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Ludovico Ariosto: Orlando Furioso

(1532)

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Genre: Poetry (any). Country: Italy.

One of the best known works in Italian literature, the *Orlando Furioso*, is a continuation of the romance epic *Orlando Innamorato*, which was left unfinished at the ninth canto of Book Three when Boiardo died in 1494. Like Boiardo, Ariosto weaves together Carolingian and Arthurian themes into an intricately interlaced plot, creatively imitating a vast range of works—from classical epic poetry and history to medieval lyric and novella traditions—in order to surprise, delight, and signify. As he continues to mix imaginary sites and the geographical reality of a rapidly expanding globe, Ariosto not only meticulously completes the various threads of Boiardo's poem, but also adds original episodes following his own creative genius and Weltanschauung.

It is generally thought that Ariosto began writing his "gionta" (sequel) in 1505 after the publication of a mediocre fourth book by Niccolò degli Agostini. The first edition of the poem in 40 *canti* was completed in 1515 and appeared in print in 1516. Ariosto continued to work on the poem throughout his lifetime, producing a second edition in 1521 that contained relatively minor revisions and a definitive third edition in 1532 that included four additional episodes inserted within the poem, bringing the number of *canti* from 40 to 46. Ariosto had also worked on a continuation, in which Charlemagne's realm was subsequently threatened both internally and externally by powerful behind-the-scenes forces fomenting violence, but this unfinished sequel, commonly referred to simply as the *Cinque canti* [*Five canti*], was never published during Ariosto's lifetime and only appeared in print in 1545 as an "addition" to the *Furioso* thanks to Ariosto's son Virginio (see Quint, introduction, *Cinque canti*).

During the period of the poem's composition, the Estense family still ruled Ferrara and Ariosto, like Boiardo before him, read from his poem in progress to the appreciative and eager Isabella d'Este. Yet much had changed in the decades following Boiardo's death. Beginning with Charles VIII's 1494 descent into Italy with 90,000 troops, the peninsula was subject to a wave of invasions on the part of French, Spanish, Swiss, and German-Austrian armies, until it was reduced politically to a possession of its European neighbors. Historical circumstances may be partially behind the darker moments that some critics have detected in the poem. Michael Murrin, for example, suggests that the horrors of the French invasion of Italy provided a real-life precedent for Rodomonte's assault on Paris: "Virgil's Turnus and Boiardo's Agricane, the heroes in the scenes that served as models for Ariosto, fight other soldiers. Rodomonte slaughters civilians. The French had shocked the Italians in 1494, when they killed all their prisoners" ("Trade and Fortune," 83).This does not mean, however, that the *Orlando Furioso* is all gloom and doom. On the contrary, some of the poem's most iconic episodes involve magic and enchantment, romance adventures, pastoral interludes, and flights of fantasy.

The poem’s opening verses announce the major plot lines to be continued: the war between King Agramante of Biserta and Charlemagne (epic), Orlando’s infatuation with Angelica of Cathay (romance), and the foundation of the Estense family through the hero Ruggiero (dynastic). It is above all in the development of Orlando’s love story that Ariosto announces his unique contribution to the genre:

> Dirò d’Orlando in un medesmo tratto
> cosa non detta in prosa mai né in rima:
> che per amor venne in furore e matto,
> d’uom che sì saggio era stimato prima (1.2)
>
> I shall tell of Orlando, too, setting down
> what has never before been recounted in prose or rhyme:
> of Orlando, driven raving mad by love—
> and he a man who had been always esteemed for his great prudence.

Indeed, prior to Boiardo’s “revelation” that Orlando had forsaken Charlemagne’s court in his all-consuming desire for Angelica, the paladin had been depicted as a stranger to eros: even though he was wed to Alda in the Italian tradition, their marriage remained unconsummated due to his vow to first crown her queen of a kingdom in Spain. Now, Ariosto alerts readers to expect an Orlando who is not only in love, but downright insane. The cause for Orlando’s madness is his discovery that Angelica has relinquished her virginity to Medoro, a simple foot soldier who accompanied King Agramante from Biserta to France. The revelation comes when Orlando spies upon the names of the lovers carved on trees and reads a poem that Medoro had composed to celebrate his conquest. Ariosto even imagines that Orlando is welcomed by the same shepherd family who had hosted the happy couple and ends up lying in the very bed that had witnessed their amorous embraces. Unable to sustain the new knowledge that dashed his hopes and collapsed his world view, Orlando returns to the forest and strips himself not only of the armor that made him a knight, but also of the clothing that marked him as human. In this bestial state, he begins to wander the globe wreaking havoc indiscriminately on the plants, animals and humans he encounters in his path.

In his state of madness Orlando even comes across Angelica in the company of Medoro on their way to Cathay where the princess planned to “Medor coronar del suo bel regno” (“place on Medor’s head the crown of her fair kingdom”) (19.37). Although Orlando *furioso* does not recognize the woman, she nevertheless awakens his lust: “così gli piacque il delicato volto, / sì ne divenne immantinente giotto” (“he took a liking to her delicate face and immediately wanted her [or, more literally, became gluttonous for her]”) (29.61). As Angelica uses her magic ring to elude his grasp, she tumbles from her horse, thus leaving readers with a final awkward image of the princess with her legs in the air just before becoming invisible (29.65).

In developing the dynastic theme, Ariosto creates a series of adventures that will delay the union of Ruggiero and Bradamante, mostly through the magician Atlante’s attempts – at the *palazzo d’acciaio* [steel palace], Alcina’s island, and the *palazzo incantato* [enchanted palace] – to thwart his former pupil’s destined conversion to Christianity and early death. In the central episode, involving a romantic interlude with Alcina, Ariosto turns to the only Boiardan fairy who was not connected in some way to Orlando. Ruggiero remains under Alcina’s spell, oblivious to his previous priorities, until the fairy Melissa, with the help of Angelica’s magic ring, exposes her as a decrepit old hag and causes the knight to feel revulsion at her newly revealed ugliness.

Ariosto provides Ruggiero with the opportunity to gain greater wisdom on the nearby island inhabited by Logistilla, Alcina's virtuous sister, yet Ruggiero’s later actions seem to indicate that he misses his chance for self-scrutiny and self-improvement. After rescuing Angelica from an Orca, his sexual appetite overcomes his higher faculty of reason and, forgetting his chivalric duty, he intends to rape her. Using the magic ring he has handed her, the maiden disappears before his eyes and escapes. Ruggiero subsequently falls victim to the spell of Atlante's final enchantment, the *palazzo incantato*. However, in the end all turns out as foretold by the *maga* Melissa, since he eventually converts following a shipwreck at sea and marries his Frankish beloved in the poem's final episode.

The epic war between Agramante and Charlemagne, which began in the *Innamorato* as a case of *aviditas dominationis* in which the king of Biserta exemplified an overreaching ruler destined to lose his kingdom in a reckless attempt to acquire something he did not possess, increasingly takes on the connotations of a holy war. The African ruler thus comes to represent an enemy of the Christian faith who must be either converted or annihilated. The knight who plays a principal role in this ideological shift toward a Crusading ethos is Prince Astolfo of England, who, after a purgatorial experience in the Indian Ocean, slowly develops into a *miles Christi*, as evidenced by his worship at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, his charitable mission on behalf of Senapo (Prester John) in Ethiopia, his retrieval of Orlando's wits with the guidance of St John, and finally his participation in the destruction of Agramante's North African kingdom under God's direction.

Astolfo initially reappears in Ariosto's poem when Ruggiero stumbles upon him in the form of a myrtle bush on Alcina's island. Once he has regained his original body, he is entrusted to Logistilla for moral instruction and then sent on his way with a book that explains how to protect oneself from enchantments and a horn that puts to flight those who hear it (6.46). The English knight will repeatedly use these two gifts, allegorized as moral virtues by sixteenth-century commentators, to carry out a series of exemplary actions in various historical and invented sites: he rids Egypt of two menaces who attacked unwary pilgrims (the *magus* Orrillo and the giant Caligorante), he frees himself and his friends from a horde of killer women near Syria, and he rescues those imprisoned within Atlante's magic palace. As a consequence of this latter undertaking, he finds himself in possession of the mythical hippogriff, lost earlier by Ruggiero and left behind by Atlante.

In due course, Astolfo arrives by hippogriff in the midst of Ethiopia, at the court of the emperor Senapo, who is said to be known to Europeans as "Prete Ianni" ("Prester John") (33.106), and he eventually reaches the moon in a celestial chariot driven by St John. If earlier Logistilla had tutored Astolfo in a humanistic and secular spirit, now St John will expound divine truth in the guise of a religious authority. St John reveals that even the poem's central action – Orlando's descent into madness – was decreed by God. Although the account of Orlando's loss of sanity was framed in purely psychological terms in canto 23, the saint now informs Astolfo that his cousin's affliction is nothing less than a divine punishment: "Sappi che 'l vostro Orlando, perché torse / dal camin dritto le commisse insegne, / è punito da Dio" ("Your Orlando has misappropriated the standards committed to him, and God is punishing him") (34.62). He furthers explains that although God had given Orlando special attributes "perché a difesa di sua santa fede / così voluto l'ha constituire" ("in order thus to constitute him defender of His holy Faith") (34.63), the knight was so blinded by his illicit love for a pagan woman that he not only forgot his higher calling, but even attempted to kill his cousin Rinaldo.

St John goes on to reveal that God has chosen Astolfo to help his fellow paladin make the transition from sin to salvation. In short, the English knight is divinely charged with relieving Orlando's insanity by retrieving his wits stored in a phial on the moon and forcing him to inhale them. The rehabilitated paladin will then need to make amends for his sinful behavior by using his regained faculties to further the Christian cause. This marks the end of Orlando's parenthesis as would-be Arthurian lover-turned-madman and a return to his original identity as a dutiful paladin. Yet, as Marco Dorigatti remarks, "[Orlando] becomes a wholly Carolingian figure once again, but there is something sad, something unresolved about him. […] After he has recovered his wits there is not much scope for Orlando; he is back on his way to Roncesvalles, where death awaits him" ("Reinventing Roland," 123–4).

In the final phase of the war both Orlando and Astolfo take on the role of religious as well as military leaders:

> Come veri christiani Astolfo e Orlando,

che senza Dio non vanno a rischio alcuno,
nel exercito fan publico bando
ch'oratïone sia fatta e digiuno.

As true Christians who never affronted
danger without God's aid, Astolfo and Orlando
gave orders that all hands should
turn to prayer and fasting. (40.11).

Additionally, Senapo puts a vast army at Astolfo's disposal, thus enabling the fulfillment of one of the most persistent fantasies of western Europe: that of finding a powerful Christian ally in the heart of Africa to help defeat the Muslims on a grand scale. With God's assistance, Astolfo performs a series of miracles that will ensure a Christian victory. First, following St John's instructions, he captures the South Wind in a wineskin, which permits him to cross the desert with Senapo's troops undisturbed. Next, he throws down an enormous quantity of stones that miraculously grow into horses, a feat that is said to thereby transform 80,102 Ethiopian "pedoni" ["foot-soldiers"] into outright "cavallieri" ["knights"] (38.33–5). Finally, he tosses leaves into the sea that become a fleet of ships sufficient to hold 26,000 men (39.26–9).

The combined forces of Charlemagne and Senapo, under the leadership of Orlando and Astolfo, undertake the sack of Biserta (40.33–4), which is described at great length and with a particularly harrowing description that evokes the conquest of Jerusalem in early accounts of the First Crusade. Although at this point all is already lost for the Saracens, the definitive outcome is decided by a three-on-three duel on the island of Lipadusa (Lampedusa). The Saracen side, comprising Agramante, Sobrino, and Gradasso, takes the field against Orlando, Oliviero, and Brandimarte. Although this battle results in the deaths of Agramante and Gradasso, it also spells the demise of Brandimarte, who is treacherously slain from behind. His wife Fiordiligi subsequently entombs herself alongside her husband, making the Christian triumph bittersweet.

The poem's final, post-war episode combines the epic, romance, and dynastic themes by positing the return of Rodomonte to challenge Ruggiero on the day of his wedding to Bradamante. Ruggiero's victory over Rodomonte directly recalls that of Aeneas over Turnus in the *Aeneid*, and leaves readers with the image of Rodomonte's soul indignantly descending to the otherworld rather than with the festive celebration of requited love.

The four episodes added in the 1532 edition do not form a sequel to the poem, as the *Cinque canti* would have done, but are inserted within the frame of the existing narrative. These added adventures all take place in an extended Europe: Olimpia and Bireno in the British Isles, the Rocca di Tristano in France, Marganorre in an unnamed site apparently not far from Arles (Provence), and Ruggiero and Leone between Paris and the Balkans.

The Ruggiero and Leone story not only provides the final additional episode in Ariosto's expanded poem, but it also marks a new trajectory for the character of Ruggiero. The episode consists of a trial in which Ruggiero is required by the rules of courtesy to be willing to give up what he values most in the world: his beloved Bradamante. Due to a series of narrative twists, however, when Ruggiero relinquishes Bradamante to the Byzantine prince Leone, the latter, compelled by the laws of reciprocity, not only cedes her back to Ruggiero, but unconditionally offers his person and his state as a resource: “mai trovar satollo / non mi potrai, che me e lo stato mio / spender tu possa ad ogni tuo disio” [“Draw freely upon me and upon my state: / you will never exhaust your credit”] (45.83). Since Ruggiero had in the meantime been proclaimed king of Bulgaria by its inhabitants, Leone’s courtesy and friendship guarantee peace between two previously warring nations.

The pattern of reciprocal other-regarding actions leading to friendship illustrated in this episode contrasts starkly with Ariosto’s reflection in the first edition that even his patrons’ closest friends had acted like enemies due to political circumstance: “quanti n’havete, o gloriosi nati / d’Hercole invitto, a questi dì veduto / che vi son stati e son di cor amici, / e ne li effetti poi come nemici!” [“How many, oh glorious ones born of invincible Hercules, have you seen in our day that were and still are your close friends, but who in their deeds are like enemies”] (35.5A).Despite the subsequent removal of this reflection, perhaps we should not take lightly the fact that Ariosto ends all three editions with the Latin motto “pro bono malum” – an apparent warning to readers not to expect anything other than evil in return for the good they may do for others.

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