



Androgyny in Moderata Fonte's *Tredici canti del Floridoro*

Moderata Fonte'nin *Tredici canti del Floridoro*'sunda Androjeni

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Abstract

Moderata Fonte, who is one of the earliest female authors to write chivalric romance in Italy, participates in the debate on women [querelle des femmes] with *Il merito delle donne* (1600). *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581), in which she defends the worth of women and equality between sexes, also documents Fonte's concern for female issues. Within this framework, this paper aims to analyse Fonte's protofeminism based upon the concept of androgyny. Drawing upon her thought about women in *Il merito delle donne* (1600) within the framework of the Italian patriarchal social context, it first discusses the social and theoretical implications of androgyny. It interprets the warrior heroine Risamante and the titular hero Floridoro as representatives of the androgyne examining how they deconstruct their assigned gender roles. It argues that Fonte utilizes androgyny to evince that there is no essential difference between sexes but the cultural assumptions and practices produce a hierarchical relationship between women and men. It concludes that Fonte, by means of androgyny, shatters rigid gender boundaries, and she advocates that both women and men should benefit from education and they should be treated equally. *Tredici canti del Floridoro*, thereby, manifests Moderata Fonte's protofeminist opinion.

Keywords: Renaissance, romance, androgyny, protofeminism, Moderata Fonte.

Öz

İtalya'da kahramanlık romanı yazan ilk kadın yazarlardan biri olan Moderata Fonte, *Il merito delle donne* (1600) eseriyle kadınlarla ilgili tartışmalara [querelle des femmes] katılır. Kadının değerini ve cinsiyetler arası eşitliği savunduğu eseri *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581) ise kadınlara ilişkin sorunlar hususundaki hassasiyetini kanıtlar niteliktedir. Bu çerçevede, bu çalışma Fonte'nin androjeni kavramına dayanan protofeminist argümanını analiz etmeyi amaçlar. İtalyan ataerkil toplum düzeni bağlamında Fonte'nin *Il merito delle donne* (1600) eserindeki kadınlar hususundaki görüşlerinden hareketle, ilkin androjeninin sosyal ve teorik anlamlarını tartışır. Savaşçı kadın kahraman Risamante ve esere adını veren erkek kahraman Floridoro'yu, atanmış toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini altüst etmelerinden ötürü, androjeniyi temsil eden karakterler olarak değerlendirir. Fonte'nin, androjeni kavramından faydalanarak, cinsiyetler arasında özsel bir fark olmadığını kanıtladığını, kadınlar ve erkekler arasında hiyerarşik bir ilişki üretenin kültürel varsayımlar ve uygulamalar olduğunu savunur. Makalede, Moderata Fonte'nin androjeni aracılığıyla katı toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini parçaladığı ve *Tredici canti del Floridoro*'da her iki cinsiyete de eşit eğitim hakkı verilmesi ve cinsiyetler arasında eşitlik olması gerektiğini savunduğu sonucuna varılır. Bu bağlamda, *Tredici canti del Floridoro*, Moderata Fonte'nin protofeminist görüşünü açıkça ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Rönesans, romans, androjeni, protofeminizm, Moderata Fonte.

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Introduction

And further, if they could with their owne pen,
 Set forth the worthie praise of their owne kind,
 And not to be beholding unto men,
 Whom hate and envie often so doth blind,
 To make us heare the good but now and then,
 But evrie place full of their ill we find;
 Then sure I judge, their praises would be such,
 As hardly men should have attaind so much. (37.2)¹

In the thirty-seventh canto of *Orlando furioso*, Ariosto encourages women to start writing their victorious deeds themselves which, he reckons, due to men's jealousy, have been obscured yet would have had the power to influence history if documented. Among only few women who contribute to the genre in the Cinquecento Italy, there is one who follows the path Ariosto sets forward: the Venetian Moderata Fonte (1555-1592). Fonte's *Tredici canti del Floridoro* [Thirteen Cantos of Floridoro] (1581) "represents the first sustained effort on the part of a woman writer to pen a Renaissance romance on the model of Ariosto and Boiardo" (Finucci, 2006, p. 22) and "to enter the mainstream of romance production" (Kolsky, 1999, p. 166) in Italy.

Fonte, who deals with the problems women face because of patriarchy,² is aware of the "disadvantages and inequalities" of her sex and she demonstrates "a remarkable 'feminist' consciousness" (Malpezzi-Price, 2003, p. 25) in her literary production within the *querelle des femmes* [debate on women] tradition. Within this framework, this paper seeks to analyse Fonte's profeminism based on the concept of androgyny. First, it briefly explores Fonte's stance regarding the woman question by making references to the Italian context and her *Il merito delle donne* (1600); second, it examines the social, cultural, and theoretical implications of androgyny; third, it interprets Risamante and Floridoro as androgynous characters examining how they deconstruct their assigned gender roles. It argues that Fonte employs androgyny to prove that there is no essential difference between sexes but this difference stems from cultural beliefs and practices and the biased female education, which regard men superior to women and underestimate their physical and intellectual competence, that produce a hierarchical relationship between them. It concludes that Fonte utilizes androgynous characterisation to refute rigid gender boundaries which hierarchize and discriminate women and men; she advocates that they should benefit from education alike and should be treated equally; she offers a model of an ideal individual who obviates assigned gender roles, and she manifests her profeminism.

Although Italy was the cradle of Renaissance humanism which awakened interest in the intellectual competence of individuals to cultivate themselves with education, the humanist belief in human achievement seemed inapplicable regarding the majority of female population as the Italian culture was inclined to consider women to be morally, intellectually, and biologically inferior to men. Although the home-schooled daughters of the prominent families were visible within the society - as they established their saloons for philosophical debate and authored some literary works - vis-à-vis uneducated women, in principle, compared to the other sex, women were in a disadvantageous position and their freedom was limited. For instance, they were not encouraged to improve their rhetorical skills as speaking in public would mean "a public advertisement of the self" (Panizza, 2000, p. 25). Even if Italy was not unified politically until the late nineteenth century but was constituted of city states having their particular legislation, regarding the treatment of women, albeit minor differences, women were confined in domestic place, they were instructed to be silent and obedient, and their education was limited to household chores and religious issues.

¹ Numbering refers to canto and stanza respectively.

² This study adopts the definition of patriarchy as "the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" (Lerner, 1986, p. 239).

Baldassarre Castiglione in *Il libro del cortegiano* [The Book of the Courtier] (1528) expresses the double standard women have to endure all throughout their lives:

We men have of our own authority arrogated to ourselves a licence, whereby we insist that the same sins are in us very trivial and sometimes praiseworthy, and in women cannot be sufficiently punished, unless by shameful death or perpetual infamy at least. (1929, p. 204)

Naturally enough, men and women belonged to different spheres: while the former were free to appear in public and interact with others, women were isolated from society. For instance, among the earliest moralists, Paolo da Certaldo in *Libro dei buoni costumi* (c. 1360) preaches women to stay indoors: “young girls should be taught to sew, and not to read, for it is not good in a woman, knowing how to read ... She did not stay out of the house ... but locked up in a secluded and decent place” (qtd. in Dean, 2000, pp. 195-96). The quotation reflects the fundamentals of ideal womanhood as obedience to male head, silence and abstention from public.³ The tradition also influences the perception regarding female education. For instance, Michele Bruto in *Institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente* (1555) states that “the education of a woman is to consist in limiting her access to education; her consequent ignorance is the highest wisdom” (qtd. in Jordan, 1990, p. 146); and, Stefano Guazzo asserts that the education of a woman should be compatible with the subordinate place she belongs to (Logan, 1991, p. 71). During and soon after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), in which the Catholic Church imposes regulations to ameliorate the institutional and moral malfunctions then-prevalent in society, the condition of women becomes worse and their freedom, if they have any, is substantially restricted. The period following the Council eventuates in stricter surveillance: “the possibilities of sexual equality ... were soon dampened with Trent and ensuing Counter-Reformation propaganda that put women firmly back in the home” (Panizza and Wood, 2000, p. 5). It would be safe to conclude that, regardless of regional differences, the Italian culture was shaped by “gender-dichotomised” (Cox, 2011, p. 30) principles, and women used to have a subordinate place without proper rights or equality with men.

In such a social milieu, *Il merito delle donne* and *Tredici canti del Floridoro*, the works of her protofeminist ethos, represent Moderata Fonte's resistance against patriarchy. *Il merito delle donne* [The Worth of Women] (1600) refutes Giuseppe Passi's misogynist interpretation of womanhood he launches in *I donneschi difetti* [The Defects of Women] (1599). Written in a dialogue form among women of different stages of womanhood, the work concentrates on the worth of women and meditates on the reasons of their oppression and marginalisation. Often-cited as “an impassioned defence of female equality” (Synder, 2002, p. 162), *Il merito* both points out the restrictions the society imposes on women and objects that women are not inferior by birth but have become the second sex as a result of “an abuse that has been introduced into the world and that men have then, over time, gradually translated into law and custom” (Fonte, 1997, p. 61).⁴ Defending the natural equality of sexes, it protests the unfair social practices and the patriarchal system that tyrannise women. Corinna, Fonte's mouthpiece, states how each woman should feel and be: “the heart that dwells within my breast is free: I serve no one, and belong to no one but myself” (Fonte, 1997, p. 49). By the same token, eager to show her “protofeminist sensibility” (Cox, 1997, p. 5), Fonte states that women's worth is neither celebrated nor commemorated while men are always paid tribute to:

Few sculptures are commissioned now, except to commemorate some important person, like a prince or a lord or a famous captain. Such men frequently receive

³ It should be noted that the literary saloons held a particular importance for women who took part in the literary and philosophical debates of their time in the Republic of Venice. There were even some who established their own saloons such as Veronica Franco, Tullia d' Aragona, Gaspara Stampa and Francesca Baffa (Dialetti, 2003, no page).

⁴ Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, who contributes to *querelle des femmes* in favour of women in *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1529), has the same opinion. He states that there is no difference between women and men: “God most beneficent ... created humans in his image, male and female created he them. Sexual distinction consists only in the different location of the parts of the body for which procreation required diversity. But he has attributed to both man and woman an identical soul, which sexual difference does not at all affect. Woman has been allotted the same intelligence, reason, and power of speech as man” (1996, p. 43).

the honour of having statues, columns, and other similar constructions erected in their honour, to reward their merits and preserve their fame for posterity. And our own rulers here in Venice have done just that ... to the glory of deserving soldiers and citizens of the republic. (Fonte, 1997, p. 227)

In *Floridoro*, Fonte, both to follow Ariosto's exhortation⁵ and to compensate for the lack of appreciating women in society, glorifies female achievements. Indeed, associating writing with military accomplishment - the acts traditionally accorded to men - she claims that women could achieve in both regardless of *proper behaviour* attributed to each sex:

Always one has seen and sees (provided that a
woman wanted to devote thought to it)
more than one woman succeed in the military,
and take away the esteem and acclaim from many men.
Just so in letters and in every
endeavour that men undertake and pursue;
women have achieved and achieve such good results
that they have no cause at all to envy men. (4.2)

Notwithstanding the "lack of successful female models offered by the available print literature" (Finucci, 2006, p. 22), she argues that women can write as successfully as men, and implies that they can achieve whatever they embark on so long as they are given the opportunity. That is, Fonte foregrounds the talent women have both in heroic and literary endeavour. Schiesari asserts that "to arm women would create a double threat to men: not only an emotional but also a physical danger" and thus men opine that "women must be despoiled of arms and of rhetoric because they are disarming of male virility" (1989, p. 75). In this sense, both Fonte and Risamante pose a threat to male dominance because, as the following discussion will demonstrate, they are physically and intellectually armed against patriarchal oppression, and preach women to stand against it.

Floridoro, in spite of being named after the male warrior Floridoro, serves as "a spirited passage of feminist polemic" being Fonte's "first overt public pronouncement on the question of the status of women" (Cox, 1997, p. 5). Negotiating the generic features of romance, it recounts the adventures of the female heroine Risamante with the ulterior aim to question the patriarchal culture, its teachings, and the so-called fixed gender roles that categorize sexes. Jones asserts that "a negotiated viewer position is one that accepts the dominant ideology encoded into a text by particularities and transforms it in the service of a different group" (1990, p. 4). Likewise, Fonte, holding a subordinate position as a female author writing in a genre of masculine content, utilizes the generic conventions of romance to a feminine end. Although *Floridoro* follows the generic characteristics of romances such as military / heroic adventures and damsels-in-distress, Fonte intentionally makes use of them subversively. In this sense, androgyny serves as a useful vehicle for her to convey her protofeminist message as she blends conventional gender traits featuring women and men to create Risamante and Floridoro.

Gender and Androgyny

Before analysing the manifestation of androgyny and its function in the romance, it is necessary to examine the notion of androgyny. Etymologically speaking, the word androgyny comes from the prefixes *andro* (male) and *gyne* (female) in Greek, and it basically refers to a mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics. The concept of androgyny goes back to the myth of Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who is born with a body that integrates female and male just as his name suggests. He, indeed, is the manifestation of the androgyne as fusion of a woman and a man in Greek mythology. An

⁵ "And further, if they could with their owne pen, / Set forth the wortheie praise of their owne kind, / And not to be beholding unto men, / ... / To make us heare the good but now and then" (*Orlando furioso* 37.2).

androgyny is definable as someone who adopts both feminine and masculine modes of thought and behaviour, and who behaves accordingly under particular circumstances. Secor, likewise, defines androgyny as “the capacity of a single person of either sex to embody the full range of human character traits, despite cultural attempts to render some exclusively feminine and some exclusively masculine” (1974, p. 139). It refers to those who do not properly fit in the definition of feminine and masculine gender roles. It is important at this point to distinguish the concept of gender from sex as they are not synonymous. While sex refers to the natural and biological attributes, gender is “a very complicated set of interrelated cultural ideas which stipulate the social meaning and expectation of sex” (Wood, 2007, pp. 23-24). Gender is constitutive of characteristics pertaining to the feminine and the masculine which also have the function to differentiate them from each other. Gender construction starts at birth and continues all through life. That is, while one is born female or male, to be feminine or masculine is a learnt behaviour: one selects gender out of the parameters already constructed by society. Gender roles, likewise, refer to a set of social rules which dictate the acts appropriate and / or favourable for each sex. They are “entirely socially created expectations of masculine and feminine behaviours” (Galliano, 2003, p. 98). In other words, there is a close relationship between gender and culture that shapes it, and accordingly, it is society that defines how women and men should be and should behave. Butler also states that gender is always performative (1999, p. 33). She is of the opinion that “gender is always a doing” (1999, p. 33) based upon the repetition of certain behaviours. The regular acts one repeats gradually build gender identity.

Within the patriarchal social context, women are thought / conditioned to be silent, compliant, docile, fragile, gentle, weak, and sensitive while men are qualified as outspoken, aggressive, competitive, self-sufficient, robust, strong, and rational. Despite the cultural discourse that differentiates them or the so-called intrinsic characteristics they have, it is arguable that femininity and masculinity are not different from each other. Plato meditates over the issue focusing on nature-culture dichotomy as to sex and gender in *Symposium* as follows:

The original human nature was not like the present, but different. In the first place, the sexes were originally three in number, not two as they are now; there was man, women, and a union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature; this once had a real existence, but is now lost, and the name [androgyny] only is preserved as a word of reproach. (1871, p. 506)

Plato represents the androgyny as an ideal composition unencumbered by social conventions. It thus stands for the desire to return to the ideal state of being in which women and men did not compete with but completed each other. Plato's thought becomes the cornerstone upon which the theory of androgyny rests. Apart from its repercussions in mythology and philosophy, androgyny also has a substantial place in literature. It is Virginia Woolf who deals with the concept within the framework of literary criticism. She elucidates it in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and, similar to Plato, she proposes androgyny as the ideal identity for both sexes. Woolf states that:

In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female. And in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. (1977, p. 106)

Woolf believes that the union of masculine and feminine is the ideal state of mind. She therefore criticises the dominant ideology of her time as to gender that polarizes women and men and attributes them an unequal social status. She contends that gender identity does not necessarily pertain to one's prescribed gender role. She is of the opinion that there is not a natural masculine or feminine identity neatly applicable to each sex. Woolf thereby not only rejects the validity of conventional gender roles but she also states that the androgyny produces a new subject position which is neither solely female nor male. Her stance recalls Carl Jung's concepts of *anima* and *animus*. He refers to *anima* as a man's feminine side that exists in his unconscious, and to *animus* as the presence of masculine in a woman (Galliano, 2003, p. 52). Jung also reckons that what constitutes an ideal person is dependent upon the union of *anima* and *animus*. Heilbrun,

one of the earliest feminist scholars to write on androgyny, is also of the opinion that women and men should develop a selfhood as comprehensive as possible. She defines androgyny as “a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned” (1973, p. x). In this sense, she believes, “androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate” (1973, p. x) and creates a “spirit of reconciliation between the sexes” (1973, p. xi). Given that the androgyne possesses “a full range of experience open to individuals who may, as women, be aggressive, as men, be tender”, androgyny “suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose place without regard to propriety or custom” (Heilbrun, 1973, p. xi). Pratt similarly qualifies androgyny as “a delightful interchange between qualities usually set in opposition to one another” (qtd. in Farwell, 1975, p. 442). That is, the androgyne disregards the culturally constructed gender traits assigned differently to men and women: the androgynous woman partakes in behaviour and temperament traditionally associated with the male sex while the androgynous man adopts behaviour and disposition conventionally accorded to the female sex. By compounding the binaries, androgyny blurs the difference between sexes and ultimately seeks to disrupt the hierarchical relationship between them since the ideal state one should have is dependent upon their harmonious union.

Androgyny in *Tredici canti del Floridoro*

The concept of androgyny is also closely related to feminism. Indeed, it is the reason why the present paper argues that Fonte utilizes androgyny to deal with women’s rebellion against the patriarchal culture in that it does not privilege one sex over the other but gives merit to both, and foregrounding the favourable position of an androgyne, it sets individuals free from the conventionally imposed patterns which, in turn, support equality between women and men and obliquely constitute a profeminist message. Rado celebrates Woolf for her interest in the theme in *Orlando*, which renders her a “subversive, even deconstructive, feminist” (2000, p. 139). What Rado and Rosenman claim concerning her aim when she writes *Orlando* is also applicable to Moderata Fonte: by proposing the androgyne, which disrupts cultural conventions, Fonte challenges patriarchal definition of femininity. Androgyny enables her “a way of rejecting biological determinism and undoing the privileging of the masculine over the feminine” (Rosenman, 1989, p. 647). Fonte attacks the gendered hierarchy between sexes; by emphasising the fluidity of gender, she interrogates the validity of identity as fixed and stable. Bazin and Freeman also argue that androgyny is beneficial in terms of profeminist concerns as it helps “the elimination of sex roles and the overthrow of the current male structures and values” (1974, p. 185). That androgyny is antithetical to the patriarchal order is obvious. Likewise, Risamante and Floridoro question the received notions of gender and offer a refreshed look as to gender roles. Blending the feminine with the masculine, they transgress established patterns of behaviour. Their nonconformist stance, which breaks away from the conventional understanding of sex and gender but proves that “there is no wholly masculine men, no purely feminine woman” (Fuller, 1994, p. 75), renders them exemplary and evidential figures to build up the argument of this study.

Within this framework, the insuperable warrior heroine Risamante, whom Fonte benefits from to upset the gender boundaries, fits in the definition of androgyny as she inhabits both masculine and feminine gender traits. Risamante is driven by a motive to regain the rightful kingdom of Armenia from which she has been disinherited by her father and thus usurped by her twin sister Biondura. Her parallel encounters with Macandro and Cloridabello, the mighty warriors, prove Risamante’s martial skills.

Risamante’s combat with Macandro, the king of the Parthians, inverts the traditional gender traits a woman is supposed to have. In the first canto, Risamante fights against Macandro who arrives at the court of King Cleardo in Greece to honour his lady Biondura’s beauty which “has no peer in the world” (1.17). The adjectives Fonte uses to depict Macandro show that he is quite a self-confident and ferocious warrior. As well as being a “fierce, crude man” (1.14), he is also arrogant and, owing to his “great pride” (1.22) and “valour which he considered so great”, he speaks “with a loud and haughty voice” (1.15) to challenge the others. The narrative builds his might so great that he seems unbeatable; indeed, a group of men try but cannot beat him. Soon, however, Risamante outdoes him with her “harsh and biting sword” (2.21). Macandro, the representative of ideal manhood for his courage, pride and self-confidence, falls dead by

Risamante's stroke. As soon as she removes her helmet, Risamante's sex is revealed in contradistinction to her recent act. She turns out to be a woman who is as beautiful as a Petrarchan lady though she is the opposite in disposition:

She removed her helmet and uncovered the blonde
tresses, clearer and more luminous than gold.
And two stars appeared, so joyful
that for envy the sun hid itself in the sea.
Her fresh, rubicund cheeks moved
the lilies and crimson roses to envy,
and her hand, which she had bared as well,
seemed whiter than snow. (2.26)

Risamante not only circumvents the masculinity Macandro represents but she also upsets the gender expectations she is supposed to conform to. Although Fonte uses the male pronoun to refer to Risamante until she takes off her helmet, it is understood that the defeater is "a most noble maiden" (2.25) who amazes everyone by overcoming the so-called weakness of her sex. Interestingly enough, she looks like the portrait Macandro showed earlier:

Just as one who is present when
a woman holds a mirror before herself,
and now gazing at the natural face,
now at its likeness in that glass,
examining every part, cannot discern
anything that might differ between them,
just so this woman seemed to resemble in all her parts
the beloved of the king of the Parthians. (2.28)

In the final canto, paralleling the scene in the first one, Risamante pits against King Cloridabello who also acts on behalf of Biondura in order to save her kingdom from Risamante's threat. He is also beaten by the armoured warrior (13.62). As Dollimore states, "in appropriating, inverting and substituting for masculinity, the female [androgynous] inevitably puts masculinity itself - and sexual difference more generally - into scrutiny" (1991, pp. 305-06). Risamante, likewise, in both instances, shakes the foundation of masculinity that produces a dichotomous relationship between sexes. Interestingly enough, in a scene alike that closes the canto in which King Cloridabello sees his rival's face when she uncovers, he cannot understand why Biondura, for whom he fights, wounds him. He confuses Risamante with Biondura:

"Is it not," he said, "the beloved face
that Love's hand stamped in my heart?
Are these not the beautiful eyes that caught me
with a sweet snare and placed me in sweet error?
Indeed I am not so blind nor so foolish
as not to recognise the one who has taken my heart." (13.66)

The quotation is meaningful regarding the profeminist content of Floridoro. It is quite hard to discern the twins because "one is soft and delicate" while "the other goes armed as a warrior" (2.30). Identical in appearance but different in nature and upbringing, Risamante and Biondura manifest the shaping force of culture and education on individuals. The former is raised by "the great wizard Celidante ... in a castle founded in the middle of the sea" (2.31-32) while Biondura lives in the palace. In other words, Risamante, having been grown up in isolation from the patriarchal environment and exempted from its rules, does not adopt the conventional female roles and turns out to be a strong and courageous woman. Fonte expresses the same as to the influence of culture on women in *Il merito*: "if women do not bear arms, that isn't because of any deficiency on their part; rather, the fault lies with the way they are brought up" (1997, p. 100).

Fonte's opposite characterisation of the twins supports her protofeminist thought. Risamante and Biondura represent two phases of femininity. Although they exactly resemble each other, Risamante embodies features traditionally associated with manhood such as valour, power, courage, perseverance, strength, and resolution while Biondura represents the damsel-in-distress who is in need of help to protect her kingdom; she is a coward who cannot face her sister. If Risamante is a self-sufficient woman, Biondura is her polar opposite owing to her helplessness. Fonte juxtaposes them to demonstrate that it is not by birth that they are thus but the way they have been raised is what they have become now. The fact that Risamante grows away from the society, which does not force her into certain behavioural patterns expected of her sex, turns out to be the reason why she becomes a stout person. Risamante, as a heroine who transgresses her assigned gender role, thus challenges the construction of gender stereotypes. In this sense, the antagonism between Risamante and Biondura makes apparent the biased construction of gender roles which is not based on biological attributes but on conventions. Their characterisation proves Beauvoir's often-quoted sentence that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1956, p. 273).

That Risamante and Biondura are of the same origin but have opposite personalities enables Fonte to voice one of the most powerful defences of equality between sexes. True it is that Fonte cannot transcend the social system that compartmentalises each sex based upon their stereotypical features but she tries to dilute rigid boundaries between them. She shows that what produces division between men and women is divergence in education:

If when a daughter is born the father
Set her with his son to equivalent tasks,
She would not be in lofty and fair deeds
Inferior or unequal to her brother,
Whether he placed her among the armed squads
With himself, or set her to learn some liberal art.
But because she is raised in other pursuits,
For her education she is held in low regard. (4.4)

Fonte calls attention to the double standard regarding the upbringing of sexes as she believes that it is not due to their innate shortcomings that women cannot manage the manly deeds but they are not given the opportunity to excel in them. In other words, she provides a critique of the education system that restricts their development. *Floridoro* thereby urges women to overcome gender attributes that oppress them.

On the other hand, now that Risamante's masculine traits seem to be exalted, it might appear on the surface that the feminine characteristics she should ideally have are oppressed. It should be noted at this point that Fonte does not underestimate the features traditionally associated with women but suggests that there are no certain characteristics solely allotted to one sex. For example, Risamante, contrary to her valour and boldness in the battlefield, grows into a modest person when she does not want to share her memories of military achievement:

Risamante was not opposed to his
entreaty, though it was quite reluctantly
that she narrated to others her successful feats
and made known her lofty triumphs. (5.68)

Her humbleness, the opposite of Macandro's arrogance, immediately associates her with ideal feminine comportment. Risamante also turns out to be merciful and compassionate. Having "a soft and humane heart" (13.63), she does not kill King Cloridabello but "with a pitiful hand hurriedly frees his head from the bloody helm" (13.63). "[W]ith great pity" she has him sent to the "regal pavilion and doctored [him] (for he was severely wounded) treating him like a king, not like a prisoner" (13.70). Low argues that the ultimate aim of a female warrior is "not to punish [her] opponent but to change his view of what is due to women" (2003, p. 141). Risamante, similarly, is not a bloodthirsty person but becomes an exemplary figure for Fonte to show that women do not necessarily have to suppress their feminine side to accomplish what they aim at. King and Rabil assert that within the generic features of romance, as power is within the realm of the masculine, a

woman who possesses it, is inevitably either masculinised or her female identity is erased (2006, p. xxvii). Fonte, however, does not prefer masculinity over femininity nor does she regard power solely belonging to menfolk. Risamante does not completely renounce femininity or totally adopt masculine behaviour but navigates between feminine and masculine gender stereotypes: “she as a woman possessed as much beauty as she did valour as a warrior in the saddle” (2.39). That is, Risamante represents an ideal individual; and, Fonte demonstrates that an androgyne, moving beyond the prescriptive gender stereotypes, disrupts the patriarchal dictate that promotes male supremacy over female inferiority. Risamante evacuates the fixed gender binaries. Her correspondence to both masculine and feminine gender attributes transcends the dichotomous and artificial construction of gender, and thus challenges the patriarchal encoding of gender roles that hierarchizes women and men. Uniting the feminine with the masculine, she serves as “an emblem of a quest for identity beyond the constraints of conventional gender prescriptions” (Cox, 1997, p. 6).

That Fonte wants to overcome rigid gender stereotypes comes to the fore when she not only attributes masculine features to Risamante but also feminine traits to a man who is the titular hero, Floridoro. Even though the romance is named after him and creates the impression that the story would focus on his deeds, Fonte deconstructs the generic expectation when she inserts Floridoro into the narrative as late as the fifth canto. So as to disrupt the established gender features, she does not introduce him as an ideal romance hero who is thought to be intrepid, venturesome, and mighty. In Floridoro’s depiction, there is not even a single reference to his masculine features. The adjectives employed to describe him are the ones commonly used to refer to women. His appearance thereby crosses gender boundaries:

The expression of his comely face was so agreeable,
so lovely the splendour of his beautiful, golden hair,
and his appearance was so divine,
that every heart, even a harsh one, was inclined to love him.
With his shrewd father came the noble son,
in delightful and lovely clothing.
Love laughed in his tranquil brow;
rather he appeared Love’s very image.
His splendid white and vermilion complexion
made every eye eager to contemplate him.
Every part of him, except his speech,
appeared that of an illustrious and beautiful girl. (5.45-46)

Fonte employs blazon as a poetic device, made popular by Petrarch and imitated by the Elizabethan sonneteers, which lists generally physical features of a lady. Floridoro is also described in the Petrarchan tradition. In fact, Fonte uses the same adjectives she made use of earlier when she described Risamante. Floridoro’s face is “comely”; he has “golden hair” similar to Risamante’s “blonde tresses ... luminous than gold” (2.26); he has “white and vermilion complexion” just as Risamante’s “rubicund cheeks” and hands “whiter than snow” (2.26); he laughs delicately and, but for his voice, he has the appearance of an “illustrious and beautiful girl” calling for Risamante’s eyes which are, in fact, “two stars ... so joyful” (2.26) that even the sun is jealous of. That Floridoro is representative of the androgyne is observable from his description. In other words, even though the title of the work bears his name and anticipates that it would honour his heroic achievement and praise his masculine disposition, they are not taken into consideration, and Fonte deliberately foregrounds his feminine side. That is, by blurring / blending gender stereotypes, she tries to destabilise gendered hierarchical order.

As well as his appearance, his feminine temperament also qualifies Floridoro as an androgynous person. That he is quite a sensitive and compassionate person is observable: when he gets a letter informing of his mother’s illness, for instance, he cannot help but immediately burst into tears:

Floridoro reads and is so upset,
he is so moved with compassion,
that he cannot hold back from his eyes the tears
which, streaming down his beautiful face, fall to his breast. (7.21)

He becomes so upset that he “weeping” (7.23) asks for his father’s permission “with a most sweet and gentle voice” (7.23) to visit his mother. That he is inclined to cry is also reinforced when he helplessly weeps once he falls in love with Celsidea, King Cleardo’s daughter:

Unspeaking a while, in tears and sighs
 he gives vent to his grave, unwonted torment.
 Then, overcome by his new, bitter agonies,
 he joins words to weeping.
 “Alas, what unaccustomed, lofty desires
 disturb my peace and happiness?
 What new sorrow, what new anxiety is this,
 which leaves me so afflicted and troubled?” (8.57)

Interestingly enough, when his companion Filardo promises to find a solution to Floridoro’s desperate love, immediately after “a whirlpool of weeping” (8.65), he “with the pleasure one has in suddenly obtaining an unanticipated delight” (7.27), starts to embrace him. It is observable that Floridoro displays emotional excess symptomatic of hysteria because he both sheds tears and indulges in extreme delight almost simultaneously. The word *hysteria* etymologically comes from the Greek word *hystera* which means *uterus*. It was believed in ancient Greece and during the Renaissance that hysteria and its symptoms were the consequences of a defect in the womb⁶ and menstrual cycles, and therefore, it was thought that only women could be hysterical (Micale, 1995, pp. 19-20). Hysteria was thought to be characterised by excessive or unrestrained emotion which has been traditionally associated with womenfolk ever since. Floridoro’s over-emotional nature, in this sense, suggests that there is the feminine that dwells within him. That he is incapable of controlling his emotions also shows that he does not meet the attributes of ideal manhood. According to Fletcher, in the conduct literature concerning gender roles, the hierarchical gender positioning contrasts manhood with effeminacy as it is perceived as mental and physical strength while effeminacy (or womanhood) refers to being emotionally delicate and weak. Uncontrollable behaviour or emotion is seen as dangerous to manhood. Likewise, excessive love is also thought to be hazardous as it would prevent “manly action” (1999, pp. 420-27). In this sense, it is seen that Floridoro is not only effeminate in appearance but he is also prone to womanish behaviour. His characterisation transcends the conventional gender boundaries given that Fonte foregrounds the feminine features Floridoro has.

Auerbach states that “the very essence of the knight’s ideal of manhood is called forth by adventure” (2013, p. 135) by which he demonstrates his courage, intelligence, and strength. Floridoro, likewise, wants to prove his might when he gets eager to joust in honour of Celsidea. Reminding the scene in which Macandro challenges the warriors to honour Biondura, Floridoro is willing to fight for her sake. His attempt to build his manhood is prevented by his father, though: “the king does not grant him leave to arm himself and joust, for he does not believe valour is found at so tender an age” (7.9). Since his father does not let him fight, Floridoro seems to be “the mockery of a true knight” (Malpezzi-Price, 1997, p. 124) at this point. Soon, however, the reason why he cannot get his father’s permission is understood:

He calls him an incautious and imprudent boy
 who seeks to engage in so perilous an attempt,
 who tries to expose himself to certain peril,
 when he is unfit and inexperienced with weapons. (7.10)

His father does not allow him because he is inexperienced and has “never yet practiced feats of Mars” (5.47). Mars, the god of war, might symbolise the urge for participating in heroic acts. In this sense, as he has not yet got martial education, Floridoro seems to be an immature - or, not manly enough - knight to appear on the battlefield. The fact that the narrative focuses more on his effeminacy than his warrior side

⁶ “Hysteria has been a label used for potpourri of female ailments and non-ailments alike since Antiquity ... The Greeks and Romans called almost all female complaints hysteria, and believed the cause of all these female maladies to be a wandering uterus ... In various Hippocratic texts the term *hysteria* is applied to a large variety of female complaints” (King, 1998, p. 206).

and that he is not well-equipped to be a warrior underline the influence of education in moulding one's personality and creating gender binaries. It has already been known that Risamante is well-educated in martial arts, and thus she is not a frail woman; Floridoro, contrariwise, lacking the education that would make him a fully-grown man, an idealised portrait of manhood, foregrounds the so-called feminine tenderness. Fonte, by diametrically positioning Risamante and Floridoro at this point, once more emphasises how education, which cultivates men and women differently based on their stereotypical features, also shapes gender and perpetuates gender binaries. She, therefore, repeats her concern that it is the double standard in terms of schooling children that gender roles are strengthened. Interestingly enough, just as Risamante represents the ideal individual harbouring both masculine and feminine traits, Floridoro, despite his salient effeminacy, becomes victorious on the battlefield:

He unhorsed Riviero. He knocked down the king of Persia,
who proudly met and opposed him.
He hit Marcane, he struck Brandilatte,
and made the one and the other end up on foot.
In short, the knight whiter
than milk defeated everyone.
For joy then every trumpet sounds,
and the people's shouts resound to heaven. (10.68)

It is seen that Floridoro also embodies an ideal person because the narrative does not privilege his masculine aspect over the feminine but he still succeeds in what he does. That the narrative emphasises the colour of his outfit before the tournament is also worthy of attention:

There Filardo had already prepared
arms for Floridoro which would humiliate
pure snow, and, both having dismounted,
he and a page help him put them on.
Then with a mantle of delicate silk
(it too was white), he makes him even more adorned.
Thereafter he leads him to that destrier⁷ so beautiful
that it fills him with amazement and eagerness. (7.30)

Apart from his equipage, Floridoro also uses the cognomen "Biancadoro" (10.79) which is related to whiteness. Cox states that the name "comes from a feminine, rather than a masculine, onomastic canon" (2011, p. 188). Deliberate emphasis on the colour white, which is traditionally associated with women and the feminine qualities such as purity, chastity, softness, lightness, and goodness, also betokens Floridoro's feminine side. Indeed, as Kolsky states, "the males who have not completely repressed their feminine qualities are the ones who seem to have the approval of the poet" (1999, p. 178). The fact that Floridoro has a feminine aura when he goes to the tournament but becomes victorious upon defeating so many warriors suggests that there is nothing wrong with the feminine qualities one might have but it is the way they are culturally constructed to refer to render them inferior to the masculine ones. Fonte thereby emphasises that the feminine should be tempered with the masculine and the masculine with the feminine.

Fonte also covertly communicates the message that education, which conforms to or produces traditional gender roles, does not necessarily prove triumphant (Macandro, for instance, the representative of ideal manhood, falls dead). If gender is readable as a cultural and performative product, Risamante and Floridoro, therefore, endorse Fonte's proposition that women and men should be educated alike because there are no exclusively feminine or masculine features applicable to subordinate one sex to the other. Indeed, Risamante and Floridoro, as androgynous characters, affirming a "fertile oscillation between positions" (Caughie, 1991, p. 82), represent how an ideal individual should be. They are idealised because both exist beyond the confines of the patriarchal system that oppresses women via certain gender roles.

⁷ It is also described as "a fair destrier far whiter than snow" (7.28).

Fonte envisions an identity that transcends their physical sex; Risamante and Floridoro “both respond to and elude gender imperatives and sexual codes that shape Western culture” (Kaivola, 1999, p. 235). While the patriarchal model of education regards the female sex and what is related to it inferior, simultaneously exalting the male and its associations, Risamante and Floridoro, possessing both feminine and masculine qualities, shatter such patriarchal paradigm and disrupt the gendered categories. Their identity spills over gender distinctions and thus upsets the established social order. Not being either-or but both-and figures, their androgyny functions as a challenge against patriarchal understanding of gender roles which configures them in accordance with the interests of patriarchy. It shatters naturalised gender roles that strengthen masculine hegemony, and suggests that a symmetrical opposition of genders is an invalid assumption. Cull avers that “the inversion of sexual roles is a form of androgyny... [which] takes the form of an anti-feminist comment” (1989, p. 327). Likewise, inverting the features stereotypically associated with the opposite sex, Fonte challenges the patriarchal understanding that privileges one sex over the other and questions the validity of the hierarchical relationship between them. She argues against the cultural assumption that women lack / are less than what men have / are. She seems to believe that “the Masculine and the Feminine must unite for the Rebirth of the new human being and the new society. This, in its widest possible sense, is the Androgynous Vision” (Bazin and Freeman, 1974, p. 212). Indeed, in the manifesto-like octave of the work, she claims that women and men are of the same essence; and thus, there is no difference between them:

Women in every age were by nature
 endowed with great judgment and spirit,
 nor are they born less apt than men to demonstrate
 (with study and care) their wisdom and valour.
 And why, if their bodily form is the same,
 if their substances are not varied,
 if they have the same food and speech, must they
 have then different courage and wisdom? (4.1)

Arguing that women and men are undifferentiated, Fonte believes that androgyny is their natural state as opposed to their cultural positioning. She rejects gender categories and asserts that it is the patriarchal culture and its assumptions that restrict women. It is by means of her androgynous characterisation that Fonte invites women to resist social injustice and to transcend the boundaries that categorise each sex based on so-called innate features. In this sense, Risamante and Floridoro’s “androgynous balance enables [her] to resolve social discord” (Dreher, 1986, p. 116).

Androgyny helps Fonte oppose discrimination and attack biased education system. By representing the androgyne as the ideal, Fonte supports that men and women should be treated equally as women are not inferior to men and, in doing so, she both promotes protofeminism and criticises the masculine power structure. Risamante and Floridoro’s liminal position provides an explanation as to how gender is not a natural but a cultural construct and how identities could be consciously rebuilt. One is free to choose whatever gender ascription one desires, irrespective of sex. It shows that gender has nothing to do with one’s physiological sex. *Floridoro*, in this sense, negates the “so-called natural ... concept of gender as wholly consistent with biological sex” but offers instead that gender is “fluid and considered as if it were constructed along a spectrum of possibilities that allowed everyone ... a prospective latitude of masculine or feminine behaviours” (Jordan, 1999, p. 297).

Conclusion

This paper tends to underline Fonte’s effort to search for equality between sexes by deliberately blurring gender boundaries and diminishing the supposed male superiority. Benefiting from the examples available to her yet producing a message in favour of the female audience, Fonte employs *Floridoro* and “themes of the genre for the purpose of reforming it ... with the result that it undermines patriarchal ideology” (Kolsky, 1999, p. 182). Cognizant of the fact that Risamante, as a warrior heroine, has

“emblematic significance” (Cox, 1997, p. 138) within the framework of protofeminism, she creates her as an autonomous woman who transcends the place the patriarchal culture assigns her, and who shatters the patriarchal attributes of femininity owing to her upbringing independent of her sex. Floridoro, in the same vein, who incorporates both masculine and feminine traits, enables Fonte to envision a non-hierarchical social order in which there is not a dichotomous but a holistic relationship between women and men. Fonte’s *Floridoro* is both readable as her reaction against the stabilised notions of gender upon which patriarchy is built and against the prejudiced opinion on sexes, women in particular. Malpezzi-Price notes that Fonte “was able to elaborate and divulge in a non-conformist message which helped gradually to modify certain aspects of the prevalent social ideology with regard to women” (Moderata, 2003, pp. 20-21). Indeed, it is true that she urges them to realise their worth and power through her verse:

And although of so worthy and so famous
a status there are not great number of women,
it is because on heroic and valorous acts
they have not set their hearts for various reasons.
Gold which stays hidden in the mines
is no less gold, though buried;
and when it is drawn out and worked,
it is as rich and beautiful as other gold. (4.3)

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