



Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533)

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Poet; Courtier; Letter-writer/ Diarist; Playwright / Dramatist.
Active 1493-1533 in Italy

Ludovico Ariosto was born in Reggio Emilia on September 8, 1474, to Daria Malaguzzi and Niccolò Ariosto, military governor of the city at the time. His father's service to Duke Ercole I d'Este of Ferrara led the family to Rovigo in 1481, back to Reggio Emilia during the Venice-Ferrara War (1482-1484), and finally to Ferrara in 1484, where he would spend most of his life. The eldest of ten children, Ludovico was initially compelled by his father to study law at the University of Ferrara in 1489, but after five years he was allowed to follow his inclination and dedicate himself to literary studies, which at the time consisted primarily of classical Latin works. During the 1490s Ludovico also frequented the Ferrarese court, a vibrant cultural and intellectual center. After his father's death in 1500, he sought regular employment under the Estense in order to provide financially for his mother and nine younger siblings, including his paralyzed younger brother Gabriele. After a brief period as commander of the fortress of Canossa (1501-1503), he entered the service of Ercole's son, Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, where he remained for fourteen years.

Although Ariosto aspired to the position of court poet, his duties and occupations as Cardinal Ippolito's *familiaris continuus* (attendant) were not of the literary sort, ranging instead from daily personal care to occasional diplomatic missions. During this time Estense Ferrara was not only in a precarious position with respect to Venice, but was also caught between the conflicting pressures of France and the Papal States. In 1510 Pope Julius II attempted to add Ferrara to his domain, excommunicating Duke Alfonso d'Este (who had succeeded his father Ercole in 1505) and declaring his fiefs forfeit. Ariosto was sent to Rome to plead for a repeal of the excommunication, but left without success and in fear for his life. Better relations between Estense Ferrara and the Papal States became possible only in 1513 with the death of Julius and the election of Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici as Pope Leo X. Sent to Rome by his patrons to congratulate the new pope, Ariosto also sought, albeit in vain, to offer his services to the Papal Court. He would later refer to the disappointing treatment he received there in his third and seventh satires (1518, 1525).

Little is known about Ariosto's private life during this period. He had two sons from extramarital relationships: Giambattista, born in 1503 to his maid Maria, and Virginio, born in 1509 to Orsolina Sassomarino, identified only as the daughter of a neighboring nail-maker. In 1513 he began a life-long relationship with the Florentine Alessandra Benucci, wife of the Ferrarese Tito Strozzi.

Ariosto's early writings in Latin consist mostly of encomia for the Estense family, such as an elegy on the death of the Duchess Eleonora d'Aragona in 1493 and an epithalamium on the marriage of Alfonso d'Este and

Lucrezia Borgia in 1504. Writing in praise of his Estense patrons, however, was not always an easy task. In 1506 Duke Alfonso's brothers Giulio and Ferrante plotted to seize the state and were imprisoned when the conspiracy was revealed. The animosity between the brothers was said to have dated to an earlier incident in which Ippolito had Giulio's eyes gouged out in jealous rivalry over Lucrezia Borgia's lovely cousin Angela. Ariosto, who possibly witnessed the blinding of Giulio, unpunished by Alfonso, and certainly knew of the failed coup attempt, discovered by Ippolito, wrote an (incomplete) eclogue in tercets condemning the betrayal of the conspirators while celebrating the actions of Alfonso and Ippolito (1506).

Ariosto's initial foray into writing epic poetry was the *Obizzeide*, an encomiastic historical epic in tercets celebrating Este family ancestors. He interrupted the work in 1504 after having composed only 211 verses. He also wrote lyric poetry in Italian, mostly on the theme of love. The poems currently deemed to have been composed by Ariosto consist of five *canzoni*, forty-one sonnets, twelve madrigals, twenty-seven *capitoli*, two eclogues, eleven stanzas, and seventy-one pieces in Latin. None of his lyric poetry was published during his lifetime: the first collections of his poems in Italian and Latin were printed in 1546 and 1553, respectively.

The revival of Latin comedy, which began in Ferrara in the 1470s and 1480s under Ercole d'Este, continued under the reign of Duke Alfonso. Ariosto's first contributions to this genre were his prose comedies *La Cassaria (The Coffer)* and *I Suppositi (The Pretenders)*, performed in Ferrara in 1508 and 1509, respectively. In the first play, two servants arrange marriages for their masters. The second, based on Terence (*The Eunuch*) and Plautus (*The Captives*), served in turn as the basis for parts of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Ariosto is primarily known, however, for his masterpiece, the romance epic *Orlando Furioso*, a continuation of Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*. Boiardo had died in 1494, leaving his poem unfinished nine cantos into the third book. It is generally thought that Ariosto began his work after a mediocre fourth book by Niccolò degli Agostini saw the light in 1505. Epistolary exchanges suggest that members of the Estense circle followed with interest the decade-long progress of the poem's composition. Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, Marchioness of Mantua, wrote to her brother Ippolito in February of 1507 that Ariosto had read portions of the poem to her during his recent visit to Mantua. In July of 1509, Duke Alfonso asked Ippolito to send him "quella gionta fece Lud.co Ariosto a lo Innamoramento de Orlando" ("the addition that Ludovico Ariosto made to the Innamoramento de Orlando"). In July of 1512, Ariosto wrote to Isabella d'Este's husband, the Marquis of Mantua, agreeing to transcribe for him the most satisfactory sections of his unnamed book, which he identified simply as a continuation of "la inventione" (the narrative invention) of the Count Matteo Maria Boiardo. The forty-canto poem comprised of 4124 ottava rima stanzas was completed in 1515 and published in Ferrara the following year with the title of *Orlando Furioso*. Ariosto was present at the presses in order to make final corrections to the text as the pages were being printed. Discrepancies among the twelve extant copies of this first edition document his last-minute modifications.

Like the *Innamorato*, the *Furioso* offers innumerable interlaced episodes in a whirlwind of chivalric adventures undertaken across the expanse of Europe, Asia, and Africa. At the same time, the poem's opening stanzas identify three storylines that correspond to the principal epic, romance, and dynastic threads that Ariosto takes over from Boiardo's poem and brings to a conclusion.

The main epic thrust of the poem is provided by the war that King Agramante of Biserta has been waging against the Frankish King Charlemagne and his allies in Christian Europe. Agramante's invasion of France not only brings to bear all the Saracen forces of Africa, but involves pagan characters from as far east as India (Gradasso) and as far north as the Mongol Empire (Mandricardo). The war's climax is the battle of three against three on the island of Lipadusa (Lampedusa) off the coast of Sicily. This battle leads to the death of Agramante and Gradasso and the conversion of the North African Sobrino. Indeed, by the poem's end Christianity has triumphed, Biserta has been devastated, and all the major non-Christian knights have either been killed or have converted to Christianity.

Although the poem presents many romance adventures, the episode singled out in the opening stanzas (and which gives the work its title) is the madness of Orlando brought about by love. Orlando had been infatuated with the princess Angelica since the first canto of Boiardo's *Innamorato*, forsaking his role of Charlemagne's champion in order to follow her across the globe. Ariosto transforms this infatuation into downright insanity. Initially Orlando's affliction appears to be caused by intense jealousy when he discovers that his "beloved" has given herself romantically and sexually to a Saracen foot soldier named Medoro. The poem's narrator subsequently reflects that madness is the natural state of all lovers, since there is nothing more insane than losing oneself in one's desire for another. Finally it is revealed that Orlando's madness is actually God's punishment for his having abandoned the Christian cause in order to pursue a pagan damsel. Following God's will, Orlando is eventually cured of his love madness and thereupon joins the Christian forces in destroying Agramante's state.

The dynastic theme centers on the many vicissitudes of Ruggiero and Bradamante, mythical founders of the Estense dynasty. The couple had met and fallen in love in the final cantos of Boiardo's poem, but were separated shortly thereafter. Throughout the *Furioso* they are continuously reunited and then separated until their wedding is celebrated in the poem's final canto.

In striking contrast to other members of the court, the poem's dedicatee Ippolito d'Este appears to have shown no interest in or appreciation of Ariosto's literary efforts, purportedly dismissing the work with a flippant and vulgar remark. Already strained relations between poet and patron led to a definitive break the following year when Ariosto refused to accompany Ippolito in his transfer to Hungary as the newly appointed bishop of Buda. Ariosto's first satire describes his state of mind to those who joined the Cardinal. While excusing himself from the journey on the grounds of his poor health, desire to study, and need to care for his private affairs and family, Ariosto also effectively criticizes the continued subservience on the part of his peers.

Between 1517 and 1525 Ariosto wrote a total of seven such satires in tercets that were published posthumously in 1534. Following the model of Horace's satires, these pieces offer a critique of contemporary society. Ariosto conveys his disgust with the corruption of the Italian courts, the nepotism of the popes, and the vices of humanist teachers. The *Satires* can also be read as an idealized autobiography, in which the author portrays himself as disdainful of the base servitude expected of courtiers, concerned with the education of his son Virginio, and nostalgic for a life of domestic tranquility in Ferrara.

In 1518 Ariosto passed into the service of Ippolito's older brother, Duke Alfonso. Although thus remaining within the Estense orbit, he never enjoyed close ties with his new patron. Indeed, from the death of his cousin Rinaldo Ariosto in 1519 until his own death in 1533, Ariosto was involved in a bitter legal battle against the Estense over Rinaldo's inheritance.

Between 1519 and 1520 Ariosto worked on two additional comedies, *Il Negromante* (*The Necromancer*), about a marriage kept secret, and the unfinished *I Studenti* (*The Students*), about frustrated love. The latter comedy, which depicts the love stories of two youths studying in Pavia (one is in love with a servant girl and the other with a professor's daughter), was completed by Ariosto's son Virginio and brother Gabriele in two separate versions.

In 1521 Ariosto published a second edition of the *Orlando Furioso*. The changes were minor, mostly limited to linguistic, stylistic, and historical modifications. The success of the poem did not bring about Ariosto's economic independence, however. In fact, Alfonso tightened his coffers due to Ferrara's political vicissitudes, and Ariosto's salary was initially suspended, then withdrawn altogether. In order to secure an income, in 1522 Ariosto accepted the post of governor of the mountainous Garfagnana region. Although the Garfagnana had been technically under Estense control since 1430, the inhabitants of this tumultuous hinterland apparently had little regard for administrative regulation. In his seventh satire and in a series of letters addressed to Alfonso,

Ariosto laments his inability to deal efficiently with brigandage and fighting among local factions without the Duke's support. Indeed, a substantial portion of Ariosto's extant letters date from the three years he spent at this Apenninic outpost.

It was during this trying period that Ariosto composed the five cantos (*Cinque canti*) that were originally intended to serve as a direct continuation of the *Furioso*. As dark as the *Furioso* may seem in relation to the *Innamorato*, the *Cinque canti* make Ariosto's 1516 poem appear sunny by comparison. Intrigue and treachery rule the day: Orlando disguises himself to avoid being detected by Charlemagne who intends to imprison him; Bradamante believes that she is embracing her beloved Ruggiero when suddenly the figure before her reveals itself to be the treacherous Gano di Maganza; Orlando and Rinaldo fight against each other, no longer motivated by jealousy or justice, but because they too have been tricked by Gano's falsehoods. The work stands as an explicit indictment of contemporary society without any resolution, and the final image of the fifth canto, of Charlemagne being rescued by his horse as his forces are in disarray, gives the sense of a world on the verge of chaos.

At his own request, Ariosto was released from his post in the Garfagnana in 1525 and returned to Ferrara where he resumed administrative duties for Alfonso. On the cultural side, he oversaw the court's theatrical productions. During this period he rewrote in verse both *La Cassaria* (1531) and *I Suppositi* (1528-31), revised *Il Negromante*, and composed a new comedy, *La Lena* (1528), based on the story of Peronella from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. *La Lena* was performed as part of the wedding celebration for Ercole II and Renée of France in 1528. Around 1530 Ariosto composed the satirical *Erbolato* (*The Herbalist*), a supposed speech in which the charlatan Faventino claims that his brand of medicine offers a universal remedy for every illness.

Throughout this time Ariosto continued his relationship with Alessandra Benucci, whose husband died in 1515. They secretly married around 1528, but continued to live separately so that Alessandra could maintain her inheritance and Ludovico his ecclesiastical benefits. In 1529 Ludovico, along with his brother Gabriele and son Virginio, moved into a house he had purchased in 1526, and which bore the following apt inscription: "Parva sed apta mihi, sed nulli obnoxia, sed non sordida, parta meo sed tamen aere domus" (The house is small but right for me, indebted to no one, clean, and purchased with my own money).

In 1532 Ariosto oversaw the printing of the third edition of the *Furioso*, which contains not only minor revisions, but four additional episodes that increase the number of cantos to forty-six. Unlike the *Cinque canti*, which would have formed a sequel to the poem, the new material is inserted within the frame of the existing narrative. The situation, moreover, reverses that of the *Cinque canti*, in which the Byzantine Emperor Constantine had sent an army against Charlemagne at Prague out of sheer envy. Whereas earlier Constantine had thus complicated the European war by turning it into a major rift within Christendom, in the final added episode Constantine's son Leone and Charlemagne's neo-paladin Ruggiero become the architects of a new era of cooperation between Eastern and Western Europe. This third edition is now considered the definitive version of the poem. According to a letter from Ariosto to the Marquis of Mantua, however, the poet continued to revise his magnum opus and intended to publish a future edition with hundreds of new stanzas. As in the case of his predecessor Boiardo, however, death intervened to prevent any such additions to the poem from reaching us.

When Ariosto died in July of 1533, he was buried by his relatives in a small ceremony before the Estense court was officially informed that he had passed from this world. At the time they were occupied in the long-standing dispute over his cousin's inheritance.

The *Orlando Furioso* continued to be immensely popular even though intellectuals who debated literary questions in the latter half of the sixteenth century called for a greater adherence to the precepts found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, first and foremost that of a single plot line. In the course of this academic dispute, the

multiple interlaced stories of the *Furioso* were contrasted to the unified narrative of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1571), a poem which it nevertheless influenced. The *Furioso* also left its mark on authors of both popular and elite works in Italy and beyond, most notably Spenser, Cervantes, and Lope de Vega. Episodes and characters from the poem can also be found depicted in works by major artists the likes of Dosso Dossi, Tiepolo, Ingres, and De Chirico, as well as refashioned in musical venues such as madrigals and melodrama. Ariosto's *Furioso*, along with Boiardo's *Innamorato*, is still performed today in the context of Italian folk culture, notably Sicilian Puppet Theater and the epic Maggio of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines. It is a suggestive coincidence that the origins of the epic Maggio have been traced back to the Garfagnana, the same territory that was so inhospitable to Ariosto during his lifetime.

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