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Women and the Making of Poetry in Ariosto's Orlando furioso by Ita Mac Carthy

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Ita Mac Carthy. *Women and the Making of Poetry in Ariosto's Orlando furioso*.

Leicester: Troubador Publishing Ltd., 2007. xx + 182 pp. index. bibl. £15.99. ISBN: 978-1905886-61-6.

Ita Mac Carthy's stated approach in this book is to combine "a thematic examination of the *Furioso's* 'donne' and their encounters with 'i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori, l'audaci imprese'" together with "a poetic analysis of their treatment" (xv). After an initial chapter on the poems that refer to love and women, the rest of the book is divided into chapters devoted to a number of the *Furioso's* female characters: Alcina, Angelica, Marfisa, Olympia, and Bradamante, as well as secondary or episodic figures.

Since I am convinced that one cannot understand the *Orlando furioso* when taken out of its context as a continuation of the *Orlando innamorato*, it is perhaps to be expected that I should find a study that examines Ariosto's female characters without reference to their prior development in Boiardo's poem to be of limited usefulness. Yet a graver problem for me arises in the one instance in which Mac Carthy does attempt to compare Boiardo's and Ariosto's treatment of a character (chapter 4). In arguing that only in the *Furioso* Marfisa "demands to be taken seriously as a knight, despite the fact that she is a woman," Mac Carthy distorts Boiardo's creation as "hyperbolically skillful, excessively aggressive [and] over-zealously religious" (76). To support the last attribute she alleges that Marfisa vowed "to never rest until she has killed three Christian kings in battle" (74). In Boiardo's poem, however, Marfisa simply aims to defeat the world's three greatest kings, two of whom are actually non-Christian, Agricane of Tartaria and Gradasso of Sericana. Mac Carthy's assertions that "a fervent religious devotion places Boiardo's Marfisa on the wrong side of the Carolingian wars" and that "Ariosto's version, though, is not such a glaring threat to Christianity" (76) go against textual evidence to the contrary. Whereas in the *Innamorato* Marfisa is neither motivated by religion nor participates in a Christian-Saracen conflict, in the *Furioso* she becomes so filled with religious zeal upon her conversion to Christianity that after the defeat of Agramante she intends to take up arms against all Muslim states for the greater glory of the Holy Roman Empire and the faith of Christ.

Leaving aside the issue of Boiardo's precedent, Mac Carthy tends to present her arguments without sufficient consideration of the poem's literary and historical context. In the second chapter, for example, she asserts the importance of Neoplatonism for the episode of Alcina's island (and in the following chapter, for the figure of Angelica as well), yet many of the examples that she presents as evidence ("the power of sight to trigger desire," 46, "desire as something a woman perpetrates on her would-be lover," 51) are common tropes in the wider tradition, especially courtly romance and lyric poetry. Moreover, in linking the poem to the *querelle des femmes*, Mac Carthy makes reference primarily to the court of Urbino (92-93, n. 29). While this focus has merit, her argument could have benefited from recourse to historians who have studied the Estense court of Ferrara as the

center for the debate on the status and nature of women due to the presence there of the powerful figures of Eleonora d'Aragona and her daughter Isabella d'Este.

The most original and convincingly argued chapter in my view is "Women in *Gestes*," which deals with a series of secondary female characters, in particular Ginevra, Gabrina, Drusilla, Isabella, Ullania, and Olimpia. Looking at them together as types, Mac Carthy examines "the *geste* episode's overwhelming concern with virginity, chastity and fidelity against the conventions of courtly literature" (xvii). Some structural confusion arises, however, when Olimpia is brought back as the central figure in the next chapter ("Olimpia: Moral Ambiguity in the Third *Furioso*") and then as a counterpoint to the ideal figure of Bradamante in the final chapter. Moreover, Mac Carthy presents Olimpia as the principal indicator of "the intensification and darkening of tone of the third and final *Furioso*" due to the years of warfare following the 1494 French invasion of Italy (120). Yet chapter 6's argument for Ariosto's more cynical view toward women in the later episode of Olimpia, read largely against the characters of Isabella, Drusilla, and Bradamante, does not hold because the episodes used to discuss the latter two characters are likewise added only in the third edition.

Mac Carthy expresses her ideas with clarity and has a genuine interest in her subject. Despite the book's shortcomings, it nonetheless stands as a testament that Ariosto's poetry is still intriguing readers and provoking discussion five centuries after its composition.

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