

Conquistare la montagna

Storia di un'idea

Conquering mountains
The history of an idea

a cura di Matteo Al Kalak, Carlo Baja Guarienti

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National Political Ideologies and Local *Maggio* Traditions of the Reggio Emilia Apennines: *Roncisvalle* vs. *Rodomonte*

Jo Ann Cavallo

The *maggio epico*, also called *maggio drammatico* to distinguish it from *maggi lirici* (springtime festival songs), has recently been shown to have antecedents dating back to the Renaissance, but the current tradition is documented in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines from the late 1700s¹. This form of folk opera, generally performed in a natural outdoor setting on summer Sunday afternoons, consists in singers dramatizing stories that are often directly adapted from or inspired by medieval and Renaissance chivalric romance². In this way we might contend that canonical texts composed for the Estense court of Ferrara or the urban elite of Florence – which in turn refashioned subject matter originating largely in France – virtually “conquered” remote Apenninic villages by periodically transforming members of its rural population into chivalric knights sporting swords, shields and fancy feathered helmets recalling images from illustrated volumes. Indeed, as Romolo Fioroni has remarked, «nessuno di noi, evidentemente, può oggi capire un *maggio* [...] senza la cavalleria, perché l’anima del poema cavalleresco è così profondamente penetrata

¹ For the epic *maggio*'s forerunners in sixteenth-century Tuscany, see M. Feo, *Il Maggio prima del Maggio*, in «Il paese», XIX, n. 3, April-May 2008, pp. 1, 3. Following A. Prosperi (*La religione della Controriforma e le feste del Maggio nell'appennino tosco-emiliano*, in «Critica storica», XVIII, 1981, pp. 202-222), moreover, Feo argues that this earlier cultural expression with pagan connotations was suppressed by Catholic authorities during the Counter-Reformation and remained dormant or underground for centuries. For the tradition as it developed over the last two centuries, see in particular R. Fioroni, G. Vezzani (ed.), «Vengo l'avviso a dare». *Appunti per una bibliografia della drammatica popolare: indagine sull'attività dei complessi del Maggio dell'Appennino reggiano e modenese: 1955-1982*, Centro Culturale “A. Benedetti” di Villa Minozzo, Reggio Emilia 1983; M.E. Giusti, “*Canterem mirabil cose*”: *Immagini e aspetti del Maggio Drammatico*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2000; T. Magrini (ed.), *Il Maggio Drammatico. Una tradizione di teatro in musica*, Analisi, Bologna 1992; G. Vezzani (ed.), *La tradizione del Maggio*, Biblioteca Comunale A. Panizzi di Reggio Emilia, Reggio Emilia 1983; and, specifically for the Reggio Emilia Apennines, N. Zambonini, *Storia e tradizione nell'Appennino reggiano: La rappresentazione dei Maggi*, Università di Bologna, 2000.

² This is especially true of the Reggio Emilia Apennines, the geographical area to be considered in this essay.

nel cuore e nella fantasia del popolo da contaminare ogni argomento e fonte»³. It is no less true, however, as this essay will argue, that very different ideologies can be expressed under the umbrella of *cavalleria* and that through the process of adaptation the *maggio* authors and companies have reshaped the stories to reflect their own particular Weltanschauung. Using as a working hypothesis the principle asserted by Walter J. Ong and others that «oral traditions reflect a society's present cultural values rather than idle curiosity about the past», this essay compares two prominent *maggio* companies from the same Apenninic village in an attempt to uncover how each company's performances are tied to the expression of its core principles⁴. Of special interest to me is the depiction of the designated enemy, which brings to the fore questions about group identity, whether local, national, ethnic, social or religious⁵.

Although there are several features common to epic *maggi* performed throughout the Tuscan-Emilian mountain towns that carry on the tradition, including choreographed battles with swords and shields and a symbolic contest between good and evil, the Reggio Emilia Apennines in particular feature adaptations of medieval and Renaissance romance epic narratives pitting Christian paladins against Saracen foes⁶. Yet even within the same

³ R. Fioroni, *Filoni ariosteschi nel 'Maggio' dell'Appennino*, extract from «Bollentino Storico Reggiano», VII, 1974, n. 25, p. 1.

⁴ W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, Routledge, New York 2002 [1982], p. 48. V. Turner has also aptly argued for the social relevance of ritual and theatrical performances: «The stage drama, when it is meant to do more than entertain – though entertainment is always one of its vital aims – is a metacommentary, explicit or implicit, witting or unwitting, on the major social dramas of its social context (wars, revolutions, scandals, institutional changes)» (*Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?*, in R. Schechner, W. Appel (ed.), *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge 1997 [1990], p. 16).

⁵ My forthcoming essay, *Il destino di Clorinda, Erminia ed Armida nel Maggio epico dell'Appennino tosco-emiliano*, in R. Puggioni (ed.), *Torquato Tasso nel teatro moderno*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2016, specifically analyzes differences among female Saracen characters in *maggi* based on Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. For a comparative study on the representation of Saracen characters in the analogous Sicilian puppet theater tradition, see J.A. Cavallo, *Encountering Saracens in Italian Romance Epic and its Folk Performance Traditions*, in L. Shutters, K. Attar (ed.), *Teaching Medieval and Early-Modern Cross Cultural Encounters Across Disciplines and Periods*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014, pp. 159-178.

⁶ As S. Fontana remarks: «Sono queste le terre dove ancora risuona la tromba epica del Boiardo e dell'Ariosto, i due più grandi poeti reggiani di tutti i tempi» (*Il Maggio*, Olschki, Firenze 1964 [1929], p. 14).

municipality, the portrayal of Christian-Saracen relations is far from unified⁷. The two most tenacious *maggio* companies from the mountain town of Villa Minozzo – the Compagnia Maggistica di Costabona and the Compagnia Maggistica Monte Cusna di Asta – offer an apt case for comparison⁸. Two *maggi* that bring their ideological differences to the fore are Costabona's *Roncisvalle*, adapted by Romolo Fioroni in 1966 from various versions of the *Chanson de Roland*, and Asta's *Rodomonte*, an anonymous text transcribed by the company's *capomaggio* Giordano Zambonini in 1975⁹.

The sources of the two *maggi* under consideration already convey a different worldview despite the fact that both ostensibly feature Charlemagne's paladins. The *Chanson de Roland* (*Song of Roland*), dating from the mid-eleventh to early twelfth century, expresses a Crusading ethos in which Christianity is locked in inexorable conflict with the Saracen enemy. The legendary hero Roland (who is renamed Orlando in the Italian tradition) is characterized by an unconditional devotion to his religion, king, and country, and by a determined readiness to die in an ambush with his fellow paladins rather than call for reinforcements. The anonymous *Rodomonte*, on the other hand, is adapted from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, an early sixteenth-century romance epic that, following Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, brings Carolingian characters into contact with the fantastical world of Arthurian romance, giving marked prominence to the desires of individual knights and damsels, whether Christian or Saracen¹⁰.

⁷ Following the conventions of medieval and Renaissance chivalric romance, *maggio* authors use the names «Saracen» and «pagan» (and sometimes «Turk») interchangeably, avoiding historical religious terms such as «Islam» and «Muslim».

⁸ The companies are named for the *frazioni* (neighborhoods) of Costabona and Asta within the municipality of Villa Minozzo (population of about 4000). For more information on the performance activity of *maggio* companies, see R. Fioroni, *Indagine sull'attività dei complessi del Maggio dell'Appennino reggiano e modenese: 1955-1982*, in R. Fioroni, G. Vezzani (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 17-46.

⁹ Both *maggi* hold a prominent place in the repertory of their respective companies. *Roncisvalle* was Romolo Fioroni's first *maggio* and it was also one of the two *maggi* chosen to represent the historical trajectory of the company on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary (together with a *maggio* by Romolo's grandfather Stefano Fioroni). *Rodomonte* is one of the two most performed texts by Asta's *maggerini*, referred to as a "cult" *maggio* by company member Luca Sillari and often recalled through the singing of excerpts when the company gathers for festive dinners.

¹⁰ In *The World beyond Europe in the Romance Epics of Boiardo and Ariosto*, I argue that the *Orlando Furioso* progressively moves toward the ideology of Carolingian epic as the poem progresses (University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2013).

The different treatment of the Saracen foreigner in the source material is further developed in the respective *maggio* scripts. The prologue to the *Roncisvalle* presents the ensuing conflict as a battle between good and evil, or rather between courage («l'ardimento») and vile treachery («il bieco e vile inganno») in which ultimately justice and virtue will win out over iniquity («Verrà alfin resa giustizia / morte avranno i traditori; / dagli uman, alti valori / sarà vinta l'iniquizia!»). The evildoing is perpetrated by both the Saracen camp as a whole and by the Christian traitor Gano, who in the *maggio* seeks revenge against his fellow paladins for having been spurned by Alda and upbraided by Orlando.

The *Rodomonte*, by contrast, allots comparatively greater space to vicissitudes on the Saracen side, where characters are developed in their own right and not treated simply as enemies of the Christian heroes. The prominence of the Saracen characters is even suggested in its title, which replaces Orlando's name with that of the fierce Algerian warrior king. As the *maggio* opens, Charlemagne announces that King Agramante has invaded his territory motivated by a desire for revenge, thus completely leaving out the question of their different religious creed. The action then moves directly to the Saracen side as the African king, surrounded by the Christian army, sends a messenger to look for military support, while the Spanish Saracen maiden Doralice, in the arms of her new beau Mandricardo, fears the approach of her old flame Rodomonte. Having omitted Mandricardo's ruthlessness in abducting Doralice in the original poem, the *maggio* underscores the tender affection between the two Saracens and transforms Ariosto's fickle Doralice into a model of devotion. The *maggio*, furthermore, privileges scenes that feature Christians and Saracens in analogous situations. For example, while Orlando arrives at the tree inscribed with the names of his beloved Angelica and her lover Medoro, Rodomonte learns that his own betrothed Doralice prefers another and thus in some respects parallels Orlando in his loss of sanity.

The distinct worldview of the two *maggi* emerges even more sharply in their respective conclusions. In the *Roncisvalle*, all the Saracens are killed after Charlemagne returns to avenge the rout, and the mortally-wounded Gano repents of his evil doing, invoking the forgiveness of both God and his peers in his closing speech:

È giunta ormai l'estrema ora fatale,
a Dio perdono chiedo d'ogni errore
e ancora a te e al mio imperatore,

Nonetheless, its romance adventures still provide a notable contrast to the implacable opposition of Christians and Saracens in the tragic story of Roncevaux.

per la fierezza che mi spinse al male.
Su tanto danno ancor voi piangerete,
con Dio voi tutti, alfin, perdonerete.

(stanza 222)

At last the final extreme hour has arrived
I ask forgiveness from God for every error
and also from you and my emperor,
for the pride that pushed me to evil.
You will still weep over so much harm,
with God all of you will in the end forgive.

Addressing the public directly in the final two stanzas, the chorus offers a vantage point from which to interpret the entire drama:

Su tanto e tale errore
ancora piange il mondo
per il dolor profondo
che l'uomo fa patir
quando scende a tradir!

Velate, calde lacrime,
solcano il nostro viso;
siam certi, in paradiso,
vivranno i nostri eroi,
vegliando su di noi! (stanzas 225-226)

About such and so much error
the world still weeps
for the profound sorrow
that man causes it to suffer
when he descends to treachery.

Hidden hot tears
fall down our face;
we are certain, in Paradise,
our heroes will live,
watching over us.

While the penultimate stanza frames the epic as a cautionary tale of betrayal justly punished, the concluding stanza provides a happy twist to

a tragic story by moving from the collective tears of those present to their certitude of the ascension of the epic heroes to heaven where they will take on the role of intercessors. The connection between the *maggerini* and the spectators, epic fiction and current reality, as well as the afterlife and earthly existence, is suggested by the fate of the play's heroes as protectors of the community. The shared fate of all those present is reinforced by the first person plural possessive adjective «nostro viso» («our face») and «nostri eroi» («our heroes») as well as by the final rhyme of «eroi» («heroes») and «noi» («us»).

The adaptation of *Rodomonte* generally performed by the Compagnia Monte Cusna di Asta, on the contrary, actually eliminates references to Christianity present in the script's original ending. First, following the reconciliation between the *donne guerriere* Bradamante and Marfisa (stanza 338) that will free Ruggero and Bradamante to marry each other, the company skips over the script's conclusive battle of three Christians against three Saracens at Lipadusa and moves directly to the final scene of the couple's wedding interrupted by Rodomonte's challenge. Second, the final pronouncement on Rodomonte following his death is altered to give a different emphasis. In the *maggio* script, Ruggero and the collectivity («tutti») treat Rodomonte as an exemplum of *superbia* punished and offer their gratitude to the Christian God:

Ruggero	Rodomonte quel superbo che fu in vita sì possente
Tutti	giace estinto finalmente. Ringraziamo il Padre e il Verbo. (stanza 552)

Ruggero	Rodomonte, that proud one who was so powerful in life,
All	lies extinct at long last. Let us give thanks to the Father and the Word.

Omitting the above *quartina*, the company inserts instead the final *ottava rima* of the *Orlando Furioso* in which Rodomonte remains scornful even as he arrives at the shore of Acheronte (*Orlando Furioso* 46.140). In this revised version, not only is the dying warrior proudly unrepentant as he makes his way to a pagan afterlife, but the script's reference to Christian Providence at the conclusion of the drama («Ringraziamo il Padre e il Verbo») is removed.

The *Rodomonte*'s happy ending, a required element of even the most

tragic of *maggio* plays, is provided by the wedding festivities of Bradamante and Ruggero evoked in the final *arietta*. Whereas Ariosto had left readers with the vision of Rodomonte's indignant descent to the underworld, the *maggio* concludes with everyone («tutti») celebrating the newlyweds, along with peace and freedom from aggression:

Viva gli sposi evviva
dei principi la pace
e l'avversario audace
mai più ci turberà
mai più ci turberà. (stanza 554)

Long live the bride and groom,
the peace of the rulers,
and the prideful opponent
will disturb us nevermore,
will disturb us nevermore.

As I sought further insight into the significance of the interactions between Christian and Saracen characters for the *compagnie maggistiche* of the Regio Emilia Apennines, I turned to authorities (and authors) from both companies, Costabona's Romolo Fioroni (1928-2010) and Asta's Berto Zambonini (b. 1923). The focus of both men was on the local community and neither mentioned any sense of antagonism toward the world beyond Europe. Indeed, Romolo Fioroni, in looking back at the shared enjoyment of the chivalric stories that served as traditional sources of the *maggio* plays, acknowledged that in his youth he did not know much about global geography. He recalled listening to a local reader name the city of Baghdad and wondering where such an exotic-sounding place could be located¹¹. When speaking of *Roncisvalle*, Romolo concentrated on the essential characteristics required of the paladins, such as obedience to constituted authority (Charlemagne) and loyalty to the group leader (Orlando). He added that he had developed the character of Gano to provide a motivation for his betrayal and to draw out his essential humanity.

Berto Zambonini, a singer, author, constructor of scenery and special effects, and a major presence within his company for decades, likewise made no reference to hostility toward foreign cultures and remained focused on his local mountain community. This is of course not surprising

¹¹ In Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, for example, Baghdad was the home to the most vile tyrant (Truffaldino) as well as to two knights exemplary for their courtesy (Iroldo and Prasildo).

given that, unlike Sicily, whose tradition of puppet theater featuring the paladins of France could be seen as evoking the island's various invasions and occupation by North African Muslims, the northern mountain town of Villa Minozzo never risked conquest by an «infidel foe». Who, then, did the Saracen adversaries represent and why did they seem to receive more sympathetic treatment on the part of the company in Asta? Zambonini, when referring to the interruption of *maggio* performances in Asta during the 1950s and 1960s, incidentally provided evidence of a perception of Saracens based not on the historical reality of Muslims in the world, but on his own community's orientation in Italian politics. According to Berto, his group ceased performing during this period because for them the *maggio*'s Christians were none other than Italy's Christian-Democrats. As opponents of this national political party, therefore, they identified with the Saracens who in every *maggio* ended up on the losing side:

Si è smesso di cantare perché in quel periodo c'era la politica, c'era la lotta politica tra Democrazia Cristiana (clero), comunismo, e via dicendo. Allora noi di Asta eravamo piuttosto di sinistra. I maggi, nove maggi, anzi dieci maggi su dieci, in fondo vincevano sempre i Cristiani e i Pagani perdevano. Per noi i Pagani erano quelli di sinistra, i comunisti, e i Cristiani erano i democristiani. Allora smettemmo per quel fatto lì. Perché dico: se cantiamo il maggio, aiutiamo la politica di destra. Smettemmo per quel fatto. Tant'è vero che quelli di Costabona, che sono di destra, continuavano a cantare il maggio.

We stopped singing because in that period there was politics, there was a political battle between the Christian Democrats (clergy), communism, and so on. So we from Asta were rather left-wing. The *maggi*, nine *maggi*, even ten *maggi* out of ten, in the end the Christians won and the Pagans lost. For us the Pagans were those on the left, the Communists, and the Christians were the Christian-Democrats. So we stopped because of that fact. Because, I say, if we sing the *maggio*, we help the politics of the Right. We stopped for that fact. And it goes to show that those from Costabona, who are right-wing, continued to sing the *maggio*¹².

Might the *maggerini* of Costabona also have interpreted the *maggio*'s traditional background of Christian-Saracen animosity along political lines? Although Romolo Fioroni's account of the revival of his *compagnia*

¹² July 2002 interview, quotation available on <http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/epic-maggio/interviews>. What is relevant in this context is not whether Berto Zambonini was correct in his assessment of the group's self-identification with the Saracens, but the fact that he made the analogy.

maggistica following a hiatus in the 1950s does not delve into political affiliations, his recollection of the initial impetus to stage a *maggio* in 1962 brings to bear the community's observance of the Christian calendar since he specified that the crucial conversation took place on «il lunedì di Pasqua» (Easter Monday)¹³. Referring to the Costabona community as a «parrocchia», a group of church-goers tied to the neighborhood, he also mentioned in passing that one of his relatives had been the parish priest. Religious observance does appear to be a characteristic of Costabona, whose inhabitants celebrated the restoration of their Chiesa Parrocchiale (parish church) in 1981, the centenary of its original construction¹⁴, and even today the *parrocchia* (parish) attends the annual «messa dei maggerini» (Mass of the *maggio* singers) on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption. The centrality of religion, at least in Romolo's case, was linked to a commitment in the political sphere, since he was active in the local Christian-Democrat party from 1945 until its demise in 1993 when it was reformulated as the Partito Popolare¹⁵.

Whereas initially it might seem that the chivalric narratives of Renaissance courts had conquered the mountain communities through the *maggio* tradition, a comparison of two key *maggi* from Costabona and Asta suggests that at least during the second half of the twentieth century it was instead the national political scene that was “conquering” this traditional art form, creating two distinct currents in line with Communist and Christian-Democrat positions. Whereas in Costabona the Saracens could have stood for any force threatening the constituted authority of Church and State, Berto Zambonini maintained that members of his community in Asta identified with the Saracens as the perennially disadvantaged opponents of the ever-victorious Christian Democrats. While it is true that other *maggio* scripts performed by the respective companies may not

¹³ Information relayed to me by Romolo Fioroni stems from a July 2002 interview and is included in my documentary *Il maggio emiliano: ricordi, riflessioni, brani*, Province of Reggio Emilia, Comunità Montana Appennino Reggiano, Comune di Villa Minozzo, Parco del Gigante, and Centro Tradizioni Popolari (LU), 2003.

¹⁴ The booklet commemorating this event opens with a greeting from the bishop Gilberto Baroni stating that «[a]l centro del vostro paese sta la Chiesa Parrocchiale, perché al centro, nel cuore della vostra vita, in mezzo alle vostre fatiche e ai dolori, perfino nel momento della morte, sta Dio Padre» (*Lettera del Vescovo di Reggio e Guastalla*, in F. Milani, *Costabona: Orme civiche e religiose del passato*, Futurgraf, Reggio Emilia 1981, p. 5).

¹⁵ Romolo's active engagement in political life through the Christian-Democrat party and the Associazione Liberi Partigiani Cristiani is touched upon in various tributes in «Il Cantastorie», 48, s. III, n. 77, 2010.

have brought this opposition so vividly to the surface¹⁶, it would be hard to imagine a *Roncisvalle* performed by Berto's comrades or a *Rodomonte* performed under Romolo's guidance¹⁷.

Further evidence of the ideological distinction traced in the two *maggi* can be found in the manner in which representatives of the two groups have described the spirit of their community and the purported values inherent in *maggio* scripts. Whereas the key words that local *maggio* scholar Benedetto Valdesalici chose to describe the community of Asta were «independent, free, anticonformist» («c'è qualcosa di speciale in Asta ed è lo spirito indipendente, libero, anticonformista degli abitanti che credetemi non s'insegna»)¹⁸, Romolo Fioroni underscored instead the traditional moral virtues such as a sense of honor, duty, respect, and honesty («il senso dell'onore, del dovere, del rispetto, dell'onestà») that *maggio* authors could find in their sources¹⁹. Even for a text like the *Orlando Furioso*, purportedly an example of art for art's sake without any thought to a moral imperative («ha come obiettivo l'arte per l'arte, e pertanto esula dal suo ideale qualunque problema morale»), Romolo asserted that the *maggio* tradition transformed its strictly ludic content into didactic material with ethical ends («il 'maggio', per contro, utilizza i contenuti ariosteschi ai fini ludici e ne fa materiale didascalico con finalità morale»)²⁰.

The above comparison of the *Roncisvalle* and the *Rodomonte* suggests that encounters between Christians and Saracens could be interpreted by two *compagnie maggistiche* from the same mountain municipality to express a distinct ideological position and scale of values connected to the

¹⁶ The full repertory performed by both companies, in fact, comprises a wider range of themes that attenuate the differences highlighted here. As a case in point, among Fioroni's compositions are *Antigone* and *Spartaco*, two *maggi* that honor individual resistance to illegitimate power, and Berto Zambonini's own *Carlomagno*, based on Andrea da Barberino's *Reali di Francia*, celebrates the youth and rise to power of the Christian emperor.

¹⁷ Incidentally, although a reworking of the *maggio Orlando Pazzo* is attributed to Romolo's grandfather Stefano Fioroni (1862-1940), it has not been performed for several decades. The *Furioso* adaptation performed by the Costabona company after its reconstitution was his *Ginevra di Scozia*, a «delicata e patetica storia d'amore» (R. Fioroni, *Filoni ariosteschi...*, cit., p. 5).

¹⁸ B. Valdesalici, G. Zambonini (ed.), *Il canto del Maggio in Val d'Asta*, La Nuova Tipolito, Felina 2013, p. 1.

¹⁹ R. Fioroni, *I "Maggi": una raccolta di ottanta componimenti manoscritti*, extract from «Bollettino storico reggiano», III, 1970, n. 8, pp. 1-14, p. 5.

²⁰ R. Fioroni, *Filoni ariosteschi...*, cit., p. 9.

national political scene in post-war Italy without any link to the historic relations between Islam and Christianity.

But what about the *maggi* written and performed in more recent years? Although according to musical ethnographer Tullia Magrini today's *maggio* participants and spectators may cherish the cultural traditions of their ancestors as a shield against the modernized and urban world just beyond the confines of their mountainous territory,²¹ it is no less true that they are also immersed in contemporary society, many with both careers and primary residences in urban centers around Reggio Emilia. They are, moreover, in contact with individuals from around the world, whether through media or direct experience, giving them a heightened awareness that the foreign characters in their *maggi* could be interpreted by the general public as representatives of actual peoples from diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. I would therefore like to conclude by briefly sketching the new "face of the enemy" in a number of recent *maggi* performed by current members of the same two companies.

The most prolific *maggio* author in the Compagnia Maggistica Monte Cusna di Asta is Luca Sillari (b. 1973), who has written several *maggi* that break out of the traditional opposition of Christians and Saracens to imagine alternative scenarios, including newly invented heroines such as the snake charmer in *Rolando da Corniano* (2001) and the vampire in *Antinea* (2003) and contemporary themes like the interior battle against depression in *I cavalieri erranti* (2008). Even *maggi* based on medieval history and chivalric romance aim to underscore common humanity over geographic boundaries, as when Saint Francis travels to the Holy Land to advocate an end to the military conflict in *Le vele dei crociati* (2006). This sentiment is perhaps most succinctly expressed in Sillari's adaptation of Boiardo's romance epic, likewise entitled *Orlando Innamorato* (2004). When Brandimarte justifies his need to fight against a threat from the East («di andare in guerra io non son contento / da Oriente viene una minaccia ardita»), his sage beloved Fiordelisa gets to have the last word (indeed, the last two verses of an ottava rima stanza): «Oriente ed Occidente pari sono / se al centro della vita poni l'uomo» («East and West are equal / if at the center of life you place the individual»). Fiordelisa's statement takes on a greater political relevance if we recall that the *maggio* was composed around the time of the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq, when multitudes of Italians hung rainbow-colored flags with the word «PACE» («PEACE») outside their windows and demonstrated in the streets to protest the military action, which had the explicit support of the Italian government.

²¹ T. Magrini, *Maggio drammatico: Folk Theatre in Emilia*, CD-ROM, Si.lab, Firenze 2003.

Another contemporary *maggio* author, Davide Borghi (b. 1973), has also penned *maggi* that veer away from judging characters according to group identity. His *Arminea e Liseno* (2000), performed by the Compagnia Maggistica Monte Cusna di Asta, takes place in two imaginary realms and an enchanted forest (Bosco degli incanti). It is the overreaching pride and acquisitive desire from within the ruling family of both realms that set the plot on a disastrous course: while the children of King Nuvolano depose him because of his refusal to wage war to conquer neighboring Torreluna, the ambitious queen of this latter realm recklessly sends her son off to distant lands to seek the rainbow. The *maggio* is a poignant illustration of Boiardo's warning at the opening of the *Orlando Innamorato* against the power elite who only want what they cannot have, with the consequent destruction to their populations:

E sì come egli advien a' gran signori
Che pur quel voglion che non pòno avere,
E quanto son difficoltà maggiori
La desiata cosa ad otenerne,
Pongono il regno spesso in grandi erori,
Né posson quel che voglion possedere (1.1.5).

And as it happens to great lords
Who only want what they can't have,
The greater obstacles there are
To reaching what they would obtain
The more they jeopardize their realms,
And what they want, they cannot gain.²²

The disastrous course is eventually reversed through disobedience to unjust commands, increased self-awareness, the rejection of aggression against others, and the practice of benevolence.

Maggio author Daniele Monti from the Costabona company has likewise composed *maggi* that abandon the epic framework of antagonistic groups and has linked evil instead to an inordinate craving for power. His first two compositions, *La rivolta degli oppressi* (1997) and *Il medaglione di Gradessa* (2005), turn our attention to the abuses perpetrated by the powerful against innocents both within the same political state and in neighboring realms. His most recent *maggio*, entitled *Il drago di Avalon* (2014), presents some

²² M.M. Boiardo, *Inamoramento de Orlando*, A. Tissoni Benvenuti and C. Montagnani (ed.), in *Opere*, 2 vols., Ricciardi, Milano 1999; *Orlando in Love*, C.S. Ross (trans.), Parlor Press, West Lafayette (In) 2004.

of the principal characters from the Breton cycle in a new guise. Without giving away the ending of the story, I can say that his original plot, while retaining certain familiar features such as the love affair between Lancelot and Guinivere, challenges previous versions of the Arthurian legend. If at the opening of the *Orlando Innamorato* Boiardo claimed to reveal the unflattering biography of Orlando that Turpin had purportedly kept hidden so as not to embarrass the paladin, at the conclusion of his *maggio* Monti intimates a more sinister reason for the suppression of the story that he brings to light, namely, the whitewashing of nefarious deeds committed behind the scenes by the power elite in order to paint an idealized portrait of their rulership. In all three *maggi*, Monti invites the public to distrust those who seek to attain power, warning against their potentially ruthless methods, while calling for communication and collaboration across social boundaries and political borders.

It may also be that particular structural features of the epic *maggio* facilitate moving beyond an antagonistic approach toward a foreign ‘other.’ The distinguishing characteristics between the Saracen and Christian knights are simple variations in the *maggerino*’s costume and shield, while the female damsels don Renaissance-style gowns regardless of origin or creed. The Saracens, like their Christian counterparts, are portrayed by *maggerini* who are recognizable as members of the community, without make-up or masks. As there is no “backstage” to shield them from view when they are not performing, *maggerini* slip in and out of their roles in full view of everyone, watching the action and sometimes conversing with the public when they are not “on stage”. The *vinaio* circulates offering a glass of red wine to moisten the throats of Christians and Saracens alike. Moreover, the company enters together in a procession and ritualistically circles the performance space before the onset of the action, and they all typically link arms with each other as they sing a final five-verse *arietta* directly to the public²³.

In sum, even though folk culture, especially in traditionally isolated mountainous regions, is often considered a conservative venue that conveys values passed down from previous generations, an examination of the epic *maggio* in the Apenninic municipality of Villa Minozzo shows that the staged plays are far from a static reenactment of an outmoded past. On the contrary, the representation of the enemy in the epic *maggio*

²³ In the case of Monte Cusna di Asta, the “congedo” negates difference as it reestablishes the equivalence between performers and public: «Oh spectators present, / excuse our errors, / we are not real actors, / but folks like you, / but folks like you» («O pubblico presente, / scusate i nostri errori, / non siamo veri attori, / ma gente come voi, / ma gente come voi!»).

Conquistare la montagna/Conquering mountains

is ever-changing and linked to national issues as well as factors specific to each performance community. Recently composed plays by authors from both companies – despite their continued adherence to «the highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes» – share a questioning of political power, condemnation of aggressive warfare, and promotion of understanding across barriers²⁴. In this way, *maggerini* use their traditional Apenninic art form to voice views on pressing national and global issues of the present time and thus offer a viable vehicle for social discourse into the future.

²⁴ The quoted phrase is from W.J. Ong, *op. cit.*, p. 45.