

Essays in Medieval Studies 15

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**A Fifteenth-Century Florentine Community of Readers
and the Romances of Chivalry****Gloria Allaire**

A persistent myth concerning the reception of chivalric romances in Italy claims that the Breton cycle was favored by the aristocratic reader while the Carolingian material was relegated to the lower class streetsingers and their listeners. One reads statements such as "Carolingian material met with great success especially among the popular sects, while the Arthurian material exercised its spell on the mercantile bourgeoisie and in the courts" ¹ or "the romances of Andrea da Barberino ... met the needs of the humblest listeners, while the Arthurian stories answered the needs of the most elevated and refined classes."² Unsupported generalizations by influential literary critics like De Sanctis,³ Carducci, and Fòffano have had a negative impact on the study of this culturally significant genre. The insensitive and often misinformed critical opinion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--appearing just at the moment when many of these texts were beginning to receive modern editions--has led to misconceptions concerning their readership that persist to our own day. However, recent scholarship on the medieval reception of other texts suggests that the opposite position may obtain: for example, Roger Chartier found that, for French communities of readers after the invention of printing, "the same texts were appropriated by 'popular' readers and other readers more than has been thought."⁴ The present paper will briefly examine readership, production, and use of manuscripts containing Carolingian cycle texts in Tuscany in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Owners' notes and colophon evidence as well as contemporary inventories of private libraries argue that a transcendence of class boundaries holds for chivalric literature in Italy. Evidence from primary sources proves that the same epic romances crossed "class" lines and political divisions. They were read by Medici partisans and rivals, by guildsmen and tradesmen, and by Florence's elite as well as by those she exiled.

The texts in question are lengthy chivalric epic romances in Tuscan prose. The majority of this *corpora* are by Andrea da Barberino (b. 1365/72--d. 1431/

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33), the most prolific and best-known writer of this genre in Italy. His huge cycle of nine epic romances was reworked from French and Franco-Venetian models. Titles include *Aspramonte*, a lost *Spagna*, *Ansuigi*, *Le Storie Nerbonesi*, *Ugone d'Alvernia*, *Aiolfo*, and *Rinaldo da Montalbano*. An ample number of extant exemplars (over seventy-five) combined with his cultural importance make maestro Andrea's texts a natural focal point for this study. His *I Reali di Francia* and *Guerrino meschino* are especially useful since they are readily identifiable: their attribution is unquestioned; they do not belong to a tangled, anonymous textual tradition such as one finds for *Aspramonte*, *La Spagna* or *Rinaldo*; and, except for a rare *ottava rima* version of *Reali* found in a unique fifteenth-century manuscript, all extant manuscripts and print versions are in prose. Since contemporary household and library inventories primarily listed books by title without authorial attribution, such easy identifiability is most helpful.

How did the critical bias against chivalric epic in Italy develop? The problem deals first and foremost with issues of canon creation. Even Ariosto's great epic was once critically despised and neglected, and needed to be re-evaluated by Croce in the early twentieth century. Despite recurrent critical laments over the lack of an Italian national epic, Italian scholars rejected the enduring presence of Carolingian cycle material based on the notion of its evident "popularity." The taint of the popular exposed these texts to critical scorn. One finds harsh judgments such as the following, by Carducci: "The compilations of Barberino ... remained the preferred reading material of the *people*, especially of country folk."⁵ The tendency has been to impose modern aesthetic standards on texts that belong to a cultural milieu very different from our own. Yet, as Chartier has pointed out in his discussion of the *Bibliothèque bleu*, the notion of popularity itself is a slippery one (12-14). Despite the inappropriateness of this concept, once an artistic devaluation had been exercised upon the Carolingian cycle, it was but a short step to equate the presumed baseness of material with an assumed baseness of audience.

The false division of readership along the lines of class or perceived educational background reflects nineteenth-

century reading and publishing practices. In *I promessi sposi*, Manzoni's village tailor is characterized--in an ironic mockery of folk "erudition"--as a reader of *Guerrin meschino* and *Reali di Francia*.⁶ Nineteenth-century criticism was negatively influenced by the new, folkloristic interpretation of these texts in the puppet shows and decorations of Naples and Sicily. However, one must be skeptical of claims for readership that are unsupported by codicological evidence. To the best of my knowledge, mine is the first study that has looked for such evidence. The several texts and numerous exemplars of maestro Andrea form a rich body of data that indicates that his readers were actually not the plebeian idiots or ingenuous rustics modern scholars have imagined.

Who, then, were the readers of these Carolingian cycle narratives in prose? Notes of possession in extant manuscript copies reveal a largely Florentine readership. The citizens who copied, owned, and/or read these texts belonged to Florence's oldest, most prestigious and prosperous families, a far cry from the farmers and peasants proposed by De Sanctis, or the superstitious and gullible provincials that Fòffano imagined. Among the oldest families represented are

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the Bagnesi, Bardi (three different members), Bruzzi, Minerbetti, Antonfrancesco Visdomini (who proudly lists twelve generations in his name), and Bernardo Porcellini (who signs himself "spectabili viro").⁷ Among famous Florentine merchant and banking families, we find a Guadagni, a Soderini, two Galli, and three members of the Doni family owning these books. Four sons of Lorenzo di Giovanni di Taddeo Benci jointly copied a *Guerrino* in 1444 (Ricc. 2266). This successful family of linen producers boasted high cultural connections in Medici Florence: they not only belonged to the Accademia di Careggi and knew humanists like Ficino, but they wrote and translated themselves.⁸ Bartolomeo di Jacopo di Bartolomeo Galli made a copy of *Nerbonesi* for himself (BNCF, MS II.VII.3). His father, a banker living in Rome, had commissioned the young Michelangelo's statues of *Bacchus*, a lost *Cupid*, and the Bruges *Madonna*. Galli père was a friend and neighbor of Cardinal Riario; he was "the intimate of a Humanist circle that included ... such men as the writer Jacopo Sadoletto, whose dialogue *Phaedrus* was set in Galli's ... villa."⁹

Other later fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century owners or readers of maestro Andrea's texts include members of the distinguished Nasi, Orlandini, Adimari, Inghirami, Salviati, Viviani, and Tornabuoni families. Giovanni di Francesco Tornabuoni owned an untraceable copy of *I Reali di Francia*, as shown in a 1497 inventory probably made at the time of his death.¹⁰ Florentine historians have established that Tornabuoni belonged to one of "the most prominent Florentine families" of the day,¹¹ and his household was one of the wealthiest 1,500 in Florence.¹² The uncle by marriage of Lorenzo "il Magnifico," he served as branch manager of the Medici bank in Rome from 1464-94, was a partner in the Lyons branch,¹³ and also travelled to England on Medici bank business.¹⁴

Girolamo di Giovanni di Nicholaio Davanzati copied a *Nerbonesi* and *Ugone* (Laur., MS Redi 177).¹⁵ His immediate family, whose imposing *palazzo* survived the ravages of the post-Risorgimento "urban renewal," belonged to "the inner circle of families closely involved with the running of the [Medici] regime" in the late Quattrocento.¹⁶ The grandson of the noted Florentine architect Antonio da Sangallo the Younger once owned an *Aspramonte* (identifiable as BNCF, MS Pal. 583) as stated in the inventory to his extensive private library (Ricc. MS 2244, modern f. 22v). One should also not ignore the repeated occurrences of "Ser" or "Messer" in the owner's notes of other manuscripts; this title indicated men of learning or notaries.

Tradesmen are represented as well. Francesco di Michele di Salvestro Lapi, a wealthy *calzaiuolo* (cobbler), copied an *Aiolfo* (BNCF, MS II.II.54). Nicholò di Giorgio di Nicholò Baldesi, a *cartolaio* (stationer) in Poggio di Santo Giorgio just outside Florence, made a copy of *Nerbonesi* and *Ugone* (Parma, Bibl. Palatina, MS Pal. 32).¹⁷ Giovanni di Pagholo di Simone del Paghone, from a Florentine family of *merciai* (drapers), copied an *Aiolfo* (Parma, MS Pal. 35).¹⁸ Giovanni di Piero Francesco Cufagni was a member of an old Ghibelline family mentioned in Giovanni Villani's *Cronica*. Giovanni Cufagni copied a *Nerbonesi* in 1521; his colophon ends "in Santa Maria Nuova servo" ("I serve in [the hospital] of Santa Maria Nuovo" [Ricc. MS 2481, f. 146r]).

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Another group of Andrea's readers were guildsmen. One must realize that this did not simply indicate humble workers; membership in certain guilds allowed access to participation in the government of the commune. Bartolomeo di Francesco di Bartolomeo, a *cimatore* (waller), copied an extant *Nerbonesi* (Laur., MS Plut. XLIII, 18, f. 122r) and a

lost manuscript from the Albani Library in Roma that contained *Aspramonte*, *Prima Spagna*, and *Ansuigi*.¹⁹ One *Aiolfo* (Ricc. MS 1912) was probably produced in Tuscany to judge from its watermarks. Although its two scribes are anonymous, an owner's note (f. 1r) shows it came into the possession of Dino Canaci. The Canacci were "one of the leading families in the masons' guild who made it into the patriciate," achieving a position as one of six elite "Guild Consular Families" in Quattrocento Florence as identified by Goldthwaite.²⁰ Adriano, of the Drapers' Guild in Dicomano, a small town northeast of Florence, owned an *Aspramonte* (Ricc. MS 2410, f. 208v).

Given the preponderance of martial encounters in these books, it is not surprising to find professional soldiers among their readership. Michelagnolo di Cristofano di Giovanni da Volterra, who served as trumpeter for Piero di Lorenzo dei Lenzi, the captain in Pisa; and Giovanni Mazzuoli, called Stradino, who served under Giovanni delle Bande Nere, were both *appassionati* of this genre. Additional information regarding Michelagnolo da Volterra's literary taste is found in an intriguing list of "best sellers" added at the end of Laur., MS Mediceo Palatino 82, fols. 166r-68r. He was obviously most fond of "libri bellissimi di batagle" (wonderful books about battles) since of four categories of reading material, he privileges this one. Compared to the long list of chivalric epics Michelagnolo names, Dante and Petrarch receive short shrift! This evidence alone speaks Volumes about the dangers of imposing modern theories about the value of a particular text on past cultural practice. Although Michelagnolo's list preserves titles that he had ostensibly read, it cannot be determined which of these he actually owned. For Stradino, however, surviving inventories document the contents of his extensive library at via San Gallo: over two hundred books, nearly all vernacular, a high percentage of which were chivalric texts.²¹

As Florentine merchants and diplomats travelled, they took their reading material with them. An interesting case is the former Dyson Perrins *Guerrino* (now privately owned), copied by the Florentine citizen Tommaso di Domenico Guasconi while he was in exile in Naples in 1462.²² Prior to the Medici, the Guasconi were one of the aristocratic Guelph families who ruled in Florence.²³ This family served in the Florentine Signoria forty-seven times beginning in 1314.²⁴ For their opposition to the Medici in 1434, the Guasconi were severely punished; three were exiled, and others were disqualified from holding office for many years.²⁵

Certain other exemplars of maestro Andrea's texts are notable for their fine appearance, and the signs of professional production suggest that they were commissioned by discriminating clients. The former Phillipps MS 6554 of *Guerrino*, recently come to light in a private collection, was written in a semi-gothic cursive hand.²⁶ The *bianchi girari* on its first folio are typical of Florentine humanistic ornamentation of the mid-fifteenth century. The coat of arms on f. 1r may belong to the Boni family of Venice. Although most chivalric texts are on paper, one beautifully-copied *Guerrino* on parchment (Parma, MS Pal. 30) done in a

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clear *littera antiqua* hand suggests a luxury copy, produced for an illustrious buyer. This may be the untraceable *Guerrino* commissioned by Jacopo di Alamanno Salviati in 1480.²⁷ Jacopo was the brother-in-law of Pope Leo X and acted as caretaker in Florence while Leo, Giulio, Giuliano, and Lorenzo de' Medici were in Rome conferring with their supporters about Florence's future. A member of another branch of the Salviati family--Giannozzo di Bernardo di Marco di Forese--read the prose *Le Storie di Rinaldo da Montalbano*.²⁸

Chivalric texts by maestro Andrea were known and copied elsewhere in Tuscany. The 1484 library inventory of Pistoian Ubertino di Ser Atto di Giovanni Gherardi contained a *Meschino*.²⁹ The Gherardi had been a notable Florentine family in Andrea's day and possibly emigrated to Pistoia. Similarly, Jacopo di Piero della Rena copied a manuscript containing *Nerbonesi* and *Ugone* (Vatican, MS Barb. lat. 4101).³⁰ Although this individual awaits exact identification, the Della Rena were originally a noble family from Lucca.

How were these texts produced? The majority of manuscripts I examined display the hallmarks of amateur production unlike the luxury codices of Latin humanist texts. Many of these chivalric texts were copied on paper by Florentine notaries, merchants or tradesmen for their own libraries. Numerous colophons demonstrate that the roles of reader, copyist, and bookowner frequently overlapped. The hands are most often the fifteenth-century, semi-gothic cursive or *mercantesca* used to produce the typical, unadorned Volume in the vernacular. A few are very carefully done using *littera antiqua* or neat book hands. Riccardian MS 2410, an *Aspramonte*, presents an interesting case of production. It was copied rather hastily on unprepared paper in several semi-gothic, cursive book hands and completed

in 1472 for the "Adriano of the Drapers' Guild," mentioned above. After the initial scribal colophon, Adriano wrote his name and a short rhyme stating that he "had it made." It is possible that he acquired the book from someone else after its initial production, or he may indeed be the person who instigated its production. If the verse may be taken literally, Adriano may have had several friends or associates copy this book for him. From the haste of copying, and the frequent hand changes, one can almost imagine several busy merchants--more skilled at writing than our bookowner--producing the copy as they had moments free from their more pressing duties.

This survey of scribes, owners, and readers of chivalric prose material reveals a readership encompassing various socio-economic classes: from shoemakers and guild members to bankers and humanists, from those banished by Florence's government to those in the top echelon of her society, from persons of unknown origin and occupation to notables with proud lineages. Thus, far from being *una lettura spregevole*--contemptible reading matter--as modern critics once believed, Carolingian cycle narratives were enjoyed by a broader spectrum of readers than was previously imagined. In fact, existing data show a wider representation among the highly-placed than among tradesmen. As such, this literary genre should be granted its place as a valid part of late medieval-early Renaissance Florentine culture.

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Notes

Principal libraries are abbreviated as follows:

BNCF = Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale

Laur. = Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana

Ricc. = Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana

1 "La materia carolingia incontrava grande fortuna soprattutto presso i ceti popolari, mentre quella arturiana esercitava grande fascino sulla borghesia mercantile e presso le corti" (*Romanzo cavalleresco inedito [British Library Add. MS 10808]*, ed. Aurelia Forni Marmocchi, Biblioteca di Filologia Romanza della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Bologna 6 [Bologna, 1989], p. 13, translation mine).

2 "I romanzi di Andrea da Barberino possono essere stati i racconti rimaneggiati da un uomo del contado, che avvertiva ... le esigenze di ascoltatori più umili, mentre i racconti arturiani, risponde[vano] alle esigenze delle classi più elevate e più raffinate ..." (Luigi Russo, "La letteratura cavalleresca dal *Tristano* ai *Reali di Francia*," *Belfagor* 6 [1951], 51, translation mine).

3 Francesco De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, rev. ed. Benedetto Croce, Scrittori d'Italia 31-32, 2 vols. (Bari, 1912), vol. 1, pp. 72-74; idem., "I romanzi cavallereschi," in *La poesia cavalleresca e scritti vari*, ed. Mario Petrini, Scrittori d'Italia 212. De Sanctis Opere 9 (Bari, 1954), pp. 9-20; Francesco Fòffano, *Il poema cavalleresco*, Storia dei Generi letterari italiani 58 (Milan, 1904); Giosuè Carducci, "Su l'Orlando Furioso," in *La vita italiana nel Cinquecento* (Milan, 1893); rpt. in *Edizione nazionale delle Opere 14: L'Ariosto e il Tasso* (Bologna, 1942); Benedetto Croce, *Ariosto, Shakespeare e Corneille*, Scritti di storia letteraria e politica 14 (Bari, 1920), p. 5.

4 Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books. Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford, 1994), p. 8.

5 "Le compilazioni del Barberino ... rimasero poi lettura prediletta al *popolo* specialmente di campagna ..." (Giosuè Carducci, "Su l'Orlando Furioso," pp. 70-71, emphasis mine).

6 Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, ed. Vittorio Spinazzola, 3rd ed., I Garzanti (Milan, 1972), pp. 350-51.

7 A detailed list of manuscripts and their owners is found in Appendix B of Gloria Allaire, "The Chivalric 'Histories' of Andrea da Barberino: A Re-evaluation," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993, pp. 480-86. Porcellini owned Oxford, Bodl. MS canon. it. 27.

8 See Giuliano Tanturli, "I Benci copisti. Vicende della cultura fiorentina volgare fra Antonio Pucci e il Ficino," *Studi di filologia italiana* 36 (1978), 197-313.

9 Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 2d ed., Icon Editions (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), pp. 38-43, 73.

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10 Christian Bec, *Les livres des Florentins (1413-1608)*, Biblioteca di "Lettere italiane." Studi e Testi 29 (Florence, 1984), p. 207.

11 J. R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici. The Pattern of Control* (1977; New York, 1986), pp. 85; see also 21, 80.

12 Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence*, Harvard Historical Studies 114 (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 405.

13 Bec, *Cultura e società a Firenze nell'età della Rinascenza*, Studi e saggi 3 (Rome, 1981), p. 181; Raymond De Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank 1397-1494*, Harvard Studies in Business History 21 (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 86, 159, 223-24, 333, 377, passim.

14 Marcel Brion, *The Medici. A Great Florentine Family*, trans. Gilles and Heather Cremonesi (New York, 1969), p. 30.

15 See Allaire, "Un manoscritto rediano delle *Storie Nerbonesi* e dell'*Ugone d'Avernia* di Andrea da Barberino," *Studi e Problemi di Critica Testuale* 47 (1993), 43-48.

16 Hale, *Florence*, p. 80.

17 See Allaire, "Due inediti di Andrea da Barberino nella Biblioteca Palatina di Parma," *Pluteus* 8-9 (1990-8), 19-25.

18 See Allaire, "Un codice ritrovato della *Storia d'Aiolfo del Barbicone* di Andrea da Barberino," *Lettere Italiane* 45 (1993), 398-401.

19 Leopold von Ranke, "Zur Geschichte der italienischen Poesie," in *Abhandlungen und Versuche* (1835; Leipzig, 1888), p. 163.

20 Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (1980; Baltimore, 1985), pp. 238, 281.

21 Berta Maracchi Biagiarelli, "L'*Armadiaccio* di Padre Stradino," *La Bibliofilia* 84 (1982), 55-57.

22 Bernhard Degenhart and Annegrit Schmitt, *Corpus der italienischen Zeichnungen 1300-1450*, pt. I, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1968), pp. 338-39.

23 Gene Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 137, 268.

24 John M. Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill, 1982), pp. 324, 329.

25 Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)*, Oxford-Warburg Studies (Oxford, 1966), pp. 2, 3n, 9, 110n.

26 *Bibliotheca Phillipica. Manuscripts on vellum and paper from the 9th to the 18th centuries from the Celebrated Collection formed by Sir Thomas Phillipps. The Final Selection*, Catalogue 153 (New York, 1979), pp. 73, 149.

27 "Un libro chiamato Meschino, sciolto," (ASF, *Capitani di parte [rossi]* 74, fol. 116v). I wish to thank Outi Merisalo for bringing this item to my attention.

28 "Letto per me Giannozzo di bernardo di marcho di messer forese saluiati a dì primo di marzo 1505. Im firenze avuto dallo stradino" (Laur., MS Med. Pal. CI, 4, rear guard fol. Ir). This is an exemplar of part of the *Rinaldo* that I have attributed to maestro Andrea. See Allaire, *Andrea da Barberino and the Language of Chivalry* (Gainesville, Fla., 1997), pp. 65-92.

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29 Bec, *Les livres*, p. 197.

30 See Allaire, "Due testimoni sconosciuti di Andrea da Barberino nel codice Barberiniano Latino 4101 della Biblioteca Vaticana," *Pluteus* 6-7 (1988-89), 121-30.