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The Chivalric Epic in Medieval Italy

Juliann Vitullo

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"Vitullo adopts modern theoretical approaches and successfully synthesizes them into an innovative study of a literary genre that has long merited attention: the chivalric epic in medieval Italy. Her perceptive study examines figures such as wild men and warrior women in their cultural and historical contexts through the lens of modern gender studies, proving that this literature was anything but primitive or simplistic."-- Gloria Allaire, Gettysburg College

The Chivalric Epic in Medieval Italy offers a new interpretation of the role of one of the most popular literary traditions in northern Italian medieval culture. Whereas most previous studies describe these epics as either inferior copies of their aristocratic French models or as representations of a bourgeois ethos, Juliann Vitullo shows how the epics contributed to discourses of social power. Emphasizing issues of orality, literacy, and identity, she challenges the notion that late medieval Italian society uniformly adopted humanistic models of bourgeois individualism.

Vitullo explains how adaptations of Old French tales of Emperor Charlemagne, his valorous nephew Roland, the rebellious vassal Rinaldo and the faithful vassal Ugo d'Alvernia flourished in Veneto at the end of the Duecento and were gradually transplanted into Tuscany during the following century. While the leaders of Italian city-states were fighting for independence from the traditional powers of kings, emperors, and the church, epic writers began adopting and piecing together elements of the old myths, which had supported established authorities, to create a version of history that validated the communes' newly forged political muscle.

This remarkable marriage of medieval text and modern cultural studies theory offers fresh insights into a neglected area of Italian literature. It also participates in the debate about how to use the contemporary theory of identity formation to increase our understanding of European history.

Juliann Vitullo, associate professor of Italian at Arizona State University in Tempe, has published articles on the chivalric epic in journals such as *Olifant* and *Annali d'Italianistica*.

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