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Courtliness in Ludovico Ariosto's Satire and Orlando Furioso**

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Composed during the most difficult years of Ludovico Ariosto's relationship with the Este court, the Satire are known for presenting a picture of their author as a simple, quiet-loving man, and also as a man who can speak only the truth. However, the self-portrait offered by the Satire of the author as a man incapable of lying stands in direct contrast to the depiction presented by St. John in canto 35 of the Orlando Furioso of all writers (and thus, implicitly, of Ariosto) as liars. This article investigates the relationship between such contrasting self-portraits of Ariosto, aiming to overcome the traditional opposition of satire as the mode for honest speech—and for a truthful portrayal of the author's self—and epic as the mode for courtly flattering.

Self-Portraits of a Truthful Liar: Satire, Truth-Telling, and Courtliness in Ludovico Ariosto's *Satire* and *Orlando Furioso*

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Composed during the most difficult years of Ludovico Ariosto's relationship with the Este court, the Satire are known for presenting a picture of their author as a simple, quiet-loving man, and also as a man who can speak only the truth. However, the self-portrait offered by the Satire of the author as a man incapable of lying stands in direct contrast to the depiction presented by St. John in canto 35 of the Orlando Furioso of all writers (and thus, implicitly, of Ariosto) as liars. This article investigates the relationship between such contrasting self-portraits of Ariosto, aiming to overcome the traditional opposition of satire as the mode for honest speech—and for a truthful portrayal of the author's self—and epic as the mode for courtly flattering.

Composée pendant les années les plus difficiles de sa relation avec la cour d'Este, les Satires de l'Arioste sont connues pour la représentation qu'elles donnent de leur auteur comme un homme simple aimant la tranquillité et ne disant jamais rien que la vérité. Toutefois, cette représentation de l'auteur comme un homme incapable de mentir contredit directement la représentation des écrivains (incluant implicitement l'Arioste lui-même comme menteurs, avancée par saint Jean dans le chant 35 de son Orlando Furioso.) Cet article examine donc les relations qu'entretiennent les différents autoportraits qu'offre l'Arioste et cherche à dépasser l'opposition traditionnelle entre la satire comme forme du discours honnête — qui comprend l'autoportrait honnête de l'auteur —, et le discours épique comme mode de flatterie de cour.

Antonfrancesco Doni's *Le dimostrazioni de gli animi de gli huomini* presents a picture of Ludovico Ariosto as a man skilled in devising *impreses* for flags and banners, and who had also created an admirable *impresa* for himself. The *impresa* quoted by Doni is not—as one might expect—the famous *Pro Bono Malum* from the final page of the *Orlando Furioso*, but a different image altogether: a pair of scissors about to cut a snake's tongue in half, along with a banner bearing the motto *A la cattiva lingua* ("to the evil tongue") (Fig. 1).¹ Doni interprets the *impresa* as a warning to gossipmongers, liars, and anyone who might try to offend the poet.

1. The same *impresa* is also present in Doni's *Una nuova opinione circa all'impreses amoroze et militari*, Fondo N. A., 267, c35r, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence.

Intriguingly, *Le dimostrazioni de gli animi de gli huomini* includes another *impresa* to feature a tongue and a reference to cutting, though in a completely different context. According to Doni, Pietro Aretino designed an *impresa* for himself that featured a pouch and a tongue cutting it to make coins fall out, with the motto *Quasi gladius*.² In this case, the reference is, of course, to the power of Aretino's *lingua*, dreaded by the powerful who feared his slander and used by the author for profit, praising those who remunerated him and defaming those who proved unsupportive.³



Fig. 1. Antonfrancesco Doni, *Le dimostrazioni de gli animi de gli huomini*, Ms. Palat. E.B.10.8, Striscia 1392, c16r, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence.

Striking in Doni's characterization of both writers through their *imprese* is that, on the one hand, Aretino is styled as the quintessential *malalingua*, a writer who would go to any lengths for his own interest, while, on the other hand, Ariosto is presented as the champion of sincerity, whose power rests precisely in opposing liars and slanderers.

2. Antonfrancesco Doni, *Le dimostrazioni de gli animi de gli huomini*, Ms. Palat. E.B.10.8, Striscia 1392, c27v, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence.

3. On Pietro Aretino, see also in this issue Marco Faini, "E poi in Roma ognuno è l'Aretino': Pasquino, Aretino, and the Concealed Self."

Doni's conception of Ariosto may well be based on the latter's idealized self-portrait in the *Satire*, wherein Ariosto depicts himself as a man who is unable to lie. He simply does not know "what to be if not truthful," as he tells his cousin Annibale Malaguzzi in *Satira III* in order to explain the scarce enthusiasm with which he describes his life at court in the service of Duke Alfonso I d'Este. Ariosto also proclaims himself incapable of foregoing sincerity, even when such an attitude puts him dangerously at odds with the powerful. In *Satira I*, he explains that an act of insubordination against his patron Ippolito d'Este set him apart from the approving chorus of his fellow courtiers, who, unlike him, would never dare speak an unflattering word in front of their *signore*, let alone one that contradicts him.

The role played by prudent courtly speech and flattery in sixteenth-century court culture is well known. Employing words intended to curry favour or to deceive one's potential adversaries was common practice at court, where simulation and dissimulation ruled the day, and lying was considered a justified practice.⁴ Yet the sixteenth century also witnessed the emergence of a radically opposite tendency: a tendency to value sincerity in an unprecedented manner and to consider it, for the first time in history, a moral category unto itself. According to John Martin, it is within the tension between prudence and sincerity that the early modern self was shaped.⁵

Despite his self-presentation in the *Satire* as a man of utter sincerity, Ariosto himself offers a foil to this image in one of the most renowned episodes of the *Orlando Furioso*: Astolfo and St. John the Evangelist's journey to the moon in cantos 34 and 35. The lunar episode of the *Orlando Furioso* famously features the declaration, voiced by the Evangelist, that all writers are liars, and that the entire literary canon is nothing more than a mass of fabrications assembled by writers either to reward a magnanimous patron or to retaliate against an ungenerous one.

A comparison between the *Satire* and the *Orlando Furioso* thus results in two opposing portraits of the author: the first of an honest man who uses his poetry to express his most truthful thoughts, the second of a man who is a shameless liar precisely *because* of his identity as a poet.

4. On lying at court, see Dallas G. Denery II, *The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

5. John Martin, "Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe," *The American Historical Review* 102.5 (Dec 1997): 1309–1342, 1334.

The two contrasting self-portraits could be explained away as due to the differing genres in which they are expressed. The image of the satiric speaker as a man of virtue who casts a critical look on the corrupt reality that surrounds him, and who is straightforward to the point of bluntness, is typical of satirical writings.⁶ The satirist's inability to lie, in particular, is a leitmotif of Juvenal's third satire—"Quid Romae faciam? Mentiri nescio" ("What can I do in Rome? I'm a hopeless liar")⁷—in which this quality is presented as the clearest sign of the poet's ineptitude at life in the corrupt environment of the capital. Ariosto refers to similar literary motifs throughout the *Satire*, but his insistence on the authenticity and sincerity of the satiric persona is a feature of the piece. The *Furioso*, on the other hand, belongs to the courtly genre of epic poetry, wherein celebratory words in favour of the author's patron and his lineage were expected. Peculiar to Ariosto's poem, however, is how the courtly encomium—and the role and the figure of the poet within it—is problematized through St. John's words. To say that the two opposed self-portraits Ariosto crafts are merely dependent on genre would be reductive. This article aims to show that, in the case of Ariosto, the opposition goes beyond a mere contrast between satire as the genre wherein the author speaks his mind in an informal style, and epic as the genre of public speaking and courtly encomia. I investigate Ariosto's considerations of truth-telling and lying as expressed in the *Satire* and in the *Orlando Furioso* by examining the meanings that both concepts acquired in the Renaissance, as well as other relevant issues for the period, such as the role of the poet within the courtly context and the relationship between both writers and patrons, and poetry and courtliness. I also take into account the tensions that emerged in the period between the opposing values of prudence and restraint on the one hand, and of sincerity on the other. Additionally, I question the very idea that there exists a radical and unresolvable conflict between the two portraits of Ariosto as, respectively, a truthful man and a liar.

Most likely composed between 1517 and 1525, during some of the most tumultuous years of Ariosto's relationship with his patrons, the Este, lords of

6. On the figure of the satirist, see Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). On the satiric *capitolo* in the sixteenth century, see also in this issue Carla Chiummo, "Burlesque Connotations in the Pictorial Language in Bronzino's Poetry."

7. Juvenal, *Satire III*, in *The Sixteen Satires*, ed. and trans. Peter Green (London: Penguin, 2004), 41. For images of Rome and of the papal court as the epitome of corruption, see in this issue Ambra Moroncini, "Érasme, l'Arétin et Boccace dans l'invention du discours comique-burlesque d'Annibal Caro."

Ferrara, the *Satire* were never published during the author's lifetime but were probably privately circulated among Ariosto's friends.⁸ The themes developed are diverse (including considerations on marriage and on the best education for a son) but the *Satire* owe most of their popularity to their function as a reflection on court life written by the ultimate insider, a court poet who was fully involved in court activities at the time, and composing encomiastic poetry. The author's disenchanted take on courtly life is voiced principally in *Satira I* and *Satira III* (the same two satires where the author's statements on sincerity are expressed) wherein Ariosto considers his relationship to his two Este patrons, Cardinal Ippolito and Duke Alfonso. *Satira I*, addressed to his brother Alessandro and his friend Ludovico da Bagno, and written in the fall of 1517,⁹ centres on the most controversial moment in Ariosto's career as a courtier: his denial of Ippolito's request that the poet be one of the courtiers to accompany him to Hungary. Ariosto's first concern is to be informed of his fellow courtiers' reactions to his outspoken refusal:

I wish to hear from you, Alessandro, my brother, and Bagno, my dear friend, whether at court there lingers any recollection of me; whether my lord continues to revile me; whether a comrade rises to defend me and explains why I am staying here while everyone else is leaving; or whether you are all schooled in sycophancy (the art among us most studied and revered) and help him to blame me beyond reason.¹⁰

8. For detailed information on the *Satire*, see Corrado Bologna, "'Satire' di Ludovico Ariosto," in *Letteratura italiana: le opere*, ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), 2:181–219.

9. Bologna, 200.

10. "Io desidero intendere da voi,
Alessandro fratel, compar mio Bagno,
s' in corte è ricordanza più di noi;
se più il signor me accusa; se compagno
per me si lieva e dice la cagione
per che, partendo gli altri, io qui rimagno;
o, tutti dotti ne la adulazione
(l'arte che più tra noi si studia e cole),
l'aiutate a biasmarme oltra ragione" (*Satira I*, 1–9).

The Italian text is quoted from Ludovico Ariosto, *Satire*, ed. Alfredo D'Orto (Milan: Fondazione Pietro Bembo, 2002). The English translation is quoted from Peter DeSa Wiggins, *The Satires of Ludovico*

Employing a common topos in Renaissance satires,¹¹ Ariosto paints a gloomy picture of toadying courtiers eager to please the prince in every possible way. It is precisely in contrast to such a depiction of courtliness as flattery that Ariosto develops his self-portrait as a man who—unlike those surrounding him—does not shy away from speaking truth to power:

Mad is the man who would contradict his lord, even if he were to say he had seen the day full of stars and at midnight the sun. Whether he praise a man or disgrace him, suddenly one hears a concert of as many voices as he has around him in accord; and he who has not for meekness the courage to open his mouth applauds with all his face and seems to yearn to say “I too agree.” But blame me though you must in other respects, you should at least praise me, because I declared openly, without deception, that I wanted to stay.¹²

Satira III, written in the spring of 1518 and addressed to Annibale Malaguzzi, the poet's cousin, presents an opportunity for Ariosto to reflect further on similar issues. While reporting his condition under his new patron, Duke Alfonso, Ariosto again underscores his near-uncontrollable urge to be truthful:

Ariosto: A Renaissance Autobiography (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976). All subsequent references are to these editions.

11. On the topoi of medieval and Renaissance anti-court satires, see Pauline Smith, *The Anti-Courtier Trend in Sixteenth Century French Literature* (Geneva: Droz, 1966).

12. “Pazzo chi al suo signor contradir vole,
se ben dicesse c’ha veduto il giorno
pieno di stelle e a mezzanotte il sole.
O ch’egli lodi, o voglia altrui far scorno,
di varie voci subito un concerto
s’ode accordar di quanti n’ha dintorno;
e chi non ha per umiltà ardimento
la bocca aprir, con tutto il viso applaude
e par che voglia dir: —anch’io consento.—
Ma se in altro biasmarme, almen dar laude
dovete che, volendo io rimanere,
lo dissi a viso aperto e non con fraude” (*Satira I*, 10–21).

Annibale, since you wish to hear how I am succeeding with Duke Alfonso and whether or not I feel myself heavier with my shifted burdens—because, if now I continue to lament, you will tell me that I have a ruptured harness sore or that I am by nature a reluctant jade—without so much thought I will say swiftly that this weight galls me as much as the other and it would be better not to be under any. Now tell me I have a broken back and, if it pleases you, tell me I am a jade and tell me worse. In short, I do not know what to be if not truthful.¹³

Even the author's reply to his interlocutor's imagined objection—that his real reason for not wanting to leave Ferrara is not wanting to leave the woman he loves—becomes an occasion for a reiteration of his commitment to sincerity:

I seem to see you laughing at me now and saying that, not love of country or of study, but of a lady, is the reason I do not wish to leave. Frankly do I confess it to you. Now shut your mouth. I am not one to take up sword and shield to defend a lie.¹⁴

Ariosto relates his attraction to sincerity to his incapacity to ever adapt to life at court—which will eventually lead to his failure as a courtier. The author's

13. "Poi che, Annibale, intendere vuoi come la fo col duca Alfonso, e s'io mi sento più grave o men de le mutate some; perché, s'anco di questo mi lamento, tu mi dirai c'ho il guidalesco rotto, o ch'io son di natura un rozzon lento: senza molto pensar, dirò di botto che un peso e l'altro ugualmente mi spiace, e fòra meglio a nessuno esser sotto. Dimmi or c'ho rotto il dosso e, se 'l ti piace, dimmi ch'io sia una rózza, e dimmi peggio: insomma esser non so se non verace" (*Satira III*, 1–12).

14. "Parmi vederti qui ridere e dire che non amor di patria né de studi, ma di donna è cagion che non voglio ire. Liberamente te 'l confesso: or chiudi la bocca, che a difender la bugia non volli prender mai spada né scudi" (*Satira III*, 73–78).

inability to be anything but sincere becomes, in short, the sign of his inherent anti-courtliness. In many passages in *Satira I* and *Satira III*, Ariosto undertakes a project of self-fashioning that seems meant to challenge the precepts of courtliness. This stance is particularly evident in *Satira I*, where Ariosto refers to his service to Ippolito as “my wretched servitude,”¹⁵ and exhorts his brother Alessandro with the recommendation: “serve for both of us, and make good my errors.”¹⁶ In the same years that Baldassar Castiglione is reviewing his *Libro del cortegiano*, with its portrait of the ideal courtier, Ariosto fashions an anti-court persona for himself: a simple and genuine man who should have been born “in the days when men lived on acorns,”¹⁷ and who becomes the perfect foil to the perfectly mannered, sophisticated, and well-groomed courtier.

These same anti-court sentiments pervade the lunar episode of the *Furioso*. The *valle della luna* that Astolfo and St. John the Evangelist visit in cantos 34 and 35 to recover Orlando’s wits is littered with references to courtly life and the condition of the court writer: the golden and silver hooks representing the gifts that are made “in hope of reward to kings, to greedy princes, to patrons,” the laces hidden in garlands of flowers that stand for words spoken to flatter, the “broken phials” that symbolize “service as wretched courtiers” and, most significantly from the point of view of court poetry, the “exploded crickets” that embody verses written in praise of patrons:

Next he saw a heap of gold and silver hooks: gifts made in hope of reward to kings, to greedy princes, to patrons. He asked about garlands he saw which concealed a noose: all flattery, he was told. Verses written in praise of patrons wore the guise of exploded crickets. / Love affairs pursued to little purpose had the shape of bonds, jewel-studded shackles. There were eagles’ talons—and these were, I am told, the authority which lords vest in their servants. The bellows littering the hillside all around denoted the praise given by princes and the favors conferred upon their favorites, all wafted away with the flower of their years. / Cities and castles and immense treasures lay here in a confused jumble of ruins. They were treaties, he was told, and ill-concealed plots. He saw snakes with maiden’s faces: the works

15. “La mala servitude mia,” (*Satira I*, 85).

16. “Servi per amendua, rifà i miei danni,” (*Satira I*, 225).

17. “Quando viveano gli uomini di giande,” (*Satira I*, 150).

of coiners and thieves. Then he noticed an assortment of broken phials:
service as wretched courtiers.¹⁸

His allusion to the dubious effectiveness of encomiastic poetry in terms of reward for poets paves the way for an extensive reflection on the power of poetry to guarantee eternal fame, and to the comments voiced by St. John in canto 35 on “wise” patronage for those who want to be positively remembered. In what feels like a lecture for patrons on how to make good use of their resources, Ariosto introduces a distinction between bad poets, represented as crows and vultures, and great ones, depicted as swans. Sponsoring a mediocre

18. “Ami d’oro e d’argento appresso vede
in una massa, ch’erano quei doni
che si fan con speranza di mercede
ai re, agli avari principi, ai patroni.
Vede in ghirlande ascosi lacci; e chiede,
et ode che son tutte adulazioni.
Di cicale scoppiate imagine hanno
versi ch’in laude dei signor si fanno.

Di nodi d’oro e di gemmati ceppi
vede c’han forma i mal seguiti amori.
V’eran d’aquile artigli; e che fur, seppi,
l’autorità ch’ai suoi danno i signori.
I mantici ch’intorno han pieni i greppi,
sono i fumi dei principi e i favori
che danno un tempo ai ganimedi suoi,
che se ne van col fior degli anni poi.

Ruine di cittadi e di castella
staván con gran tesor quivi sozzopra.
Domanda, e sa che son trattati, e quella
congiura che sì mal par che si cuopra.
Vide serpi con faccia di donzella,
di monetieri e di ladroni l’opra:
poi vide bocce rotte di più sorti,
ch’era il servir de le misere corti” (*Orlando Furioso*, 34.77–79).

Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. Lanfranco Caretti, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1992). English translation by Guido Waldman, *Orlando Furioso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All subsequent references are to these editions.

poet—a “crow”—will not result in fame of any kind: such lowly birds are unable to prevent the plaques engraved with the names of their patrons from being dumped into the waters of the Lethe, the river of oblivion, thus damning them to being forgotten forever. But Ippolito d’Este—Ariosto assures us—has chosen his poet wisely, and therefore has nothing to fear: two swans, as white as the Este coat of arms, fly high over the Lethe, safely holding the plaque carrying his name in their beaks.

Being able to secure for oneself the praise of a real poet is, however, only the first step in the fight against oblivion. Patrons must also ensure that their poets are always content, since they alone possess the power to immortalize people as either heroes or villains. What does such a power consist of? Every writer, St. John reveals, lies. As a consequence, everyone should understand that the great men of history were not so great: their only merit was in wise investment in good writers, the builders of their eternal fame. Augustus, the Evangelist continues, was not as “august” and “beneficent” as Virgil makes him, but his good taste in poetry allowed him to have his not-so-noble actions concealed. Poor Nero, on the other hand, would have been spared from public infamy, “had he known how to keep friendly with writers.”¹⁹ These lines and those that follow suggest the complete reversal of historical truth as we know it, whereby the most famous historical figures and facts are revealed to be their opposite.²⁰

Augustus was not as august and beneficent as Virgil makes him out in clarion tones—but his good taste in poetry compensates for the evil of his proscriptions. And no one would know whether Nero had been wicked—he might even, for all his enemies on earth and in heaven, have left a better name—had he known how to keep friendly with writers. / Homer made Agamemnon appear the victor and the Trojan mere poltroons; he made Penelope faithful to her husband, and victim of a thousand slights from her suitors. But if you want to know what really happened, invert the story: Greece was vanquished, Troy triumphant, and Penelope a whore. / Listen on the other hand to what reputation Dido left behind, whose heart

19. *Orlando Furioso*, 35.26.

20. In the *Orlando Furioso*, as underlined by Stefano Jossa, “non esistono verità univoche, ma solo verità parziali [. . .] tutti i valori sono reversibili e rovesciabili.” Jossa, *Ariosto* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), 67.

was so chaste: she was reputed a strumpet purely because Virgil was no friend of hers.

After all, St. John knows of what he speaks, for he himself was a writer: “Don’t be surprised if this embitters me and if I talk about it at some length—I like writers and am doing my duty by them, for in your world I was a writer too.”²¹

As underlined by Sergio Zatti, good and bad poets (“crows” and “swans”) are here portrayed as opposite only in terms of the value of their art, but not in terms of their ends, and, most importantly, their ethics.²² Moreover, St. John’s commitment to showing how much a good poet can achieve in terms of depicting his patron as a man of great deeds leads to justifying mystification, to sacrificing historical accuracy on the altar of the patrons’ and of the poets’ quest

21. “Non fu sì santo né benigno Augusto
come la tuba di Virgilio suona.
L’aver avuto in poesia buon gusto
la proscrizion iniqua gli perdona.
Nessun sapria se Neron fosse ingiusto,
né sua fama saria forse men buona,
avesse avuto e terra e ciel nimici,
se gli scrittor sapea tenersi amici.

Omero Agamennòn vittorioso,
e fe’ i Troian parer vili ed inertì;
e che Penelopea fida al suo sposo
dai Prochi mille oltraggi avea sofferti.
E se tu vuoi che ’l ver non ti sia ascoso,
tutta al contrario l’istoria converti:
che i Greci rotti, e che Troia vittrice,
e che Penelopea fu meretrice.

Da l’altra parte odi che fama lascia
Elissa, ch’ebbe il cor tanto pudico;
che riputata viene una bagascia,
solo perché Maron non le fu amico.
Non ti maravigliar ch’io n’abbia ambascia,
e se di ciò diffusamente io dico.
Gli scrittori amo, e fo il debito mio;
ch’al vostro mondo fui scrittore anch’io” (*Orlando Furioso*, 35.26–28).

22. Sergio Zatti, *Il Furioso fra epos e romanzo* (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 1990), 147.

for, respectively, fame and sponsorship. The idea that poets lie is a Renaissance commonplace,²³ but Ariosto takes it to a different level. Intriguingly, it is precisely by declaring poetry falsehood that Ariosto makes his own work sincere: as pointed out by Stefano Jossa, “it is only when the poet lies, but at the same time shows that he is lying, that poetry achieves its truthfulness.”²⁴

From the point of view of Ariosto’s relationship with his patron, the resulting picture is what Albert Ascoli has defined as a “vortex” wherein Ariosto’s own encomium of Ippolito disappears, together with “a series of ‘civic humanist’ values, particularly that of the modified ‘impegno civile’ of Castiglione’s *Cortegiano*, which is assailed by a number of references to courtly parasitism and princely ingratitude.”²⁵

Even the *Satire*, in which the influence of anti-court sentiments is at its most evident and most straightforward, are not immune from the contradictory relationship towards courtliness that pervades the *Orlando Furioso*. The situation is, however, reversed: while the *Orlando Furioso*, a courtly poem, slips into anti-courtliness, the *Satire*, in spite of Ariosto’s constant affirmations of his otherness to courtliness and dissatisfaction with courtly life, seem to relapse at times into courtliness. This is particularly evident in *Satira I*, in which Ariosto says he is ready to return to Cardinal Ippolito’s service, although on his own terms. The condition, predictably, is that he be employed only as a poet. In return, Ariosto promises to make the cardinal’s name soar higher than any dove flying in the sky: “If he wishes to make use of me with ink and quill, and not budge me from my firm resolve, tell him, ‘My lord, my brother is yours.’ Dwelling here, I will with a shining clarion make his name ring out higher perhaps than ever flew a dove.”²⁶

23. See David Quint, “Astolfo’s Voyage to the Moon,” *Yale Italian Studies* 1 (1977): 398–409, 407.

24. Stefano Jossa, “The Lies of Poets: Literature as Fiction in the Italian Renaissance,” in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Joseph Connors*, ed. Machtelt Israëls and Louis A. Waldman (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2013), 569. On the ways in which Ariosto constantly makes explicit the fictive nature of his own poem, see Daniel Javitch, “The Advertising of Fictionality in *Orlando Furioso*,” in *Ariosto Today: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Donald Beecher, Massimo Ciavolella, and Roberto Fedi (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 106–25.

25. Albert Russell Ascoli, *Ariosto’s Bitter Harmony: Crisis and Evasion in the Italian Renaissance*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 275.

26. “Il qual se vuol di calamo et inchiostro
di me servirsi, e non mi tòr da bomba,

The bird simile employed to represent the glory with which Ariosto could endow Ippolito is a clear reminder of the swans carrying his name into posterity in the valley of the moon. Is Ariosto, despite his claims of being unable to lie, thus declaring his willingness to lie for his patron if he is supportive enough, as St. John has stated that all poets do? Is he, in fact, prepared to behave much like his friend Pietro Bembo, who in *Satira VI* is praised for his ability to “sate princes with false praises,”²⁷ as Ariosto notes with a wink?

While it is worth pointing out the conflict between Ariosto’s commitment to sincerity and his readiness to lie for patronage, it is also important to underline that such a conflict is perhaps more nuanced than it appears at first glance. The two opposite approaches towards truth may, in fact, be compatible, if one takes into account the development of the ideal of sincerity in the sixteenth century.

Scholarly criticism on Ariosto’s *Satire* has long stressed the self-portrait of their author as either a lazy bourgeois trapped in his small affairs, or as the epitome of the placid, daydreaming poet, perfectly content with a simple life of retirement that allows him to spend his time lost in his poetic fantasies—see Antonio Baldini’s famous definition of Ariosto as “Ludovico della tranquillità.”²⁸ The *Satire* themselves were considered elegant but trivial, a testimony of withdrawal into a private dimension and of detachment from reality in a period of social and political crisis.²⁹

Such a conception of the *Satire* and of their author persisted until later criticism began to question these assumptions, first and foremost recognizing that the self-portrait Ariosto offers should not be taken at face value, since the author is donning the mask of the satirist and offering his own, personal and

digli: — Signore, il mio fratello è vostro. —
Io, stando qui, farò con chiara tromba
il suo nome sonar forse tanto alto
che tanto mai non si levò colomba” (*Satira I*, 226–31).

27. “Far sovente / di false lode i principi satolli” (*Satira VI*, 54).

28. Antonio Baldini, *Ludovico della tranquillità: Divagazioni ariostesche* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1933). On this point, see also Peter DeSa Wiggins, introduction to *The Satires of Ludovico Ariosto*, xiii–xiv; Bologna, 201–05.

29. Peter DeSa Wiggins, “A Defense of the Satires,” in *Ariosto 1974 in America: Atti del Congresso Ariostesco — Dicembre 1974, Casa Italiana della Columbia University*, ed. Aldo Scaglione (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1976), 55–68, 56.

yet fictional, version of such a figure.³⁰ Likewise, the collection of *Satire* has been reconsidered as an erudite and relevant piece of work, worthy of being explored in and of itself as well as for its relationship to the *Orlando Furioso*.³¹

Most importantly, the idea that the *Satire* are detached from contemporary political and social reality has been challenged,³² and the *Satire* are now valued—just like the *Orlando Furioso*—as an illustration of the social and cultural changes taking place in the early sixteenth century. One less explored yet relevant field of investigation is precisely the contemporary development of and interaction between the notions of sincerity and of courtly prudence. The emergence of the discourse of sincerity is increasingly being recognized as one of the most compelling—and also potentially revolutionary—innovations of the early modern period.³³ In an environment that required almost constant public display, such as the courtly one, and that was dominated by imperatives of secrecy and self-control, sincerity came to stand for a recuperation of a private dimension that was, at the same time, a recuperation of one's individuality: freedom to be true to oneself, the antithesis to the mask imposed by courtliness.³⁴

According to Martin, the ideal of sincerity emerged over the course of the sixteenth century—as a consequence, the modern concept of sincerity is a sixteenth-century invention. Martin connects the emergence of sincerity to the “layered quality” of the Renaissance notion of the self: in a society where individuals were often required to conceal their inner thoughts and convictions, a new attention was given to interiority, seen as the quintessence of personal identity. The word *sincero*, which had until then referred to the purity of a material object, became used to designate a moral concept. Parallel to this new

30. Wiggins, introduction to *The Satires of Ludovico Ariosto*, xiv–xv; Bologna, 28.

31. See Claudia Berra, ed., *Fra satire e rime ariostesche* (Milan: Cisalpino, 2000); Alessandra Villa, “Canonizzazione e tradimento di Ariosto satiro,” in *La Renaissance des genres: pratiques et théories des genres littéraires entre Italie et Espagne (XV–XVII siècles)*, ed. Giuseppe Sangirardi and Paloma Bravo (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2012): 299–312, and “Ludovico Ariosto e la ‘famiglia d’allegrezza piena,’ con una riflessione sul progetto delle *Satire*,” *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 185 (2008): 510–35.

32. See Wiggins, “A Defense of the *Satires*,” 67.

33. Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in the Early Modern Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 161–63.

34. For an in-depth analysis of these issues, see Martin.

moral category, an unprecedented desire was born to reveal one's interiority, and to make one's words coincide with their actual feelings.³⁵

The impulse for sincerity, or the idea that honesty should prevail over decorum, both coexisted and contrasted with the doctrine of prudence that gave prominence to decorum—which included, when needed, the ability to pretend and to lie—and that was in place especially in a courtly context. Prudence and sincerity have therefore been interpreted as the two opposed models that people in the Renaissance could refer to when fashioning their identities and shaping their behaviour in their everyday lives.³⁶ Individuals could simultaneously want to be both prudent and sincere—especially when living at court, where choosing prudence was always wise and often necessary, while sincerity was a sought-after value in a world that demanded constant control over one's feelings.

The contrasting statements of blunt sincerity and willingness to lie found in Ariosto's *Satire* and *Orlando Furioso* become, then, active proof of the interplay between such polar opposite models in the same individual and, in the case of the *Satire*, in the pages of the same work. More precisely, Ariosto's discrepant statements portray a grey zone where sincerity and honey-tongued courtly speech could cohabitate and turn into each other, at times without the subject being aware of any evident contradiction.

In the case of Ariosto, the tension between honesty and the dictates of courtliness is further complicated by the author's commitment to defend his role as a poet and to stand up for the value of poetry. In stating his readiness to go back to courtly service on the condition that he is employed as a poet, and in promising fame for his patron if he accepts such a condition, as well as in making patrons aware of the importance of keeping writers satisfied to ensure their own good reputation, Ariosto declares himself ready to lie—or, at least, to embellish the truth—not only to comply with prudent courtly behaviour, but also to make a statement regarding his role as a writer and the status of the *litteratus* in early modern society. Ariosto's willingness to relinquish sincerity in order to praise his patron, paired with the reminder that those who disregard writers are doomed to a poor reputation, is his most honest attempt to state

35. Martin, 1321–26. On the origins of sincerity in the Renaissance, see also Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980).

36. Martin, 1333–38.

a commitment to humanistic practices. The lunar episode becomes a “self-reflexive celebration of the power of poetry to be at once entertaining and useful,”³⁷ and, while exposing all writers as liars, it also stages a writer’s heartfelt defense of the role of poetry and of its importance to society.

The ambiguity of the episode as a whole, and the contradictions inherent in such a statement, are reflected in the different interpretations that can be applied to St. John’s words. Scholarly readings of St. John’s speech stand on the two opposite poles represented by, respectively, a reading that holds that the episode should not be taken seriously—especially in light of the implication that the evangelist lied about Christ—and other who consider it the epitome of the general destruction of meaning operated by the poem as a whole.³⁸

What becomes particularly intriguing, then, is that St. John’s speech on poets as liars is built with such an inherent ambivalence that it can give life to diametrically opposite interpretations, to the degree that even its own veracity is put into question. The borders between sincerity and falsehood become blurred, almost to the point that one turns into the other. In presenting the point of view of the court writer, who reminds potential patrons of the relevance of his role by boasting of his capacity to lie for them, the *Orlando Furioso* stages a poet’s most extensive declaration of sincerity. Or, in Zatti’s definition, St. John’s speech reveals that “poetry is useful (to power) in that it manipulates historical truth, but it is also useful (to truth) in that it denounces such manipulation.”³⁹

The satirical mode that is predominant in the lunar episode, moreover, adds a further twist to the dynamics between sincerity and lying. The satirical nature of the passage has often been pointed out by scholars, either to highlight the legacy of Menippean satire in the poem⁴⁰ or to underline the subversion of the topoi of the epic genre in the lunar scenes.⁴¹ Acknowledging the influence on the lunar episode of modes other than epic, such as satire and comedy, becomes particularly relevant when one takes into account the relationship

37. Ita Mac Carthy, “Ariosto the Lunar Traveller,” *The Modern Language Review* 104.1 (Jan 2009): 71–82, 71.

38. For an overview of the various readings of the episode, see Ascoli, 291.

39. Zatti, 145: “la poesia è utile (al potere) in quanto manipola la verità storica, ma è anche utile (alla verità) in quanto denuncia questa manipolazione.” My translation.

40. Mac Carthy, 72.

41. Jane Everson, “Ariosto and the *Orlando Furioso*: An Epic?” *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies* 2.1 (1993): 223–42, 239.

between writers and patrons central to St. John's speech. Ariosto's praise for his patron, and his commitment in both the poem and the satires to immortalize him in exchange for appropriate recompense, seems an elaborate *beffa* (prank): in the *Orlando Furioso*, by equating poets and liars, Ariosto reveals his own tribute to the Este to be a patent untruth. As a consequence, he has "paid Ippolito d'Este the most backhanded of compliments."⁴² There is further irony in the realization that Ariosto did indeed render Ippolito's name immortal, but his fame is more that of the disappointing, unrewarding patron of the *Satire* than the virtuous one Ariosto wrote about elsewhere. In the end, the poet's satirical voice and satiric representation of the patron prevail over the dynastic commendation of epic.

These considerations may shed further light on the relationship between Ariosto and Aretino suggested by Doni's *impresa*. Intriguingly, the same satire wherein Ariosto sardonically commends Bembo for his skill at pleasing princes with flattering lies also features an homage to Pietro Aretino. In the satire, Ariosto claims to be limiting the critiques of his contemporaries, lest the satirical wit he displays make him look as if he were stealing from Aretino's "armari."⁴³ As noted by Gianluca Genovese, the use of the term *armari* is particularly trenchant since it can mean both "armoire" and "armory": Ariosto would thus be stealing not only Aretino's private property from his armoire, but, more precisely, weapons from his armory.⁴⁴ Genovese also remarks that at the time *Satira VI* was written (1524–25) the weapon that Ariosto may have been interested in stealing was related to Aretino's desire to become *virtutum ac vitiorum demonstrator*—that is to say, one unafraid to uncover the truth, be it pleasant or unpleasant.

Had Ariosto, then, shortly after the second edition of the *Orlando Furioso*, repudiated the idea of writers as liars acting in their own interest and converted to a belief in writing as truth-telling? His complete disavowal of the figure of the writer presented by St. John is unlikely, given that the speech remains in the final edition of the poem, and considering that the circumstances of Ariosto's

42. Quint, 406.

43. "But if I strive to lay bare the altars of the others, you will tell me I am rifling the closets of Il Pistoia and Pietro Aretino." "Ma se degli altri io vuo' scoprir gli altari, / tu dirai che rubato e del Pistoia / e di Petro Aretino abbia gli armari" (*Satira VI*, 93–96).

44. Gianluca Genovese, "Stolen Weapons: Pietro Aretino and Ludovico Ariosto," paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America, New York, NY, March 2014.

life resulted in him being a court poet for his entire career. Promising fame to his patron was, as a court poet, his only realistically viable instrument in fighting for recognition and rewards.

For sure, Ariosto was impressed by Aretino's notion of the pen as a writer's weapon of choice, and by the idea of the man of letters who dares to address the powerful on equal terms, using the power of the written word to denounce the truth or, at times, more cynically, to gain a personal advantage. In recent years, scholarship has begun to re-evaluate the relationship between Ariosto and Aretino, attempting to overcome the long-standing critical commonplace that the two were radically opposed.⁴⁵ In the common narrative, the "great writer" Ariosto—better known for the "noble" genre of epic than for his satires—would have held little respect for the "low writer" Aretino—commonly associated with the "base" genre of satire. In particular, the pair's mutual admiration, and especially Ariosto's admiration for Aretino, must be re-assessed. The two writers appear to have been equally drawn to reclaiming the crucial role of the man of letters through the power of his pen. Nonetheless, while Aretino would go on to become the ambassador of truth-telling—an attitude exemplified by the motto *veritas odium parit* at the end of the first book of his letters—Ariosto endorsed a more ambiguous attitude towards sincerity and lies. It is striking that Doni himself seems to have misunderstood this aspect of both authors. In his hurry to defame his archenemy, Aretino, Doni made him the symbol for a cynical distortion of language, and, clearly disregarding the statements on the topic that can be found in the *Orlando Furioso*, celebrated Ariosto as the advocate of truth.

Yet to say that Ariosto was an unrepentant liar would be just as inaccurate. St. John's words in the *Orlando Furioso* reveal that the ability to change reality with one's words is Ariosto's weapon, and that he intends to use it to claim a role from the powerful, and to reject the subjection inherent in his position as a courtier; while sincerity, as described in the *Satire*, becomes the author's main tool to assert his otherness to courtliness, and to oppose the logic that courtliness entails. Throughout Ariosto's oeuvre, sincerity and lies appear as antithetical weapons that are, nevertheless, aimed at the same target. In

45. On the relationship between Ariosto and Aretino, see Marco Faini, "Un'opera dimenticata di Pietro Aretino: il *Lamento de uno cortigiano*," *Filologia e Critica* 32 (2007): 75–93; Stefano Jossa, "Veraci finzioni: sullo statuto della letteratura nella cultura delle corti," in *Classicismo e culture di Antico regime*, ed. Amedeo Quondam (Rome: Bulzoni, 2010), 197–212; Genovese.

portraying himself as a truthful liar, Ariosto underlines the struggles, as well as the unrelenting aspirations, of the *litteratus* of sixteenth-century Italy, with unparalleled clarity.