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Author

Cavallo, Jo Ann

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The Role of the Woman in the *Orlando Innamorato*

The two types of the woman characters one can generally find within the confines of the chivalric novel are the "damsel in distress," that virginal maiden in need of the knight's prowess to save her from a fate worse than death, and the enchantress, a Circe-like character who seduces the knight and keeps him subject indefinitely her through magic powers. Although Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* contains its share of these familiar female fictions, its treatment of women is certainly unique and shows a notable departure from the treatment of women and their roles in earlier chivalric novels.¹

Even if we find that Angelica plays at times both the damsel in distress and the enchantress, she is far from being limited to these roles. While Orlando pursues Angelica, she in turn pursues Rinaldo. While Orlando saves Angelica through his prowess, *she* saves the object of her desire from death through her cleverness.² And just as Orlando's love for her remains unreciprocated, her love for Rinaldo is met with the latter's disdain. This double role of Angelica—pursuing lover and pursued beloved—dissolves the idea of any sexual hierarchy of desire.

Yet Boiardo has a different idea of the positive role of woman in his poem, shown through his depiction of the other two female protagonists, Fiordelisa and Brandamante. The first of the two is the lover of Brandimarte. In a text which pokes fun at the courtly love tradition, it is noteworthy that descriptions of their relation are free of such courtly love clichés as the vassal/suzerain hierarchy. Fiordelisa, neither angel nor demon, is presented as Brandimarte's partner on equal terms. Their relation gives value to—but at the same time goes beyond—pure erotic

instincts. Franceschetti notes Fiordelisa's integrity: "Non la vediamo mai in fatti ingannare o mentire o tradire altri personaggi, né far uso della sua bellezza e del suo fascino per ottenere quanto desidera" (206).³

Fiordelisa and Brandimarte eventually marry, and soon afterward they resume their life of adventure, together undertaking the extremely important mission of freeing Orlando from the Fonte del Riso. In the course of chivalric literature, this joint act amounts to a fundamental innovation, and to understand it we should put the situation in historical perspective. Boiardo's source of inspiration for many episodes, Chrétien de Troyes, has been considered by some critics to be a vindicator of marital love. Yet Chrétien's positive view of marriage and of woman's role in chivalry has very narrow limits. For instance, in *Erec et Enide*, and again in *Yvain*, he presents a conflict between the marital relation and the chivalric ideal, exploring the laziness that can befall a knight if he settles down to enjoy marital bliss. If he no longer exercises his profession, the knight goes against his very reason for existence. As this new disposition upsets the fabric of the courtly society, in both novels the knight is forced back out into the world of adventure, and a makeshift equilibrium is found only much later and after many hardships. To my knowledge, in Italian literature of subsequent periods until the time of Boiardo, the relation between marriage and chivalry received no further elaboration. In this episode of the *Innamorato* Boiardo picks up the thread of Chrétien's problematic presentation of marriage and in particular of the woman's role in a chivalric world. Boiardo's answer is unequivocal: he counters Chrétien by presenting a wife who is not only *not* a hindrance to the carrying out of the knight's chivalric duties, but who is an active and necessary partner in carrying out worthy deeds.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Boiardo's panegyric on friendship dedicated to Brandimarte occurs immediately after that character's marriage to Fiordelisa, for it indicates that marriage is not an obstacle to friendship. Although married to Fiordelisa, Brandimarte is nevertheless "in gran pensiero" over his friend's well-being and so it is that he—not alone but together with Fiordelisa—travels to a distant land to rescue Orlando from the spell of the Fonte del Riso.

Instead of an impediment, as Chrétien feared the knight's wife would be in such adventures, Fiordelisa is virtually the leader.⁴ It is she who advised Brandimarte, as well as Rugiero and Gradasso, who in the meantime have joined them in their search. While Brandimarte is assailed by various spells on his way to the fountain, it is always Fiordelisa who guides him:

[Brandimarte] da diversi incanti
 Era assalito, et esso alcun non piglia,
 Ché Fiordelisa sempre lo consiglia. (3.7.30)

Upon reaching the fountain itself, Brandimarte falls victim to the spell and forgets his friend, his wife, and even his own existence. Yet Fiordelisa, by furnishing Brandimarte with four crowns which have the power to break spells, frees not only her husband, but also Orlando, Gradasso and Rugiero (the latter two also having recently fallen under the spell). Having thus regained their reasoning faculties, the four knights exit from the enchanted fountain as if awakening from a dream. The crowns in Fiordelisa's power are a symbol of the control of reason and will over concupiscence. If we recall Dante's *Purgatory*, we see that it is just before taking leave of Dante that Vergil crowns the pilgrim master of himself: "io te sovra te corono e mitrio" (XXVII,142). Through this ritualistic act, Vergil proclaims the victory of the intellectual faculties over the sensory faculties in the pilgrim Dante.⁵ That Boiardo had the same symbolism—and, as I believe, the same scene—in mind is suggested by Fiordelisa's words of encouragement: "Vince ogni cosa la animositate, / Ma condurla con *senno* è di mestiero" (3.7.16). This call for "senno," or reasoned judgment, by Fiordelisa is actually an echo of Vergil's final words to the pilgrim:

Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno:
 libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
 e fallo fora non fare a suo *senno*:
 per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio." (XXVII, 139-142)

Yet Fiordelisa goes beyond the role of Vergil: rather than merely recognizing the dominance of reason in the knights, she *imparts* that dominance to them. Her power is therefore all the more worthy of note,

for without it the knights would be forever entrapped in the illusion of the fountain's spell.

Moreover, the setting for the *Innamorato* episode recalls the Garden of Eden of Dante's *Purgatory* scene, which in turn brings us to consider the original Genesis story. In Eden's terrestrial paradise the faculties of the soul were originally in order, the higher over the lower, as in reason over sense, but were lost, as Genesis 3 tells us, due to the woman's eating of the fatal apple and offering it to the man. The return to the Garden of Eden in Dante's *Purgatory* implies a return to this pristine order for the individual Dante. In the *Innamorato*, the Fonte del Riso is a place where the hierarchy of reason over the senses is continuously overturned, and as such is a perpetual reenactment of the Fall.⁶ Yet in this simulacrum of Eden it is due precisely to a woman that the garden can become once again the place where the higher faculties dominate the lower. By identifying Fiordelisa with the part of liberating reason and by relating the scene to the Garden of Eden via Dante's *Purgatory*, Boiardo has reversed the Genesis story and boldly countered Chrétien's fear that women are inimical to chivalry.

The other female protagonist and the soon to be co-founder of the Estense dynasty, Bradamante, is the model of valor and *cortesía*. Completely dedicated to the well-being of her king and Christian people, she incorporates all the qualities of the ideal Christian knight. She is referred to by the author as "la dama di valore" (3.5.5), while Charlemagne considers her just as essential as her brother Ranaldo to the safety of Christendom (2.6.23). The king is certainly justified in putting so much faith in Bradamante, for when his troops are attacked by Rodamonte, it is she who leads them against the ferocious pagan: "Costei mena la schiera gran flagella" (2.6.57).

She neither disdains eros, nor perceives it within the courtly love tradition. The genesis of her love for Rugiero is unique. We need only recall Andreas Capellanus' assertion that the blind were incapable of love, or the provencal poets' (and their successors') endless descriptions of love entering through the eyes, in order to realize the importance attributed to sight in the origin of love.⁷ Bradamante, on the contrary, becomes enamored before seeing Rugiero's face, her sentiments based solely on his courteous nature and benevolent actions.

When Rugiero and Bradamante are attacked by evildoers, Boiardo has occasion to tell us that Rugiero fights spurred on by reason and love working together: "Ragione, animo ardito e insieme amore / L'un più che l'altro dentro lo martella" (3.5.56). Here again, as in the above case yet contrary to most depictions of love in chivalric (and other) literature, we are witness to the collaboration of love and reason.

Bradamante and Rugiero are destined to marry and found the Estense family. Yet before their relationship has the chance to progress any further, they lose sight of each other in their pursuit of their would-be attackers. This temporary separation allows Bradamante to meet the hermit who discloses that Rugiero:

. . .morirà dannato,
Se Dio per sua pietate non lo aiuta,
O se persona non li mette in core
Di batezarse e uscir di tanto errore. (3.8.58)

The fact that the hermit reveals this to Bradamante in particular suggests her intended role in the coming chapters. Is Bradamante destined by Boiardo to be the instrument of her beloved's conversion in the same way that Rugiero's father brought about the conversion of his beloved to Christianity? With the fondness Boiardo has shown for symmetrical conversions in the poem, this eventuality seems highly probable.⁸

In her relation with her beloved, while Fiordelisa saves Brandimarte from indefinite unconsciousness through the exercise of reason, Bradamante intends to save Rugiero from eternal damnation through converting him to Christianity. Thus while Fiordelisa led Brandimarte to embrace reason, Bradamante was meant to lead Rugiero to embrace faith, faith and reason constituting for Boiardo the highest values of humankind. Even if the narrator is a masculine voice and the woman is viewed from the male perspective, it is nevertheless clear that the *Innamorato*, for the first time in chivalric literature, gives to woman a significant, active, and positive role in the development of the narrative.

JoAnn Cavallo
Yale University

Notes:

1. Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato*, ed. Aldo Scaglione (Torino: Unione Tipografico-editrice Torinese, 1963).
2. As Rinaldo is about to die at the hands of the monster of Rocca Crudele, Angelica renders the monster harmless by throwing it waxed bread (I.9).
3. Antonio Franceschetti, *L'Orlando Innamorato e le sue componenti tematiche e strutturali* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1975).
4. Chrétien's Enide, also, once she is forced into accompanying her husband in his pursuit of adventure, is helpful in saving his life on a number of occasions. She is, however, in no way a leader or even a partner in the knight's adventures.
5. In *Dante Studies II* (Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge, 1967), Charles S. Singleton treats this act of crowning as the culmination in the process of justification (59).
6. For the Garden of Eden's relation to the false, enchanted gardens of Renaissance literature, see A. Bartlett Giamatti, *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966).
7. Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry, ed. Austin P. Evans (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1941).
8. In *Reali di Francia*, Rugiero's mother was, like his future bride, a warrior.