



Matteo Maria Boiardo: Orlando Innamorato [Orlando in Love]

(1495)

- [Jo Ann Cavallo \(Columbia University\)](#)

Genre: Epic, Poetry (any). Country: Italy.

Written for a fifteenth-century Italian court society hooked on Arthurian romance but also attuned to current world events, Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* [*Orlando in Love*] charts a complex imaginary course in which characters from diverse cultures encounter one another in ways that range from armed conflict to friendship and love. Although knights and damsels from around the globe are gripped by a number of passions, such as erotic desire, anger, ambition, compassion, and the desire for glory or revenge, their actions are not based on either religious or ethnic differences. The narrative thereby breaks out of the polarization of Christians and Saracens typical of Carolingian epic, presenting a broader cosmopolitan vision of humankind consonant with ancient, medieval, and fifteenth-century historical and geographical texts that were capturing the attention of the Ferrarese court.

In the *chansons de geste*, or historical songs, that formed the basis of the medieval Carolingian epic genre, the hero Roland (later Italianized as Orlando) was celebrated as Charlemagne's most stalwart paladin. In the twelfth-century *The Song of Roland*, a Basque ambush of Charlemagne's retreating army at the mountain pass of Roncesvalles (Einhard) was refashioned into an Armageddon of sorts in which Roland and his companions who formed the rearguard were massacred by Saracens due to his stepfather Ganelon's treachery. Subsequent elaborations of Frankish exploits in Spain prior to the fatal battle of Roncesvalles, most notably the Franco-Venetian *Entrée d'Espagne* (c. 1320–30) and its variants, depict Roland abandoning the emperor in righteous anger following an offense, conquering the Holy Land and its surrounding territories, compelling the Muslim inhabitants to convert en masse, and then returning to Spain to reconcile with Charlemagne and bring victory to the Frankish army. Despite his quarrel with the emperor, Roland remained a chaste hero who thought first and foremost of king, God, and country. Even when in the later Italian tradition he weds his fiancée Alda, Orlando vows not to consummate the marriage until he has won for his bride a kingdom in Spain.

Matteo Maria Boiardo turns the literary tradition on its head by claiming to have uncovered an embarrassing chapter in Orlando's career as a Carolingian paladin. Announcing that the Bishop Turpin had kept this scandalous scoop hidden, Boiardo reveals that the purportedly impeccable knight had fallen hopelessly in love at first sight with Angelica, a Saracen princess from Cathay who appeared in Paris during an international tournament and offered herself as prize to the knight who could unhorse her brother in a joust. Yet we are advised not to be shocked at the news since:

Né forte braccio, né ardire animoso,
Né scudo o maglia, né brando affilato,

Né altra possanza può mai far difesa,
Che al fin non sia da Amor battuta e presa. (1.1.2)

No strong arm, no audacity,
No blade well-honed, no shield or mail,
No other power can avail,
For in the end Love conquers all.

In his new guise as Arthurian knight errant, Orlando traverses the globe searching for his beloved and undertaking brave deeds in an attempt to win her love. Yet all his efforts are for naught: as Boiardo already anticipates in the opening stanzas, the previously invincible Orlando was a loser when it came to love [“contra ad amor pur fu perdente”] (1.1.3).

Boiardo’s subversive transformation of Orlando was no doubt intended to delight readers used to indulging in Breton romance with its stories celebrating courtly (i.e., romantic and adulterous) love and individual prowess in a setting imbued with fantastical dangers and alluring enchantments. According to Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti (xi–xxi), Boiardo most likely began writing his chivalric poem under the reign of Borso d’Este, who declared his fascination with Arthurian matter in no uncertain terms in his 1470 letter to Count Ludovico da Cuneo: “Vi mandiamo questo nostro C[avallaro] a posta pregandovi et incaricandovi ne lo vogliatj mandare carrico di quanti più libri francisi vuj poteti cioè de quelli de la tavola vechia recordandovj che ne riceveremo maggiore pia[ce]re et contento che di una citade che nui guadagnassemo” [“We are sending you our horseman urging and entrusting you to send us as many French books as you can, that is, those of the old Round Table, reminding you that we would receive greater pleasure and happiness from them than if we had conquered a city”] (cited in Bertoni 92).

While the hapless Orlando follows Angelica to Cathay in an attempt to play the role of courtly lover, his fellow paladins head East for different reasons. Most notably, the Frankish Rinaldo of Montalbano (from the French Renaud de Montauban, Rinaldo elsewhere in the Italian tradition), cured of his love for Angelica after inadvertently drinking at the Fountain of Merlin, fights in the service of the emperor until the princess, who is enflamed with desire for him due to the contrary effects of the Fountain of Love, has him swept away involuntarily to an island in the Indian Ocean where she intends (albeit, in vain) to seduce him.

Rinaldo’s adventures outside the borders of Christian Europe offer material for contrast and comparison with his lovesick cousin. Whereas Orlando repeatedly becomes the victim of magical entrapments, Rinaldo acts consistently in the name of justice. On three occasions he hears (or, in one case, reads) a story leading up to a present situation of injustice and then acts to bring about a just conclusion: he puts an end to a death trap at Castle Cruel, he liberates innocent victims from a monster at the Garden of Orgagna, and he challenges and kills the torturer and murderer Truffaldino. In the latter case his actions are most clearly opposed to those of Orlando, who actually defends and protects the treacherous king of Baghdad due to a promise made out of love for Angelica.

The third major Christian knight to head eastward is the English prince Astolfo (from Estout in the Carolingian epic), whose departure from the Frankish court is staged as a protest against the unjust emperor. In an earlier episode, Charlemagne had abused his power by accepting the false story told to him by Gano (the treacherous Ganelon of the French tradition) and imprisoning Astolfo indefinitely without giving him a fair hearing. The knight is subsequently forgotten in prison and only released by chance months later after Paris is captured by the East Asian king Gradasso (more, below) and the prisons are opened. When the newly freed knight learns that Charlemagne is about to hand over Rinaldo’s famed horse Baiardo to Gradasso, he challenges the invader single-handedly. Defending the private property of his absent friend, he asserts that “Carlo ha a far in quell destrier niente, / Me se lo vole, esso il venga ’ acquistare” [“Charles did not own the steed, / so if Gradasso

wanted it / he'd have to fight him in the field"] (*OI* 1.7.45). When Astolfo unexpectedly defeats Gradasso (out of sight of the court), he plays a joke on Charlemagne with the complicity of the Eastern ruler. He tells the group that he lost the contest, converted to Islam, and is heading to India as Gradasso's court jester. Thus vindicated, he then refuses Charlemagne's plea that he remain in France and sets out in search of his cousin Orlando.

All three knights end up in Albracà, where hundreds of thousands of warriors are fighting due to the fact that King Agricane of Tartary seeks to force Angelica to marry him. In the extended episode of the siege of Albracà, the fortress in which the princess has taken refuge, Agricane will be mortally wounded by Orlando fighting over Angelica. He thus fully exemplifies the figure of one of those "gran signori" ["great lords"] referenced in the poem's opening lines:

Che pur quel voglion che non pòno avere,
E quanto son difficoltà maggiori
La disiata cosa ad ottenere,
Pongono il regno spesso in grandi erori,
Né posson quel che voglion possedere.

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. (1.1.5)

The above statement is occasioned, however, by the imminent arrival of the poem's first unrestrained ruler, Gradasso of Sericana, whose unexpected appearance in France sets in motion much of the bellicose content of Book One. Gradasso's ruthless destructiveness may be meant to evoke the hordes of eastern invaders who had threatened Italy and western Europe in the course of the centuries, from Germanic tribes to North African Arabs, from the Mongols to the Ottoman Turks. Yet rather than imbue the king of Sericana with the characteristics of a specific historical group, Boiardo seems interested in accruing suggestive allusions from multiple directions. Gradasso even wears armor that once belonged to the biblical Herculean figure Samson (1.4.71).

Gradasso can also be likened to Angelica since both serve, albeit in different ways, to illustrate the dangerous consequences of unbridled desire for both oneself and others. Whereas Angelica demonstrates the overwhelming force of love by mesmerizing every man who catches sight of her (1.1.2), Gradasso exemplifies the more general acquisitive desire of those in power who would risk losing their state in the vain attempt to attain something beyond their reach (1.1.5), in this case, Rinaldo's horse Baiardo and Orlando's sword Durindana. The aims of both characters, moreover, reach across geographical and religious boundaries: while Angelica challenges to a joust against her brother all those gathered in Paris, whether "pagano o batizzato" ["pagan or baptized"] (1.1.27), Gradasso plans to single-handedly "vincere e disfare / quanto il sol vede e quanto cingie il mare" ["conquer and destroy / all the sun sees, all sea surrounds"] (1.1.7).

If Book One opens announcing Gradasso's determination to acquire Baiardo and Durindana, in Book Two the North African king Agramante intends to conquer Charlemagne's entire realm. Like Gradasso and Agricane, Agramante also suffers from an insatiable – and ultimately futile – desire to gain something he does not possess, yet he represents a much graver threat to western Europe than Gradasso, who does not seek to occupy France even after defeating the Frankish troops and imprisoning the emperor. In Book Two's opening canto, King Agramante gathers thirty-two African kings in Biserta in order to announce his imperialistic plans in emulation of his ancestor, Alexander of Macedonia. In this desire to go even beyond his model, Agramante is

yet outdone by his fellow African king Rodamonte, who not only hopes to be crowned king of France, but declares his intention to follow (or precede!) Agramante in the conquest of paradise and hell (2.1.65). The wizard-king of Garamanta foretells that Agramante's only hope of victory lies in enlisting the services of Rugiero, at present magically hidden in the mountains by his tutor Atlante. After some delay, Rugiero is found with the help of Angelica's magic ring, stolen right from her finger by the wily Moroccan thief, Brunello.

The combined forces of Africa and Asia (under Agricane's son Mandricardo) are converging on Paris at the end of Book Two, when Boiardo abruptly breaks off the narrative because of the war between Ferrara and Venice. Attributing the interruption to current hostilities (2.31.49), Boiardo suggestively links the suspended invasion of Paris to Venice's attack on Ferrara. The publication of the poem in two Books between April 1482 and February 1483 corresponds to the most intense period of the war when Venetian troops threatened the survival of the Ferrarese state. Some time after the conclusion of the war, Boiardo resumed his poem. Even if he only composed a little over eight cantos in the final years of his life, these further develop the story of the unblemished hero Rugiero.

As Rugiero himself explains in Book Three, canto 5, he is descended from Hector's son, Astyanax, who, in Boiardo's version of events, was actually saved by his mother and then set out with an anonymous friend of his father to continue the war against the Greeks from Sicily, where he became the king of Messina. At the end of an illustrious genealogical line, going back on his maternal side to Alexander of Macedonia, Rugiero was born of an Italian father and a half-African half-Amazon mother.

In the figure of Rugiero, Boiardo combines the classical virtues of Hector with the values of medieval chivalry, offering an exemplary model for the ruling family of Ferrara. During the war against France, Rugiero is always ready to help those in need, demonstrating his courtesy toward both African allies and European enemies. He even offers to take the place of an unknown Frankish knight in a one-on-one combat against his fellow countryman Rodamonte when the latter will not give the warrior leave to follow Charlemagne in retreat. The warrior, as it turns out, is Rugiero's future wife Bradamante, "la dama di valore" ["the valorous woman"] (3.5.5) considered by Charlemagne to be just as essential as her brother Ranaldo to the safety of Christendom (2.6.23). Although Bradamante initially accepts Rugiero's courteous offer to take her place in combat so that she can reach Charlemagne as he withdraws to Paris, she soon rethinks her decision, explicitly stating her hierarchy of values: "Sono obligata a l'alto imperatore, / ma più sono a me stessa et al mio onore" ["I'm bound to the high emperor, / But to myself – and honor.–.more"] (3.5.7). Her decision to place her obligation to herself over feudal allegiance is vindicated by the author since this is what leads to her falling in love with Rugiero and thus the foundation of the Estense family, the poem's dedicatees.

The *Orlando Innamorato* may be the first poem in which the author's patrons are honored by being heralded as the descendants of a European-African-Amazon mix. Indeed, one of the most noteworthy aspects of Boiardo's romance epic is how it continuously works against the standard opposition between Christians and Saracens that would have been taken for granted by the poem's early readers. Although he does not refute the eventual tragic fate of Charlemagne's rearguard in the Pyrenees, he provides an alternative vision in which Charlemagne's knights do not fight to conquer territory or to force their religion upon others. The most positively portrayed characters across the globe are those who respect a universal code of chivalry.

One such character is the Eastern queen Marfisa, whose alliance with Ranaldo at Albracà develops into a bond of friendship. When she believes that Ranaldo has been mortally wounded by Orlando, her silent weeping reveals a hidden tenderness beneath her nerves of steel: "E Marfisa tacendo lacrimava, / Perché pose Renaldo al tuto perso" ["and quietly Marfisa wept / because she thought Ranaldo lost"] (*OI* 1.28.27). Yet since she had promised Orlando not to intervene in the battle (*OI* 1.26.56), she never considers breaking her word, even though she fears losing her friend and ally. Indeed, her unconditional adherence to the chivalric code is so well known that, when she agrees to a safe-conduct for Angelica to watch the day's battle between the cousins,

everyone feels safe to move about without danger (*OI* 1.27.43).

The interlaced plot allows Boiardo to weave in episodes concerning additional foreign protagonists whose interests remain beyond the confines of Europe, such as the courteous Syrian knight Norandino (whose name is the Italian rendering of Nur ad-Din, Saladin's predecessor). As Orlando accompanies Angelica from Albracà back to France, he reaches a “ricco e bel paese” [“a wealthy, splendid realm”] that was subject to neither “guerre o contese” [“wars nor battles”] (2.19.51). The couple thereupon encounters Norandino, the ruler of this beautiful and peaceful land, who invites Orlando to join his entourage on its way to a tournament in Cyprus even before asking the knight's name, rank, and nationality (2.19.57-58). Boiardo thus creates a situation in which Charlemagne's foremost paladin finds himself in the Middle East not to fight a holy war, but to participate in a tournament under a Muslim king's banner.

Addressing his audience as social equals, Boiardo combines the role of entertainer with the stance of the humanist preceptor who uses literature to propose an ethics of action. Yet all is not rosy under the brilliant surface of the fast-paced narrative. A constant thread underpinning the poem is the theme of treachery. The genealogy of Rugiero includes a series of betrayals that lead to the tragic deaths of Alexander of Macedonia (2.1.29), Hector of Troy (3.1.27) and his son Astyanax (3.5.24), and even Rugiero's grandfather and father, Rugiero I and II (3.5.30-34). Moreover, a prophecy warns that Rugiero himself will die by treachery at the hands of none other than the infamous Carolingian villain Gano (3.1.3). At the same time, however, the betrayed heroes leave behind brave widows who will give birth to children, balancing the desperation of their unjust deaths with examples of courageous resolve and a sense of hope for the next generation.

Boiardo suspended his poem in citing his inability to compose poetry during the invasion of Charles VIII, and his death a few months later rendered the interruption permanent. As noted above, he had recorded a comparable moment of crisis at the end of Book Two, when the offenders were not French, but Venetian troops. In this case, the opening proem of Book Three proclaimed a revival of Ferrarese court life, while the narrative found room once again for romance adventures that brought together Christians and Saracens outside war – from Mandricardo's serendipitous rescue of all those imprisoned at the Fountain of the Fay, to Fiordispina's futile passion for a Christian stranger. As it stands now in its unfinished but final state, a poem celebrating the global adventures of both Charlemagne's paladins and newly invented foreign protagonists ends with a chilling evocation of the modern day “Galli” [“Gauls”] setting “la Italia tutta” [“all of Italy”] aflame. In the poem's concluding stanza the French army has been transformed from the defending heroes within the epic plot to the invading enemies who have taken away the voice of the poet.

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