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On Ferrara and Chivalric/Epic Poetry in Italian Criticism Today

by

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For the past ten or so years I have witnessed, both in Italy and North America, a proliferation of courses, congresses, symposia, and publications on Italian Renaissance epics. A most deserving testimony to the seriousness of American scholarship is the recent publication of R. J. Rodini and Salvatore Di Maria, *Lodovico Ariosto: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism, 1956–1980* (1984), which was designed to continue Giuseppe Fatini’s *Bibliografia della critica ariostea* (1958) of 3624 items annotated chronologically up to 1956. Out of the 930 items of the new *Bibliography*, 237 are in English and 608 in Italian. This “torrent” of critical scholarship has its negative aspects, as observed by J. V. Mirollo in *Renaissance Quarterly* 36 (1983), 620, and by A. N. Mancini in *Forum Italicum* 19 (Fall 1985), 345. Still the extensive scholarship should be registered as a form of vitality, an index showing that Renaissance chivalric and epic poetry, when approached with new methodologies, may reveal to contemporary readers previously unnoticed aspects.

The Rodini/Di Maria *Bibliography* ends with 1980. During the past five years many new works have appeared in Italian and English, some of which should be mentioned in order to present the three books I here propose to evaluate in the proper context. Among the Italian books, I list first a trio I plan to review shortly elsewhere: Guido Baldasserri’s *Il Sonno di Zeus: Sperimentazione
narrativa del poema rinascimentale e tradizione omerica (1982), Francesco Espamer's La biblioteca di Don Ferrante: Duello e onore nella cultura del Cinquecento (1982), and Sergio Zatti's L'uniforme cristiano e il multiforme pagano: Saggio sulla "Gerusalemme liberata" (1983). Other recent book-length studies include L'Ariosto la musica i musicisti: Quattro studi e sette madrigali ariosteschi (1981), edited by M. A. Balsano; Raffaele Manica, Preliminari sull'"Orlando furioso": Un paradigma ariostesco (1983); and Giuseppe Della Palma, Le strutture narrative dell'"Orlando furioso" (1984). During this same period notable articles on Ariosto have appeared in Italian by Giulio Ferroni, Edoardo Saccone, Remo Ceserani, and Giovanni Sinicropi, and in English by Daniel Javitch, Peter De Sa Wiggins, and Marianne Shapiro. The most meaningful Italian contribution, however, is the edition of the Orlando furioso by Emilio Bigi (1982), an excellent instrument for scholarly research as well as for classroom use. Preceded by a critical introduction, which is predominantly but not exclusively linguistic, and by a varied and classified bibliography, Bigi's edition is enriched by the most exhaustive kind of notes one might desire: they list meticulously not only sources and influences but also the variants among the poem's three versions (A, B, C).

How does the Italian criticism differ from the American? The difference is not simply in methodology but also in a general attitude towards the Renaissance epic itself. In Italy the Orlando furioso, to cite but one example, has long been a classic that a student reads in high school and carries with him for life. In the United States, in spite of the increased recent interest in Ariosto's poem (not to speak of Boiardo's Orlando innamorato), the Orlando furioso is affirming its presence as a great work of universal literature with great difficulty. For instance, it still does not classify as one of the "great books" in a rather sophisticated course of literary humanities at Columbia University. It is still a poem for an American elite; and even this elite, mainly made of scholars, views it differently from the corresponding Italian élite. Ceserani, in a recent review article (Forum Italicum 19 [Fall 1985], 322-32), defines, through an analysis of three American studies, what he calls "Ariosto in America." (By contrast a major concern of my review article is what I would call "Ariosto in Italy.") Ceserani first cites a sharp American interpreter of Ariosto, D. S. Carne-Ross, who attributes the unreachability of the Furioso in this continent to its classical quality, consisting mainly in Ariosto's great faith in the capacity of language to take the place of human experience. (Carne-Ross himself admits, however, that Ariosto's impenetrability in this sense is more apparent than real.) According to Ceserani, what actually distances the American reader from the Furioso is not an historically objective "distance" but a subjective way of reading the poem: not directly but via Spenser and Shakespeare, impeded by prejudices diffused and deeply rooted in the collective, middle-class Anglo-Saxon culture. The Furioso does not escape from the prejudices still involving the Italian Renaissance as a whole. The recent Pocket Books
edition of *Ariosto Furioso: A Romance for an Alternate Renaissance*, a “fantasy” by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro (a pseudonym), is a pointed example of this misdirected attitude. The third American approach which Ceserani details is by Patricia Parker and is, in my opinion, the most germane in my effort to visualize American versus Italian criticism in the specific case of the *Furioso*.

In the chapter dedicated to Ariosto (pp. 16-53) in *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (1979), Parker offers a type of analysis of the *Furioso*, within the wider context of the romance tradition, which is inspired by the Yale School of criticism and at the same time influenced by Northrup Frye’s strong inclination to recapture romantic literature as an integral part of today’s belles-lettres. By means of an attentive textual approach, she concludes that the *Furioso* anticipates some of the problems concerning modern textuality. By stressing the complex meanings and implications of the term *errore*, of the tension internal to the poem, and of *perdere se stesso as uscire di sè*, Parker points to the deconstruction by Ariosto of the idea of narrative fiction as deprived of error, even when one deals with a privileged genre or work, such as Dante’s *Commedia*, or the Holy Scriptures. I am reminded of Valla’s appeal in *On Pleasure*: “non esse semper habendam auctoribus fidem... qui... more hominum lapsi sunt.” Ariosto is, as he describes himself, a weaver who, by employing a multiplicity of material from other texts, suggests that he does not privilege any authority whatsoever. Irony in this context is a cognitive phenomenon. With Parker’s point of view in mind let us now explore three recent Italian books on Ferrara and chivalric/epic poetry.

The three books I have chosen to examine have some external and internal elements in common. Their authors all recently participated in a Barnard/Columbia course on “Italian Chivalric Poetry” under the auspices of the Barnard Center for International Scholarly Exchange (CISE). (CISE’s main aim is the direct exchange of ideas among scholars in a specific course on both sides of the Atlantic; among its American Associates is one institution in the Rocky Mountain region, Brigham Young University.) The three authors presented at Columbia the methodological principles that inspired them, defining not only the topic they had chosen for their American course but also the methodology that inspired their research in the field. Each of the three books presents a collection of essays with an underlying common method and theme. As for method, all three authors can be defined as historically oriented, in that the chivalric and epic material—the *Orlando innamorato*, the *Orlando furioso*, and the *Gerusalemme liberata*—is viewed as deeply couched in an historic-literary tradition and is examined accordingly. Yet, each of the three scholars is strongly aware of new methodologies, as I hope to show. A viewpoint the three share is that of the “city of Ferrara” as the *humus*, to use Giovanni Getto’s terminology from an old seminal article, for the blooming of the Italian chivalric/epic poems. The three poems unveil, through a study of literary
and historical documents a “new” Ferrara, a most vital locus, literally and historically, because of the vital cultivated gentry that inhabited it.

Gennaro Savarese, a Professor at the University of Rome, condenses in 94 pages and four chapters, a series oflezioni—classroom lectures or presentations at congresses (the second essay at Columbia)—on Il “Furioso” e la cultura del Rinascimento. The booklet is a masterpiece of elegance and conciseness. His aim is to identify what he intuits to be present in the poem: “alcune rilevante concomitanze dell’imaginario arioesto con episodi aspetti ed autori della cultura rinascimentale nel suo complesso” (p. 9), a concomitance of ideas between Ariosto’s fantastic involventio and episodes, aspects, and authors of Renaissance culture. A historically and philologically objective reading of documents of the “high” Ferrarese culture contemporary to the poet denies the image of the poet as “sublime smemorato,” oblivious of the “serious” culture around him.

Savarese shows, while dealing with various documents, a clear awareness of modern critical theories (such as those of Cassirer, Barthes, Foucault, Vittorini, and Svevo). His originality of approach can be seen in his discriminating use of some of these theories. For instance, in opposition to a kind of impressionistic reading of the poem he suggests an application of the theory of “parallelisms” (as he finds described by Cassirer) to the philosophical cosmology of a Cusanus, in a non-Aristotelian/scholastic world, and the poetic cosmology of an Ariosto; in both cases we are faced with a unique empirical cosmos, homogeneous in itself and counterposed to the absolute. Aware of Barthes’ derision of a “filosofia del tempo,” Savarese suggests the identification of “campi di concomitanza,” as defined by Foucault, as a means of complementing old-fashioned source studies.

By reading the Furioso in the light of the culture that nourished it, Savarese’s purpose is, on one hand, to recapture the dynamic quality of the poem that even such a negative critic as Jacob Burckhardt could not deny; on the other hand, he intends to destroy the prejudices that from De Sanctis to Burckhardt to Lewis tend to identify the poem’s greatness with the idea of “harmony” and with an absolute technical supremacy. Savarese asserts, at the same time, that he does not in any way wish to condition Ariosto’s poetry within a scheme of rigorous, paradigmatic formulas. Hence Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism should be studied only in their cultural significance as ideological movements, stimuli to new curiosities and forms of knowledge (p. 14).

The philosophy of behavior of the characters of the Furioso points specifically to some “colori e fantasie” typical of Renaissance culture. In this sense specific ethical-philosophical trends can be traced as far back as Lorenzo Valla’s dialogue On Pleasure. Within this historical climate irony acquires a new (Vallian, I am tempted to add) type of identity. Passages on the figurative arts are found by Savarese to be connected with the figurative culture of the time, especially with the discovery of Vitruvius. Even sections of the poem that
clearly classify as poetic \textit{inventio}, such as the episode of Astolfo on the Moon, reveal by close analysis that Ariosto worked within a specific historical pattern.

The first essay of the book focuses on some very basic errors of interpretation of a passage of the dialogue \textit{Equiratio} by the Ferrarese scholar Celio Calcagnini. By integrating the passage in question in the \textit{real} situation in which the poet found himself in an historically well-determined literary crisis (the conversion of the \textit{doctus} to a chivalric poet), we are made to discover Ariosto’s attitude towards the \textit{doctrina} of the humanists and his own \textit{inventio}. The second essay treats some concordances, at times literal, between passages of Valla’s \textit{On Pleasure} and observations by Ariosto concerning the behavior of his characters, with the challenging conclusion that I fully share: “Dal riso de’ Valla che incontrerà lungo la sua strada e quello di Erasmo naseranno l’ironia dell’Ariosto e la risata di Rabelais” (p. 47). The third essay is dedicated to Ariosto’s literary mimesis of a figurative phenomenon. The final chapter focuses, along the line Valla/Alberti/Erasmus, on the Ariostean \textit{inventio} of Astolfo on the Moon. While accounting for Lucian’s presence, Savarese suggests that “sarebbe più giusto parlare di un lucianesimo di secondo grado, passato attraverso Lorenzo Valla ed Erasmo.”

Riccardo Bruscagli, Professor at the University of Florence, reveals in the title \textit{Stagioni della civiltà estense} the theme underscoring the six essays of his book: a study of Ferrarese Renaissance literature within the context of Italian courtly literature from 1400-1500. Focusing on specific texts—the \textit{Orlando innamorato}, the \textit{Orlando furioso}, the tragedies of G. B. Giraldi Cinzio, and the \textit{Gerusalemme liberata}—and complementing the study of the texts with the literary theories of the respective authors, Bruscagli succeeds in giving us an Estense literary history in which the historical events appear in a dialectical relation with the literary text. Both the literary critic Getto and the historian of Ferrara Werner Gundersheimer should be pleased with the results and the implications of this type of study.

In the second essay of the book, “Il romanzo padano di M. M. Boiardo,” Bruscagli attempts to discover Boiardo’s poetic of the chivalric novel, as hidden mainly in the \textit{proemi} to the \textit{canti}. At the opening of Book II of the poem Boiardo announces a return of \textit{allegrezza} and \textit{cortesia}, after a period of darkness, to the world of the poet and of his public (p. 38). The \textit{Innamorato} projects through exemplary myths a kind of utopia, the return of the golden age, a new “season of history,” a periodic return of the \textit{primavera} or spring (p. 43). Through the adventure the world of chivalry is strictly connected with the one of nature (p. 49). This is the meaning of the Arthurian fable with which the poet passionately identifies his own era, even in the comic alienation of an Astolfo. In the third essay, “Ventura e inchiesta tra Boiardo e Ariosto,” the relation between the two major chivalric poets is identified with the prevalence in the \textit{Furioso} of \textit{inchiesta} (investigation) over \textit{ventura} (fate), easily visible in the case of Orlando. Next, in “La corte in scena: genesi politica della tragedia
ferrarese," the emphasis is on the appearance of the tragic genre, a kind of intellectual *ventura*, clearly traceable from Giraldi's *Orbecche* back to Ariosto's comedies. The influence of *Orbecche*’s ideological horror can be seen in Pomponio Torelli’s tragedies on the *ragion di stato* and in the anti-courtly polemic of Federico Della Valle. In the essay on “G. B. Giraldi: comico, satirico, tragico” we witness the division between the political element, the only issue potentially capable of generating tragedy, and the private feelings which are the subject of melodrama and bourgeois comedy. This separation denounces an unresolved problem of Italian sixteenth-century literature which the theater will circumvent precisely by making the private feelings the subject of the pastoral drama and the political passions the subject of tragedy.

The contradiction implied in this particular unresolved issue emerges powerfully with the *Gerusalemme liberata*, treated in Bruscagli’s most inspired chapter, “Il campo cristiano nella *Liberata*.” The *campo*, or military camp, in the epic of the crusades affirms itself with a clear-cut physiognomy of its own, between the *sacro* of the besieged Jerusalem and the *profano* of the *selva*, the *civitas Dei* against the *civitas diaboli*. The *campo cristiano* becomes the *civitas hominis*, the lay space of history open to the painful exercise of will; the Christian camp presents, in fact, the drama of free will.

From Chapter I to VI Bruscagli penetrates more and more deeply into the proposed theme, a study of Ferrarese culture through literature; he overcomes in the end the barriers of literary genres in a supreme effort to capture the essence of such civilization.

Rosanna Alhaique Pettinelli is a Professor at the University of Rome. The four essays which constitute her *L'immaginario cavalleresco nel Rinascimento ferrarese* represent her work over a fifteen-year period along two well-defined lines: the research of sources for the poems of Boiardo and Ariosto and the study of minor poets as a useful means to acquiring an awareness of the cultural ambiance in which the two major poets operated. Her originality consists in pursuing, through concrete textual analyses of characters and situations and language, the dynamic relation between the *Innamorato* and the Italian chivalric tradition *in ottave*. Such dynamism, which Bigi and Mengaldo have studied in its linguistic interrelationship with the popular genre, has escaped critics of the old historical school, such as Rajna, Bertoni, and Foffano. What Pettinelli proves with ample textual documentation is that Boiardo uses the popular tradition with great originality. In the brief Chapter II (pp. 137-51), “Di alcune fonti del Boiardo,” we have a laboratory proof of what she intends by use of sources in contrast with those of the old historical school. Within a new methodological perspective the study of sources can be useful if they are considered actively as part of a conscious choice on the part of a poet. In the specific case of Boiardo, he used sources so different among themselves as Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, Fazio degli Uberti’s *Dittamondo*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* because he was searching for exotic elements typical of the cultural ambiance in which
he lived. The case in question actually proves that the chivalric genre allowed
the poet a much greater freedom of choice than, for instance, the lyric genre.

In her third essay, “Tra il Boiardo e l’Ariosto: il Cieco da Ferrara e Niccolò
degli Agostini,” the author faces a field of research previously dealt with by her
teacher Walter Binni. The vast number of romance sources of the Furioso pro-
posed by Rajna are limited here to two Ferrarese sources: Niccolò degli Agostini
and il Cieco da Ferrara, whose poems connect the Innamorato to the Furioso.
These two poets, famous in their own times, were later obliterated by the suc-
cess of the two great ones. The attentive reading of the two “minor” poems as
sources of the Furioso reveals that Ariosto in the composition of his book
made very precise and courageous choices with the specific intent to recreate
and modernize the genre. As Carlo Dionisotti proves in his Appunti sui “Cinque canti,”
from the middle of the fifteenth century on there is in Northern Italy a blooming of Carolingian poems which should be considered as
more probable sources of the Furioso than the interminable French romances
that Ariosto did not have available in printed form. Of Niccolò’s Innamoramento
mento di Orlando (1525) Pettinelli examines mostly Book IV as having more
direct contacts with the Furioso. Ariosto asserts his originality versus the
Innamoramento and Cieco’s Mambriano, which tends to heavy moralization,
in his precise references to what is real and concrete. (See, for example, his
treatment of Fortune, the use of Turpino, and the connections between
cantos.) The greatest form of originality is visible in Ariosto’s recapturing of
old themes, such as the flight of Angelica from the Christian camp or Bradamante
and Ruggero after their marriage or the relation between Orlando and
Atlante or the episode of Alcina (pp. 194–201). The last field of study, the mili-
tary events, is mostly linguistic in character. Also in this case Pettinelli’s docu-
mentation is very full. Through comparisons, analyses, and annotations, she
succeeds in proving (1) that Ariosto draws much from Carolingian chivalric
material and (2) that the image of a “classical” Ariosto, whose poetry is thickly
interwoven with classical poetry should be supplemented—if not replaced—by
the one of a poet who thematically, linguistically, and stylistically is tightly
connected with the literary world of chivalry that precedes him.

In her last chapter, “Una descrizione di Ferrara nell’Angelica innamorata
del Brusantino,” Pettinelli offers us an interesting first-hand view of Ferrara in
the middle of the fifteenth century that is more of a photograph, than a
description, of the city with the genti onorate that inhabited it. The Appendix,
titled “Dal ‘divino’ Ariosto all’umanissimo Ariosto,” crowns and climaxes
the book with a special homage to Walter Binni as the critic who contributed
much to humanize the author of the Furioso. The new approach to the text
that Binni introduced, from the early Poetica, critica e storia letteraria to the
more recent Metodo e poesia, is based on a study of the personality of the artist
as well as on an attentive reading of his poetry. By discovering Ariosto’s most
complex humanity, Binni in the end recaptured even an episode he had formerly
criticized, that of Ruggero and Leone. Within this context Binni tried to identify the substantial connections between life and poetry.

With Savarese, Bruscagli, and Pettinelli we have three examples, I should like to conclude, of the directions Italian criticism on chivalric/epic is taking today. One of the results obtained is a Ferrara not photographed—as it is in Brusantino’s poem—in a crystallized, static position, but rather one portrayed as the center of vital historical experiences whose essence is best revealed in poetry.