



## Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441-1494)

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Poet; Humanist; Letter-writer/ Diarist; Playwright / Dramatist; Translator.

Active 1463-1494 in Italy

Matteo Maria Boiardo – contemporary of Sir Thomas Malory and forerunner of Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Cervantes, Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis – is best known as the author of the *Orlando Innamorato* [*Orlando in Love*], a poem in *ottava rima* organically merging Carolingian epic and Arthurian romance. He was also a lyric and pastoral poet, playwright, and translator of classical texts into the Italian vernacular.

The eldest of five children, Matteo Maria Boiardo was born to Giovanni Boiardo and Lucia Strozzi in Scandiano under the sign of Gemini, as he notes in one of his sonnets. He was grandson of the humanist count of Scandiano Feltrino Boiardo, nephew of the Ferrarese court poet Tito Vespasiano Strozzi, and cousin of the Neoplatonist philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Raised by his parents in Ferrara until the age of ten, Boiardo returned to live in his grandfather's castle in Scandiano after his father's death in 1451. Following the deaths of his grandfather (1456) and paternal uncle (1460), Boiardo initially shared the title of count as well as the governance of Scandiano and neighboring territories with his cousin Giovanni. During these years, Boiardo lived alternately in Scandiano and Ferrara, then under the reign of Borso d'Este.

Boiardo's earliest poetry was in Latin, in accordance with the humanist tradition, which was strongly felt in Ferrara due to the influence of Guarino da Verona. His *Carmina de laudibus Estensium* (*Songs in Praise of the Estense*, 1463-64) extol the feats of Ercole d'Este at the court of Ferdinand I of Naples. His contemporaneous *Pastoralia* (*Pastorals*) are ten eclogues of Vergilian inspiration that celebrate the current and future Estense dukes, Borso and Ercole. He praises Borso in particular for maintaining a golden age of peace in contrast to the horrors of war.

Between 1469 and 1476 Boiardo wrote the *Amorum libri tres* (*Three Books on Love*), a sequence of 180 poems inspired by a woman from Reggio Emilia by the name of Antonia Caprara. The three books incorporate classical, medieval, and contemporary styles of poetry into an autobiographical itinerary outlining the illusions and delusions of love. Recognized today as one of the most important collections of Italian lyric poetry in the fifteenth century, Boiardo's canzoniere presents original thematic and formal elements with respect to the Petrarchan model in vogue at the time. Their distinct perspectives are apparent from the opening sonnets of the two works: whereas Petrarch underscores the insubstantiality of all earthly joys, Boiardo affirms the sentiment of love as a fundamental expression of one's emotional life:

Ma certo chi nel fior de' soi primi anni  
senza caldo de amore il tempo passa,  
se in vista è vivo, vivo è senza core.

(*Amorum Liber Primus*, Incipit)

But yet I know that he whose flowering youth  
is passed away without the warmth of love  
may seem to live, but lives without a heart.

Boiardo's tribulations during these years, however, were caused less by the fickleness of a young lady than by the treachery of his relatives. In 1474, after various vicissitudes, his uncle's widow Taddea Cornelia, along with her brother Count Marco Pio da Carpi and her son Giovanni's chancellor, conspired to have him poisoned. Alerted to the plot by a servant, Boiardo gathered the evidence of its proof, including the poison itself. Although Marco Pio and the chancellor were apprehended and imprisoned, Ercole could not afford politically to antagonize the count of Carpi. In the end, the only consequence of the attempted poisoning was simply the division of the family properties that the two cousins had held in common: Matteo Maria retained Scandiano and the surrounding land, while Giovanni took control of the other territories. This division was intended to remove any cause for future dispute.

After the poisoning attempt Boiardo returned to reside in Ferrara where a court document from January 1476 lists him as the first of Ercole's five companions, an indication of his prestigious standing. That same year Ercole's nephew Niccolò d'Este, son of the late humanist Duke Leonello, attempted to take over Ferrara, but Ercole thwarted the coup and had those responsible brought to justice. Boiardo's Latin *Epigrammata* (*Epigrams*) laud Ercole's actions.

In 1479 Boiardo married Taddea dei Gonzaga di Novellara, and the couple took up residence in the Scandiano castle (the "Rocca dei Boiardo"). In 1480 he was appointed by Ercole as military governor of Modena, one of the three cities within Estense territory along with Reggio Emilia and Ferrara itself. He maintained this position until 1483 when, in the context of the Venice-Ferrara War (1482-1484), he was given leave to defend his native Scandiano. This was also the period of his ten *Pastorale* (*Eclogues*, 1482-83), in which shepherds converse about both personal and political themes. The most pressing contemporary issue was the war against Venice, which threatened the survival of the Ferrarese state, and Boiardo's verses call urgently for the military assistance of Duke Alfonso d'Aragona of Calabria, Ercole's brother-in-law and the son of King Ferrante of Naples. Alfonso, who had recently been occupied defending his own territory from Ottoman Turks who captured Otranto in 1480, was initially prevented from reaching Ferrarese territory by Papal forces, but was allowed passage when the Pope broke his alliance with Venice.

The first edition of Boiardo's masterpiece, the romance epic *Orlando Innamorato* (also originally entitled *Innamoramento de Orlando*), saw the light of print in the midst of this war. Although no extant copies exist, it is believed to have been published between April 1482 and February 1483 in Reggio Emilia, Modena, or Scandiano. Characterized by Marco Villorosi as "the most innovative text in the history of Italian chivalric literature" (147), the poem is the point of departure for the Italian Renaissance romance epic as we have come to know it.

Boiardo's innovation consists not simply in combining Carolingian epic and Arthurian romance, but in devising a coherent and original poem through creatively rewriting stories from sources that comprised the whole of the literary canon available in his day (from works in ancient Greek and Latin to medieval French and Italian) and encompassed genres as diverse as history, tragedy, comedy, the novella, and the lyric.

Through the technique of creative imitation, which entails a meaningful transformation of source material, Boiardo fashioned his knights against classical models the likes of Hercules, Hector, Aeneas, Jason, Perseus and Pentisilea, but also medieval icons such as Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Isolde. He populated the fantastic landscape of his poem with figures recalling Circe, the Lestrigons, the Cyclops, Morgan Le Fay, and Merlin, alongside an abundance of giants, enchantresses, villains, and monsters. The seemingly innumerable interlaced episodes fit together like pieces of a puzzle, or perhaps like threads in a vast tapestry, conferring a coherent vision amongst a myriad of colors.

Boiardo's all-inclusive approach to past literary traditions finds a correspondence in his treatment of geographical space as well, given that his knights and damsels originate from every corner of the globe, which they then proceed to traverse in a variety of directions for a host of different motives. Newly invented Asian, African, and Middle Eastern characters join traditional Carolingian figures in embodying a code of chivalry that transcends national, religious, ethnic, and linguistic barriers. Indeed, in the course of the poem, neither camaraderie at a personal level nor alliances at a political level are based on religious or ethnic identity. Since Christian and Saracen characters do not treat each other as "outsiders" who must convert or perish as was common to chivalric narratives of the period, friendships frequently develop between individuals from both groups.

At the opening of the poem knights from diverse countries are gathered at Charlemagne's court in Paris for a tournament when a princess from Cathay named Angelica suddenly appears and disrupts their festivities, proposing a new joust with herself as the prize. All the knights present, whether Christian or Saracen – including Charlemagne himself and his nephew Orlando – are immediately lovestruck. The traditionally dutiful Orlando most scandalously abandons the French court and follows the alluring princess to Cathay in an often humorous attempt to play the role of courtly lover. His fellow paladins head East for different reasons: notably, the Frankish Rinaldo of Montalbano is swept away involuntarily in an unmanned boat that takes him to an island in the Indian Ocean where Angelica intends to seduce him, and Astolfo of England rejects Charlemagne's court in anger over an injustice stemming from false accusations and departs in search of his cousin Orlando.

All three knights eventually find themselves involved in the war at Albracà where the Tartar king Agricane is attempting to seize Angelica by force. While Orlando fights to defend the princess, Rinaldo enters on the opposite side because of his vow to punish her treacherous ally Truffaldino, king of Baghdad and murderer of the courageous maiden Albarosa. Although Astolfo had initially offered his service to Angelica, he changes sides upon the arrival of Rinaldo. This war also introduces the figure of the indomitable warrior queen Marfisa, who has vowed not to remove her breastplate until she has bested the world's greatest kings: Gradasso, Agricane, and Charlemagne (1.16.29, 1.20.45).

Unlike Agricane's siege of Albracà which takes place in distant Cathay, the poem's two other epic battles threaten western Europe. At the opening of Book One Gradasso of Sericana travels from East Asia to Paris with 150,000 troops in order to win Orlando's sword Durlindana and Rinaldo's steed Baiardo. In Book Two Agramante of Biserta sets out from Northern Africa to conquer all of France. Before his invasion reaches full force, however, the poem abruptly breaks off with Boiardo's distressed reference to the Venetian attack on Ferrara (2.31.49).

The Venice-Ferrara War ended in 1484 with the loss of vital Estense territory to its stronger neighbor. In 1487

Ercole appointed Boiardo military governor of Reggio Emilia, a position he occupied until his death. Boiardo's extant correspondence (204 letters) was written mostly during his tenure in Reggio Emilia and documents his constant preoccupation with attaining justice in civil disputes and criminal cases. During his final years Boiardo also worked on Book Three of his romance epic, albeit at a slower pace, possibly due to his ill health and the obligations of his post. Isabella d'Este enthusiastically followed the composition of the poem, and an exchange of letters between the Scandianese poet and the Marchioness of Mantua indicates that he read aloud to her from his work-in-progress.

In September 1494, King Charles VIII of France, technically an ally, passed through Ferrarese territory on his way to conquering Naples. Boiardo was directly involved in ensuring that this movement of troops would cause the least possible damage to the Estense state, and some of his letters refer to the difficulty of this enterprise in light of abuses to the civilian population by the French army (Monducci and Badini). Whereas Boiardo had concluded the poem's first edition with a reference to the Venice-Ferrara War, he breaks off at the ninth canto of the third book citing his inability to "sing" during the invasion of "these Gauls" (3.9.26). Boiardo's death a few months later left the poem unfinished.

The *Orlando Innamorato* does not downplay the human capacity for evil, and the world depicted in the poem is, in fact, prey to both destructive violence and treacherous intrigue originating both within and beyond Latin Christendom. At the same time, however, Boiardo does not encourage an attitude of either isolationism or aggression but, on the contrary, advocates communication and interpenetration at all levels. This attitude of openness corresponds to an interest on the part of Boiardo's early readers in the vast world lying beyond the confines of western Europe. Indeed, without negating Boiardo's individual vision as a poet, the *Innamorato* can be viewed as encapsulating that moment in which, according to Guido Ruggiero, "European encounters with other worlds [...] reflected an original confidence that meeting and understanding others was ultimately a project that was valuable and doable" (10).

Boiardo also translated four historical works into Italian over the course of his career: the *Le vite degli eccellenti capitani* (*Lives of Famous Captains*) by Cornelius Nepos and Xenophon's *Ciropedia* (*Education of Cyrus*) between 1467 and 1471, the thirteenth-century Ferrarese chronicler Ricobaldo's *Storia imperiale* (*Imperial History*) between 1472 and 1478, and Herodotus's *Guerre di Greci e Persi* (*Histories*). This latter work of unknown date was based primarily on Lorenzo Valla's Latin edition, and was the first translation of Herodotus into a modern vernacular. In prefaces to these works, all dedicated to Ercole d'Este, Boiardo adopts the perspective of a humanist teacher, underscoring the role of history as a guide of moral conduct and manual of good government. It has been noted that his method of translation, often approximate and not devoid of errors, privileges instruction over philological accuracy. In addition to his translations of historical texts, Boiardo rendered Apuleius's *Golden Ass* into Italian around 1479, apparently continuing a translation begun by his grandfather Feltrino. Sometime between 1469 and 1478 Boiardo also composed *Capitoli del giuoco dei tarocchi* (*Verses for the Game of Tarot Cards*).

Boiardo's comedy *Il Timone* (c. 1490), a creative rewriting of Lucian of Samosata's *Timon* with substantial additions, is one of the earliest comedies to appear in the Italian Renaissance and attests to the interest in classical theater in late-fifteenth-century Ferrara. Written in tercets with a five-act structure and a new comic ending, Boiardo's version specifically focuses not only on the proper uses of wealth, but also on the proper mode of governing. In a dialogue of his own invention between Jupiter and a personification of Wealth, Boiardo writes that whoever rules without justice should be called a tyrant rather than a prince. This play is considered by some critics as a source for Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*.

At his death in December of 1494, Boiardo left behind his widow Taddea, son Camillo, four daughters Emilia, Giulia, Lucia, and Cornelia, as well as his unfinished romance epic numbering 35,440 verses. Taddea and Camillo commissioned the publication of the final edition of the poem in three books (Scandiano, 1495). The

work was an instant success, and led to frequent reprintings, *rifacimenti* (rewritings) in standard Tuscan, and six continuations by four different authors. The most famous sequel is Ludovico Ariosto's masterpiece, *Orlando Furioso* (*Mad Orlando*, final edition, 1532). After a series of vicissitudes, Ariosto brings both the war in France and Orlando's obsession with the princess Angelica to a happy conclusion.

The sequel to Boiardo's real life, however, was a tragic one. When nineteen-year-old Camillo died suddenly in 1499, the local doctor detected signs of poison. Nonetheless, Ercole d'Este did not investigate and allowed Matteo Maria's cousin Giovanni to immediately expel his widow and daughters from the castle in Scandiano and occupy it himself. Giovanni then refused to relinquish the family's personal possessions despite letters from King Louis XII of France and Isabella d'Este Gonzaga to Ercole d'Este on their behalf. A subsequent letter from Boiardo's widow to Ercole's heir, Duke Alfonso I d'Este, reveals that the matter was still unresolved in 1505 (Monducci and Badini). As often happened in the poem, the most insidious and lethal dangers did not originate in distant lands, but stemmed from within the poet's own local environment.

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**Citation:** Cavallo, Jo Ann, and Jo Ann Cavallo. "Matteo Maria Boiardo". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 19 April 2008.

[<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=471>, accessed 13 March 2015.]

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ISSN 1747-678X