

LADIES ERRANT

Wayward

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DEANNA SHEMEK

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For Tyrus,
che mi porta il girasole

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction i

1 Circular Definitions: Configuring Gender in
Italian Renaissance Festival 17

2 That Elusive Object of Desire: Angelica in
the *Orlando Furioso* 45

3 Gender, Duality, and the Sacrifices of History:
Bradamante in the *Orlando Furioso* 77

4 Getting a Word in Edgewise: Laura Terracina's *Discorsi*
on the *Orlando Furioso* 126

5 From Insult to Injury: Bandello's Tales of Isabella de Luna 158

Appendix 1: Matteo Bandello, *Novelle*, part II, novella 51 181

Appendix 2: Matteo Bandello, *Novelle*, part IV, novella 16 187

Notes 191

Index 249

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Introduction

La donna è mobile.¹ In the strains of Verdi's best known aria, from the third act of *Rigoletto*, the spirited lover offers his memorable encapsulation of women's "fickle nature" while he chases a lithe young maid about the room. If the amusing irony for Verdi's audience lies in the evident fact that it is the Duke—and not his sweetheart, Gilda—who is "mobile," no matter.² The lilting refrain marks men's age-old dismay at their failure to "fix" woman in her place, to prevent her straying from the express wishes of fathers, husbands, brothers, and lovers. Mobility in this instance carries both the positive connotations of adaptability and free flow, and the negative overtones of inconstancy and error. Its double edge cuts both ways through the concerns of this book. *Errancy*, at least since the *Divina commedia*'s Christian pilgrim confronted Dante's dark wood, has named a wandering away—be it spiritual, moral, or geographical—from the straight path that is thought to be right and good. Errant spirits both diverge from the norm and stray from the course of truth, rectitude, or purpose. Everyday usage often recalls the second meaning recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for *wayward*: "Capriciously wilful; conforming to no fixed rule or principle of conduct; erratic"; but my subtitle dwells equally on an additional sense of the word: "Disposed to go counter to the wishes or advice of others, or to what is reasonable; wrongheaded, intractable, self-willed; froward, perverse. Of children: disobedient, refractory."

Taking as its backdrop the vast literature devoted in the Italian Renaissance to the "proper" conduct and education of women,³ this book presents the problem of wayward feminine behavior in five different cultural articulations of that period. Each text examined here presents "woman" as the site of potential disorder. Each entertains in a different way the possibility that woman might exceed whatever bounds society has set for her, might

deviate from the path authorized by a culture centered on male privilege, and might for this reason pose a danger to individual men or to the order of the community as a whole. My title is meant to evoke the explicit early modern fear that feminine initiatives, which almost by definition lapse from the rigid norms of decorum, could lead orderly society itself astray. At the same time, it celebrates the determined efforts of women (then as in other moments) to venture beyond the social and cultural bounds set for them by men: errancy, in this sense, must be seen as more than casual or unwitting “error”; it must be understood as an act of resistance.⁴ To the present-day reader, as for interpreters of the sixteenth century, the female figures who populate my discussions may seem improbable, fantastic, strange. Prostitutes race about the streets of European cities; an Indian princess flees through magical forests, dodging and duping her none-too-chivalrous pursuers; lady knights rove a treacherous romance landscape; a woman poet infiltrates the stanzas of an earlier classic with her own rebel verses; and a courtesan runs afoul of the law, stalking away unrepentant after her grisly and spectacular punishment. Fictional representations and historical references blur together in these pages, making it difficult at first glance to discern which were the living participants in a collective life and which sprang from the literary conjurings of the poets. This blurring of the given (or the “natural”) with the created, however, is precisely the process by which gender (the *social* understanding of what it means to be male or female) takes on its smudgy contours; and the juxtaposition of women real and imagined in this volume is intended to recognize the inextricability of associations between the two. Each of these figures, whether historical or imaginary, captures the sixteenth-century efforts to arrest the ever mobile, ever elusive meaning of the difference that men located in women as a way of defining themselves. Each, finally, points to a powerful cultural logic dictating that any woman who insists on her mobility—whether of mind or of body—invites on herself the suspicious denomination of “wayward” and “errant.”⁵

As many have already attested, a considerable literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries promulgates ideas about the education, social roles, and moral worth of women. Stemming from traditions as diverse as humanist learning, mercantile economics, Old and New Testament theology, and the Greek schools of medicine, writings on nearly every aspect of women’s lives flourished to an unprecedented degree in early modern Italy. These

works span an enormous generic range, from moral sermons to guides for household management, from tracts on feminine education to philosophical meditations on the soul, from catalogues of famous women to misogynist catechistic dialogues, from beauty manuals to handbooks on courtly manners. Also participating variously in the Renaissance *querelle des femmes* were the plays, romances, novellas, and lyric poetry of the period.⁶ Early modern writers in all the modes mentioned above, moreover, regularly conjoined the “order” of sexual difference with broader social concerns, explicitly troubling themselves over the potential errancy of women in the social world. Whatever our interpretation of its individual works, the sheer volume of this literature establishes the matter of woman’s place—and the implicit possibility that she might stray from it—as one of the period’s most persistent cultural questions.

In the chapters that follow, I look beyond that openly prescriptive literature on womankind, toward a broader space of cultural representation within which ideas about sexual difference circulated, a space that both helped shape these advisory and didactic writings and in turn formed the arena in which their effects were felt. Specifically, I discuss the appearance of discourses about the feminine in examples from chronicle, law, festival, painting, fictional narrative, poetry, and literary theory, individually and in their interactions with one another. Implicit in the juxtaposition of these different media and genres is my interest in discerning points of contact between marginal and centralized, authorized and unauthorized scenes of signification. It is indeed the case that early modern thinking about women spanned contexts both privileged and lowly; if we wish to understand better the stylization of femininity in that epoch and its later ramifications, we must open our gaze to the very wide frame in which womanhood acquired its meanings. Apparent even in the writings of progressive humanists is the assumption that women of all classes share more with each other than with the men of their social group.⁷ Given the authority and the general scope of this belief in the period I examine, I consider elite and popular culture as alternative but interconnected spheres. I thus focus especially on substantial exchanges between them, on ways in which the one at times seems implicated in the other.

Each instance I take up here in effect reveals the internal operation of something that lies “outside” its apparent frame: a contest among prosti-

tutes discloses a crucial concern with female chastity; an idealized "foreign" woman turns out to be the (weak) hinge of European male personhood; a domesticated martial maid stands paradoxically poised to supplant the male epic hero; a female poet haunts and quarrels with the text of her "feminist" male predecessor; and a courtesan walks away, oddly heroic, from the scene of her public whipping. My aim in focusing on such relations is partly to take in a more varied, more differentiated vista of a historical moment that, when defined narrowly as a Renaissance, relegates to the background many of its most interesting figures. It is, in particular, to open up the cultural interstices where women's role in that moment has lain hidden, and to suggest, through concrete historical and literary critical investigations, methods by which certain kinds of unrecognized information embedded in textual forms may be brought to light. For though "Renaissance" texts themselves tell us only a part of women's story, they also reveal much more about gender relations than traditional criticism has generally assumed. By attending to the "double voicing" of cultural expressions such as those I take up here, by exploring the competing perspectives at work in the spectacles, painting, poetry, law, and storytelling of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, I aim to discern especially those traces that may teach us how Renaissance culture thought about women.⁸

A center for humanist thought and a cradle of mercantile capitalism, Italy occupied a unique cultural position in early modern Europe. Yet in contrast to its cultural and economic strength, the peninsula was by the sixteenth century politically feeble. Italians' dismay over their inability to resist foreign invasions of more centralized states such as France and Spain lent urgency to humanist concerns with identity, both national and individual. As Italians dedicated their energies to analytical and prescriptive works that codified language, literary theory, political leadership, and domestic economy, their creative efforts in painting, architecture, and literature also produced model texts for a Renaissance of continental scope. Italy's artistic and intellectual productivity, however, stood in stark contrast to its real vulnerability as a political entity. Indeed, the efforts of intellectuals and artists to experiment with new creative frameworks (visual, literary, architectural) often ran up against a contrary wish to solidify existing systems (linguistic, political, domestic) and halt the proliferation of potential meanings and practices. Of central interest to me is the way early modern

notions of womanhood figured in both of these conflicting social processes. Representative works in virtually all of the genres named above celebrate an evolving place for women in Renaissance culture, but they also betray a consistent fear that unstable boundaries for feminine behavior might forbode more generalized social disorder.

My opening chapter, “Circular Definitions,” spans the temporal range of the subsequent chapters as it examines not a written text but an enduring popular festival that evolved over several centuries in Ferrara. The Palio di San Giorgio, an annual celebration in honor of that city’s patron saint, featured a footrace by local prostitutes as well as parallel contests for horses, mules, and men. A holiday sponsored by the ruling Este dukes, the *palio* was typical of early modern celebrations in European cities. Its primary purpose was to commemorate the power of the city’s government and reinforce the orderly behavior of the populace. The spatial design of this event, as Francesco del Cossa’s fresco illustrates from its place on a wall in Ferrara’s Palazzo Schifanoia, contrived that Ferrara’s proper women look down from their protective balconies on the violators of Christian feminine mores, who ran in exhibition through the city’s streets. The married and marriageable women of the city thus served to illustrate—indeed to literalize in their height above these proceedings—the superiority of chastity over more transgressive feminine behaviors.

The *palio* remapped the city as a field of play. The city-as-gameboard functioned generally to demarcate the power relations between the dukes and their subjects, but it also reinforced differences among these subjects themselves. Contemporary chronicles and statutes indicate, in addition, that civic *palios* in Ferrara and elsewhere had direct ties to earlier races run by the prostitutes who accompanied armies in their assaults on rival cities. In the military races, the running women symbolized the dominance of even the least respected members of the aggressing populace over the doomed enemy city. In the later urban races, the women acted out their subjection to contemporary rules of gender that cast sexually active women as deviant. In both performances it is the prostitutes’ wayward embodiment of feminine sexuality and their errancy from the approved path of female behaviors that assign meaning to their participation.

The Palio di San Giorgio illustrates the main concerns of this book because the women played a central and exemplary role in the race, which was

clearly intended (at least in part) to stake out the boundaries of feminine behavior within the community of Estense Ferrara. The *palio* also reveals the ambivalence and reticence that surround gender construction in early modern Italy, even in what seem to be its most public displays. Official descriptions of the event resort to euphemism, generalities, and other evasive language to record the women's participation, eliding from view their profession and the rhetorical force of their performance. As a participatory event, however, the *palio* emphasizes the collective and consensual nature of gender construction, as each person present lends meaning and validity to the tableau. Like the writings discussed in succeeding chapters, the *palio* discloses its fullest meaning only when considered in a broader context that well exceeds its generic classification as entertainment.

Finally, in opening a book largely focused on literary texts with an exploration of a public event, I mean to signal my understanding of literature as embedded in multiple contexts and in many other discourses.⁹ Artistic expression, it follows, may be appropriately studied within a set of interfaces, not only among genres and media but also between elite and popular cultures. This is not to argue away the different degrees of complexity or sophistication that mark works intended for different purposes and audiences; it is rather to disturb the notion of a neat separation between the contexts in which different kinds of works are created and in which they operate. For example, my early investigation of the fresco in which Cossa commemorates Ferrara's festival alerted me to the apparent suppression, in virtually every commentary I encountered, of any information that might relate this high-cultural artifact to the world of prostitutes, soldiers, hangmen, and the general populace of Ferrara—groups that seemed nonetheless to contribute extensively to its meaning. As evidence mounted in support of this connection, my *palio* research took its place beside an already developing—and similarly hybrid—interest in the relations between literary romance and popular oral narrative and song. I do not deny, in this regard, that Ariosto modeled his poem on those of Virgil and Boiardo, or that much of the *Orlando furioso*'s poetic richness arises from a set of literary relations too numerous to list here. I express only my further interest in his interactions with popular performers and audiences, and in responses by a number of sixteenth-century readers to this element of romance culture. The chapters in this volume approach different texts in varied ways.

Not all of them exhibit to the same degree the concerns I outline here, because the research and writing of each marked a different stage in my investigations. The contiguity of the chapters themselves, however, and the framing positions of two considerations treating apparent outsiders to elite culture (chapters 1 and 5) should convey my interest, strengthened in the course of my research, in the fluid boundaries between early modernity's different social and cultural spheres.

This movement from site to site—my own methodology of errancy—follows from the necessity of seeking women's cultural traces through detours from the more linear narratives of male-centered history. Such detours have sharpened my concern for historical specificity and detail, but they have also heightened my awareness of all discourse's capacity to say more than an author or speaker intended. My employment of the language and methods derived from psychoanalysis, anthropology, literary theories, and cultural history has been guided overall by Mikhail Bakhtin's cautionary remarks on three general ways in which we may interpret texts. If we seek to identify only meanings the author had in mind or that contemporaries may have recognized, notes Bakhtin, we “enclose” a work within its epoch and relinquish any grasp of its larger significance and its vibrant “life” in later times. We also radically reduce the potency of artistic expression to distinguish itself from other kinds of communication. If, on the other hand, we modernize works with no regard for their historical context, we turn them into mere markers of our own contemporary concerns and lose the opportunity to learn from them in any way that could be “true” to the works themselves. The first approach impoverishes the reader's potential; the second sacrifices that of the writer. When, however, we carefully view creative and expressive works as “noncoincident” with themselves, as inherently capable of plural significations, then we can interpret them so as to exploit potentials latent but not yet historically actualized by them. Bakhtin insists on the surplus of potential meanings that makes works, cultures, and even individuals “unfinalizable” in the most positive sense and allows them to continue speaking, even though interpreters in previous epochs may not have heard them in quite the same way.

For Bakhtin, the enduring appeal of particularly rich authors and texts resides in their successful articulation of more than they immediately understand to be their intention, argument, or task; and he sees this continued

ability to articulate ideas as the evident aim of great works. The continued development of the potential meanings of such texts, moreover, is enhanced by the perspective of more than one culture. Thus the “outsidedness” of a given interpreter, the distinctness of his or her interpretive tools and context, are—combined with historical attentiveness—important resources in the process of “creative understanding.” As Bakhtin puts it, “*Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing.”¹⁰ In this sense, feminist theory and psychoanalysis appear as the most marked symptoms of my own outsidedness to the early modern sites I study here. My aim is not to enlist these authors in the service of postmodern projects—reducing Cossa, Ariosto, Terracina, or Bandello to verifications of current theoretical and political models—but to place these various ways of representing women and the world in dialogue with each other, and thereby to attempt their mutual illumination for readers today.

Drawing on evidence from popular and elite spheres, from literary and theoretical writings, from pictorial and festival culture, and from legal and outlaw behavior, the chapters of *Ladies Errant* at the same time circle around a single, yet seminal, literary phenomenon: the publication of Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*.¹¹ A diplomat and humanist intellectual employed by the Este lords of Ferrara, Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) wrote plays, satires, lyrics, and—most famously—a forty-six-canto poem in rhymed octaves entitled *L’Orlando furioso*. Ariosto’s decision to take up the well-worn materials of Charlemagne’s eighth-century wars against the Saracens and write “a little sequel” to Matteo Maria Boiardo’s enormously popular *Orlando innamorato* (1495) appears at first blush to be a decadent move. Orlando was, after all, only the Italian reincarnation of the French Roland, nephew to Charlemagne; and he seemed to have reached the pinnacle of his literary development in Boiardo’s poem a generation earlier, a poem that was itself the culmination of decades of experimentation by Italian poets with imported romance materials.¹² Boiardo had interlaced his Carolingian character’s story with magical and erotic elements from the twelfth-century French Arthurian cycles. Thus among other striking innovations, the *Innamorato* treated its readers to the traditionally austere Orlando’s unprecedented tumble into the throes of love for Angelica, princess of Cathay. Popular as Boiardo’s poem still was, however, most writers of Ariosto’s day saw it as part of an outmoded culture rapidly being supplanted by works

with a humanist orientation not toward France and Spain (the lands of vernacular romance) but toward ancient Greece and Rome.

Ariosto foresaw further possibilities for Orlando and his gallant fellows, however, possibilities already signaled (though not developed) in Boiardo's unfinished poem. Grafting onto the romance's chivalric themes abundant allusions to the vernacular tradition of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, he also wove into it the overarching narrative of national foundation we find in Virgil's *Aeneid*. In so doing, Ariosto wrote the narrative poem of his century, a text that would come to stand as Italy's playful and serious contribution to the genre of Renaissance epic. Ironic and learned, musical and fast-paced, highly sophisticated and yet accessible to an audience with no learning at all, the *Orlando furioso* occupies a truly pivotal space: it gathers into its pages the dual heritage of vernacular and classical literatures, ally-ing itself at the same time with a literary future when Spenser, Monteverdi, Cervantes, and eventually even Italo Calvino would integrate it into bold new artforms.¹³ The *Furioso*'s fusion of modes makes way for a modern sensibility no longer compelled to separate out the threads of experience into comic, tragic, ironic, and lyric presentations. Its aggressive handling of narrative form, moreover—its employment of ambitious, multiplopped, and suspenseful interconnected sequences—stands as an early model not only for masters of the long novel but for specialists in those latter-day channels of narrative desire, the genres of suspense and serial narrative.¹⁴

I place the *Furioso* at the material center of the present volume for several reasons. It was the most popular literary work of its century. This poem filled with women warriors, amorous adventures, and political parables was the first literary work, moreover, to enjoy wide appreciation by elite and popular readers alike. The *Furioso*'s success was due not only to its poetic distinction but also to a combination of other factors: a booming print industry, rising literacy rates, and the public's familiarity with the characters and scenarios the poem resumes from previous romances. Circulating in cheap, scrappy paged editions at the same time it was enjoyed in luxury presentation copies richly adorned with illuminations, it was also recited for the unlettered in the piazzas, inns, and farm fields of Italy. It became the basis for dozens of madrigals sung in the courts and towns of Italy and abroad; and it inspired numerous literary sequels, some of them by women. We have good reason to believe that girls of the sixteenth century, like their

later counterparts who delighted in the novel, were especially attracted to the *Orlando furioso* and other romances, because contemporary writers on female education and morals railed with particular vehemence against the corrupting capacities of this fanciful and immoral genre. Even outside the bounds of the printed page, Ariosto's poem generated texts. Staged versions of episodes from the *Furioso* were sufficiently popular in the *commedia dell'arte* to constitute the basis of substantial careers for actresses and female playwrights in the latter Cinquecento, women whose beauty and professional travels evoked for their audiences all the charming errancy of the characters they played.¹⁵ Other women took more literary inspiration from the *Furioso's* female characters and its attention to injustices against them; encouraged by the Ferrarese poet's arguments, they cited his defense of their sex when they began to circulate new works representing women's perspectives. Both women's advocates and their critics, then, saw Ariosto's poem as more than literature; it represented, in addition, a provocative intervention into their fervent discussions of women's proper role in an evolving culture.

Ariosto clearly recognized his generation's concern with relations of power between the sexes, for he incorporated some of the best known arguments of the contemporary *querelle des femmes* directly into the text of the *Orlando furioso*. Yet he does far more than merely record the various positions espoused by ancient and contemporary writers. Rather than simply illustrate the opinions of his peers or take a position on one side or the other of the misogynist/philogynist exchanges among his poem's characters, the poet of the *Furioso* sets the two facets of this argument side by side and highlights the limitations of the terms employed by each.¹⁶ By blurring seemingly clear dichotomies between Christian and Muslim, friend and enemy, even good and evil, Ariosto's poem unrelentingly exposes the difficulties of all interpretation in a world of contingency and moral dilemma. The *querelle des femmes* too appears in this flawed framework of dualistic categories: it functions as a recurring example of the analytical and ethical issues at the heart of the *Furioso*. Ariosto weaves the debates over women into major episodes of his poem and shows in each instance how arguments of this kind are inevitably related to the specific interests of their proponents. Carrying this focus on the subjective nature of the *querelle* one step further, he fashions a narrator who cannot make up his own mind about women. At the very foundation of the *Orlando furioso*, then, we encounter

a narrator who is as “errant” as his perpetually fickle knights, at least where women are concerned. He turns his argument this way and that, races headlong into passionate praise or tirade, then pulls up short, as if forgetting his goal or falling ingloriously from his writing chair. It is in the exquisite distinction between this narrator and the author of the *Furioso* that the poem reveals its remarkably modern grasp of the *querelle des femmes*.

Though readers over the centuries have generally not considered the gender debates an important feature of Ariosto’s text, they immediately intuited the allure of a character who, as Benedetto Croce later put it, “symbolizes Woman.” The role of the supremely beautiful, exotic princess Angelica, who inspires the pursuit of so many of the knights in the poem and thus sets in motion Ariosto’s centrifugally structured narrative, is the subject of chapter 2, “That Elusive Object of Desire.” There, I follow the lead of that consistent response from readers and argue that Angelica may indeed function in the *Furioso*’s narrative as a sign for quintessential femininity. But such a sign, when seen in the context of Ariosto’s questioning of the gender opposition, can only be a phantasm created by the desires of those who cast themselves as its opposite and perfect complement. Each of Ariosto’s principal male knights makes his entrance into the poem by *seeing* Angelica and registering his desire for her. It is this entwinement of seeing with desire, seeking to encircle Angelica from without, that defines the Indian princess’s primary role in the poem. In simplest terms, she is the (vastly overinvested) object of the desirous gazes of pursuing men. Yet this function in no way exhausts her character as unfolded by the poet, who accords her a will and desires of her own. If Woman’s desires are antithetically related to the overheated fantasies of her pursuers in the *Orlando furioso*, herein may lie the poet’s wisdom.

With remarkable consistency, Angelica acts on her own desires only when she recedes from the knights’ gaze by fleeing their advances or when she becomes completely invisible through magic. Since each knight pursues Angelica oblivious to the gaze that constitutes *her* as subject, the revelation that she has desires of her own—that she has fallen in love not with a cavalier but with the lowliest of soldiers—triggers the madness of her most dedicated admirer, Orlando. What is more, Orlando’s mental collapse in the absence of Angelica signals the figurative disintegration of the entire order of chivalry. It is not just one character among many, we are bound to recall, but the very embodiment of knighthood who sheds his armor

and embarks on a campaign of terrorizing destruction in the countryside: Orlando jilted is effectively a code run amok. Orlando's madness reveals the pathological face of the chivalric dedication to a code of absolutes. Because Angelica emerges from precisely this code as ideal Woman, Ariosto's title episode points to fantasies regarding the feminine as a precarious foundation for masculine—or cultural—identity.

Even more than Angelica, however, another female figure captured the imaginations of sixteenth-century readers and quickly came to be regarded by many as the most positively portrayed character in the *Orlando furioso*: the female knight Bradamante. Chapter 3, "Gender, Duality, and the Sacrifices of History," presents this warrior heroine as the *Furioso*'s positive alternative to the idealized but illusory femininity that Angelica represents. While Angelica flees or suffers capture and transport by her pursuers, Bradamante roams the French countryside in service to her king and in search of her beloved, Ruggiero. By donning armor she conceals her sex and enjoys free movement as a martial champion. This guise allows Bradamante to appropriate both male and female roles for herself and to defer the traditional feminine functions (marriage and childbearing) that the poem reserves for her at its end. It also permits the poet to explore in an audacious way the foundations of custom and belief on which gender identity appears to rest.

The movements of these two female characters also trace competing narrative structures for the poem. Angelica's constant flights from danger typically lead her to unfamiliar perils among new contenders for her charms; she thus tends to open new, spiraling romance episodes in the *Furioso*. In contrast, Bradamante's commitment to the prophecy that destines her to marry Ruggiero and found the family of Ariosto's patrons (the Este of Ferrara) carries these spiraling plot lines toward a purported historical telos. Her journey toward "history," and thus toward mortality as well as fulfillment in love, runs parallel to Ariosto's shift of his poem out of romance's endlessly digressive structure into the closure of historical epic. This movement toward closure includes what many readers have rightly called Bradamante's domestication, for she abandons her role as a formidable warrior in order to assume a subordinate position as the wife of a monarch. As my discussion will show, however, the "taming" of Bradamante is not nearly so complete as feminist criticism has argued of late. In any case, Bradamante's undeclared gender allegiance and her wandering adventures through most

of the poem are what inspired female readers of Ariosto's poem throughout the sixteenth century. The behavior of this warrior heroine—far from acceptable in the view of many contemporary readers—was also among the features of the *Furioso* that appeared most transgressive and undisciplined to the canon theorists of the latter sixteenth century.

The *Orlando furioso* enjoyed unprecedented popularity in Italy and beyond for several generations. Its numerous reprintings and translations, its public recitations and elaborations into music, its countless imitators, and even the willingness of Europeans to name their children after its characters made it in a real sense the outstanding literary work of its time. The wildly digressive narrative of Orlando's mad love for Angelica became a favorite of the illiterate populace and the educated courtly circles alike. But among poets and intellectuals in the generation immediately following the author's death, the text inspired hot debate. The diverse class composition of the *Furioso*'s audience brought critics face-to-face with issues of social distinction, hierarchy, and order. Ariosto's detractors clashed with his partisans over whether such a "popular" poem should be considered a part of the illustrious Italian literary tradition. At stake in the highly charged arguments over the *Furioso*'s generic innovations, fantastic elements, and nonlinear narrative was nothing less than the competitive strength of a specifically Italian literature against both classical and modern rivals. In this explicit way, the debaters' political commitments and sense of social proprieties informed their literary judgments. The debate on national literature was also strongly colored by the general problem concerning social order and hierarchy within which, as I have suggested, women were perceived as a perturbation if not an outright threat. The sense of women as a problem left its specific mark on the literary debates in questions about the propriety and decorum of female characters and their actions, and about the effects these characters might have as examples for readers, "lady" readers most of all.

Of especial importance for several of the romance's most prominent critics, for these reasons, was their understanding of Ariosto's portrayal of women such as Bradamante. For though much of their debate addressed questions of the *Furioso*'s conformity or innovation in relation to classical models, a recurring point of tension for critics on both sides was Ariosto's depiction of independent female warriors. Disturbingly for these readers, the "wayward" characters Bradamante and Marfisa outshone their male

comrades not only in moral rectitude but also in martial prowess. Beneath these critics' apparently quaint concerns for the "verisimilar" and the "decorous" lie ancient questions about the powers of art and the media still pressing today: What is the relation between imagined events and experience or action in the real world? Can literature affect the behavior of its readers? If it can, must we dictate that only proper and desirable images circulate? Whatever our own responses to such questions may be, women readers of the *Orlando furioso* were clearly moved by the poem's representation of their sex and by its acknowledgment of the irrationality in prevailing notions of femininity. They tell us so in their own writings.

Chapter 4, "Getting a Word in Edgewise," explores one sixteenth-century female poet's response to Ariosto's poem. Living in Naples in the decades following Ariosto's death, Laura Terracina was one of his most avid readers. More important, she also took the repeated advice of the *Furioso's* narrator, who urged women to counter the misogyny of history and literature by becoming writers themselves. Terracina published eight volumes of poems between 1548 and 1567, an extraordinary degree of activity and popularity among her contemporaries, which, however, has garnered her almost no recognition in literary histories of the period. Her most popular lyric sequence, the *Discorso sopra tutti i primi canti d' "Orlando furioso"* [Discourse on the beginnings of all the *Orlando furioso's* cantos], appeared in more than eleven editions between 1549 and 1608. In this unusual work, Terracina strikes an intimate structural and thematic relation with the *Orlando furioso*: each of her forty-six cantos corresponds to the identically numbered canto in Ariosto's poem. The work's title reflects a specific pattern of citation, moreover, wherein Terracina breaks apart the opening octave of each *Furioso* canto, inserts seven of her own poetic lines between each of Ariosto's, and produces a new set of eight octaves, each of which ends with a line from the earlier, model poem. Notably, Terracina's *Furioso*-in-miniature dwells not on Ariosto's narrative plot, but on the ethical themes of his canto exordia, a number of which take up the *querelle des femmes*. This ingenious appropriation of a contemporary classic allowed Terracina to adopt the *Orlando furioso* as a highly visible platform for her own opinions, even when they differed markedly from those of her model poet. Her resourceful compositional strategy offers an intriguing illustration of women's efforts to find their way into the pages of published books and take their place among

poets past and present. At the same time, the *Discorso's* clear dependency on a previous, well-established text by a prominent male poet also stresses the extent of women writers' secondariness to a literary tradition that had overwhelmingly excluded them from its ranks.

My final chapter turns to a figure who exemplifies the kind of feminine error with which I opened the volume, newly complicated by the cultural and political developments of Tridentine Rome. A descendant of the military prostitutes who first performed in the early modern *palios*, Isabella de Luna served with the army of Charles V before establishing herself in Rome and building a career as one of the most successful courtesans of the Renaissance. She also came to be the protagonist of two novellas by the genre's most prominent writer in sixteenth-century Italy, Matteo Bandello. Bandello presents us with an Isabella who is part streetwise prostitute, part Bradamante, as he highlights both the rough edges and the astonishing bravery of his heroine in these two tales. But the dangers of waywardness for women like Isabella point to a future less entertained by such matters than was the age of Ariosto. In Bandello's first treatment of this character, the Spanish courtesan earns the approving laughter of her comrades by outsmarting a man who hoped to defame her before her friends. But her escapades in the second tale place her in the streets of Rome, outside the Colosseum, where she must finally submit to a public whipping for her impertinence before the law. Isabella's defiance of the law and her clash with legal authority are shadowed, moreover, by the ritual burning of another military prostitute, evoked by Bandello in the second tale's preface. These figures together intimate the danger accompanying women's transgressive behavior throughout early modernity, and they heighten the logic of ritualized humiliation so crucial to the Ferrarese *palio* I discuss in chapter 1. Bandello's tales, for their part, pose a powerful counterimage to idealized versions of the Renaissance woman.

If there is still some argument over the question Joan Kelly answered in the negative twenty years ago ("Did Women Have a Renaissance?"), this is no doubt because women experienced both gains and losses in liberty as a result of the social, economic, and cultural transformations of early modernity.¹⁷ Female literacy and education under humanist influence suggested for the first time that (social) gender might be disjoined from notions of women's presumed (bodily) limitations as a sex; and women began to learn,