description of this encounter emphasizes the allure Angelica holds for the great Rinaldo: “when [Rinaldo’s] eyes lit on the woman, he recognized her angel’s countenance, even from a distance, and the lovely face which held him in amorous thralldom” (2). Rinaldo is so overcome with desire for Angelica that he completely disregards his previous mission and pursues her. Angelica, however, flees from his advances: “the damsel turned her palfrey’s head and galloped through the forest at full tilt” (2). With this motion, Angelica initiates a chase that continues throughout the entire poem. She sparks
another pursuit when seen by the Saracen knight Ferrau, who proceeds to compete with Rinaldo in the hopes of catching her. After battling each other, the knights realize that while “[they] tarry here, she is slipping away,” for Angelica flees on horse once again (3). Instead of continuing a futile fight, the knights decide to join forces and pursue her together: “here, not knowing which path the damsel had taken (for in both were fresh tracks which were not to be distinguished from each other), they left the decision to Fate: Rinaldo took the one path, the Saracen the other” (3).

Ariosto often prioritizes and assumes Angelica’s perspective during her pursuit, inviting the reader to sympathize with her and appreciate her terror. Although the knights seek her out because of her beauty, they ignore her rebuffing of their advances. The narrator aims to highlight her rejection of them, however, and explain that it is fueled by fear. When running from Rinaldo, “the stirring of a branch, of a green leaf of oak, elm or beech would make her swerve in fright; at each shadow she espied, whether by hill or dale, she imagined Rinaldo was still close behind her” (Ariosto 5). Resselear Lee describes Angelica’s position in the poem as “precarious fortune” (13). She is fortunate to be beautiful and desired, but this desire leads men to attempt rape and kidnapping. Angelica’s terror, therefore, is captured in these vivid images of her fleeing from men in order to encourage sympathy in the reader:

Like a baby fawn or kid, who has watched through the leaves of the wood where he was born, and has seen the leopard’s fangs close on his mother’s throat, seen her flank and breast torn open; he flees through the thickets to escape the monster, trembling with terror and alarm; and every time he brushes against a twig he sees himself already in the cruel beast’s jaws. (5)

By comparing Angelica to the fawn, the narrator accentuates her innocence, while the leopard-like knights hunt her and wish to destroy her completely. Just as the leopard ignores the fawn’s desire to live, so too do the knights ignore her rejection of their advances. Although she attempts to preserve her virginity, the knights see this virginity as a prize they can fight for and take.
John Harington's translation omits much of Ariosto's sympathetic portrait of Angelica, yet by examining the changes Harington makes we can see all the more clearly Ariosto's expressions of proto-feminism. Studying the portrayals of Angelica in Ariosto's and Harington’s versions, Scarsi argues that “while Ariosto’s depiction of Angelica is multifaceted and complex, Harington simplifies it greatly, reducing it to a mostly negative portrayal: presenting her as the ‘embodiment of lust’” (43). When looking at each text line by line, Scarsi believes that Harington omits lines and phrases from the original Italian that paint a more “proto-feminist view” (Scarsi 44). In this way, Harington portrays Angelica as haughty and sexual, a stark contrast to the proto-feminist elements found in Ariosto's version. The positive virtues Ariosto incorporates in his portrayal of Angelica shine through when compared to Harington's altered translation. Angelica's character could be read as haughty and purely sexual in Harington's translation, yet her complexity and close association with chastity—her active preservation of her virginity—that Ariosto captures in his poem ultimately reflect his proto-feminist views. Scarsi further argues that Ariosto wished to show the “condition of women” as victims and objects in a world driven by men (44). As the fawn, Angelica is the innocent victim of the knights who wish to claim her virginity, ripping it from her as the leopard sinks its “fangs into [the] throat” of the fawn (Ariosto 5). Ariosto recognizes this inequality in the patriarchal world and aims to capture its brutality through the entrapments Angelica endures in *The Furioso*.

Perhaps the most iconic representation of Angelica's objectification and victimization at the hands of patriarchy is when she is sacrificed to an orc (an orca or some sea beast) as tribute. The narrator describes the legend of an island named Ebuda, where the sea god Proteus impregnated the king’s beautiful daughter. The king, outraged by his daughter’s lack of virginity, had her beheaded and so Proteus, seeking revenge, sent "all his watery flock" to ravage the town,
causing the townspeople to hunt for a “maiden as beautiful as the first and take her to the water’s edge and offer her to the irate god” as compensation (Ariosto 76). If Proteus did not find the maiden sufficiently beautiful, she would be “engulfed in the maw of a great orc” (77). Pirates from Ebuda seek out Angelica, famed for her beauty and virginity, as a sacrifice to Proteus. Chained to a rock, she is compared by the narrator to “a statue fashioned in alabaster or some lambent marble, and tethered thus to the rock by some diligent sculptor’s artifice” (103). Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s nineteenth-century painting of this episode (fig. 1) perfectly captures the details of this comparison, which, in a subtle critique of patriarchy, indicates Angelica’s status as a commoditized object. The tableau on the whole powerfully expresses Ariosto’s perspective on the position of women in the early modern world as decorative bodies lacking thought, opinions, or desires.
Having been saved from the orc, Angelica once again finds herself actively defending her chastity against a lustful hermit, showing ultimately how the victimization of women in patriarchy is relentless. The hermit secretly observes Angelica swimming in the water near a cliff, her “tresses [hanging] loose about her shoulders, while the lascivious breeze caresse[s] her” (Ariosto 74).
Although she never asks for attention and actively avoids men, Angelica is still viewed as an object to obtain. Overcome with desire for her body, the hermit approaches Angelica and “offer[s] her good, devout words of comfort, and as he [speaks], he boldly place[s] his hands now on her breast, now on her tear-stained cheeks. Then, gaining confidence, he trie[s] to embrace her, but she angrily [strikes] at his chest and push[es] him away, her face suffused with a modest blush” (75). Although the hermit first appears to Angelica “with a show of piety as profound as that of Paul or Hilarion,” this is actually a façade to take advantage of her (75). Angelica, however, falls victim to this fraud and suffers his attempted rape, only hindered by his age which causes his “flop-eared nag…[to not] raise his head” (76). Ultimately, this tableau stresses that Angelica must relentlessly defend herself from unwanted advances, a living nightmare women face in patriarchal societies. Lee notes that Angelica is seen by the hermit and other men as a "symbol of unstable fortune and of the elusiveness of things desired" (15), an elusiveness that spurs the men to objectify her. By adopting and sustaining Angelica's perspective in this objectification, Ariosto ultimately vilifies her tormentors.

Sympathetically sustaining Angelica's perspective, however, does not prevent Ariosto from also portraying her flaws. Ariosto does not aim to portray women as perfect, but instead as complex—with both virtues and flaws. For example, when first describing Angelica, the narrator depicts her as “hard…and cold as a stone pillar…[who] would not stoop to pity: [for] it would seem she disdained all human kind, and believed no man was worthy of her” (Ariosto 6). Although Ariosto celebrates Angelica’s attempts to preserve her virginity, he does recognize that she exhibits haughty qualities in this preservation. This haughtiness comes across in canto 10, when Angelica evades a group of knights with the help of a magical ring that renders her invisible. Angelica exhibits haughtiness when she stays and “laughs at [her suitors] without indulgence as, cloaked in
invisibility, she observed their movements" while they clamor to find her after a sudden disappearance (Ariosto 120). These malicious actions prove that Angelica is not completely innocent so they complicate her role as a victim. These negative qualities intermingle with her exhibited virtues to provide a complex representation women, with both positive and negative traits. Ultimately, these negative qualities give Ariosto credence and legitimacy because he depicts characters that reflect the complexity of women.

The narrator also resists simple moral reductionism in his comments throughout the poem. He juxtaposes seemingly proto-feminist beliefs with more misogynistic comments. Although he may celebrate Angelica’s decision to run in order to preserve her virginity, the narrator just a few canti later pokes fun at women’s decision-making skills, stating, “women have often made better decisions on impulse than on reflection, for among the countless faculties bestowed on them by Heaven, this one is peculiar to them” (Ariosto 323). The narrator's comments could offend the reader but they are intended to give the text more honesty by acknowledging both positive and negative qualities exhibited by women. Many critics have acknowledged this feature of the narrator. Scarsi, who herself does so, cites C. Salinari and C. Ricci to argue that Ariosto’s celebration of women "does not exclude…the several comments on the sex's weakness, frailty, mistakes, inconstancy”(19). These negative comments, the critics argue, do not represent misogyny but instead "awareness" that both genders exhibit flaws (19). These more misogynistic points are further diminished by Scarsi, who describes them as “consonant with the general, ‘smiling tone’ of the work,” a work that represents a “plurality of voices and of perspectives” (20).

The complex mixture of virtues and vices with which Ariosto endows and defines his characters

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6 Angelica’s laughter harkens back to Odysseus in The Odyssey who cannot resist taunting the Cyclops Polyphemos after he and his crew narrowly escape death (9.500-505).
broadens the spectrum of female virtues and reflects the richness and variety of the phantasmagoria as a whole.

The flexibility and complexity of Angelica's character is furthered by her dedication to true love. In canto 19, the narrator relates Angelica’s submission of her haughtiness when she encounters Medoro, an injured boy lying in the forest. Seeing him grieving for his lost king who was killed in battle, “an unaccustomed sense of pity [steals] into [Angelica’s] breast by some unused door, softening her hard heart” (Ariosto 218). Angelica heals Medoro’s wounds “with the juices secreted by herbs,” and while she treats him she begins to feel a connection between the two (219). The narrator notes that “not until [Medoro] was returned to health would she leave him, so much did he mean to her” (219). Ariosto focuses the readers’ attention on this commitment to Medoro because here he celebrates Angelica’s devotion and selflessness. Ultimately, she sheds her haughtiness and she finally experiences true love, “feel[ing] herself in fire, devoured in flames” of love for Medoro (219). In her study, Tomalin suggests that through his episodic poem Ariosto "provides the reader with a balanced range of emotional situations" (541), and I believe in Angelica's episodes we see this range of emotion as well as a mix of both vice and virtue.

Throughout the text, Angelica’s flight from lustful knights indicts patriarchy and also symbolizes her defense of chastity, a virtue that preserves her virginity for her beloved. Although a series a knights fight one another and chase Angelica for her virginity, ultimately “Angelica let[s] Medoro pluck the first rose, hitherto untouched” (Ariosto 220). The language emphasizes Angelica’s control over this consummation, for she “lets” him have her virginity instead of Medoro simply taking it away. In this way, we are invited to celebrate Angelica's defense of virginity while also acknowledging that she does not have to remain a virgin to be virtuous. This tableau emphasizes Angelica’s control over her own body; she is no longer a victim of others.
Although the sex occurred outside of marriage—an act the couple “cloth[ed]...in the trappings of virtue...with holy rites” of marriage (219)—Angelica’s virtue is still intact because of her love and devotion to Medoro, thus emphasizing these feminine virtues. No longer haughty, instead, Angelica “[can] look no further than the youth. She [can] never have enough of him...she [clings] constantly round his neck, her appetite for him never [cloys]” (220). This marital bliss shows that Angelica’s devotion to Medoro is her driving virtue. Overall, she is entitled to be complex and change, acting as fluid and shifting as the poem itself.

As a whole, The Furioso presents its readers with a freedom of choice in relation to feminine virtue. The female characters of the poem reflect this freedom, particularly in the case of Bradamante’s pursuit of both epic glory and love which symbolizes her fusing of epic and romantic virtues. Ariosto imitates and adapts epic tradition to explore feminine virtue in his characters, using examples from classical texts to accent his own interpretation of the freedom of feminine virtue. Through its female characters and their encounters with others, The Furioso illustrates the complexity of feminine virtue as a reflection of the poem’s structure. With this text, Ariosto joins the conversation of classical epic poets and offers his own interpretation of feminine virtue associated with freedom of choice. The inclusion of proto-feminist leanings also responds to depictions of patriarchal society to show that feminine virtue is equal to masculine virtue, ultimately producing an ungendered virtue that both sexes can exhibit. Ariosto molds both classical and contemporary ideology to redefine feminine virtue in his own terms and thus prompt subsequent poets, like Torquato Tasso, to respond.
II. Reconciliation of Gender and Genre in *Gerusalemme liberata*

**Clorinda: A Closet Christian?**

Decades after Ariosto's wide success, and on the heels of the Council of Trent when the Catholic Church was striving to reassert its moral authority, Torquato Tasso sought to re-write *The Furioso* to celebrate and affirm Christian virtue. In *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), Tasso personally challenges himself to redeem Ariosto's sensual phantasmagoria with moral focus and classicism. A lover of both epic and romance, Tasso struggled to reconcile the two in his poem about Christian Crusaders storming Jerusalem in 1099. As Anthony Esolen observes, Tasso's poem faced harsh criticism for its "'digressive love stories" (2) taken from Ariosto, and Tasso’s own "scruples about the doctrinal purity of *Gerusalemme liberata* drove him to madness" (1). Tasso's attempt to redeem poetry with moral focus is nowhere clearer than in the Allegoria of the poem, which details the allegorical significance of each character in the text in an attempt to fuse romance and epic with his moral beliefs. Tasso remolds Ariosto's characters and their expressions of feminine virtue to assert his moral allegory of Christian virtue within the conversation of epic tradition. In *Gerusalemme liberata*, Tasso translates Ariosto’s warriors Marfisa and Bradamante into his own expression of the female warrior, Clorinda. Just as Ariosto emphasizes the military valor of his own female knights, Tasso also celebrates Clorinda’s reputation as a fierce warrior. When introducing herself, she boldly states, “I am Clorinda: you have heard my name mentioned” (Tasso 2.46). This assumed name recognition is justified on the basis of Clorinda’s demonstrated skill and success in battle. Even in her first introduction to the reader, Clorinda is described by Tasso as “a young girl…all clad in armor” (1.47). By introducing her on the battlefield, Tasso immediately links Clorinda to her predecessors in early modern and ancient epic.
The details Tasso borrows from his classical and early modern forerunners in inventing Clorinda’s childhood and upbringing clearly present her as a new generation of a familiar type. Lawrence Rhu notes the classical connection established here to the “Virgilian model for a woman warrior, Camilla, who was thus nourished by a wild mare” (30), a connection I also find in Marfisa’s childhood in the Furioso. Just as Marfisa learned from a rugged childhood, Clorinda also hones her battle skills in the tradition of education first established by Camilla. Tasso describes Clorinda’s childhood much as Boccaccio relates Camilla’s formative years in the wild. Clorinda “from her greenest years scorned the ways of women, and the skills which these demand” and instead “hurled / the sword and spear and bridled the swift horse; / hardened her muscles in the wrestler’s ring” (Tasso 2.39-40). Beginning with this rugged childhood, Clorinda, like Marfisa and Camilla before her, hones her epic virtue in pursuit of the kleos of the greatest heroes of ancient epic.

Clorinda’s relationship to this tradition, however, is complicated by her romantic relationship with Tancred, a Christian knight who falls in love with her. This romantic tie which appears to bring Clorinda more in line with Bradamante than with Marfisa. Marfisa does not involve herself in romantic love. Clorinda, however, forms a tumultuous relationship with Tancred after facing him in battle, where he recognizes her as the maiden “whom one day [he] saw cool / her brow besides the solitary pool” (Tasso 3.22). Although she is Tancred's opponent, Clorinda’s “anger” appears “sweet,” and he revels in her “lovely face” even while on the battlefield (3.22). Their relationship, although romantic, thus begins upon and develops in the context of the battlefield. This substantiates the connection to Ariosto’s Bradamante and Ruggiero, who are both lovers and knights. Moreover, for Tasso as for Ariosto, this figure, who balances beauty and
military virtue, stands for the reconciliation of epic and romance. This reconciliation fuses the two genres, and virtues, together to represent Christian virtue.

The scene when Tancred mistakenly battles Clorinda closely mirrors the scene in *The Furioso* when Ruggiero battles an unknown knight who turns out to be Bradamante. Overcome with jealousy after hearing of Ruggiero’s adventures with Marfisa, Bradamante challenges him to single combat. Ruggiero, who fails to identify Bradamante in her armor, is “left bewildered and mystified: he [cannot] begin to imagine who it [is] who [is] challenging him” (Ariosto 429). This tableau is repeated in Tasso’s poem, strengthening the link between Clorinda and Bradamante. In canto 12, Tasso relates a fiery battle between the Christian and Muslim troops. The Christian knight Tancred, “wish[ing] to fight” (Tasso 12.52), pursues Clorinda after witnessing her kill the Christian leader Arimon. Clorinda's armor and prowess in battle lead Tancred to assume that she is “a man / worthy to put his mettle to the test” (12.52). Tasso's close imitation of Ariosto’s scene implies that he, like Ariosto, seeks to reconcile the opposed energies of epic and romance. Tasso's reconciliation, however, is unique because he ultimately unifies epic and romantic virtues as Christian virtue, or Christian love.

What ultimately distinguishes pagan Clorinda from Christian Bradamante is her spiritual struggle. Tasso’s emphasis of this theme implies that *Gerusalemme liberata* is not simply an imitation of *The Furioso* but an attempt to moralize Ariosto’s epic romance. Julia Cozzarelli recognizes Tasso's moralizing attempts in the emphasis he places on his characters' faiths. Cozzarelli argues that Ariosto's "knights' religious beliefs seemed secondary to their heroic roles" (173), yet Tasso places his knights' faiths in the foreground. For example, nominally a pagan, Clorinda nevertheless feels and conspicuously exhibits empathy for Christians, revealing a virtuous interior concealed by her pagan exterior that spurs her to convert before her death. The
first signs of this remarkable empathy appear in Canto 2, when Clorinda attends the public execution of Sophronia and Olindo. The pair has been falsely accused of stealing “a shrine / hidden beneath the earth” in a Christian church (Tasso 2.5). Moments before their execution, Clorinda recognizes that

one [Olindo] moans while the other [Sophronia] is silent
and the weaker sex shows more tenacity
…the woman looks to heaven with such fixed eyes
she seems to leave this world before she dies. (2.42)

Recognizing, in spite of her pagan background, the piety and heroic martyrdom of these two figures, “Clorinda’s heart grew tender at this sight /grieving for them, and a tear welled in her eye” (2.43). Driven by this empathy, she persuades the king to pardon Sophronia and Olindo. In this, the first major representation of feminine virtue in the poem, we learn that this virtue transcends not just gender but, it appears, religion. Here Tasso attempts to fold feminine virtue into Christian virtue.

As an epic in a post-Tridentine context, *Gerusalemme Liberata* shows that virtue is remotely linked to religious beliefs and ultimately virtuous pagans, and virtuous Protestants, connect back to the Catholic Church's view of Christian virtue. Rhu describes Tasso's attempt to unify all virtue under Christian virtue as a "crucial reckoning" that ultimately made Tasso's career (17). Studying Tasso's characters, in Clorinda's case, her nominal paganism does not stand in the way of Christian virtue, which transcends such rifts. This virtue also prompts her to convert to Christianity before her own death. After suffering a fatal blow from Tancred in their battle discussed above, Clorinda “forgive[s] [him]” and “has nothing more to fear” (Tasso 12.66). She asks Tancred to “give / [her] baptism, to wash [her] soul and clear / all of [her] sins away” (12.66). Those early demonstrations
of Christian virtue prepare the reader to understand her motivations in asking for baptism. Clorinda's expressions of virtue throughout her life reveal that she actually has always possessed this Christian virtue, and it is this virtue that allows her to empathize with others. While Ariosto presents a spectrum of virtue, Tasso always construes virtue as Christian virtue. Tasso's concept of virtue doesn't transcend; it rather suggests that there are only two categories: virtue and Roman Catholicism on one hand and vice and everything else on the other.

Clorinda’s conversion is sudden, yet Tasso establishes its legitimacy through Clorinda’s constant performance of female virtue. Tasso describes Clorinda during her last moments as a “rebel in life,” yet this rebellion refers only to her paganism, not to her virtue (Tasso 12.66). As she is baptized and “grace is poured / that she may die the handmaid of the Lord,” Clorinda fulfills the virtue she has exhibited throughout her life in such moments as the Sophronia-Olindo episode (12.66). Tasso Christianizes her to confirm that her exhibition of virtue is in alignment with the standards of the post-Tridentine Church and the poem itself. Yet even before the conversion episode, the virtue Clorinda displays can be read as Christian because Tasso associates empathy with the teachings of the Church. Clorinda's connection to Sophronia and Olindo relates back to the Apostle Peter's lesson on unity: "finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind" (1 Peter 3:8). Clorinda's empathy is for Tasso an example of the "love of brethren" described by Peter in the New Testament, so ultimately she is in line with the teachings and virtues of the Church even though she is nominally pagan.

The final element with which Tasso prepares his reader for the conversion episode is also found in The Furioso. He legitimizes this conversion episode and cements its place within the epic

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7 Virgil, in Dante’s Inferno, describes himself as a “rebel in life” because of his pagan religion.
8 Bible verses come from the Revised Standard Version.
tradition by drawing upon Ariosto’s description of the conversion of Marfisa in canto 38. When Marfisa learns that Ruggiero is her brother, she realizes that “as [her] father was kinsman and vassal to [Charlemagne], so [she is his] vassal and kinswoman” (Ariosto 457). This revelation not only gives Marfisa a reason to convert but also provides a possible explanation for the source of her military virtue: Charlemagne, the only emperor she respects and bows to “of all the emperors and kings she had even seen, Saracen and Christian, who were distinguished for valour or wealth” (456). Ariosto focuses on Marfisa's battle prowess and exhibition of epic virtue through her conversion, not her religion. Tasso, however, accentuates Clorinda's religious conversion to show that her virtues align with Christian virtue. Whereas epic virtue, for Marfisa, links her to empire, for Clorinda, her virtue links her to Christianity. Tasso has all virtue revert back to Christian virtue to illustrate that all virtues are merely aspects of Christian love. Ariosto doesn't seek this unifying quality of virtue, but instead presents to his readers a wide spectrum that connects with both epic and empire as well as romance.

**Armida: Linking Virtue with Christianity**

Tasso’s celebration of Christian virtue through the figure of the strong female warrior continues in the episodes surrounding the transformation of Armida from enchantress to warrior. Armida, an enchantress sent by Pluto to distract and ruin the Christian troops, is first introduced in canto 4 as a beautiful temptress who seduces the troops and leads them astray. Tasso captures the purely physical means by which she seduces her victims:

Her shapely breasts showed the uncovered snow
that stirs and nourishes the fire of love.
They looked, in part, like fruit not fully ripe,
part sheltered by her gown that lay above,
envious—yet if it shuts the pass for sight,
imagination, you have room to move. (Tasso 4.31)

Here Tasso plays upon the sensuality evident in Ariosto's poem, yet he uses Armida's sexuality to further the plot. He captures the lust the soldiers must have felt seeing her body tantalize them at the camp, lust that drives them to desert their campaign and help her. The soldiers believe she “resemble[s] nothing earthly, nor, / of all of Adam’s daughters graced with light, /…heaven has never showered more” (4.35). Armida purposefully leaves some of her body shrouded, left to the "imagination," to heighten the sexual tension. This passage is a prime example of Tasso's struggle between his allegorical goals for his epic and his desire to include elements of sensual romance. Cozzarelli identifies this struggle in Tasso's invocation at the opening of the poem. Following epic tradition, Tasso invokes the Muse, but according to Cozzarelli, in this invocation he asks "for pardon for the use of pleasing ornamentation in his text" (173), ornamentation like Armida's sensual form. Yet, by weaving in Armida's body as means to drive the plot--ultimately leading the Christian soldiers to temporarily stall in their crusade--Tasso attempts to resolve both epic and romance into the structure and plot of his poem.

Tasso's exploitation of Armida's beauty harkens back to Homer's depiction of the enchantress Circe, who famously transformed the followers of Odysseus into swine. Circe stands at the front of one of the most lasting features of the epic tradition. Epic poets after The Odyssey conventionally employ a Circe-figure who brings about chaos through the exploitation of beauty and sexuality. Ultimately, the enchantress’s beauty is stripped away to reveal the ugliness beneath. Melinda Gough has termed this feature of the genre the “enchantress-turned-hag motif” (525). Gough traces the motif from Homer to Ariosto, who invokes Circe in Alcina, the enchantress of The Furioso who seduces and holds Ruggiero hostage. With the help of Melissa, a magical woman
who resides in Merlin's cave, the spell Alinca has cast over Ruggiero is lifted. Free from Alina's sorcery, Ruggiero is able to see her true appearance: “a woman so hideous that her equal for sheer ugliness and decrepitude could be found nowhere on earth. She was whey-faced, wrinkled and hollow-cheeked; her hair white and sparse…but she made such use of arts unknown…that she could pass for young and fair” (Ariosto 69). This same shocking revelation of true ugliness underlying fraudulent beauty also occurs in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* when Duessa is exposed as an ugly harpy in canto 8 of Book I. With his introduction of Armida as another sensual enchantress, Tasso leads his readers to believe that she too will fulfill this common motif by revealing her inner evil.

Tasso shifts away from epic tradition, however, by maintaining Armida's beauty and by elevating her through religious conversion. He does not reveal Armida’s beauty to be a mask for ugliness; instead, he transforms her into a beautiful female warrior in celebration of the Christianized virtues of love and devotion. In this way, her beauty reflects the positive virtues she exhibits, unlike these other Circe-figures whose ugly appearances mirror the vices they express. Rather than expose her beauty as fraudulent, Tasso redeems it by associating it with Christian virtue. While Tasso first introduces Armida as a dark enchantress, he begins to transform her into a virtuous female warrior through her romantic relationships. With the positive transformation of Armida, Tasso is clearly circumventing epic tradition to redefine feminine virtue as Christian virtue. Armida expresses romantic virtues of love and devotion, so with her transformation into a converted female warrior these virtues become associated with Christianity.

Unlike other Circe-figures, Armida redeems her outward beauty with inner virtues that emerge in her romantic encounters with Rinaldo. Having captured Rinaldo, one of the Christian knights, during her manipulation of the Christian troops, Armida begins to fall in love with him.
Through her actions, Armida reveals her true devotion to Rinaldo and takes him to the Fortunate Isles, a beautiful, magical island chain that resembles in its appearance the purity of their love. When alone, she

> leaned, and sipped sweet kisses from his eye
> and sucked them from his lips. If you’d looked on
> just as you heard him heave a deep, deep sigh
> you would have thought ‘His pilgrim soul has gone
> and fled to hers.’ (Tasso 16.19)

Just as Rinaldo’s soul seeks for Armida’s, her soul also clings to his in love. Unlike expressions of love from other enchantresses in epic tradition, Armida's love is no ruse, trap, or exploitation of sexuality meant to control Rinaldo. Likewise, unlike the other Circe-figures who are associated with ugliness, Rinaldo and Armida are “among enchanting loveliness, among/ allurements, and such tender melody” (16.17). The beautiful setting reflects the beauty of their love; unlike fraudulent beauty in other scenes of enchantresses, this beautiful setting is legitimate.

This love is tested, however, when Rinaldo is compelled to leave Armida and return to the crusade—a scene which points to the incompatibility of romance and epic. She begs him to stay, explaining that whereas she had initially intended only to seduce him with her sorcery, she has truly fallen in love with him and views him as “[her] faith, [her] idol” (Tasso 16.47). As Tasso observes, Armida has “lost the game she played” by falling in love with her intended victim (16.48). Tasso thus transforms his Circe not into a hag or a harpy but into to a virtuous lover who demonstrates real devotion and undertakes real sacrifice for her beloved. She asks to “follow Rinaldo,” even against her will as his “despised slave,” “prey,” or “prisoner” (16.48-49). Conspicuously deviating from epic tradition, Tasso presents Armida as a lovesick maiden who
exhibits in love the same virtues that Bradamante exhibits in love in *The Furioso*. He thus resolves Armida’s vice and paganism into virtue and Christian heroism. Here Tasso presents Christian virtue as a monumental, all-encompassing Truth that can resolve paganism. Esolen notes that unlike Ariosto, Tasso engages in an "energetic pursuit of the truth" (4), a pursuit that leads him to elevate Christian love. Therefore, in Armida's case, like Clorinda she is converted, and the force that coverts her is love.

Armida draws even closer to Bradamante in subsequent canti. Like Bradamante, she dons armor and faces her beloved in anonymous single combat in retaliation for wrongdoing. In *The Furioso*, Bradamante attempts to fight Ruggiero but is overcome with love: “the damsel, who was closing to strike and injure him, her mind hardened against pity, could not bring herself, once she was near, to throw him to the ground and do him intended harm” (Ariosto 435). In this episode Bradamante's love for Ruggiero compromises her pursuit of epic glory, yet Ariosto still celebrates this love as a virtue. Tasso also calls upon this same expression of love over epic glory when depicting Armida’s fight with Rinaldo. Armed with her bow and arrow, she prepares to shoot him yet undergoes the same struggle as Bradamante:

Love rose up against anger, and revealed
the fire that thrived within her heart, though hid;
she set her hand three times to draw the bow,
three times she dropped her hands and did
not shoot, not till scorn took the triumph, then
she sent the arrow flying. But amid
its very flight, she from her deepest soul
suddenly prayed that it might miss its goal. (Tasso 20.63)
The psychomachia between “love” and “anger” over the soul of Armida provides a popular subject for early modern visual art from painting to tapestry (fig. 2).

This passage relates the tumultuous struggle Armida faces when battling her own conflicting desires for glory and love. It appears in action that epic glory wins out, for "scorn took the triumph," yet from "her deepest soul" her love still urges the arrow to miss Rinaldo—thus love ultimately prevails. This passage is the story of Clorinda's conversion retold: here as "good" and "evil," "love" and "anger" battling over the soul of Armida in psychomachia. The triumph of Armida's love over "scorn" matches Clorinda's expressions of virtue over her pagan faith. Ultimately, Christian virtue, here as Christian love, prevails. Praying that her loosed arrow will miss Rinaldo, Armida effectively aligns herself with romance over epic. Epic heroes going back to Achilles define themselves above all by the pursuit of kleos, or glory in battle. Armida’s love for Rinaldo compromises that pursuit, as it does in the case of Bradamante and Ruggiero in The Furioso. Both Tasso and Ariosto endow their female warriors with a love that surpasses anger and overrides the pursuit of glory. Yet whereas Ariosto celebrates this love as one of many such virtues that women can strive to possess, Tasso dramatically limits the options by directly associating this love with Christian charity. This limitation connects back to what Esolen calls "the one Truth" that Tasso believes to be the Catholic faith (4). The love that makes Armida appear vaguely Christian here is the same love—the monolithic Christian charity—that makes Clorinda appear Christian. In Gerusalemme liberata, the element of choice or variety that defines Ariosto's pluralistic celebration of feminine virtue resolves into a monolithic Christian virtue that subsumes all others. This Christian virtue is so transcendent that it surpasses all categories, including gender and genre.

As with Clorinda, love or virtue—indistinguishable in Tasso—ultimately leads Armida to convert and to support Rinaldo in the crusade. Tasso doesn't just stop at redeeming Armida as a transformed Circe-figure; instead, he has her join the side of the protagonist to ultimately become
a Christian heroine. After their abortive fight, Rinaldo implores Armida to join him and the Christian troops:

Look at my eyes if you cannot trusts my words!
Look at them and you’l see my faith and zeal!
I’l take you back to where your kinsmen rule,
I swear it but if heaven could reveal
some of its rays of true faith to your mind
and let is dissolver your paganism’s veil,
throughout the orient how I would see
that no one equaled you in royalty! (Tasso 20.135).

Rinaldo urges Armida to see past the possible manipulation of words to recognize the truth that pervades his Christian "faith and zeal." He wishes for her to look into his eyes, and ultimately his soul, and relate to his Christian love. Armida, driven by this same love, feels the “rays of true faith” and agrees to be Rinaldo’s “handmaid” (20.135). The transformation here fulfilled from evil enchantress to Christian lover is unique to Tasso’s work in the epic tradition. Ultimately, to fit into this Christian narrative, Armida expresses these feminine virtues of love and devotion as a reflection of a Christian attitude, even when exhibited by a pagan. The shared Christian love between Rinaldo and Armida ultimately shows that, for Tasso, Christian virtue transcends all things, including gender. Thus, Tasso links feminine virtue with Christianity, suggesting that actions reflect one’s faith. With this, all figures of virtue in the poem must be resolved to Christian (in this case Roman Catholic) virtue. In the case of feminine virtue, it, like all other forms of virtue, bows to the exigencies of Tasso's faith.
Attempts to Resolve Epic and Romance

Throughout *Gerusalemme liberata*, Tasso struggles to reconcile the genres of epic and romance through his characters' expressions of virtue. The portrayal of feminine virtue plays directly into this project. As noted above, Clorinda fuses epic and romantic virtues in her role as beloved female warrior, thus accommodating both her pursuit of epic glory and love for Tancred. Such attempts at fusion, however, fail to resolve the tension between the two constituent genres of Tasso’s poem. Writing to inject allegory into his epic filled with romance, Tasso struggles between favoring one genre over the other. Tasso stresses the importance of his *Allegoria* as a means to provide moral substance for the romantic aspects of his epic. In her research on fusion of romance and epic, Scarsi plays upon Paul Lariaville's study of Tasso's struggle to marry the two genres. Lariaville suggests that Clorinda is “‘persistently two-faced’” (qtd. in Scarsi 84) because of her expressions of both epic and romantic virtues. Indeed, with her Camilla-like upbringing, Clorinda appears, initially, to be Tasso’s imitation of the classical female warrior. Yet her relationship with Tancred complicates this imitation. Scarsi describes Clorinda as “representing the idealized, unattainable beloved, being the object of Christian hero Tancredi’s unrequited love” (84). Tancred admires Clorinda from across the battlefield as a knight of courtly romance admires his beloved’s beauty from across the room. The setting of the battlefield, as opposed to the court, however, links Clorinda ultimately with epic rather than romance. In his attempts to reconcile these genres, it therefore seems that Tasso has increased, or at least drawn attention to, the tension between them.

The final battle scene between Clorinda and Tancred effectively allegorizes Tasso’s struggle with epic and romance. Scarsi notes that this “nocturnal duel” is described in terms “more appropriate for a love encounter” yet this encounter actually consists of “two antagonist knights…trying to kill each other” (Scarsi 93). Tasso uses sensual—even sexual—language to
describe not a romantic encounter but a bloody battle between them. Cozzarelli describes the couple "like two bulls" embracing "in a struggle with overt erotic overtones" (175). Using these erotic overtones, Tasso shows Tancred “[pushing] the pointed iron into her beautiful breast…and her robe…held lightly, and tenderly her nipples, [filling] with a warm river” (Tasso 12.64). Although Clorinda is the object of Tancred’s love, as Tasso emphasizes with the sensual imagery, she ultimately dies in battle as a knight. Contrasting Clorinda’s end with that of Bradamante, it is important to note that Clorinda dies on the battlefield while Bradamante assumes the donna role by marrying Ruggiero and initiating the Este family line. With Clorinda's seemingly epic death, Tasso initially appears to favor epic over romance as a genre and as a category of virtue. Even Virgil's Camilla, as Thomas Roche succinctly points out, is "killed off" in battle (128) as an epic hero. Clorinda's death is unique, however, because it cannot simply be labeled as an epic death. Unlike Camilla who dies stalking Chloreus, Clorinda dies in the arms of her beloved Tancred, thus dying a more romantic death. Tasso showers this scene with love, describing Tancred reverently caring for his lover:

His hands were trembling as he undid her laces
And over her face, her unknown face he bent;
he saw her, he knew her. And he could not move
or speak. Ah, thus to see and know his love! (12.67)

Tancred is physically overwhelmed with love and devotion for Clorinda in the final moments of her life. Here we see his sorrow literally surging through his body, causing him to tremble as he makes her comfortable. In the arms of a devastated lover, Clorinda does not die as an epic hero, but as a romantic beloved. With this death, Tasso fuses both the epic and romance genres into one character: Clorinda the epic knight and beloved. This love Tancred has for Clorinda is another
expression of Christian charity since he is the one who baptizes her and saves her soul. Ultimately, with this death scene Tasso merges the romance and epic genres, and the virtues associated with each, under Christian virtue.

It appears that as romance and epic are resolved for Tasso, overall all expressions of virtue are resolved into Christian virtue. In *The Furioso* feminine virtue appears to equal, and some cases surpass, masculine virtue to become gender-transcendent. In *Gerusalemme liberata* the question of feminine versus masculine virtue is not addressed; instead Tasso seeks to prove that all virtue lies within Christian virtue. In Tasso’s *Allegoria*, for instance, he focuses on explaining the allegorical significance of his major characters, yet he doesn't address the significance of Clorinda or Erminia, another female heroine. The *Allegoria’s* focus on the male figures Geoffredo and Rinaldo, however, doesn’t suggest a preference towards masculine virtue. Instead, Tasso happens to mold these particular figures to explore Christian virtue as a whole. As we see, Tasso doesn't focus on Clorinda or Erminia as individuals possessing feminine virtue. He doesn't see them as individuals possessing masculine virtue for that matter either. In this text, all virtuous figures, both male and female, exhibit for Tasso a unified example of Christian virtue. If Ariosto celebrates the dynamism of feminine virtue, Tasso instead molds females not to be females necessarily, but to be Christians. Divisions for Tasso are problematic, just as they were for the post-Tridentine Church. Instead of offering divisions based on gender or genre, Tasso presents readers with one monolithic Christian virtue. Rhu reminds us that allegory in epic poetry intends to "instruct…in either virtue of knowledge, or both" (155). With this goal of instruction, Tasso uses this text to celebrate Christian virtue as an all-encompassing force. Ultimately, it isn't a question of masculine versus feminine or epic versus romance; all simply exist as Christian virtues.
III. Spenser's Representation of Feminine Virtue as Chastity

Britomart and Spenser's Reading of Ariosto

Writing just ten years after the publication of Gerusalemme liberata in the Protestant England of Queen Elizabeth I, Edmund Spenser presents his epic romance, The Faerie Queene, both as an homage to the Queen and as an allegorical investigation of virtue. In a letter addressed to Sir Walter Raleigh and appended to the 1590 edition of The Faerie Queene, Spenser describes the plan and purpose of the poem, which he was never able to complete. Structurally, each book of the poem allegorizes a specific virtue through the episodic adventures of a single knight. Spenser refers to these episodes as “ensamples” -- examples of virtue presented for imitation by men at court (15). Drawing upon Ariosto as well as ancient epic, Spenser transforms the epic tradition in The Faerie Queene into a "darke conceit," a complex moral allegory intended to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (15).

Throughout Book III of The Faerie Queene, Spenser adapts the model of feminine virtue presented by Ariosto and Tasso and consolidates it to elevate chastity as the pivotal feminine virtue. Spenser pursues his mission of fashioning “a gentleman of noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline,” and he focuses on the “gentle discipline” of women through the lens of chastity (15). Beginning Book III, Spenser notes in the introductory canto, ““it falles me here to write of Chastity, / that fairest virtue, farre aboue the rest” (3.1.1). Chastity is "farre aboue" the other virtues because, as we will examine, this virtue provides the restraint needed to practice other virtues. Furthermore, it helps women sometimes surpass men in their performance of virtue. In his letter to Raleigh, Spenser makes it clear that his purposes are expressly moral and his audience is expressly male, which makes the difference between his poem and Ariosto's quite clear. In Book
III, therefore, Spenser depicts chastity as the chief feminine virtue that his male readers should respect in their female counterparts.

Spenser centers his exploration of chastity on Britomart, his knight errant based off of Ariosto’s Bradamante. We are introduced to Britomart in Book III of *The Faerie Queene* when she is on a quest to look for her beloved Artegał, who she has actually never met, but merely seen his face in a magical mirror. Throughout the Book Britomart is on a “straunge adventure” to seek Artegał (3.1.8) and exhibits chastity along the way. This structure is similar to Ariosto's presentation of Bradamante, who searches for her beloved Ruggiero throughout *The Furioso*. Like Bradamante, Britomart is, in the words of Judith Henderson, "armed and in love" (113). Britomart’s active commitment to chastity makes her beautiful and appealing, traits Spenser symbolizes in comparing her to a “vermeil Rose” (3.1.46). The rose uses its “sharpe thornes and breres” to protect its beauty from being crushed and destroyed by “hardy hand[s]” (3.1.46). In this same way, Britomart uses her restraint—driven by chastity—along with her skill in battle to preserve her virginity and commitment to Artegał.

Linked with Bradamante, Britomart embodies the ungendered virtue first seen in Ariosto through her camaraderie with male knights. During her quest to find Artegał, she joins Arthur, the Redcrosse Knight, and other male counterparts and as a group they save damsels and battle supernatural monsters. Although she is the only female, Britomart experiences camaraderie as an equal because the entire group is connected by “that golden chaine of concord” (Spenser 3.1.12). This “chaine” links all the knights together through their shared pursuit of glory and chivalry, regardless of gender. The male knights are impressed by Britomart’s skill in battle and her pursuit of glory even though she is female. Judith Henderson recognizes this powerful impression
Britomart gives when she “first unseats Guyon” (114), the leader of this group. Once she proves her military skill, Britomart is included in the group and as a whole they

vowd with all their power and wit

to let not others honour be defaste

of friend or foe, who euer it embaste (Spenser 3.1.12).

Britomart has the same “power and wit” as a knight that her male counterparts possess. Therefore, she too exhibits this ungendered chivalry to protect the honor of others. Spenser’s representation of the “chaine of concord” as ungendered links back to Ariosto’s approach to ungendered virtue exhibited by his female knights Bradamante and Marfisa. Here we see this common theme of linking all knights together through their virtue regardless of sex.

Spenser’s “chaine of concord” links Britomart with the knights through expressions of ungendered virtue, yet he still describes this virtue in gendered, often phallic terms. Studying Spenser’s language use, Martha Craig believes that the “action” of his heroes unfold “an ‘etymological’ rationale, the secret wit of reality which his language is devised to disclose” (701). In this case, Britomart’s actions, described with phallic imagery, is used to reflect her virtue in masculine terms. Throughout canto 1 of Book III, Spenser describes Britomart in battle spearing and jabbing her opponents in penetrative, masculine fashion: “With that her mortall speare/ She mightily auentred t

owards one (3.1.28). By “entering” the opposition with her spear, a penetrative object jutting out from her body, Britomart exhibits attributes conventionally associated with masculine sexuality. Britomart is tied to the male knights with “concord” that appears ungendered, yet her expressions of military skill are still described with masculine language.
Britomart’s beauty, initially obscured by her armor, reveals her feminine qualities that complicate this masculine language. Britomart’s appearance is described as a “shining ray” that “[gives] light vnto the day” (3.1.43). The knights she had joined in "that golden chaine of concord" are surprised to see how beautiful she is when dressed in typical feminine dress:

And eke those six, which lately with her fought,
Now were disarmd, and did themselves present
Vnt her vew, and company vnsoght…
Now were they liegemen to this Lady free (3.1.44).

It appears that the "chaine of concord" exists when Britomart is dressed as a masculine knight like the other knights, and when she reveals herself as a "Lady" they are now "liegemen." Separated from the battlefield where they fought as a group, the knights now focus on Britomart's feminine virtue instead of her pursuit of glory written in masculine terms. Overall, her complicated physical appearance—a mix of masculine and feminine qualities—reflects the masculine and feminine virtues she exhibits throughout the text.

Britomart’s feminine appearance “disarm[s]” the knights and portrays her as a “Lady,” yet as a knight she outperforms her male counterparts when striving to be virtuous. Ariosto shows Bradamante surpassing her brother Richardet’s virtue in their episode with Fiordispina. Spenser also plays upon this performance of virtue by juxtaposing Britomart and the male knights of her party during their travels. For example, in canto 1 Spenser describes the group riding in the forest when “a goodly Ladie” runs by, fleeing from a “Foster…breathing out beastly lust her to defile” (3.1.15, 17). The knights quickly act to save the maiden, yet Spenser details the reasons why the male knights act and why Britomart acts. Guyon and the other male knights rush in to fight the Foster in hopes of winning the “most goodly meede, the fairest Dame aliue” (3.1.18). Britomart,
however, is not driven by passion or lust. She instead acts purely out of chivalry to help the maiden in distress. Spenser notes, “faire Britomart, whose constant mind, / would not so lightly follow beauties chace, /…did stay behind” (3.1.19). Unlike the male knights, Britomart does not require the mediating Platonic factor of physical beauty to serve her ideals with constancy; the make knights may help the maiden because of her beauty, but Britomart serves her only because she expresses chivalry as a knight errant. Ultimately, this chivalric virtue prompts Britomart to bypass beauty and serve the ideal itself. Britomart's ability to act "with constant mind" and control her actions comes from her chastity, the virtue portrayed throughout Book III. Here we see this virtue as paramount to performing as a knight because it compels her to serve the ideal versus just beauty. By linking chastity with being a chivalric knight, Spenser appears to show chastity as a pivotal virtue both females and males should acknowledge and respect.

Britomart's chastity also helps her show restraint while at Malecasta's Castle Joyeous, a symbolic "bower" of passion that overcomes her male counterparts (Spenser 3.1.42). While traveling, Britomart's party come across the "stately port of Castle Joyeous" (3.1.31), where they enter and rest. The castle contains a myriad of enticements, including a "sumptuous array" (3.1.32) of foods and a pool full of "Damzels, and of Squires, / dauncing and reueling both day and night" (3.1.39). With its offerings of many "sensuall desires" (3.1.39), the castle as a whole symbolizes the passions one can lose him or herself in when not restrained by chastity. Thankfully for Britomart, her chastity keeps her from falling victim to the "lustful fires" (3.1.39), yet her male counterpart the Redcrosse Knight, the knight of Book I who exemplifies the virtue of holiness, does not control himself. Rather than remove all her armor to better enjoy the castle’s sensual accommodations, Britomart “onely [vents] vp her vmbriere (3.1.42). The Redcrosse Knight, however, "was soone disarmed" and "cheared well with wine and spicereee" (3.1.42). Here
Britomart's chastity, a conventionally feminine virtue, paradoxically serves to make Britomart more virtuous than her male counterpart. Chastity allows Britomart to live up to a masculine standard that her male equivalents fail to live up to. In this way, Spenser presents chastity as the paramount feminine virtue because it allows women to be just as, if not more, virtuous than men.

Just as he uses the Redcrosse Knight, Spenser also uses Malecasta to help direct his reader to recognize the importance of chastity by depicting virtue in regard to its opposite. In Book III, the chastity of Britomart finds negative expression in Malecasta, whose name means "bad chastity." In her castle of sensuality, Malecasta expresses her sexuality and passions while Britomart controls her actions through chastity. The narrator first compares Malecasta to “the proud Persian Queenes” and notes that she “roll[s] too lightly” her “wanton eyes,” a movement that symbolizes “ill signes of womanhed” (Spenser 3.1.41). As the leader of the castle, Malecasta embodies the sensuality, lust, and passion captured in its offering of food and dancing described above. In this way, she does reflect "bad chastity" because she has no self-control over her desires. She is controlled entirely by her passions and therefore lives by her "vaine thoughts" and "sparkes of fire" that symbolize this passion (3.1.47). Just as the Redcrosse Knight quickly removes his armor to enjoy the sensual enticements, Malecasta also disregards chastity and restraint. Malecasta is controlled by her "vaine thoughts" and therefore engages in passion-filled bouts of lust, bouts Spenser chastises as lacking "all regard of shame" (3.1.48). Overall, Spenser's description of Malecasta gives a portrait of chastity's opposite to show his male readers what to avoid in a woman.

Northrop Frye focuses on the educating factor of Spenser’s text, noting that Spenser “believed in the moral reality of poetry and in its effectiveness as an educating agent” (733). With his “educating agent,” Spenser’s male readers should be able to recognize these "ill signes of womanhed" and spot the lack of chastity and restraint. By giving this damning look at the lack of
chastity, Spenser urges his male readers to recognize the importance of chastity and respect it as the pivotal feminine virtue.

**Spenser's Dissection of Chastity**

As we saw in *The Furioso*, Ariosto seeks to cement his heroines' expressions of virtue in epic tradition by tying them with classical epic figures. Spenser writes not only to guide gentlemen but also to pay homage to the queen, and does so by linking her virtues with that of Britomart. In the text, Britomart is Queen Elizabeth's ancestor. In this way, Spenser celebrates chastity as a royal virtue with Arthurian roots, just as Bradamante and Marfisa's virtues had classical roots. Spenser connects his depictions of chastity to the queen in the opening stanzas of Book III by explaining that chastity is

shrind in my Souerines brest,
and form'd so luely in each perfect part,
that to all Ladies which haue it profest,
need but behold the pourtraict of her hart,
if pourtrayd it might be by any liuing art (3.1.1).

Here Spenser directly links the chastity he explores in Book III with the chastity exemplified by Queen Elizabeth—she acts as the "liuing art" and living example of the chastity first exhibited by her ancestor Britomart. Since he is writing admittedly for a male audience, it appears that Spenser asks his male readers to compare "Ladies" who claim or "profest" to be chaste to his example of Britomart, and ultimately to the queen herself. Here Spenser not only praises the queen but also celebrates chastity as the ultimate feminine virtue by linking it with the queen. Contemporary writer John Bodenham provides a useful definition of chastity common in Spenser's time. In *Politeuphuija: Wit’s Common Wealth*, Bodenham defines chastity as “the beauty of the soule and
purity of life, which refuseth the corrupt pleasures of the flesh, and is onely possessed of those who keep theyr bodies cleane and undefiled” (191). By having the queen's ancestor be the symbol of chastity in the poem, clearly Spenser elevates it as the feminine virtue. Unlike Ariosto who depicts a spectrum of feminine virtues, Spenser narrows his focus to this one Arthurian virtue that is still important in contemporary times. Since women should "behold the pourtraict of [the queen's] hart," it seems that this virtue is paramount in Spenser's time because, as Britomart shows, it helps women be just as virtuous, if not more virtuous, than men. Spenser's celebration of the queen may further this idea because he suggests her to be more virtuous than the men of her court because of this chastity.

Throughout Book III of The Faerie Queene, Spenser employs his female characters as "ensamples" (15) of two types of chastity. Thomas Roche points out that Bodenham's general definition of chastity was divided by Spenser's contemporaries into two forms: "virginal" and "matrimonial" chastity (270). Like his fellow writers, Spenser distinguishes between these two forms in his own poem. First, Britomart represents matrimonial chastity (although she is not technically married) because she links herself with Artegał and shows restraint due to her love and devotion. As we will discover later, Spenser uses his other female figure Belphoebe to symbolize virginal chastity.

These two distinct forms of chastity are complicated in the case of Florimell, who dedicates her life to Marinell, who does not reciprocate her love. Chastity here is complicated because although Florimell pursues matrimonial chastity, the one-sidedness of her relationship traps her in virginal chastity. While in this virginal state, Florimell must combat unwanted advances from unchaste men who wish to rape her. Therefore, she must uses her chastity as a tool against these
attacks. Florimell’s chastity, depicted as "goodly ornaments of beauties bright" (3.5.8), is a treasured tool used to not only preserve her purity under duress but also to heighten her beauty.

In practice, Florimell lives by her “stedfast chastity and vertue rare,” which Spenser describes as being her “goodly ornaments of beautie bright” (3.5.8), instruments that help her defend her chastity and physically reflect her virtuous character. Although ornaments are typically associated with the way they beautify an object, the qualities of the term "ornament" in the early modern period could also refer to an item that is “primarily functional, but often also fancy or decorative” ("ornament," n). Ornaments could include practical items such as "equipment," "trappings," and even "furniture" ("ornament," n). By linking chastity with ornaments such as equipment, Spenser shows that chastity has a practical purpose and can be used to solve problems. Just as equipment like a compass guides a hiker, chastity guides Florimell to act devotedly toward Marinell. Overall, chastity takes both forms of an ornament because it helps her defend against unwanted, lustful advances and beautifies her.

In his descriptions of Florimell, Spenser shows that her beauty is rooted in her chastity. Described as “the bountiest virgin, and most debonair,” Florimell is beautiful and sought after for her “bountiful” appearance, but she does not give in to temptation (3.5.8). This connection between beauty and virtue is captured in Baldesar Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, in which a fictionalized Pietro Bembo, one of the leading proponents of early modern Neoplatonism, famously addresses the goodness of beauty: "beauty springs from God and is like a circle, the center of which is goodness…thus, a wicked soul rarely inhabits a beautiful body, and for that reason outward beauty is a true sign of inner goodness" (Castiglione 248). He goes on to explain that "beauty is the pleasant, cheerful, charming, and desirable face of the good" (248). Working from this popular understanding of Neoplatonism, Spenser confidently employs physical
description in *The Faerie Queene* as an allegorical means of teaching moral lessons. In this way, Florimell is recognized for both inner and outer beauty and is “belou’d of many a knight,” but she herself “loues none but one”—Marinell (3.5.8). This last line of the stanza is important because it emphasizes Florimell’s chastity in her relationship with Marinell. She is faithful to their bond—although it is one-sided—and rejects all other advances in order to be faithful and pure. She only “sets delight” in Marinell even though he doesn’t pursue her, so she is committing to be chaste in a one-sided relationship (3.5.9). In this way, her “bountiest” beauty is heightened because it is supported by her chastity.

As “ornaments of beautie,” chastity makes Florimell more attractive by giving her beautiful moral meaning beyond just the surface. These virtues are the ornaments that “brightly” shine through her outer beauty to reveal her chaste beauty within. This description recalls Tasso’s observation in the *Gerusalemme liberata* that Clorinda’s “pleasing form” is augmented by her “loveliness and grace” (Tasso 3.22). Both examples imply that for Spenser, as for Tasso, true outward beauty reflects true inward virtue. It is important to remember, however, that Spenser sometimes uses false or fraudulent outward beauty to reflect false or fraudulent virtue in his antagonists. For instance, Duessa in Book I of *The Faerie Queene* deceives the Redcrosse Knight with her false beauty, but she is ultimately revealed, in another instance of Melinda Gough’s “enchantress-turned-hag” motif, to be a hideous harpy. Likewise, Spenser calls upon false beauty when the witch satisfies her brutish son’s desire for Florimell (discussed below) by creating a false Florimell from a spirit. C. S. Lewis argues that “the false Florimell attracts by being like the true, and the true Florimell by being like Beauty itself” (691). Although the moral significance of outward appearance remains obscure in Ariosto, both Tasso and Spenser endow their virtuous female characters with beauty. By the same token, whereas for Ariosto beauty possesses its own
innate value, for Tasso and Spenser, who tend to subordinate the aesthetic to moral ends, beauty possesses value only as a sign of moral goodness. Likewise, for Spenser this moral goodness is rooted in chastity.

Spenser complicates this view of chastity as a helpful, beautifying tool by revealing it's often unwanted, external consequences. He illustrates that chastity may be its own worst enemy because as it heightens Florimell's beauty, it also makes her more appealing to the unchaste men who wish to harm her. Spenser uses terminology that Bruce Smith categorizes as "hot and moist" versus "cold and dry" to illustrate the fiery passions Florimell must defend against because of her beauty. In *Reading the Early Modern Passions*, Smith associates "hot and moist" with "the passion of lust," explaining that this is commonplace imagery used to portray the overwhelming urges associated with desire (155). Likewise, Spenser uses cold imagery to symbolize the restraint brought upon by chastity. The tense opposition of these states can be seen most clearly in the attempted suicide of Florimell, which provides Spenser's readers with a powerful "ensample" (15) of selfless martyrdom to virtue. When in the forest, Florimell seeks shelter with a witch and her "brutish" son, who quickly "cast to loue her in his brutish mind; / no love, brutish that was so beastly tind" (3.7.15). Using his hot and cold imagery, Spenser portrays the son's passions as "the wicked flame" in his bowels that grows "into outrageous fire" (3.7.16). In contrast to the fiery, volatile, and overwhelming nature of lust, Florimell’s chaste actions are performed “with countenance meeke and mild” (3.7.17). Florimell's mild reaction to the son angers the witch and so she summons a beast to rape her. In this episode, Florimell's chastity heightens her beauty so the son pursues her, but then this chastity also prompts her to reject his advances, leading to another defense of her chastity against this beast. Running from the beast, Florimell attempts to “drowne her selfe” in the sea in order “to saue her maidenhed” (3.7.26), once again connecting the cool of
the sea water with the cold imagery used to depict chastity. The chastity that makes Florimell so beautiful is the same chastity she must defend by attempting suicide. In this way, although Spenser narrows his approach to feminine virtue by illustrating it as one virtue—chastity—he shows that this virtue is complicated and called upon while under duress.

As in *The Furioso*, particularly in the flight of Angelica around which the poem is structured, so in *The Faerie Queene* virtuous women are pursued and attacked because of their beauty and therefore must actively defend their chastity. Though the moral project outlined in the letter to Raleigh distinguishes Spenser’s poem from Ariosto’s, both poets nevertheless present chastity as an active virtue—active because it is constantly under attack. In Florimell's case, the very chastity that makes her so beautiful must also be defended because this beauty invites lustful men to attack her. With Florimell, Spenser directly follows Ariosto’s lead by duplicating the poignant tableau in which Angelica is sexually assaulted by the old hermit in canto 8 of *The Furioso*. In his own eighth canto of Book III, Spenser describes Florimell, having narrowly escaped the beast, escaping a lustful old fisherman. These similar scenes, as Thomas Roche notes, reveal the poets’ mirrored definitions of chastity and purity (271). Upon waking and finding Florimell in his boat, the fisherman observes her “faire face, and…her snowy skin” and quickly feels the “secret sting of greedy lust” (3.8.24-25). The fire that had only just been quelled in the previous episode with Florimell’s attempted suicide by drowning quickly rises up again: “the drie withered stocke it gan refresh / and kindled heat, that soone in flame forth brust” (3.8.25). As seen before, Florimell’s performance of chastity takes the form of active defense as she fights off the fisherman’s attempted rape “with angry scorne…and shamefully reprov[es] for his rudenesse” (3.8.25). This chastity appears under duress and must be actively protected, even though it also spurs these attacks in some sense by making Florimell so attractive. Spenser relates to his male
readers this complicated view of chastity to stress the community's role in maintaining this virtue. His male readers must respect the chastity of women so maidens will not have to actively defend it.

Florimell's defense of her virginal chastity is also captured in Belphoebe's preservation of her own maidenhead. Spenser links the character of Belphoebe to Queen Elizabeth, noting in his letter to Raleigh that he symbolizes the Queen in two figures: as "a most royall Queene or Empresse" in the Faery Queen, and "the other of a most vertous and beautifull Lady" in Belphoebe (16). Martha Craig acknowledges the connection between the “beautifull Lady” and Belphoebe through the name’s etymology, noting that Belphoebe means “‘beautiful, pure one’” (701). Belphoebe’s encounter with Timias in canto 5 of Book III captures the chaste virtue Spenser associates with the Queen. Timias, Arthur's squire, attempts to rescue Florimell from the beast summoned by the witch to rape her. Timias is injured during this rescue, however, so Belphoebe finds him and “comfort[s] him” by “rub[bing] his temples” and “seek[ing] for hearbes, that mote him remedy” (3.5.31-32) while still maintaining her "goodly modesty" (3.5.55). Spenser focuses his description of Belphoebe’s attempt to heal Timias upon her delicate, feminine frame and her “lily hands,” which express both beauty and purity (3.5.33). Her selfless actions lead Timias to ask whether she is an “angel, or goddesse” (3.5.35), a reaction similar to Tasso's description of the Christian soldiers viewing Armida's beautiful form.

In the episode of Belphoebe and Timias we encounter again beauty heightened by chastity, yet in this case the woman does not face attempted rape. Timias' admiration of Belphoebe ultimately leads to what Thomas Roche describes as a "grievous wound of love" (271) because Timias recognizes Belphoebe's beauty and wishes to preserve it rather than destroy it through
consummation. Despite his "grievous wound," Timias attempts to transcend his passion, telling himself that his

life she saued by her gracious deed

but [his] does weene with vileinous despight,

to blot her honour, and her heauenly light (3.5.45).

The sustained reference in these lines to Belphoebe’s angelic “honour” and “light” align beauty with virtue and thus align Belphoebe with Florimell and Spenser’s other female heroes, whose outward beauty expresses inward virtue. Timias acknowledges in these lines that to engage in coitus with Belphoebe would be to “blot” or stain Belphoebe's pure image, to taint her chastity. Whereas matrimonial chastity depends upon preserving an idealistic devotion to the beloved, virginal chastity depends upon preserving independence. Recognizing this threat, Timias feels “shame” to “loue disloyally” because he recognizes the beauty of Belphoebe’s chastity and doesn’t wish to destroy it even though this means sacrificing his own desires (3.5.45). In this tableau we see that chastity must not only be protected by the maiden but also recognized and respected others. Timias’s struggle to transcend his primal attraction therefore suggests that, somewhat paradoxically, the whole community must be involved in preserving the independence of the virginally chaste. As we saw above with Florimell, here again we see Spenser urging his male readers to recognize and respect chastity as an active virtue that must be upheld by both females and males alike. Spenser's readers are Timias: they must fight passion and preserve virginal chastity.

Timias’s reverential response to Belphoebe’s beauty and virtue helps to clarify the moral, social, and political purpose of an allegory of chastity in a poem directed to a readership of gentlemen. Spenser teaches the gentlemen of the court how to respond to these qualities in the
Queen, whom he himself identifies as the allegorical tenor of Belphoebe. Yet by honoring across Book III both matrimonial and virginal chastity, and various mixtures of the two, Spenser shrewdly instructs his readers on how to navigate the delicate balance between honoring the Queen’s virginity and leaving open her the option to marry. In canto 5 Belphoebe’s chastity and virginity are compared to a “dainty Rose” which “more deare then life she tendered” (3.5.51). As a literary depiction of Queen Elizabeth, Belphoebe and her dainty rose celebrate Queen Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen because Elizabeth too protects and treasures her chastity. Spenser uses this poem to some extent as a political tool because, as Richard Helgerson point to in *Self-Crowned Laureates*, Elizabethans did not view poetry merely as a "fugitive and licentious toy," so to keep their titles poets had to look favorably on their leaders (23). C.S. Lewis also notes that Spenser, like all writers of Elizabethan England, knew “that even outside poetry all reigning sovereigns were ex officio vicegerents and images of God” (691). With this popular moral image of the Queen, much of Spenser’s praise nods to the ideology surrounding the Queen's virginity, buttressing up an ideological fiction (even if the Queen truly was virginal). It is important to note, however, that by praising both virginal and matrimonial chastity Spenser supports Elizabeth I’s choice to either stay unwedded or potentially marry. Tying in women of the court, Spenser addresses these “faire ympes of beautie” directly and tells them that “chastity and vertue virginall…shall embellish more [their] beautie bright” (3.5.53). This direct address marks *The Faerie Queene* unique when compared to the works of Tasso and Ariosto because of the three epics this poem is the first explicitly attempting to be a direct guidebook for the reader. As Neil Dodge points out, Ariosto never claims to have a moral focus (162) and although Tasso incorporates Christian beliefs and values he does not address his reader directly to follow these examples. Spenser, however, fashions his text similar to *The Book of the Courtier*, as we see in his letter to Raleigh, by providing these figures—both fictional
and historical, in Queen Elizabeth’s case—to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" (15).

**Dichotomies of Virtue**

Like the opposition presented by Britomart and Malecasta, Spenser also uses opposition of appearance to distinguish between virtue and vice in the episode featuring Hellenore. Hellenore appears in canto 9 of Book III as the young lustful wife of Malbecco, a selfish old man who hoards both his money and his wife's attention. Bored in her relationship with Malbecco, Hellenore pursues a lustful affair with Paridell, a knight staying at Malbecco's castle. She swoons over of the “close messages of loue” Paridell sends her and agrees to run off with him (3.9.27). When Paridell “casts” her aside “for hauing filcht her bels” (3.10.35), Hellenore, devoid of all chastity and fidelity in marriage at this point, goes to live with the Satyres. These goat-like people—specifically “gote”-like because goats commonly symbolize lust—“daunced with great lustihed” and symbolize a complete lack of chastity (3.9.45). Hellenore’s lack of chastity is highlighted by her appearance with the goat-people. She is physically enveloped, almost transformed into a Satyre, so her physical appearance alters to reflect her inner vice. When asleep, Hellenore is “embraced of a Satyre rough and rude” so she is surrounded and likened with these goat people (3.19.48), truly becoming her vice of lust. Likewise, at the end of the canto Malbecco is so overcome with jealousy that he “is woxen so deform’d, that he has quight / forgot he [is] a man, and Gealosie is hight” (3.10.60). The characters’ physical appearances act as markers for their vice. Hellenore’s deterioration from human being to Satyre reflects her loss of chastity, showing readers the ugliness of shirking feminine virtue.
This tableau about the “whiles of a wanton Lady” reveals to Spenser’s readers the negative effects of flippantly disregarding one’s chastity (3.9.1). Serving as another lesson rooted in dichotomies, Britomart’s life symbolizes the success of chastity; Hellenore, on the other hand, presents a lust-filled life ending in pain that, presenting another one of Spenser’s "ensamples" explained in his letter to Raleigh (15). Particularly in this tableau, one’s appearance not only reflects his or her virtue, but this appearance is also dynamic and can transform as virtues change and deteriorate.

Spenser’s representation of appearance as dynamic relates to Pico Della Mirandola’s perception of the transformative quality of human nature. Mirandola provides the most influential account of the unique capacity of human beings to move up and down the scale of being in his epochal “Oration on the Dignity of Man.” Comparing human beings to animals, Pico notes that “as soon as an animal is born, it brings out of its mother’s womb all that it will ever possess” (Pico 181. Human beings, however, have the potential to change according to their actions: “Man, when he entered life, the Father gave the seeds of every kind and way of life possible. Whatever seed each man sows and cultivates will grow and bear him their proper fruit” (182). Applying this concept to Spenser’s Hellenore, we see how she sows the seeds of lust and passion, and these seeds lead to her degenerative transformation into a satyr, a physical form that reflects her inner vice.

Throughout these middle canti featuring the minor female characters like Hellenore, Britomart is conspicuously absent. Yet the canti nevertheless contextually serve to enrich the significance of Britomart’s performance of chastity. The more the reader learns about chastity and its various forms from the positive and negative “ensamples” of Florimell, Belphoebe, and Hellenore, the better equipped the reader is to read the “dark conceit” of Britomart and Book III as the whole (Spenser 15). According to Judith Henderson, Britomart is unique among these
“ensamples” because, although she is not present throughout Book III, her character continues to be defined through "relations of sympathy and antipathy" with the other characters (114). C.S. Lewis also suggests that the poem’s appearance of “pathless wandering is largely a work of deliberate and successful illusion” (690), so Britomart’s absence is actually critical to the poem and mirrors Ariosto’s phantasmagoria. By leaving Britomart out of these canti, Spenser thus simultaneously imitates and morally reforms Ariosto.

Britomart returns in the final cantos of Book III, however, to fight selflessly for the love of others in Busirane's magical castle that allegorically symbolizes the attacks love can face. In her final adventure in Book III, Britomart must save Amoret, a fellow knight’s beloved, from Busirane’s castle. The image of a magical, evil castle stems back to The Furioso in which Bradamante must save Ruggiero from Atlas’s castle. Bradamante saves her beloved from evil magic, yet here Spenser breaks from tradition by having Britomart selflessly save Amoret, the beloved of fellow knight Scudamore. In this climactic battle, Britomart musters her dedication to love in order to save Amoret, whose names stems from “amor” or love. Busirane is described by Henderson as “an evil artist-magician” who, like Ariosto's Atlas and other magicians in Spenser’s poem, “perversely express[es] and prey[s] on human imagination” (114). In this way, his castle “objectifies, enlarges, and thereby distorts the erotic landscape of the whole of Book III” (114) and in turn Britomart must survive with Amoret to preserve the virtue of chastity prevalent in the Book. By saving Amoret, Britomart literally saves “love” from the perversions of chastity presented by Busirane, similar to how Bradamante preserves her relationship with Ruggiero even after Atlas’s magical entrapments.

Spenser's climax at Busirane's castle epitomizes the attacks chastity as a virtue under duress must face. In this episode, Britomart witnesses a masque made up of allegorical representations of
the psychological conditions that threaten chastity and love. This "maske of Cupid" (3.12.3) contains Fancy, Desire, Doubt, Danger, Fear, Hope, Dissemblance and Suspect, Grief, Fury, Displeasure and Pleasance, Despite, and finally Cruelty (3.12.7-19). Spenser compares them to “maladies” whose infinite number matches the number of “phantasies / in wauering womens wit” (3.12.26). Here Spenser describes these psychological conditions as “maladies” of the mind, thoughts and emotions that can destroy love. As Malecasta's "fickle hart" illustrates, love without chastity is merely lustful and fickle, susceptible to sudden changes due to desire, doubt, fury, and the other threatening emotions present in the "maske of Cupid." These emotions lead the procession and Amoret follows

her brest all naked, as net iuory…
and a wide wound therein (O ruefull sight)
entrenched deepe with knife accrued keene
yet freshly bleeding forh her faintin spright (3.12.20).

Amoret’s bleeding heart and Busirane’s opening of this wound represent the threat posed to love, and chastity, by the psychological conditions presented by Spenser. Henderson describes Busirane thus as “a fearful and perverted obstacle to love” because of his attack on Amoret (114). Similarly, in his essay “Love, Lust, and Sexuality,” Thomas Roche argues that Busirane is “the abuse of marriage” because his mask of Cupid presents threats to marriage (781). Spenser presents his male readers with this "perverted obstacle to love" so they will recognize and defend chastity against love's attackers—the many psychological conditions represented in the masque.

Although Book III of *The Faerie Queene* nods to Ariosto in its episodic structure and in the content of several of its episodes, the moral allegory at its center clearly distinguishes it from *The Furioso*. Spenser draws close enough from Ariosto to engage with him dialogically on the
topic of female virtue and then quickly diverges in disagreement. Rather than present, as Ariosto does, a spectrum of female virtues, Spenser, in a gesture of consolidation reminiscent of Tasso, reduces feminine virtue to chastity. His relationship to Ariosto is in this way ambivalent; he is, as Neil Dodge argues, at once “emulating the Orlando Furioso and hoping to surpass it” (153). With his "continued Allegory" (15), Spenser uses his female figures to symbolically represent his complex depiction of chastity as an active virtue the entire community must recognize and protect against lust and a myriad of psychological conditions that threaten not only chastity but also love.

**Conclusion**

Early modern imitation seeks to inspire virtue in its readers, and early modern poets extend this inspiration to both male and female readers. Ariosto presents feminine virtue to his female audience as a spectrum of virtues to choose from, creating a pluralism associated with the freedom of choice. This freedom structurally mirrors his phantasmagoria of events and his inclusion of sensual language. This freedom is ultimately submitted to the pleasure and variety Ariosto associates with art. His readers have the freedom to choose among the virtues presented in his spectrum, and he as the artist has the freedom to mold his poetry according to his own desires.

This variety present in *The Furioso*, however, reflects disjointed separation in the eyes of Tasso during the post-Tridentine period. For Tasso, and for the Catholic Church during this time, variety equals discord. During this period when the Church struggles to maintain unity and its moral authority, Tasso consolidates Ariosto’s spectrum of feminine virtues into one Christian virtue. For Tasso, all forms of virtue—masculine or feminine, epic or romantic—are all reflections of one all-encompassing Christian virtue supported by the Catholic Church.
Striving to celebrate Queen Elizabeth, Spenser draws upon both Ariosto and Tasso to redefine feminine virtue as chastity associated with the Queen. He submits feminine virtue to the public-private, communal-individual dynamics of virtue that define the Queen and her court. Focusing on his male audience, Spenser inspires them to act as Timias and respect chastity in the Queen and ladies of the court, defending it against the opposing vice of lust. Using his poem as a guidebook, Spenser instructs his readers to celebrate chastity in the individual and come together as a community to celebrate it as the paramount feminine virtue.

Each of these poets subordinate feminine virtue to other interests: artistic, religious, and political. Therefore, it appears that the dynamics of virtue and gender shift to reflect the influential ideologies of the time period. Poets shape feminine virtue to use it as an ideological instructive tool for their readers. In the end, these three poets harness feminine virtue to address larger issues—the freedom of the artist, the consolidation of faith, and the political and moral authority of Queen Elizabeth. With this foundation, scholars can look to definitions of feminine virtue as a snapshot of the ideological tenets of different time periods, thereby better understanding the conflicts and influential issues poets face.
Works Cited


