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SARACENS AND TURKS IN ARIOSTO'S *ORLANDO FURIOSO*:



Sheer Imagination or Allusions to Reality?

By Pia Schwarz Lausten

Ariosto critics usually underscored a positive and respectful rendition of the Muslim enemy, interpreting Orlando Furioso as representing an openminded and modern attitude towards Islam and Muslims in general, yet the presentation in the poem of the conflicts between Christians and Muslims does articulate a critical, albeit nuanced attitude towards Muslims. Interpretations should take the context into account: Italy's geo-political situation vis-à-vis the Ottoman expansion – particularly in the Balkans, historical events and the huge amount of humanistic and historiographical writings from the first decades of the 16th century in which we find a similar complexity in the attitude towards the Turks.

Are the Saracens a “fantastic entity without references to any historical or geographical reality” in the *Orlando Furioso*, and “represented at the same level as the Christians concerning their value and civilization” as Italo Calvino claimed in his retelling of the *Furioso*?¹ Or should the depiction of the Saracens rather be viewed in light of the contemporary historical, religious and intellectual contexts, in particular in light of the Turkish threat to the European states? Calvino, who considered Ariosto ‘his’ poet, also wrote:

To be of ‘different faiths’ doesn’t mean much more in the *Furioso* than the different colours on a chessboard. The crusading era, in which the narrative cycle of the knights had assumed a symbolic value of battle for life and death between Islam and Christendom, is far away.²

Calvino belongs to a dominating tradition among Ariosto scholars who tend to idealise the positive and equalising rendition of the Saracens in *Orlando Furioso* beginning with De Sanctis who did not consider Agramante’s war a

¹ Calvino 1970, XXVI: “un’entità fantastica per la quale non vale alcun riferimento storico o geografico”; “sono rappresentati su un piano di parità con i Cristiani per quel che riguarda il valore e la civiltà”.

² Calvino 1970, XXIII: “L’essere ‘di fè diversi’ non significa molto di più, nel *Furioso*, che il diverso colore dei pezzi in una scacchiera. I tempi delle Crociate in cui il ciclo dei Paladini aveva assunto un valore simbolico di lotta per la vita e per la morte tra la Cristianità e l’Islam, sono lontani.”

religious or political matter, but something “external and mechanical” in the poem.³ William Comfort claimed that the Saracens are just as “noble and high-minded as the Christians” and that the difference between Christians and Saracens is a “conventional division” maintained only because it has some poetical advantages for Ariosto writing in a period in which “the strong crusade feeling which had bred these distinctions had entirely disappeared from a worldly and sophisticated public.”⁴ Comfort found a “general absence of any reference to Italy’s participation in the defense of her soil against the Infidels.”⁵ Joseph Donnelly wrote that “the poems reveal no prejudice based on a sense of the superiority of western culture over oriental civilization [...] these epics have no trace of a sense of European racial superiority over Turks and Arabs.”⁶ In another, more recent article it is claimed that

in the epic texts of Italian Renaissance the rigid dividing line between Christians and pagans/Saracens, characteristic of literature from the Carolingian period, undergoes an extreme attenuation, if not a partial cancellation.⁷

According to the authors of this article, we might have seen a reopening of the cultural conflict between the Christian and Muslim worlds in light of the Turkish peril, but this, they claim, did not happen,⁸ a fact that is interpreted as a sign of the “accentuated modernity” of the poems.⁹ Also Maria Pavlova argues in line with this tradition, that the Saracen knights are portrayed as magnanimous knights and “superb warriors and worthy opponents for the most celebrated Christian knights”,¹⁰ and she claims that none of the Saracen characters is depicted as evil, “even if some of them occasionally violate the chivalric code.”¹¹ Some of these interpretations will be discussed later in this article.

Most Ariosto scholars who have analyzed the representation of the Saracens in the *Furioso* seem to agree on two aspects: First, the respectful and positive rendition of the Saracens in Ariosto’s epic poem compared to the more negative one of *Chanson de Roland*; and, second, the absence of references to contemporary conflicts with the new Islamic world power of Ariosto’s own time, the Ottomans. As exceptions to this tendency we find,

³ De Sanctis 1991, 317 and 329.

⁴ Comfort 1944, 901–902.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 909.

⁶ Donnelly 1977, 163.

⁷ Pagliardini & Fuchs 2006, 579. My translation.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 580.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 587.

¹⁰ Pavlova 2014, 473.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 472.

for example, Roger Baillet, Peter Marinelli, Jason D. Jacobs, Paul Larivaille, and most importantly JoAnn Cavallo's excellent book, *The World beyond Europe in the Epic Romance of Boiardo and Ariosto*.¹² Cavallo shows how Boiardo and Ariosto relate to the geopolitical realities of their day,¹³ and, in opposition to several other scholars, she highlights the ideological differences between the two Ferrarese poets: Her thesis is that Boiardo's poem represents an "international cosmopolitanism" while Ariosto's work expresses "a more restrictive outlook that brings to bear the crusading ideology characteristic of Carolingian epic."¹⁴ According to Cavallo, Ariosto did not share Boiardo's detached position, the two poets were "worlds apart", and her study accounts for these ideological differences through a contextualized comparison of the world beyond Christian Europe envisioned by the two poets.

Thus, "Ariosto's portrayal of Saracens and Islam have reached contradictory conclusions",¹⁵ as Maria Pavlova states and she rightly sums up that

there is no unanimity of opinion as to whether Ariosto was influenced by contemporary perceptions of Muslims in general and the Turks in particular. Most scholars who believe that Ariosto does not distinguish between Christians and Saracens tend to avoid this question. By contrast, those who take the opposite view often attempt to read the poem in light of the Turkish menace.¹⁶

The present contribution not only claims that the *Orlando Furioso* does reflect European antagonism towards the Turks, but also underscores the complexity of Ariosto's way of dealing with this *topos*.¹⁷ In the following pages, I will reject the assumption about the absence of references to contemporary history, and I will problematise the abovementioned theses regarding the positive rendition of the Saracens: In spite of some equalising and sympathising elements in the description of the medieval Saracen heroes, the *Furioso* expresses a negative evaluation of Muslims including those of

¹² Baillet 1977, Marinelli 1987, Jacobs 2006, Larivaille 2011, Cavallo 2013.

¹³ Lausten 2014, 2016.

¹⁴ Cavallo 2013, 3.

¹⁵ Pavlova 2014, 476.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 477.

¹⁷ I would like to thank both the editor of the volume and the anonymous peer reviewer for comments and advices. Since I submitted the first version of this article in 2012 (which for various reasons remained unpublished), important contributions to the field have been published, in particular JoAnn Cavallo's groundbreaking book *The World beyond Europe in the Romance Epics of Boiardo and Ariosto*. Thanks to its innovative geographical and geopolitical approach that unfolds a range of analyses of the representation of religious, cultural and political matters in the two poems, Cavallo has provided details and examples that have confirmed my interpretation of the poem based on a much smaller selection of examples.

Ariosto's own time, the Ottoman Turks. By direct references and indirect allusions and parallels the narrator reminds his readers of various historical conflicts with Muslims – with Arabs in Jerusalem and in Sicily at the time of the Crusades, and with Ottomans at the Balkans in the Renaissance period. In doing so, he points to the similarities between the times of Charlemagne (early ninth century) and those of Charles V (sixteenth century),¹⁸ and in particular he points to the common threat to their civilizations, indirectly urging the Estensi rulers, especially cardinal Ippolito d'Este, to whom the poem is a tribute (cf. *Orlando Furioso* song I, 3), to engage in the struggles against the Turks. The image of Turks and Saracens in the *Furioso* should be taken as part of the discourse about the Turkish menace in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and as a consequence it might also be interpreted as a contribution to the very idea of Europe understood as a Christian unity. Like contemporary humanists Ariosto thus in his poem contains elements of a 'crusade ideology' though not in terms of liberation of the Holy land, but rather understood broadly as an appeal to liberation of Constantinople and in general from the Turks. It is my claim that the *Furioso* must be read in the light of the so-called humanist "crusade literature",¹⁹ and in this respect my argument differs from not only Calvino's and the like but also aspects of more recent contributions.

Until recently, the image of Saracens and Turks was overlooked by contemporary research on the *Furioso*. It is not unusual for different generations to be aware of different aspects of the past, and indeed, the last two decades have seen a series of new studies both on the history of the Ottoman Empire and on Western views of the Islamic world in early modern Europe. These works have led to a new understanding of the central role of Islamic culture for the advent of Renaissance Europe and Italy. It makes sense to refer to a 'global turn' within Renaissance studies since the middle of the 1990's, which, according to Francesca Trivellato can be seen as the most innovative perspective on Renaissance studies today.²⁰

After a short presentation of text and contexts, I will refer to three kinds of examples: The references to the Ottomans in the present time frame of the poem, the image of the Saracens in relation to the medieval past, and elements from the medieval time frame alluding to contemporary reality.

¹⁸ As already emphasized by Marinelli 1987, 83–102.

¹⁹ Hankins 1995.

²⁰ Cf. Trivellato 2010, 132. As to the specific case of the relationship between the Islamic world and Italian culture, a series of works have been published since 2001 among which we find: Ricci 2002, 2008 and 2011; Meier 2010; Pedani 2010; Formica 2012; Eslami 2014.

Text, structure, motifs

The *Furioso* is a continuation of the popular poem *Inamoramento de Orlando* left unfinished by Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441–1494) at his death. Like his predecessor (and his successor Torquato Tasso), Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) was closely related to the flourishing Este court at Ferrara in the north-east of the Italian peninsula. The *Furioso* is presented as eulogy of Este family and as legitimising its power ambitions (see especially songs III, XIII and XXXIII). The Estensi were among the oldest and most prestigious rulers of Italy, with links to Spain, Naples, Hungary, Milan, Mantua, Rome and Urbino. They were culturally allied with France and politically with both the Church and the Empire.²¹ The court was famous for its apparently paradoxical enthusiasm for the classical learning of the humanists as well as for French chivalric romances in the vernacular. Ariosto was an official at court serving cardinal Ippolito d'Este from 1503 and thereafter his brother prince Alfonso I from 1518, when Ariosto refused to follow Ippolito to Hungary. He was appointed to solve practical, administrative jobs and was responsible for the organisation of theatrical performances. The court of Ferrara was among the very first to perform modern comedies in the classical mode.

Ariosto, who worked on the *Furioso* until his death, started writing it in 1504. The first edition consisting of 40 songs was published in 1516. The second edition (1521) was corrected linguistically according to the Tuscan language norms of Pietro Bembo with whom Ariosto, after having entered to service at the Este court, was in close contact.²² The *Furioso* reached beyond the regional court culture to a much larger audience and became an important component of the creation of a national literary culture. The third and last edition was published in 1532 and was amplified with six new songs resulting in a total of 46.²³ *Orlando Furioso* became a bestseller and one of the most studied and influential poems in European Renaissance literature: In sixteenth-century Italy 25,000 copies were printed; in 1545 it was translated into French; in 1549 three Spanish translations appeared; in 1591 it was translated into English.

²¹ Marinelli 1987, 88.

²² Bembo began to write his influential work, *Prose della volgar lingua* in 1501–152 (published in 1525) during his stays at the Este court in Ferrara between 1497 and 1504, cf. Marrone (ed.), 2007, 81. Ariosto's poem was "riveduta nella lingua e nello stile, nell'intento di sopprimere i residui dialettali e le dissonanze e durezza di costruito, con l'occhio fisso a quell'ideale di toscanità letteraria, che il Bembo andava proprio in quegli anni costituendo e propugnando", Sapegno 1962.

²³ The new material added to the 1532 edition are to be found in songs IX, X and XI, in songs XXXII–XXXIII, and XXXVII, and – which is most important to my argument – in the final songs ILIV, ILV, and ILVI treating the episodes about Roger and Leone in Belgrade.

The knights in the *Furioso* are constantly moving from one place to another across a huge geographical area from France, England and Scotland to Asia, Africa and to the moon! Different themes run through the text, intertwining with each other the main narrative threads representing, briefly: 1) The fictionalised war among Christians and Saracens at the time of emperor Charlemagne in the early ninth century, especially the African king Agramante attacking France and the subsequent Christian attack and destruction of his territories in North Africa, Bizerta; 2) Orlando’s love for the Saracen Angelica culminating with his madness when he discovers that she is in love with another man, a mere Saracen soldier, but ending with Orlando regaining his reason and killing king Agramante; 3) the complicated love-story of the Saracen knight Ruggiero (Roger) and the Christian female warrior Bradamante, resolved in the final songs when the knight becomes a Christian, and they can finally unite in marriage, thus founding the Este dynasty. It was Boiardo who first wrote about Roger as ancestor of the Este family and as of Trojan origin, one of Ariosto’s primary intentions was to continue this theme; Roger’s story thus introduces and closes Ariosto’s poem and marks the *Furioso* as a dynastic poem.

Together with the fabulous, magical, and allegorical episodes, in which the whole reservoir of the chivalric romance tradition unfolds with well-known legends, books, enchanted castles, winged horses and invincible swords, the poem contains many references to historical events as well from antiquity, as from the medieval past and Ariosto’s present time: The destiny of dynasties, historical characters, wars, diplomatic negotiations and court conversations are described and commented on throughout the narration. This expansion of the plot creates an open and dynamic structure characterised as “polycentric”,²⁴ oxymoronic and contradictory – also ideologically speaking, as expressing a pluralistic vision of the earthly reality.²⁵

Historical context

Ariosto scholars have traditionally focused on three fields regarding the structure and style of the *Furioso*: The intertextual aspects of the poem (related to Vergil, Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio, Boiardo and the popular French *chansons de geste*); the intratextual connections between the different songs of the poem; and the variations between the different editions. As already pointed out, scholars have only recently paid attention to the representation of Turks and Saracens in Ariosto’s poem, and whenever

²⁴ Bologna 1993, 219. My translation.

²⁵ Ceserani & De Federicis 1983, 1023; 1051; Cf. also Ascoli 2001, 487–522.

discussed they are often considered ahistorical entities.²⁶ According to Peter Marinelli, the 'romantic' line in Italian Ariosto criticism was dominant from De Sanctis and Rajna in the nineteenth and early twentieth century through the 1980s, the critics ignoring that:

Ariosto lived at the center of the great events of his time, and he observed them unflinchingly with a clear sense of both their meaning and their mutability. The *Furioso* contains the fruit of that observation, transfigured; which is [...] not to say that he wrote historical allegory but rather to say that he addressed the events of history by incorporating them into the fictions of dynastic romance.²⁷

Indeed, several prologues in the *Furioso* comment on ethical and political aspects, and many digressions touch critically upon historical events, mainly the pressure on the Italian peninsula stemming from the European nation states, beginning with that of Charles VIII in 1494 (continuing with the Spaniards (1503) and the Germans (1509)), and the pressure on Ferrara arising from the Pope and the Empire. The ruthless mass killings of these invasions may have influenced the *Furioso's* battle scenes and overall outlook.²⁸ Some of the substantial differences between the second and the more disillusioned third edition of the poem bear witness to increasing impact of contemporary socio-political events in Italy and in Europe.

The Italian wars among the great European powers, mainly Francis I and Charles V, may have worried the Italians more than the Turkish expansion, since these local conflicts had more visible consequences in daily life. Nevertheless, the larger global political context certainly explains why the medieval wars among Saracens and Christians became such a popular topic in the Renaissance court epics. Ariosto's poem was written in the decades following the fall of Constantinople and the Ottomans' conquest of most of the Balkans: Greece, Albania, parts of Hungary. Italy itself was invaded by the Ottomans from the east and the south: Venice and Genoa lost several possessions in the Egean Sea (Negroponte in 1470), the Turks made raids in Friuli (1477) and even occupied Otranto in Southern Italy for one year, before the Christians realized a symbolic *reconquista* (1480–1481). The second edition of the *Furioso* was actually published in the year of the fall of Belgrade (1521), one year before the siege of Rhodes (1522), and the third and final edition was written during the years in which Suleiman the Magnificent won the battle of Mohaç (1526) and threatened Vienna (1529).

²⁶ For an historical approach to *Orlando Furioso* cf. e.g.: Marsh 1981, Marinelli 1987, Murrin 1988, Murrin 1995, Ascoli 2001, Villa 2011, Casadei 2016.

²⁷ Marinelli 1987, 83.

²⁸ Cavallo 2013, 258.

The victory at Mohaç in particular demonstrated how the Ottomans had penetrated into Europe. Every pope attempted to promote the cause of crusade, which “still enjoyed prominence as a cultural icon, a religious concept, and a political concern in the fifteenth century”,²⁹ even if the popes did not succeed with their purpose because of internal conflicts and hesitation of the Christian nations. In spite of the fall of Byzantium and news that Mehmet II was attacking Serbia and Hungary, Pope Pius II (1458–1464) did not successfully unite the Italian states: The prince of Ferrara (Borso d’Este) and Naples refused. Like most European countries they had important trade relations with the Ottomans that also granted them access to Central Asian trade routes.³⁰

Ariosto lived in Ferrara, a city far away from the frontline of the Turks. It was a “backline”, as suggested by Giovanni Ricci,³¹ and it never experienced the threat from the Turks as directly as Venice, Friuli or Otranto: Turks did not reach Ferrara as conquerors, but as inoffensive converts, refugees or chained slaves. But even if Ferrara was not a place that determined the great politics towards the Turks, the city “experienced intensively this politics against the Turks interacting continuously with the centres of the Christian headquarters”³² and it represented “a microcosm at the intersection of global history and local contingencies”.³³ The state was closely connected to the Papal state in Rome, having immediate access to the most important news, and the dynastic relations with the Aragons in Naples made sometimes the Turks seem closer to Ferrara: In 1483, the liberator of Otranto, Alfonso duke of Calabria, son of the king of Naples and brother of Ercole d’Este’s bride, had arrived in Ferrara – and was welcomed as a hero – bringing five hundred Turkish slaves as a present to the Este prince.³⁴ Furthermore, Ferrara still remembered the church council held in the city (and in Florence) in 1438–1439, which (unsuccessfully) aimed at uniting the oriental and occidental Christian churches. Although one cannot speak of *one* oriental ‘Other’ in this

²⁹ Bisaha 1999, 186.

³⁰ Europe had a taste for the East: spices, coffee, silk, textiles and other luxuries as well as ideas in medicine, cartography, navigation and philosophy flow from East to West, and Mehmet II invited Italian artists, architects and scholars to the city, such as the Greek humanist George of Trebizond, who left the Pope for Mehmet; the painter Constanzo da Ferrara arrived in Istanbul in 1478, where he produced portraits of Mehmet, and in 1482 the Florentine humanist Berlinghieri dedicated his version of Ptolemy’s “Geography” to the Ottoman prince. In Ferrara, one may trace a certain oriental influence of the architecture and art, such as a cupola found on a building, turbans and Persian carpets in paintings, cf. Ricci 2002, 25–28.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

period, since some of the Muslim states were allies of the Christian princes,³⁵ and although great internal conflicts among Italian city-states dominated the picture as well, the Ottoman Empire was indeed a huge threat to the European states and it influenced Italy directly on several occasions.

Intellectual context

The fear of further Turkish advances in Italy and in Europe after 1453 is reflected in the huge amount of anti-Turkish writings during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, known as "humanist crusade literature":

The humanists wrote far more often and at far greater length about the Turkish menace and the need for crusade than they did about such better-known humanist themes as true nobility, liberal education, the dignity of man, or the immortality of the soul.³⁶

Even if humanist ideas were in many ways in opposition to medieval crusade ideology, many humanists approached the Turks in condemning, moral and religious terms using crusade rhetoric against Islam. This crusade rhetoric included images of the Turk as anti-Christ, as God's scourge or punishment against the sinful Christians as well as articulations of a more pragmatic need to unite the Christian forces.³⁷ In eyewitness accounts, historiographic treatises, propaganda pamphlets, letters or poems, humanists such as Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405–64, from 1458 Pope Pius II), Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), Cardinal Bessarion (1403–1472) or Marin Barleti (1450–1513), to mention just a few, implored the Christian princes to combat the Turks and thus contributed to the construction of the very idea of Europe as *unitas Christiana*.³⁸ In their writings the humanists were inspired by classical Greek and Roman authors and referred to a series of antique sources and methods, thereby creating a common discursive field. Of course, neither Christianity nor Islam existed in the classical world, yet the classical texts represented a cultural context in which the humanists so to speak situated themselves and the Ottoman Turks. They found useful cultural and political concepts of East and West, Barbary and civilisation in classical Greek and Roman authors.

³⁵ Meserve 2008, 11.

³⁶ Cf. Hankins 1995, 112. He listed four hundred manuscripts on the Turks written by more than fifty humanists during the years 1451–1481. See also the fundamental contributions to this field of studies by Bisaha 2004 and Meserve 2008.

³⁷ Höfert 2000, 55–56.

³⁸ Bisaha 2004, 84–85. Höfert (2000, 49) too interprets the Turkish menace as the generator of the very idea in the fifteenth century of Europe as a homogenous, Christian unit highlighting that: "it was only after the fall of the ideologically important Constantinople, that Europe was identified as the last, now threatened, bastion of Christianity, despite the fact that the Ottoman Empire had already existed within the geographic borders of Europe for some considerable time".

With the fall of Constantinople and the ensuing destruction of books, art and architecture, the notion of the Turks as a threat to learning and high culture became widespread, and the fate of Constantinople was compared with the pagans’ destruction of ancient Rome. The Turks were depicted as Europe’s new barbarians similar to the Persians, the Germans, the Vikings and the Mongols and as such not only considered as enemies of the faith but of the very civilization.³⁹ The humanists used the behaviour of the Turks as an opportunity to strengthen their own relation to classical culture,⁴⁰ but they did, as argued by Nancy Bisaha, relate to the medieval chivalric universe and its religious understanding of Islam as well. The discourse on the Turks did, as mentioned above, incorporate elements of crusade rhetoric, that is, the Turk as anti-Christ, God’s scourge and a punishment for the sinful Christians, as well as knowledge and strategic considerations motivated by a more pragmatic need to unite the Christian forces.⁴¹

In historical and ethnographic works from the early sixteenth century, in the works of for example Paolo Giovio and Giovan Antonio Menavino (Genovese prisoner at the sultan’s court from 1504–1514),⁴² we find examples of a new empirical curiosity towards the Turks: These works contain elements of admiration for the strength, organisation and discipline of the Ottomans, presented as a model for, as well as a warning against the Christians. However, in spite of the laudatory elements, these works are all born from the desire to understand and then better combat the huge Ottoman enemy. Furthermore, although these historiographic and ethnographic works do represent a more objective, systematic and pluralistic approach to the Ottomans than seen before, religion remains a central and distinctive element. The anthropologist Almut Höfert claims that the importance of the image of the cruel and dangerous Turkish ‘Other’ cannot be overestimated and that the construction of this discourse may even have influenced the contemporary development of typography,⁴³ the discovery of America and the evolution of ethnographic science (knowledge of self and other).

Direct references to the Ottoman Turks in the *Furioso*

Ariosto seems to participate in this discourse on the Turks. Already in song XVII, which was part of the first edition of the *Furioso* published in 1516,

³⁹ Bisaha 2004, 62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴¹ Höfert 2000, 55–56.

⁴² For references see Lausten 2019.

⁴³ The invention of typography supported the spreading of pamphlets and propaganda against the Turks, and it might not be a coincidence that the first printed text from Gutenberg’s printing house was the anti-Turkish “Mahnung der Christenheit wider die Türken” (1455).

Ariosto refers directly and unequivocally to the Ottoman Turks, contributing to the creation of images and myths about the Turks and thus offering his readers a key for understanding the Saracen motif.⁴⁴ The preamble states that bad leadership is one of God's punishments for the sinful living of a nation:

When our sins have passed the bounds of forgiveness, God, in His justice, to show equity on a par with His mercy, often gives power to unspeakable tyrants, to utter monsters, and endows them with the compulsion and the cunning to work evil. [...] He gave Italy in prey to the Huns, Goths, and Lombards [...] to plague and torment us, after we had strayed too long from the path of virtue (XVII, 1–2).⁴⁵

This is the case also today, he continues: "Not only in ages past but in our own day we have clear evidence of this, when to guard us, unprofitable and ill-born flock, He has appointed vicious wolves for keepers [...]" (XVII, 3).⁴⁶ Ariosto alludes to Pope Julius II (1503–1513), who helped Swiss mercenaries getting into Italy after the battle at Ravenna (in 1512), and as a consequence the barbarian invasions mentioned above.⁴⁷ Yet, the narrator continues hopefully, now in the future tense and thus with a double meaning: "The time will come when we shall go to ravage their shores, if ever we grow better, and their sins reach the point of moving the Eternal Goodness to anger" (XVII, 5).⁴⁸ Thus, the narrator does sanction war, provided it is intended to combat enemies of Italy or Christianity. Then moving back to the attack of king Agramante on France, at the medieval plot level, it follows that: "The Christians' excesses must have vexed the serene face of the Almighty, for the Turks and Moors had overrun all their lands, committing rape and murder, pillage and outrage" (XVII, 6).⁴⁹ The anachronistic use of "il Turco" is interesting since Turks normally do not appear at the medieval plot-level of the poem. The two temporal levels of the poem are juxtaposed: The wars

⁴⁴ In the following I quote from the English translation of *Orlando Furioso* by Guido Waldman. In the footnotes I insert the original quotations in Italian from Ariosto 1976.

⁴⁵ "Il giusto Dio, quando i peccati nostri/hanno di remission passato il segno,/acciò che la giustizia sua dimostri/uguale alla pietà, spesso dà regno/ a tiranni atrocissimi et a mostri,/e dà lor forza e di mal fare ingegno./ [...]// [...] e diede Italia a tempi men remoti/ in preda agli Unni, ai Longobardi, ai Goti."

⁴⁶ "Di questo abbiàn non pur al tempo antiquo,/ma ancora al nostro, chiaro esperimento,/quando a noi, greggi inutili e mal nati,/ha dato per guardian lupi arrabbiati [...]"

⁴⁷ Cf. the note by Cesare Segre in Ariosto: *Orlando furioso*, vol. II, p. 1326.

⁴⁸ "Tempo verrà ch'a depredar loro liti/andremo noi, se mai saren migliori,/e che i peccati loro giungano al segno,/che l'eterna Bontà muovano a sdegno".

⁴⁹ "Doveano allora aver gli eccessi loro/di Dio turbata la serena fronte,/ che scorse ogni lor luogo il Turco e 'l Moro/con stupri, uccision, rapine et onte [...]"

against the Muslims at the time of Charlemagne are associated with those of Ariosto’s era in the early sixteenth century.

The continuation of song XVII reinforces the impression of what is at stake: We move to Damaskus to follow another knight and after a long description of the city’s beauties, and an account of a huge, mythological monster, the narrator gets back to the contemporary subject of his preamble with a powerful political speech in which he directly compares his present time with the (preferable) era of the Crusades when the French protected the Holy Sepulchre: The French “settled there as rulers of the holy places where Almighty God dwelt in human flesh. Nowadays to their shame, Christians, the arrogant wretches, leave these places in the hands of dogs” (XVII, 73).⁵⁰ The Christians “ought to be setting their lances for the greater spread of our Faith; instead, they are running each other through the breast or belly and wreaking destruction on the few who already belong to the Faith” (XVII, 74).⁵¹ He then continues almost deliriously to blame the European nations for their internal fights instead of standing together and fighting their common enemy:

You men of Spain, you Frenchmen, you Swiss and Germans, turn your steps elsewhere, make worthier conquests: what you covet here is already Christ’s. If you wish to be called Most Christian, if you wish to be called Catholic, why do you kill Christ’s men? Why despoil them of their possessions? Why do you not retake Jerusalem, seized from you by renegades? Why is Constantinople and the better part of the world occupied by unclean Turks? (XVII, 74–75)⁵²

According to the narrator, Spain ought to continue the Reconquista into Northern Africa: “Spain, have you not Africa for neighbour – Africa, who has done far worse to you than Italy? And yet to bring suffering on our wretched

⁵⁰ [i Francisi] “che quivi allor reggean la sacra stanza/dove in carne abitò Dio onnipotente;/ch’ora i superbi e miseri cristiani,/con biasmi lor, lasciano in man de’ cani”. Comparing the Turks with dogs was a typical rhetorical move among the humanists of the time. Furthermore, Trivellato (2010, 150 and n. 65) notices that the use of the word ‘dog’ about Muslims reflects the tendency to associate Muslims and illicit sexuality since ‘dog’ both refers to sodomites and infidels.

⁵¹ “Dove abbassar dovrebbero la lancia/in aumento de la santa fede,/tra lor si dan nel petto e ne la pancia/a destruzion del poco che si crede”.

⁵² “Voi, gente ispana, e voi, gente di Francia,/volgete altrove, e voi, Svizzeri, il piede,/e voi Tedeschi, a far più degno acquisto;/che quanto qui cercate è già di Cristo.//Se Cristianissimi esser voi volete,/e voi altri Catolici nomati,/perché di Cristo gli uomini uccidete?/perché de’ beni lor son dispogliati?/Perché Ierusalem non riavete,/che tolto è stato a voi da’ rinegati?/Perché Costantinopoli e del mondo/ la miglior parte occupa il Turco immondo?”

country you abandon the fine enterprise you started so well” (XVII, 76).⁵³ The narrator continues by telling the Swiss mercenaries to seek “the riches of the Turk” (instead of those of the Italians):

You Swiss, if it is fear of starving to death in your lairs which tempts you down to Lombardy, [...] the riches of the Turks are not far to seek – drive them out of Europe, or at least dislodge them from Greece. Thus you shall be able to escape hunger or at any rate meet a more meritorious end in those regions. (XVII, 77)⁵⁴

He tells the Germans too to go east where the rivers are full of gold: “What I say to you, I say also to your German neighbours: that is where the wealth is that Constantine brought from Rome – thither he took the best, giving away what remained” (XVII, 78).⁵⁵ Finally, he addresses Pope Leo X, who should protect Italy, like a shepherd his flocks, instead of abusing his power. From this passage it is clear that Italy’s problems are considered closely related to the Turkish threat. Ariosto echoes a widespread tendency among intellectuals of that period: When cardinal Giovanni de’ Medici was elected as a pope and became Leo X in 1513, it was said that: “The Turkish problem had mounted the throne with him”.⁵⁶ Indeed, his most immediate challenge was to make the European leaders agree in order to combat the Turks. Many intellectuals throughout Europe thus implored the pope to lead a crusade against the Turks and dedicated their works to him.⁵⁷

The rhetoric used in the passage from the seventeenth song quoted above brings to mind how Petrarch on several occasions called for crusade and constructed an image of ‘us and them’, i.e., of the superiority of Europeans vs. the backward Muslims.⁵⁸ Ariosto’s rhetoric is also in line with the formulas found in the writings of the Italian humanists mentioned above. When Ariosto claims that the Christians “ought to be setting their lances for the greater spread of our Faith” instead of “running each other through the breast or belly and wreaking destruction on the few who already belong to the

⁵³ “Non hai tu, Spagna, l’Africa vicina,/che t’ha via più di questa Italia offesa?/ E pur, per dar travaglio alla meschina,/lasci la prima tua sì bella impresa”.

⁵⁴ “Se ’l dubbio di morir ne le tue tane,/Svizzer, di fame, in Lombardia ti guida,/[...] le ricchezze del Turco hai non lontane:/caccial d’Europa, o almen di Grecia snida:/così potrai o del digiuno trarti,/o cader con più merto in quelle parti.”

⁵⁵ “Quel ch’a te dico, io dico al tuo vicino/tedesco ancor: là le ricchezze sono,/che vi portò da Roma Constantino:/ portonne il meglio, e fe’ del resto dono”.

⁵⁶ Setton 1969, 369.

⁵⁷ This was also the case of authors like Spandugino and Menavino, cf Lausten 2019.

⁵⁸ Cf. Bisaha 1999, 189. As Tobias Gregory has said, quoted in Cavallo (2013, 175): “Ariosto employs the same line of exhortation used by Urban II in preaching the First Crusade: for God’s sake, leaders of Christian nations, stop attacking each other and go attack Muslims”.

Faith" (XVII, 74),⁵⁹ he repeats a recurring *topos* in both medieval and renaissance literature that cannot be ignored in analysis of the *Furioso*. As mentioned above, this perspective seems to have been overlooked by previous research. Most critics focus on thematic analysis of representations of medieval Saracens, examining whether they are depicted in a positive or negative way, whether they act according to the chivalric code or not, neglecting the direct references to the contemporary Turks in the poem as well as the allusions to Ariosto's own days.⁶⁰

Crusade rhetoric or noble Saracens?

When it comes to the representations of Saracens, the relationship between Christians and Saracens is indeed in some passages characterised by solidarity and equality. We see alliances and friendships across religious boundaries among individual knights,⁶¹ and occasionally Ariosto does express a non-judgmental interest in some cultural and religious aspects of Islam as when he is describing the use of similar religious rituals among Saracens and Christians: Before a duel between the Saracen Roger and the Christian Rinaldo, they both stand at the battle field with their armies and their kings (Agramante and Charlemagne) to support them, and each of them followed by a priest with a holy book. After the knights' selection of weapons, the priests step forward, one with the Bible and the other with the Koran: "Then two priests stepped forth, one from either sect, book in hand. The book our priest held contained the unblemished life of Christ; the other's book was the Koran (XXXVIII, 81)."⁶² King Agramante and King Charlemagne step forward next to them and pray at the altar: Charlemagne raises his hands to the sky and asks God to witness his promise that he will pay a certain amount of money to Agramante if his knight loses and that he will also accept a truce (XXXVIII, 84). Agramante similarly promises to withdraw his armies back over the sea if his knight loses the battle and that he too accepts a truce in that case: "Similarly, calling Mahomet to witness in no uncertain voice, he

⁵⁹ See n. 51 for Italian version.

⁶⁰ Also Pavlova (2014: 475) mentions only briefly the "passionate speech" of song XVII, without attempting to interpret it.

⁶¹ The most famous example is the episode of two great soldiers fighting over Angelica in the first song; when she escapes, they make peace with each other and decide to follow her on the same horse: "Great was the goodness of the knights of old! Here they were, rivals, of different faiths, and they still ached all over from the cruel and vicious blows they had dealt each other; still, off they went together in mutual trust, through the dark woods and crooked paths" (I, 22). The episode expresses an idealised image of the knights, who show mutual respect towards each other and towards the private, sentimental reasons behind their actions.

⁶² "duo sacerdoti, l'un de l'una setta,/ l'altra de l'altra, uscîr coi libri in mano./ In quel del nostro è la vita pefetta/ scritta di Cristo; e l'altro è l'Alcorano."

promised on the book held by his Imam to observe all he had said. Then the two sovereigns quickly strode off the field and rejoined each his own ranks" (XXXVIII, 86).⁶³ The narrator highlights the similarity of the cultural and religious aspects of the rituals prior to the duel without stressing the superiority of Christendom using negative adjectives about Islam.⁶⁴

Similar episodes prompted Ariosto scholars to claim that the only barrier to friendship and love between Saracens and Christians is their social status and not the ethnic-religious belonging of the knights.⁶⁵ However, this description seems to contrast with the abovementioned treatment of the Turks of Ariosto's day. Furthermore, as I will illustrate in the following, the noble Saracens are not as worthy as the Christian heroes in Ariosto's poem: we find several examples of a different and negative picture of the Saracens who are generally characterised as more cruel and unfair and less worthy than the Christians, while the Christian knights are helpful and humane towards their enemies.⁶⁶ The Saracen leaders are presented as cruel and despotic towards their own soldiers, while the Christian leaders, as Paul Larivaille has noted, never kill or abandon their own armies.⁶⁷ In her comparison between Boiardo and Ariosto, Cavallo shows how "Ariosto subjects Boiardo's East Asian and North African protagonists to a process of degradation"⁶⁸ and she presents examples of Saracen knights acting unchivalric and being characterised as threats to Christian Europe. This applies to the case of the African king Agramante who "comes to represent an enemy of the Christian faith who must

⁶³ "E similmente con parlar non basso,/chiamando in testimonio il gran Maumette,/sul libro ch'in man tiene il suo papasso,/ciò che detto ha, tutto osserrar promette./Poi del campo si partono a gran passo,/e tra i suoi l'uno e l'altro si rimette (...)."

⁶⁴ According to Pavlova (2014: 476): "some occasional references to Islamic culture suggest that the poet had at least some knowledge of it". However, she also says that "Ariosto does not offer a realistic depiction of Islam and Islamic culture". Ariosto's lack of knowledge about Islam, or his deliberately medieval representation of it, is manifest when he refers to Islam as a religion that worships three gods, Muhammed, Trivigant and Apollo (also known from the *Chansons de Roland*), as in song XII when Ferrau gets furious when Angelica escapes him: "She vanished, as I say, before his eyes, as a phantasm at the moment of waking. He searched amid the trees but there was not another glimpse of her to assuage his doleful eyes. Cursing Mahomet and Trivigant and their creed and every sage who taught it, Ferrau returned towards the spring [...]". Since the early medieval period many Christians thought that the Muslims worshipped three gods.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Pagliardini & Fuchs 2006, 583.

⁶⁶ This interpretation is in opposition to Pavlova's reading that underscores the chivalric values of the Saracen knights, see Pavlova 2013.

⁶⁷ See Larivaille 2011, 8 and 11. As further examples, Larivaille mentions King Agramante who breaks his deal shortly after having sworn at the Coran (XXXIX, 6) and Sobrino who wounds the horse of his rival which is considered a cowardly move (Larivaille 2011, 7).

⁶⁸ Cavallo 2013, 4.

be converted or annihilated",⁶⁹ and the Algerian king Rodomonte who is characterized more negatively than in Boiardo, being cruel against Christians and wishing to burn down Paris and Rome.⁷⁰

Turning our attention to the Christian knights, the poem presents several examples of Christian crusade ideology and of the superiority of Christian religion. The motivation of Charlemagne's troops is clear from the beginning: "All of them ready to die for the honour of Christ".⁷¹ Both Orlando and Astolfo "take on the role of religious as well as military leaders",⁷² and Charlemagne often seeks and gets divine aid in prayers, sometimes directly evoking the context and the rhetoric of the crusades as in the song XIV in which he asks for God's help: He warns against the Muslims whose "false law of Babel will drive you out and suppress your religion" and – anachronistically – presents his knights as the liberators of the Holy Sepulchre: "Defend your faithful then; they are the ones who have cleansed your sepulchre and purged it of brutish dogs; many a time have they defended your holy Church and her vicars."⁷³

Also, as argued by Cavallo, the figure of Astolfo has a crucial role in what she calls the ideological shift from Boiardo's detached "marvels" to Ariosto's "new emphasis on religion" and "greater realistic detail".⁷⁴ Astolfo travels to places of religious importance such as Jerusalem and Egypt, and throughout these episodes crusades and pilgrimage are continuously emphasized.⁷⁵ He is depicted as a true paladin of Christ: He visits the site in which the apostle Thomas was martyred for his faith and the episode's mentioning of this early missionary "calls to mind the spread of Christianity across the globe".⁷⁶ Moreover, he and his knights purify themselves spiritually before entering the holy temples:

They purged their sins in a monastery fragrant with the odour of good example, and, contemplating the mysteries of Christ's passion, they

⁶⁹ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁰ On Ariosto's Rodomonte see Cavallo 2013, 118–121. Further examples of unchivalric and cruel Saracens is found in e.g. Cavallo 2013, 43 (Gradasso), 66–69 (Mandricardo), 176 (Norandino).

⁷¹ "per Christo e pel suo honor a morir pronti" (XIV, 102).

⁷² Cavallo 2013, 195.

⁷³ "Difendi queste genti, che son quelle/ch'el tuo sepulchro hanno purgato e mondo/da' brutti cani" (XIV, 71). See Cavallo (2013, 197–207) for further examples of Ariosto's more religious and aggressive attitude compared to Boiardo. See above n. 50 for interpretation of the use of 'dogs' for Muslims.

⁷⁴ Cavallo 2013, 197–199.

⁷⁵ See the analysis of Cavallo 2013, 158–164, 167–171.

⁷⁶ Cavallo 2013, 161. See her chapters 11–13 for further details on the Christian knights' travels to Jerusalem, Egypt and Damaskus.

visited every shrine – Christian shrines now, to their eternal shame and degradation, usurped by the impious Moors.⁷⁷

When Ariosto concludes the stanza with: “Europe is in arms and aches to do battle everywhere, except where battle is needed”, he clearly alludes to his own contemporary world lamenting, like many others before him, the internal strife among European nations that prevented them from organizing a common attack against the Turks. With Astolfo’s encounter with Prester John, focusing on his religious faith, Ariosto also, according to Cavallo, “renders concrete one of the most persistent fantasies of Christian Europe: A military victory over Muslims with the help of a Christian sovereign residing in Africa.”⁷⁸

In the last songs of the *Furioso* we find an increased emphasis on holy war and on religious matters both in terms of greater ferocity among the Christian troops and in terms of religious symbolism. During the final battle of Biserta the Christian knights take prisoners, they plunder and destroy the city, and meanwhile they order collective prayers and fasting. Cavallo compares this “combination of religious piety and uncontrolled rapaciousness” to accounts of the First Crusade such as William of Tyre’s.⁷⁹

As far as a broader contextualization of the call for crusade in the *Furioso* is concerned, Cavallo is surprisingly skeptical towards a reading of the poem in light of the historical and intellectual context of the Turkish threat: The poem’s crusade rhetoric is “not dictated by current events since (...) this period was one of decreased danger from the Turks”, she claims,⁸⁰ and she doubts that Ariosto did subscribe to the crusading ideology.⁸¹ She seems to ignore that even though Italy was not attacked by the Ottomans at the beginning of sixteenth century, this period is definitely not characterized by a diminishing of the Turkish peril in Europe. As mentioned above, pope Leo X was expected to realize a crusade not to liberate the Holy Land but to liberate Europe from the Turks, and then, as formulated in one of the appeals

⁷⁷ “Purgati de lor colpe a un monasterio/che dava di sé odor di buoni esempi/de la passion di Cristo ogni misterio/contemplando n’andâr per tutti i tempî/ch’or con eterno obbrobio e vituperio/agli cristiani usurpano i Mori empîi.” (XV, 99).

⁷⁸ Cavallo 2013, 204. Also: “Ariosto’s poem thus brings to fruition Christian Europe’s great wish-fulfilment fantasy of finding a powerful ally in the heart of Africa to help defeat the Muslims. In the end, Astolfo’s haphazard arrival in Ethiopia, initially fashioned as an isolated romance narrative, becomes the catalyst for the total destruction of Biserta.” (Ibid., 196). Astolfo’s travel to the moon is also linked to Prester John, according to Cavallo, since his realm was told to be found “upon a mountain high enough to approach the moon’s circuit”. (Ibid., 194).

⁷⁹ Cavallo 2013, 202.

⁸⁰ Cavallo 2013, 175.

⁸¹ Ibid., 204.

to the pope, all Christian princes would “accept the terms of a peace or truce and turn their arms against the impious enemies” of the Christian faith.⁸² If the Christian princes came together in a single army “neither the Turkish sultans nor even the whole world could possibly oppose such a force”, and when the Turks were defeated, a new order would arise on earth, “and papal power, to which God had subjected mankind, could extend Christianity to the far reaches of Asia and Africa.”⁸³

Finally, even though it might not be the *primary* intention of the poem to defend the Christian religion, I would like to underscore how the poem very clearly pays a fundamental tribute to Christianity at the expense of Islam. Central to this point is the fact that the Saracens’ religion is not an indifferent or insignificant matter, but always considered a barrier to their final recognition by the Christians: A worthy Saracen must either die or convert. It was a common attitude among many humanist intellectuals too that only his faith was a barrier for a Turk to be considered part of a great people.⁸⁴ This argument has been used as a ‘proof’ of Ariosto’s open-mindedness, but on the contrary I believe that this argument reflects how the religious element maintains great importance. Even Donnelly, whose interpretation of Ariosto’s poem differs from the one I present here, could not fail to note that “the joy our poets take in securing their conversion again suggests a religious basis of their attitude toward Moslems.”⁸⁵ The more secular approach to the Muslims seen among humanists did not imply a less critical judgment towards Islam.

In the *Furioso*, six Saracens choose to become Christians, among them Roger and Marfisa, while the cruelest Saracen, Rodomonte, king of Algier, whom the Christians fear the most, remains a Muslim, “enemy of our faith” (XIV, 26), until his death at the end of the poem, killed by the newly converted Roger (XXXVI, 139–140). “Ariosto’s poem ends with the orthodox teaching that those who will not be saved shall be damned”, as Comfort said.⁸⁶ The motif of conversion is important to the interpretation of the view of the Saracens. Through the story of two of the conversions in particular, Roger’s and Marfisa’s, Ariosto indirectly expresses his view not only of the Saracens’ religion, but also of the Muslims of his day, the Turks: Roger fights on the Saracens’ side, until he realizes that he and Marfisa are

⁸² This *Libellus ad Leonem Decimum* was written by two Camaldulensian monks, Paolo Giustinian and Pietro Querini, and concerned “papal power, ecclesiastical reform, the geographical extension of Latin Christianity, and the crusade against the Turks.” Cf. Setton 1969, 371.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 372. It is striking that the authors of this appeal not only talked about defending themselves but also dreamt of expanding the territory.

⁸⁴ Cardini 1999, 213.

⁸⁵ Donnelly 1977, 166.

⁸⁶ Comfort 1944, 902.

twins, that their mother died in childbirth and their father was killed by the Saracens (actually by Agramante's father and grandfather) before their birth. The wizard Atlas took care of them until Marfisa, at the age of seven, was kidnapped by Arabs and sold as a slave to the king of Persia. They are actually of Christian origin, and they are descendants of Hector, who fled from Troy and ended up in Sicily where he ruled over Messina. Among Roger's descendants there are many great Christian personalities – we are told – such as Constantine, the great Norman kings including Roger I (1031–1101), who conquered Sicily from the Arabs and his son Roger II (1095–1154), a powerful king who conquered parts of Africa's coast and attempted an attack on Constantinople during the second crusade (1147–1148).⁸⁷ When Marfisa learns about all this, she immediately declares that she wants to convert to Christianity (XXXVI, 77–78). The next day she tells Charlemagne about her future plans:

She wished to become a Christian, she continued. Then, after dispatching Agramant, she proposed, if Charlemagne agreed, to go back to her Eastern kingdom and baptize it. This done, she would make war against any part of the world where Mahomet and Trivigant were worshipped: her every conquest, she promised, would be a gain for the Holy Roman Empire and for the Christian Faith (XXXVIII, 18).⁸⁸

This must have been sweet music to the ears of Christian readers in 1532: One of the strong female Saracen warriors not only converting but also planning to use her energy – both spiritually and soldierly – to serve the Christian cause around the world!

Roger is baptised in song XXXXI by a Christian hermit. He is shipwrecked on the coast of Africa,⁸⁹ where he is welcomed by the old hermit, who has lived there for forty years in harmony with nature and next to a small church. Roger is taught that “God does not deny Christ to those who seek him”⁹⁰ and: “He learns all the great mysteries of our Faith and the next day the old man baptized him in the pure spring” (X, 59).⁹¹ Roger wishes to convert both

⁸⁷ The relevance of the link between the poem's Roger and the two historical Norman kings has not gone unnoticed as Cavallo claims (Cavallo 2013, 292 n.3) since both Marinelli and Jacobs discuss the matter and use it in their interpretations of the poem.

⁸⁸ “E seguitò, voler cristiana farsi,/E dopo ch'avrà estinto il re Agramante/Voler, piacendo a Carlo, ritornarsi/A battezzare il suo regno in Levante;/Et indi contra tutto il mondo armarsi,/Ove Macon s'adori e Trivigante;/E con promission, ch'ogni suo acquisto/ Sia de l'Imperio e de la fé di Cristo.”

⁸⁹ Almost drowning he prays to God and promises to become Christian – “di core e di fede” (‘by heart and faith’) – if he survives, and never again to combat against the Christians.

⁹⁰ “non nega il cielo/ tardi o per tempo Cristo a chi gliel chiede”.

⁹¹ “Imparò poi più ad agio in questo loco/De nostra fede i gran misterii tutti;/Et alla pura fonte ebbe battesimo/Il dì seguente dal vecchio medesimo”.

because of his love for Bradamante and because he now knows that his father was a Christian too (XXII, 35). Through Roger's story, the poem confirms the superiority of the Christian faith, rather than presenting Roger as an example of "ethnic and religious hybridity".⁹² There have been differing interpretations of this episode and of the significance of Roger's character in general. Jacobs has argued that it is in a certain sense Roger's Sicilian background that makes it possible to overcome the obstacle of the apparently different religions of Roger and Bradamante.⁹³ Pavlova claims that Roger only converts to Christianity to save his own life.⁹⁴ In her analysis of the figures of Rodomonte and Roger she states that chivalric honor is the "main value" (*valore principe*) of Ariosto's narrative of Rodomonte and Ruggiero, and that religion does not count as much as chivalry does.⁹⁵ She claims that the final songs of the *Furioso* rather represent the "indifference of God towards the destiny of his followers".⁹⁶ My reading leads to the opposite result: After the conversion of Roger, the *Furioso* is full of symbolic moments that confirm the superiority of Christian religion. In the final songs God intervenes with three miracles,⁹⁷ and God is given an active role in the final Christian victory.

Inspired by Roger, other knights seek the monk to get their wounds healed: "Oh, the power Christ gives to those who believe in him! He cured the knight of all pain and so restored his foot that it was even sounder than before" (XXXXIII, 192), the narrator says with an ironic undertone.⁹⁸ However, when the Saracen Sobrino witnesses how his friend is freed from illness,⁹⁹ he too wishes to become a Christian:

On seeing the clearly miraculous cure wrought by the holy man, he decided to renounce Mahomet and confess Christ, living and powerful. His heart touched with faith, he asked to be initiated in our sacred rite, so the man of God baptized him and, with a prayer, also restored his health too him (XXXXIII, 193–194).¹⁰⁰

⁹² Pagliardini & Fuchs 2006, 585.

⁹³ Jacobs 2006, 183.

⁹⁴ Cavallo 2013, 175.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Pavlova 2013, 176.

⁹⁷ Two of the miracles recall biblical episodes associated with Moses and Jesus. Cf Cavallo 2014, 199–200.

⁹⁸ "Oh virtù che dà Cristo a chi gli crede!/Cacciò dal cavalliero ogni passion."

⁹⁹ "liberato e franco/ del periglioloso mal".

¹⁰⁰ "si dispon di lasciar Macon da solo,/e Cristo confessar vivo e potente:/e domanda con cor di fede attrito,/d'iniciarsi al nostro sacro rito./ Così l'uom giusto lo battezza, et anco/ gli rende, orando, ogni vigor primiero".

This passage clearly demonstrates how Ariosto, in spite of the soft irony, linguistically juxtaposes two semantic fields – disease and religion – inciting association in the reader's mind: He equates unequivocally pain and disease with Islam, and healing and liberation from pain with Christianity. According to Cavallo there is no irony at all in this description: "within the fiction of the poem they underscore God's participation in a Christian victory that is anything but funny",¹⁰¹ and furthermore she points to the fact that the healing "evokes religious precedents, in this case the many instances of healing in the Gospels and hagiographic literature".¹⁰²

Allusions to the contemporary wars against the Turks

My last examples deal with Roger who is foretold to found the Este house with Bradamante. In telling his story, Ariosto alludes to the contemporary wars against the Turks. As seen above, through the genealogy of Roger and Marfisa Ariosto relates these two figures to major defenders of Christianity, in particular to the Norman leaders Roger I and Roger II. Moreover, Ariosto treats the contemporary conflicts among Christians and Ottomans indirectly through the symbolic value of certain geographical areas that are normally rare in chivalric epics: In song XXXIV Roger goes to Belgrade. Here he runs into a conflict that was real during Charlemagne's time and in the following centuries, when Belgrade was the subject of conflicts between rivaling Byzantium, Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria, and changed hands eight times between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. In the poem Bradamante's father has betrothed her to the son of the Byzantine emperor, Constantin, mainly because Roger doesn't have his own reign. Roger decides to kill the rival and his father (XLIV, 56) and he finds them in Belgrade where they have besieged and are about to conquer the city (XLIV, 78). When Roger, for personal reasons, enters the fray on the Bulgarian side and struggles with superhuman powers, the Bulgarians win and Roger becomes their king (XLIV, 97–98). The episode is yet another example of how Ariosto associates historical periods. Roger has run into a historical conflict, but the contemporary reader cannot have failed to associate the above-mentioned episode with the more recent battles to conquer the city: In 1440 and 1456 Ottoman sultan Mehmed II had tried to take Belgrade, but he was met with strong resistance from Hungarian captain Janos Hunyadi (c. 1407–1456). Hungarians defended the city until 1521, when sultan Suleiman the Magnificent finally managed to conquer it. It cannot be a coincidence that

Pavlova claims that "it cannot be denied that Ariosto's voice is tinged with irony when he describes the favours that the Christian God showers on his faithful" (Pavlova 2014, 478).

¹⁰¹ Cavallo 2013, 200.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 204.

Ariosto decides to add these three final songs to the third version of his poem written between 1521 and the 1532.

It has been discussed why Roger, who had decided to become Christian at this point of the narrative, would attack other Christians (the Greeks) in Belgrade. Could it be a 'greeting' to the 'treacherous' Byzantines?¹⁰³ Or does the Byzantine Constantin in the poem represent the *Turkish* Constantinople rather than the Byzantin one, as it is argued in Jacobs' dissertation?¹⁰⁴ Compared to the historical reality of Ariosto's days, the roles seem in some way to be redistributed in the poem, since the city ends in the Christian hands of Roger. The episode may represent an example of wishful thinking just like the conversions of the Saracen heroes.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Mathias Corvinus (1443–1490), king of Hungary and one of the greatest defenders of Christianity, is mentioned shortly after the Roger episode (XLV, 3): In the prologue of song XLV, Corvinus is used as one of the examples of great men whose luck can change in a short time. Corvinus was the son of the aforementioned John Hunyadi and in 1476 he married into the Este family with Ippolito's aunt, Beatrice of Naples. (It is by the intervention of Corvinus that Ippolito becomes bishop in Hungary, Ariosto refusing to follow him). In this way, Corvinus represents still another link between the wars against the Turks of Ariosto's time and the medieval plot of the poem.

These parallels between the poem's past and contemporary levels, between the historical Ippolito d'Este and the fictional Roger are further reinforced by the presence of a tapestry that adorns Roger and Bradamante's wedding tent. It is described in detail in the last song of the *Furioso*. The tapestry is brought from Constantinople to Paris and is decorated with embroideries foretelling in a virgilian way the life of Ippolito d'Este in images. Among other things we learn about Ippolito's stay in Hungary at the court of the King "[...] where the People flock to see him and worship him as a god" (XLVI, 87),¹⁰⁶ and about his friendship with Corvinus:

The child is portrayed forever at his uncle's side, whether in the palace or the camp – if the powerful king makes expeditions against the Turks

¹⁰³ Since the medieval period the Byzantines were considered as sweep and unfair (cf Cardini 1999, 212). See also Jacobs 2006 who refers to interpretations by Marsh 1981 and Marinelli 1987.

¹⁰⁴ Jacobs 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Marinelli suggests that Roger's Christian attack on the city alludes to the reality of Ariosto's days when the Christian European nations were fighting against each other (Marinelli 1987, 93).

¹⁰⁶ "ove la gente/corre a vederlo, e come un dio l'adora".

or against the Germans, Hippolytus is always beside him, intent on performing noble feats and learning valour (XLVI, 88).¹⁰⁷

In this allusive way, Ariosto encourages Ippolito d'Este to fight against the Turks, just like Corvinus, just like his fictional ancestor Roger, who went to the same area to fight the Greeks, and just like another of Ippolito's ancestors, the historically real Roger I, who conquered Sicily from the Arabs.

Roger's and Bradamante's descendants – and as a consequence the Este family's descendants – are presented as defenders of the Empire and protectors of the Christian Church. And their struggle for love, overcoming passions and temptations, can thus be seen as

a mirror for their descendants in the here and now of the sixteenth century. For the present is clearly no less full of stresses and trials than the past: No less than the Empire of Charlemagne, the Christian world of Ariosto's day is threatened with dissolution by internal dissension and by external infidel fury.¹⁰⁸

'Every cruel, inhuman deed ever practised by Tartar, Turk or Moor'

As I hope to have demonstrated, Ariosto's poem is not indifferent towards the Saracens and the Turks, and, contrary to the view of Calvino and many others, the Saracens are not just fantastic entities detached from historical reality; several episodes in the medieval time frame contain allusions to historical events and places associated with the Ottomans. Ariosto did not provide historical allegory, though, he responded, I believe, to the invasions of the Turks – to "every cruel, inhuman deed ever practised by Tartar, Turk, or Moor" (XXXVI, 3)¹⁰⁹ – by in varying ways incorporating historical events into his final edition of the *Furioso* (1532).

I disagree with the longstanding 'romantic' tradition of idealising the image of the Saracens as well as with the similar tendency of interpreting Ariosto's poem as built on a set of (anachronistic) modern, relativistic and 'filo-Islamic' values. Instead, I sympathize with those (like Marinelli, Jacobs and Cavallo) who read the poem in light of the historical and political contexts, mainly in light of the Turkish threat. I do not consider the *Furioso* a piece of crusade propaganda *tout court*, but as a complex poem including many direct and, mainly, indirect elements of the current anti-Turkish discourse of his days – that is 'crusade propaganda' in the broad sense. As a supplement to the historicizing interpretations I would like to underscore the

¹⁰⁷ "Sempre il fanciullo se gli vede a' panni,/sia nel palagio, sia nel padiglione:/ o contra Turchi, o contra gli Alemanni/ quel re possente faccia espedizione,/ Ippolito gli è appresso, e fiso attende/a' magnanimi gesti, e virtù apprende."

¹⁰⁸ Marinelli 1987, 84–85.

¹⁰⁹ "Tutti gli atti crudeli ed inumani, ch'usasse mai Tartaro o Turco o Moro".

alignment between Ariosto and the majority of Italian humanists who in their texts continuously appealed to popes and princes in order to make them stand together and fight back the Turks. In Ariosto (as well as in the Renaissance humanists) the image of the Muslims is complex and serves different functions: We find respect and admiration as well as fear and repulsion towards the Muslims; we find a secular, political and military evaluation of the Saracens' vices and virtues as well as religious crusade stereotypes about infidels or heretics.¹¹⁰ The image of Saracens functions as a mirror in which the Christians can recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. And it functions as a warning.

Why has Ariosto's portrayal of Saracens and Islam reached such "contradictory conclusions"?¹¹¹ One reason might be found in the reception history of Ariosto: Many scholars have treated the epics of Boiardo and Ariosto in opposition to Tasso's much more explicitly religiously connoted crusade poem. Compared to Boiardo, the crusade ideology is more central in Ariosto, where as compared to Tasso, Ariosto seems less interested in religious matters. Initially, Ariosto's contemporary readers and critics did not consider the Saracen question to be central to the poem: According to Pavlova "early critics did not demonise Ariosto's Saracens" and "did not consider it to be a piece of crusade propaganda".¹¹² I disagree. First, I believe that Ariosto's contemporaries were surrounded by the discourse of the Turkish threat to the extent that they did not consider it to be worth mentioning. Attention was paid to the Ottoman threat all over Europe, it was discussed in all courts and in a huge amount of humanist texts. Among contemporary critics, there might thus not have been felt any need to stress the superiority of the Christians in Ariosto's poem. Second, critics in general seemed interested in other issues such as differences and similarities between medieval romance and classical epic, like in the case of Pigna or Giraldis Cinzio, who debated the poem's style and structure rather than its thematical contents including its representation of Saracens and Turks. Pigna, who is mentioned by Pavlova as an example of early critics, was the Este court historian and, just as his teacher and rival Giraldis, he compared the new romance of Ariosto with the epic of antiquity – the question of Turks and Saracens was not considered central to this particular project.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ See Bisaha 2004, Meserve 2008.

¹¹¹ Pavlova 2014, 476.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 478.

¹¹³ Pigna argued in his *Romanzi* (1554) that chivalric romances like Ariosto's were a modern form of poetry equal to those considered by Aristotle's *Poetics*. Tasso and others were critical towards this interpretation. The question of the role of the Saracens in this debate could be the object of a future piece of research.

Ariosto's often indirect approach to the Turkish matter does not mean that the subject was not of interest to him or his audience, it might also have to do with genre restrictions: His assignment was to entertain at court and keep political reality at a distance; the function of an epic romance was different from that of historical treatises, travel accounts and ethnographic works as well as the popular *cantari in ottava rima* produced during Ariosto's time. All these genres were fed by "everyday reality and current events",¹¹⁴ they discussed political arguments or lamented contemporary events, whereas the romance poems had to narrate episodes from a distant past, to talk about love and not war, and they had to be evasive:

Under the lash of the events, all literature in Italy searched for shelter and rest, where history, changing luck and tyranny of arms did not reach. If there was not peace on earth, at least one could find peace and stability and harmony in the fiction of art,¹¹⁵

as Carlo Dionisotti has explained. Not by chance, the summer residence of the Este family was called *Palazzo Schifanoia* ('schivare la noia' meaning to avoid boredom). However, the chivalric material can also be seen as having "a sort of false purpose, an excuse to act with absolute freedom making it totally clear (maybe helped by direct comments of the author) that one speaks about 'other things'",¹¹⁶ and through invention to talk about reality, or to offer imaginary solutions to real anxieties. This seems to be the case of Ariosto, who, even if he is writing in the popular genre of the romance, cannot hold back from commenting directly upon the Ottomans in his poem.

In the image of the Ottoman Turks that appears in the narrator's comments, we find a more unequivocally negative evaluation, and Ariosto's approach to this issue is in line with contemporary humanistic writings: Thanks to their studies of the ancient texts they treat the Ottomans from a secular and political perspective, yet they also build on the medieval tradition and do not question the superiority of the Christian religion. Even if the historical crusade era is in the distant past for Ariosto, the idea of a crusade in a larger sense, understood as war against the Muslims, in particular the Turks, is certainly present in Ariosto's poem. The *Furioso* is not detached from historical reality, the poem rather partakes in the dominating discourse about the Turkish menace, reminding its readers about historical moments of conflict with the Muslims – with the Arabs in Jerusalem and in Sicily and with the Ottomans at the Balkans. The historical and the fictional levels are both part of a vision

¹¹⁴ Dionisotti 1967, 173. My translation.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 171. My translation.

¹¹⁶ Ceserani & De Federicis 1983, 1024. My translation.

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not only of vices and virtues of the Renaissance man, but also of the political world of the Renaissance.

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