

Talking Religion: The Conversion of Agricane in Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*



Jo Ann Cavallo

Agricane's final dialogue with Orlando under a starry night sky is one of the few episodes from the *Orlando innamorato* routinely included in Italian literature anthologies. Despite its status as "l'episodio forse più noto di tutto il poema boiardesco", however, it has not received much critical attention.¹ By taking account of the scene's literary precedents and historical allusions, I aim to offer a new reading of Agricane's eleventh-hour conversion.

The attempt to convert 'pagans' was commonplace in the Carolingian narratives familiar to Boiardo's early readers. Following a pattern established in the *Entrée d'Espagne*, episodes often incorporated debates over the relative merits of Christianity and Islam.² The precedent most often cited in connection with the *Innamorato*'s conversion of Agricane is found in an Italian rewriting of the *Entrée d'Espagne* known as the *Spagna in rima*.³ That still anonymous work begins with Charlemagne calling for a Crusade against Muslim Spain and the pope granting plenary indulgences to those who fight against "la fè ria".⁴ When the

¹Gioanola, *Letteratura italiana*, 1:125.

²Juliann Vitullo (*Chivalric Epic*, 81) traces this recurring episode from its French origins to its Italian rewritings, noting that in the *Entrée d'Espagne* Roland first uses rhetoric to try to convert Saracens; see also Brusagli, "L'Innamorato, la Spagna, il Morgante", 120.

³Giulio Reichenbach (*L'OI di Boiardo*, 22–32) compares the conversion scene in the *Innamorato* with that of the *Spagna in rima*, noting that Ferrau does not convert in either the *Entrée* or the *Spagna in prosa*.

⁴*Spagna ferrarese* 1.18.

Spanish king Marsilio learns from his messenger that Charlemagne “diffidò ciascun el qual non crede / in Yehsù Cristo Padre omnipotente”, he calls on Ferraù to lead the defense of the city of Lazera.⁵ The ensuing confrontation between Ferraù and Orlando keeps religious difference at the forefront.

Initially Ferraù assures his mother of a future Muslim conquest of Rome and the entire West:

E in Roma ne la caxa di san Piero,
 in su l'altar mangierà el mio ferante.
 La legie di Iesù sença pensiero
 abatuta serà, e Trivicante
 Apolin e Machon serà più altiero
 come signor da Ponente a Levante.⁶

Although Orlando in turn exhorts Ferraù to forsake his false beliefs and convert to the true religion—“Deh, rinega la tua fè vile e vana / e torna a Cristo, Padre omnipotente!”—Ferraù adamantly refuses Orlando’s demand and reiterates the superiority of his own faith.⁷ In the ensuing battle in which warfare alternates with sermonizing, the anonymous poet repeatedly portrays the knights as representatives of two opposing belief systems in a bitterly fought contest for dominion over the earth. In this context Ferraù’s ultimate defeat convinces him that his religion is of no value: “Vegio che non val nulla el paganesmo”.⁸ The scene concludes with a mortally wounded Ferraù receiving baptism at the hands of Orlando.

The conversion of Agricane, however, is developed in direct contrast to the traditional patterns found in the *Spagna*. Whereas in that poem Orlando and Ferraù are depicted as fighting solely “per la fè cristiana et per la fella”, in the *Innamorato* the two warriors cross swords over a woman.⁹ Indeed, Orlando does not give any indication that he is aware of the religious identity of his opponent beyond the fact that he is not a Christian, and Agricane himself evinces a complete indifference to religion. He never mentions Mohammad, and the only

⁵*Spagna ferrarese* 2.5.

⁶*Spagna ferrarese* 3.28.

⁷*Spagna ferrarese* 3.39.

⁸*Spagna ferrarese* 5.1.

⁹*Spagna ferrarese* 4.2. Alexandre also points out this difference with respect to the episode’s Carolingian precedent: “[s]e il loro duello deve molto a quello famoso fra Orlando e Ferraù nella *Spagna*, cosa risaputa, nondimeno conviene insistere sulla massima differenza, che sta nei moventi dell’azione: Agricane muore a cagione dell’amore, allorché Ferraù per la fede e la patria” (“Eroe saraceno”, 132).

time he invokes a higher authority, he rather cryptically refers to his “segno” as Trivigante (*OI* 1:14.53), the name given by medieval Italian Christians to a pagan deity of unknown origin that came to be associated with Islam. The narrator frequently refers to Agricane as a Tartar, but never as a Saracen.

Riccardo Bruscaqli, recognizing that Boiardo refashions this episode “in una chiave integralmente cortese e paradigmaticamente distanziata dai contenuti ideologici e religiosi della *Spagna*” writes:

è significativo, proprio pensando alla *Spagna* e al suo codice epico-religioso, che la fede cristiana appaia nella conversazione notturna di Orlando e Agricane più come [...] la rivendicazione di una perfetta compatibilità fra ‘cultura’ ed esercizio delle armi cavalleresche, che come una credenza teologica o una distintiva ideologia.¹⁰

Given the distance that Boiardo takes from his ostensible model, Daniela Delcorno Branca observes that some of the episode’s features are to be found not in the Matter of France, but rather in the Breton cycle: the solitary duel, the fountain, the darkness of night and the conversation between two jealous rivals for a lady’s love.¹¹ In addition, Ettore Paratore points out allusions to the *Aeneid* in both the action and the dialogue.¹²

Boiardo may indeed be using Arthurian romance and Vergilian epic to cut against the grain of the episode’s Carolingian precedents; at the same time, however, neither model is sufficiently present to carry its thematic weight. On the contrary, the episode’s conclusion opposes the ideology of Arthurian romance by revealing the folly of fighting a rival suitor over a lady: as soon as Agricane is mortally wounded, Angelica is relegated to part of his unworthy past and duly forgotten. Nor can Orlando’s personal goal be linked to Aeneas’s imperialistic mission since he is fighting solely for a woman and does not stand to gain any territory. I would like to propose instead that Boiardo shifts the focus away from the perennial clash between Christians and Saracens by developing Agricane’s identity as a Mongol khan. I now therefore turn to the question of how—and why—the Mongol Empire provides a relevant historical context for the episode of Agricane’s conversion.

In contrast to the Carolingian epic, accounts of Mongol history reveal the total absence of religion as a motivating factor in warfare

¹⁰Bruscaqli, intro., xi, italics original. Cristina Montagnani has also recently noted that the “corrispondenze strutturali profonde [...] evidenziano ancor più la divaricazione ideologica” (intro., 25).

¹¹Delcorno Branca, *Tristano e Lancilotto*, 168.

¹²Paratore, “L’*OI* e l’*Eneide*”, 361–364.

or statecraft. James Chambers credits Genghis Khan with establishing “the first great empire to know religious freedom”, and early Western travelers invariably comment on the Mongols’ ongoing policy of religious tolerance.¹³ Marco Polo, who spent several years in the court of Kublai Khan and journeyed extensively throughout Asia (1271–1295), regularly documents the co-presence of Christianity, Islam and ‘idolatry’ in the Mongol cities that he visits. The Franciscan friar William of Rubruck, one of the missionaries who in 1253–1255 preceded Marco Polo to the Mongol court, records that the capital city of Karakorum housed “twelve temples dedicated to the idols of different nations, two mosques where they observe the laws of Mahomet, and one church of Christians at the far end of the city”.¹⁴

Genghis Khan’s endorsement of religious freedom appears to be linked to his overall indifference to belief systems beyond the shamanism of his ancestors.¹⁵ Some of the subsequent khans, however, not only practiced tolerance, but were reported to have been receptive to Christian teaching. Kuyuk Khan’s mother was a Christian, and Giovanni da Pian del Carpine was told that the khan himself was close to conversion: “Certain Christians of his family earnestly and strongly assured us that he himself was about to become a Christian”.¹⁶ William of Rubruck writes that he was sent to the Mongol Empire by Louis IX when the king heard that Sartak, son of Batu, khan of the Golden Horde, had become a Christian.¹⁷ He eventually arrived at the court of the Great Khan Mangu, Kuyuk’s successor, where a resident monk tried to convince him of the khan’s preference for their faith. Although William remained skeptical, he nevertheless records the ruler’s visit to the local church and questions concerning Christianity, and later mentions that the mother of Mangu and Kublai was a Christian.¹⁸ Marco Polo notes that Kublai’s brother Gigata (Chaghatai), who ruled at Samarkand, converted to Christianity before his death. The Armenian monk Hayton (also Het’um) goes so far as to claim that Kublai Khan himself had become a Christian:

¹³Chambers, *Devil’s Horsemen*, 45.

¹⁴William of Rubruck, *Journal*, 167.

¹⁵Silverberg, *Realm of Prester John*, 79–80.

¹⁶Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, *Journey*, 43. Apparently Kuyuk did later convert, as his messenger declared to King Louis IX of France in 1248, though “it is more likely to have been motivated by self-interest than by profound conviction” (Chambers, *Devil’s Horsemen*, 130).

¹⁷William of Rubruck, *Journal*, 56.

¹⁸Kublai’s mother was among the prominent Mongols who converted to Nestorian Christianity; her sons subsequently built a ‘temple of the cross’ in her honor.

Qubilai-Khan ruled the Tartars for forty-two years. He converted to Christianity and built the city called Eons [Beijing] in the kingdom of Cathay, a city said to be greater than Rome.¹⁹

Unlike the *Spagna's* convention of compelling Saracens to convert at swordpoint, accounts about the Mongol Empire consistently portray the Christian friars relying on their power of persuasion. William of Rubruck records his various attempts to convert his Mongol hosts as he is sent from Satrak to Batu and finally to the Great Khan Mangu. His first speech to Batu concluded with the threat of damnation in the afterlife:

Be it known unto you of a certainty, that you shall not obtain the joys of heaven, unless you become a Christian: for God saith, Whosoever believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not, shall be condemned.²⁰

This strategy, as one might imagine, proved completely unproductive. The friar recounts the immediate reaction of the khan and his nobles: "At this [Batu] smiled modestly; but the other Moals [i.e., Mongols] began to clap their hands, and to laugh at us".²¹

William assumes a potentially more effective attitude when, near the end of his sojourn at Mangu's court, he responds with humility to the khan's invitation to him and representatives of other faiths to assemble in order to expound their beliefs. He reports having replied,

our Scriptures teach that the servant of God must not dispute, only be kind to all. I am thus ready to explain, without hatred, the faith and hope of the Christians to whoever wishes to question me.²²

In the ensuing theological debate that takes place on the eve of Pentecost, William's first concern is to prove the existence of God; moreover, in arguing for monotheism over polytheism the Saracens are his allies rather than antagonists. He concludes that the meeting ended without hostility, but also without conversions:

Every one listened without raising the least objection. Yet no one said: 'I believe; I want to become a Christian.' Then the Nestorians and the Saracens sang together in a loud voice; the Tuins said not a word and afterwards everybody drank deeply.²³

¹⁹Hayton, *History of the Tartars* 3.19; Bedrosian in his preface notes Hayton's "tendency to emphasize (or overemphasize) Christian currents among the Mongols" in an attempt to portray them as potential allies of Western Europe.

²⁰William of Rubruck, *Journal*, 100.

²¹William of Rubruck, *Journal*, 100.

²²William of Rubruck, *Journal*, 173.

²³William of Rubruck, *Journal*, 178.

Kublai Khan subsequently sent Marco Polo's father and uncle to the pope requesting that a hundred learned men come to China "che sapessero mostrare per ragione come la cristiana legge era migliore".²⁴ Although the pope never actually sent the hundred scholars, missionary activity on the part of Franciscan friars gained momentum in the following decades. Giovanni da Montecorvino, sent to China by Pope Nicolò IV in 1289, reported six thousand baptized converts within a few years and remained there to become the first archbishop of Beijing. The Florentine Giovanni Marignolli and fifty fellow Franciscans spent over four years in China (1342–1347),

converting a good many of the great khan's subjects and even staging Christian ceremonies within the imperial palace—which was next door to the cathedral—for the enlightenment of the emperor.²⁵

The *Innamorato's* conversation between Orlando and Agricane on the outskirts of Albraca, while in contrast with the forced conversions of the Carolingian epic, is in accordance with the spirit of religious tolerance documented by Christian visitors to the Mongol Empire. Rather than hurling insults at each other like Orlando and Ferrau in the *Spagna*, Boiardo's two warriors show mutual esteem in their various exchanges. Agricane explains that he wants to preserve Orlando's life because of admiration for his valor and gratitude for his earlier courtesy of postponing their battle so that he could aid his troops. He therefore offers to let Orlando go free, as long as he will remain clear of the battlefield in the future. In expressing his distress at the thought of killing Orlando, the Tartar king calls upon the sky and the sun as his witnesses: "Ma siami testimonio il celo e il sole / Che darti morte me dispiace e duole" (*OI* 1:18.35). His invocation recalls the Mongolian reverence for the 'eternal blue sky' or "heaven" that was believed to keep watch over human events. Walther Heissig writes:

[t]he records of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, from the time of the political consolidation of the Mongols and the beginnings of the Mongol Empire, give an account of a religious system at the summit of which was the blue or eternal heaven.²⁶

²⁴Polo, *Milione* 7.

²⁵Silverberg, *Realm of Prester John*, 170.

²⁶Heissig, *Religions of Mongolia*, 6. John Man notes further that faith in "the supreme power, Blue Heaven", which "watched over events below with a remote benevolence [...] was common to all Central Asian peoples" (*Genghis Khan*, 52–53).

According to John Man, moreover, Genghis Khan in particular regularly asserted that he was “under the protection of Eternal Heaven”.²⁷ Agricane’s evocation of traditional Mongolian belief not only supports the historical context of the episode, but keeps the Christian-Saracen binary out of the picture.

In Orlando’s reply Boiardo draws attention to both the correspondences and differences between the two knights. If Agricane spoke in a gentle voice (*OI* 1:18.34: “con voce suave”), Orlando also feels compassion (*OI* 1:18.36: “avea preso già de lui pietate”) and responds in a very humane way (“molto umano”). And since he too believes in his own certain victory, it is now his turn to express regret over his rival’s impending death. In Orlando’s case, however, this regret extends to the afterlife:

—Quanto sei—disse—più franco e soprano
 Più di te me rincesce in veritate,
 Che serai morto, e non sei cristiano,
 Ed andarai tra l’anime dannate [...]—(*OI* 1:18.36).

Whereas Agricane offered to preserve Orlando’s life if he agreed to leave the battlefield, Orlando ups the ante by proposing to save Agricane’s body and soul if he consents to be baptized. This is Orlando’s only reference to the Christian religion in the entire exchange preceding Agricane’s conversion.²⁸

The reader can well imagine that Orlando’s offer is just as unacceptable as the one Agricane presented earlier to him: it is clear that neither knight would be willing to relinquish his values or refuse the battle. On the contrary, Agricane is so elated to have ascertained the identity of his opponent that not only does he show no interest in salvation, but he replies that he would turn down the prospect of ruling paradise itself just for the pleasure of testing himself against the famed Orlando: “Chi me facesse re del paradiso, / Con tal ventura non lo cangiarei” (*OI* 1:18.37). He therefore advises Orlando to cease all talk about the gods since his preaching would be of no avail:

²⁷Man, *Genghis Khan*, 14.

²⁸Orlando had earlier wished to himself that Agricane were a Christian, but he never engaged in proselytizing. Moreover, as Alhaique Pettinelli, *Immaginario cavalleresco*, 28, notes, “il suo desiderio di convertire il pagano non deriva, come nella tradizione, da un impulso generico di tutti i cristiani verso tutti i pagani, ma è legato al valore individuale della persona, alla sua «virtù», che fa desiderare al conte che Agricane entri nella schiera degli eletti”.

Ma sino or te ricordo e dòtti aviso
 Che non me parli de' fatti de' Dei,
 Perché potresti predicare in vano (*OI* 1:18.37).

Boiardo gives Agricane the last word—indeed, his answer is followed by a succinct “Né più parole” (*OI* 1:18.38) on the part of the narrator—and returns to the action. After a battle that lasts from noon until late night, the two knights lie down near each other as though they were old friends: “Come fosse tra loro antica pace, / L’uno l’altro vicino era e palese” (*OI* 1:18.40). After “ragionando insieme tuttavia / Di cose degne e condecete a loro” (*OI* 1:18.41), Orlando turns to a higher concern. Pointing to the beauty of the cosmos, he seeks to reach agreement at the most basic level; namely, the existence of a divine creator:

—Questo che or vediamo, è un bel lavoro,
 Che fece la divina monarchia;
 E la luna de argento, e stelle d’oro,
 E la luce del giorno, e il sol lucente,
 Dio tutto ha fatto per la umana gente—(*OI* 1:18.41).

Orlando’s metaphorical depiction of God as the creator of heaven’s monarchy echoes Agricane’s earlier reference to the king of Paradise. Moreover, he refrains from restricting his discourse to any particular belief, and includes all of humanity, rather than a chosen group, as beneficiaries of God’s creative outpouring. Unwilling to discuss religion or science on any level, Agricane confesses his ignorance in the latter subject and recalls how in his refusal to learn he broke the head of his first and only teacher. The khan’s youthful repudiation of book learning was compensated for by rigorous training in hunting and military exercises, which he claims to be the sole occupation worthy of a knight.

Respecting Agricane’s refusal to discuss theology, Orlando accepts the topic of what gives meaning and fulfillment to human life. Although he expresses his agreement on the primacy of arms, he maintains that learning graces an individual as flowers adorn a field.²⁹ Yet Orlando’s defense of letters brings him back to the original topic and he goes on to assert in metaphorical language that without learning one cannot begin to comprehend the mysteries of the cosmos:

²⁹The debate over the proper activities of the knight was familiar enough in medieval and Renaissance Europe and continued well into the sixteenth century. In Baldassare Castiglione’s *Cortegiano*, arms constitute the courtier’s first duty, but he must have many other interests as well.

Ed è simile a un bove, a un sasso, a un legno,
 Chi non pensa allo eterno Creatore;
 Né ben se può pensar senza dottrina
 La summa maiestate alta e divina (*OI* 1:18.44).

A few years after the poem's publication Boiardo's cousin Giovanni Pico della Mirandola will compare one's inner development to diverse forms along the chain of being:

Quae quisque excoluerit, illa adolescent, et fructus suos ferent in illo. Si vegetalia, planta fiet; si sensualia, obruescet; si rationalia, caeleste evadet animal; si intellectualia, angelus erit et Dei filius (*Dign.* 28–29).

The possibility of ascension in this scheme depends on one's state of knowledge. Citing Pico's rhetorical inquiry into the possibility to judge or love the unknown, Stephen Alan Farmer explains that for Pico the study of philosophy is the necessary preparation for either "earthly rule or the mystical ascent".³⁰ While Boiardo stops short of refashioning his knight as a mystic, Orlando's speech forcefully upholds the fundamental role of education in the formation of a fully developed human being capable of spiritual contemplation.

Whereas the existence of a divine creator began as Orlando's main point, his argument has included the interrelated topics of education, proper knightly activity and spiritual reflection. Contesting his opponent's unfair advantage of superior intellectual training, Agricane refuses to discuss such metaphysical issues and proposes instead the subject of love. Orlando responds willingly to this suggestion, acknowledging that, in contrast to previous battles, he is now motivated exclusively by his desire to win a beautiful maiden: "sol per acquistar la bella dama / Faccio battaglia, et altro non ho brama" (*OI* 1:18.48). Although the knights find themselves in agreement concerning the importance of love, the problem of course is that they are both vying for the same woman. Ironically, whereas the two of them were not estranged by religious or national differences, their rivalry over Angelica impels them abruptly to violence. As they unchivalrously resume their battle in the middle of the night, Orlando even fears treachery on the part of his adversary, whom the poet now refers to coldly as the "pagano" (*OI* 1:18.54) in accordance with Orlando's new hostile attitude.

After over five hours of combat Agricane succumbs, and with his dying breath spontaneously conveys his belief in the Christian God

³⁰Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 33.

and asks Orlando to baptize him. Rather than the victory of one creed over another, his reasoning shows a shift from a lower to a higher focus: “E se mia vita è stata iniqua e strana, / Non sia la morte almen de Dio ribella” (*OI* 1:19.13). Whereas in the *Spagna* Orlando’s victory convinced Ferraù of his God’s superior power, by way of contrast the God evoked by Agricane in his request for baptism is not a promoter of religious warfare, but a compassionate and benevolent deity who demonstrates love for mankind through the Incarnation and Crucifixion:

Io credo nel tuo Dio, che morì in croce

[...]

Lui, che venne a salvar la gente umana (*OI* 1:19.12–13).

This attitude is possible because their combat was not motivated by religious difference.

What could have prompted Boiardo to turn away from the Carolingian model of converting Saracens at swordpoint and stage instead the voluntary conversion of a Mongol khan? If we consider the episode in the historical context of late fifteenth-century Christian Europe, it emerges not as yet another example of religious propaganda but rather as a thoughtful critique of religious intolerance. The first edition of the *Innamorato* was being prepared for publication during the period in which the Catholic kings in nearby Spain were setting in motion the final phase of the Reconquista, beginning with the invasion of the Muslim kingdom of Granada in 1481. Although the forced conversion or expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain could not then have been foreseen, a period of increasing religious dogmatism was already underway with the institution of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478. Less than two decades later Giuliano Dati opened his poetic rendering of Columbus’s famous letter of 1493 with a tribute to King Ferdinand of Castile, praising his merciless treatment of non-Christians, in this case Jews:

chi altro crede è mal da lui trattato,

come si vede che non è mai sazio

di marrani giudei far ogni strazio.³¹

At the same time, however, such an attitude of intolerance was far from universally accepted. On the contrary, Pico della Mirandola actively advocated an open exchange of religious ideas in order to reach “a universal harmony among philosophers”.³² Whereas Boiardo’s

³¹Dati, *Delle isole nuovamente trovate* 10.

³²Kristeller, intro., 216.

Orlando had a single point on which he sought agreement—the existence of a supreme being who created a universe filled with beauty for the sake of humanity—Pico would soon devise 900 theological *conclusiones* that he planned to debate in January 1487. His corollary *Oration* expressed a yearning for

optata pace [...] pace sanctissima, indivua copula, unianimi amicitia, qua omnes animi in una mente, quae est super omnem mentem, non concordant adeo, sed ineffabili quodammodo unum peniut evadant (*Dign.* 94).

Glancing ahead to the following decades, we see that Orlando's ecumenical approach anticipates not only Pico's *Oration*, which aims to reconcile other world religions with Christianity, but perhaps even more closely Thomas More's *Utopia*, which seeks to establish a common ground among all religions. In More's ideal society, where everyone is free to observe the religion of his choice, commonalities prevail over differences: "nihil in templis visitur auditurve quod non quadrare ad cunctas in comune videatur"; "[i]n his deum et creationis et gubernationes et ceterorum praeterea bonorum omnium quilibet recognoscit auctorem".³³ Orlando's non-coercive approach was precisely the one advocated by Utopus, the purported founder of More's imaginary society, who "sanxit uti quam cuique religionem libeat sequi liceat, ut vero alios quoque in suam traducat hactenus niti possit, uti placide ac modeste suam rationibus astruat".³⁴

Boiardo's fictional dialogue evoking past examples provided by Mongol history thus offers a positive example of inter-religious dialogue. Agricane's spontaneous conversion results from his friendly conversation with Orlando amidst the peaceful beauty of the natural world. When Orlando cannot persuade Agricane of his point of view he willingly changes the subject. It is not Orlando but Agricane himself who returns to the topic of religion and asks to be baptized. Boiardo has thus transformed the Carolingian epic's stock conversion episode from a case of coercive proselytism into an invitation to communicate, even with one's 'enemy,' in a spirit of openness and respect for his autonomy.

Columbia University

³³More, *Utopia*, 234 and 238.

³⁴More, *Utopia*, 222.