

**Marianna Orsi**

**Virgin Martyrs, Suicide Virgins, Sinner Virgins:  
Chastity Between Virtue and Transgression in Italian Literature from the  
XV to the XVI Century**

My dissertation explores a broad range of representations of female chastity in Italian literature. The first chapter offers an overview on female chastity from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, identifying and discussing the most prominent figures and definitions of female chastity. In this chapter I show that, according to ancient medical and juridical texts, virginity did not carry any intrinsic value and was often depicted as negative: Greek physicians claimed it was the cause of a variety of illnesses, philosophers consid-



ered marriage the basis of society and reproduction the main female role. Virginity was therefore perceived as a threat to male domination. It was only with Christianity that virginity became a highly valued ideal as a substitute of martyrdom. Chapter two explores female chastity in the age of Humanism. Religious works praised virginity as the best moral choice, but they also acknowledged the dignity of the Christian marriage. Merchants, on the other hand, considered marriage and reproduction the only means to preserve lineage and patrimony, and they consequently perceived virginity as part of the family estate and a guarantee for the success of the marital transaction rather than a value per se. In this chapter I also analyze the connection between chastity, erudition and the public role of women. Chapter three studies female chastity in XVI literature by focusing on treatises, theatrical works, lyric poetry, epic and chivalric poems. It reveals the growing importance of marital chastity and an increasingly stricter binary division between genders, and it shows how female virginity came to be perceived as a dangerous form of female autonomy. The fourth and final chapter draws several theoretical conclusions. In it I propose a reading of virginity as female freedom, perceived as negative when it opposes the patriarchal order and positive when it conforms to it; furthermore, I argue for a reading of chastity either as female masculinity or as a third gender. Finally, following Bachtin's theory, I propose the concept of a "chronotope" of female chastity as a positive 'time-space' of domestic or religious enclosure, or as a dangerous form of evasion from patriarchal order.

**Committee:**

Massimo Scalabrini, French & Italian (Chair)

Marco Arnaudo, French & Italian

Andrea Ciccarelli, French & Italian

Colleen Ryan, French & Italian

Elissa Weaver, University of Chicago—Romance Languages and Literature

10:30 a.m., August 2, 2016

Sycamore, Room 100

Attendance by invitation only. Please contact  
mscalabr@indiana.edu if you would like permission to attend.