Mary-Michelle DeCoste. *Hopeless Love. Boiardo, Ariosto, and Narratives of Queer Female Desire*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Pp. x, 165. ISBN 978-0-8020-9684-5 (hardbound). \$ 35.

Focusing on female-female desire in Italian texts from the mid-fourteenth through the mid-sixteenth centuries, this slim volume makes a substantial contribution to the study of queer desire in Renaissance literature. Over the course of an introduction, five short chapters and an epilogue, *Hopeless Love* seeks “to contextualize Boiardo’s and Ariosto’s use of queer female desire as a motif within the larger literary landscape of medieval and Renaissance Italy and to identify its antecedents and the texts it influences” (4), a goal which it attains admirably via theoretically-informed close readings of texts from a wide range of genres. In particular, DeCoste engages in a detailed analysis of the Bradamante-Fiordispina episodes in both Boiardo’s *Orlando innamorato* and Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* that suggests, first, a way in which the earlier text can be read as complete and, second, that Ariosto’s rivalrous rewriting of Boiardo’s Bradamante-Fiordispina tale transforms this instance of queer female desire from a narrative crisis into a narrative opportunity.

The introduction situates these readings both theoretically (casting queer desire as a motif in Italian Renaissance literature that is both a narrative impulse and a “de-narrativizing force,” 7) and historically (in terms of the theological, legal and medical attitudes towards same-sex relations in Renaissance society). The careful laying out of the arguments that follow provides a clear guide to the entire book and is indicative of the remarkable attentiveness on the part of the author to her readers, a feature of the work throughout.

Chapters 1 (“Warrior Woman / Lovely Lady”) and 2 (“To Disguise and Deceive”) examine texts that feature two archetypal antecedents to Boiardo’s and Ariosto’s character Bradamante: the maiden warrior and the cross-dressed woman. Chapter 1 exposes the ways in which three different texts (Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, Andrea da Barberino’s *L’Aspramonte* and Luigi Pulci’s *Morgante*) mitigate the disruptive potential of their maiden warrior characters through specific narrative strategies which culminate, respectively, in “domestication, an open ending and free circulation” (23). Chapter 2 argues convincingly that a fuller understanding of Bradamante’s character can be attained by the close examination of cross-dressed women in two other genres (the hagiography and the *cantare*), which the author undertakes via four texts: the tales of Saints Theodora and Eugenia from Jacobus de Varagine’s extremely popular *Legenda aurea* as well as the late Trecento *cantari* *La bella Camilla* by Piero da Siena and *Reina d’Oriente* by Antonio Pucci.

Chapters 3 (“Stopping without Ending”) and 4 (“Concluding the Tale”) form the central section of the book, respectively addressing the motif of queer female desire in Boiardo’s and Ariosto’s poems. Chapter 3 focuses in depth on the much-disputed conclusion of the *Orlando innamorato*, employing the Bradamante-Fiordispina episode to argue “that Boiardo employs a strategy of perverse narrative to accomplish apparently contradictory and irreconcilable goals: both a conclusion of the narrative and the deferral of its conclusion” (55). Chapter 4 examines three poems, each of which is an attempt to answer, rewrite and control Boiardo’s *Orlando innamorato*: one *rifacimento*—Francesco Berni’s *Orlando innamorato* of

1541—and two *giunte*—Niccolò degli Agostini's *Orlando innamorato* of 1506 and Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* of 1532.

In this, the longest chapter of the book, two rather cursory discussions (of the Berni and degli Agostini texts) are followed by a detailed analysis of queer female desire in Ariosto's famous epic. The author makes a strong case that Ariosto's version of the Bradamante-Fiordispina episode should be read as "a struggle for narrative superiority" in which Boiardo's "male narrative impotence" becomes a "male narrative opportunity" in Ariosto's hands—one that enables him to successfully dominate the earlier poem (77-78). Though the structure of this chapter (two very short sections followed by the longest section in the book) and its abrupt conclusion leave something to be desired, the close readings in which the author engages are intelligent and provocative. Whereas previous scholars have sought to characterize Fiordispina's desire as either homo- or heterosexual, for instance, DeCoste astutely argues that Fiordispina's desire is subversive precisely because it transcends gender, radically making "irrelevant not only the categories of homo- and heterosexual, but also those of man and woman" (86).

Chapter 5 ("Queer Female Desire in Cinquecento Comedy") addresses queer female desire in four plays from the early Cinquecento: Bibbiena's *La Calandra* (1513), the Accademici Intronati di Siena's *Gl'Ingannati* (1532) Alessandro Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro* (1544) and (briefly) the anonymous *La Venexiana* (ca. 1535). This chapter situates the Bradamante-Fiordispina tale in the literary context of the first half of the 1500s and demonstrates how the motif of queer female desire operated in yet another Renaissance genre. Though this chapter accomplishes these tasks, it is somewhat hampered by the author's (perhaps unavoidable) lengthy summaries of the convoluted plots of these plays, leaving less space for her excellent analysis.

The book concludes with an epilogue outlining the critical response to Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* beginning in the mid-Cinquecento, arguing that, even though in the texts discussed, "the tale of queer female desire is [always] straightened or abandoned. . . the straightened narrative, central as it may be, does not altogether occlude the queer," which escapes narrative closure in the form of a "remainder"—namely "women's sexual pleasure in other women" (132).

Overall, I have few quibbles with *Hopeless Love*. More attention to genre and to reception (though the use of Renaissance and recent critics as an impetus for investigation is praiseworthy) might have made this study even more complete. The decision to take a text-by-text rather than a more integrative approach to the topic of queer female desire may betray this book's origin in a doctoral dissertation, and yet the relatively simple structure of *Hopeless Love* works as an appropriate counterpoint to its theoretically and analytically complex content. In her opening acknowledgments DeCoste writes that her students urge her always to be clear. This book is an articulate testament to the author's considerable skill at writing with great lucidity, making *Hopeless Love* well worth the attention of both scholars and students of Italian Renaissance literature; narrative theory; gender and queer studies.

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