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Jo Ann Cavallo

**EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION** | In his epic romance *Orlando Innamorato*, the Italian poet Matteo Maria Boiardo wove together elements of Arthurian legend and Carolingian epic with the classical tradition of Homer, Virgil and Ovid, creating a complex narrative of love in its many forms. However, as Jo Ann Cavallo (right), professor of Italian at Columbia University, explains, Boiardo's highly entertaining tale of knights and damsels in love and war also contained moral lessons for the courtly society of Renaissance Italy.

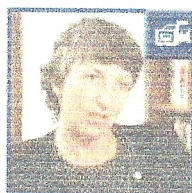


The Renaissance poet Matteo Maria Boiardo was born in 1441 in his family's castle in Scandiano, Italy, and died in 1494 while he was the military governor of Reggio Emilia. Boiardo was part of the Estense court in Ferrara and had a humanist education. During his time Boiardo translated mainly works of history from Latin to Italian for the Duke Ercole d'Este, and he also wrote love poetry, *Amorum Libri* (books of love), in the Petrarchan style. He is most famous for his epic poem *Orlando Innamorato* (Orlando in love), which consists of two books plus nine cantos of a third book, dealing with the knights and damsels of Carolingian epic, in somewhat Arthurian roles.



Illustration by Leonida Eda from  
*Orlando Innamorato* (Perino Edition, 1584)

Cover of Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*.



Jo Ann Cavallo on  
Boiardo's goal to  
both entertain and  
instruct.

Boiardo's poem *Orlando Innamorato* is usually left out of the curriculum, whether in Italy or in Italian studies in the US, in favor of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which is much more widely known. When I was a graduate student, I had planned to write my dissertation on *Orlando Furioso*, but since I knew that Ariosto

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continued Boiardo's poem, I thought the first step would be to read the original poem by Boiardo. I was amazed, because so many of the innovations I had seen and enjoyed in the Renaissance epic, from Ariosto onward, were all there in Boiardo's text. It is a poem of immense inventiveness, with a variety of episodes and characters—like a Tolstoy novel, but with knights and damsels. So instead of Ariosto I decided to write my dissertation on Boiardo.

*Orlando Innamorato* was an extremely popular romance in Italy in its time. It was read enthusiastically by members of the court, such as Isabella d'Este, and by the literati of the time. Some writers attempted to translate it into the new Tuscan standard language, others imitated it, while others wrote continuations. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, in fact, was one of six continuations of the poem—although it was undoubtedly the greatest. It was only later in the sixteenth century that Boiardo's poem started to be left aside in favor of Ariosto's continuation.

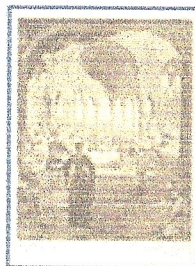


Illustration by  
Leonardo da Vinci  
Angelica at the court  
of Charlemagne.

#### **An allegory of humanist ideals**

Since Boiardo was writing for a court that loved reading the Italian romances for delight, he decided to take the themes of his humanist education and to slip them into his stories, so that the dukes would be learning while they were being entertained. He was going by Horace's dictum that literature can be fun or it can teach but the best literature does both, and he wanted to do both for his audience.

In *Orlando Innamorato* there are humanist themes related to both the private sphere and the public sphere. In the private sphere, we get to laugh at Orlando, who makes himself look ridiculous by running all over the world after a Saracen princess who doesn't even love him. He's contrasted with the knight Rinaldo, who follows the path of duty and acts like the good citizen. Rinaldo rights wrongs; he finds problems and he fixes them.

So the two knights, Orlando



Illustration by  
Leonora Ede

Rinaldo arrives at  
Angelica's Joyous Palace.

and Rinaldo, are contrasted both as knights or citizens and as readers, because, in the course of their journeys, they hear or see texts; they read pictorial narratives, they hear stories and they act on them. Rinaldo hears stories about injustices and he provides the ending to the story by intervening. Orlando hears stories about foolish people falling under illusion, and he doesn't realize that the stories are about himself. He remains mesmerized by the surface beauty of the stories and doesn't apply the lessons of the narratives to himself. So he fails as a reader and, therefore, he fails as a citizen, as someone who acts in the public arena.

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Another humanist theme is the political one, addressing not only what the citizen should do in the public arena but what the leader should do--for Duke Ercole d'Este would be reading the poem and gaining wisdom and insight about how he should govern. In internal affairs, the episodes in which the leader is a tyrant and treats his people poorly show that the leader is going to be punished. As far as international affairs are concerned, leaders who try to invade others' territories also fare poorly. So Ercole d'Este is given a lesson in politics which encourages him to be both a good citizen to his people, to be--as the Italian mayors in Italy are called today--*primo cittadino* (the first citizen), and to be a good ally.



Jo Ann Cavallo on the political humanism of *Orlando Innamorato*.

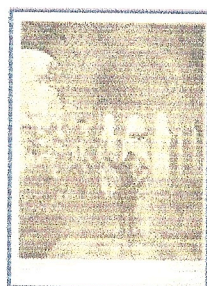


Illustration by Leonida Leo

Angelica welcomes Orlando

The love theme is very important in the poem, but it's not only Orlando who is *innamorato*, or in love. Most of the characters in the poem are in love, but there are various types of love. There's Orlando's silly love, which is mere infatuation and leads him away from everything he has created up to that point. But there are also the positive loves of, for example, Fiordelisa and Brandimarte. These two Saracen characters have been in love with each other for years and have adventures together, and when they lose each other they spend their time trying to find each other.

Then there's the ideal love between Bradamante and Rugiero. Boiardo invented the characters Bradamante and Rugiero as the founders of the Estense dynasty as a tribute to the poem's dedicatee, the Duke Ercole d'Este. Their love is very different from that of Orlando, because they meet and interact through reciprocal shows of courtesy. Bradamante is dressed in armor so Rugiero doesn't know that she's a female. They are also of different religions: Rugiero is a Saracen, while Bradamante, who is Rinaldo's sister, is a Christian. But they strike up a friendship, tell each other their genealogy and talk about themselves.

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Bradamante is the first to fall in love with Rugiero because she sees him *ben intagliato*, or "in very good shape." She appreciates his courtesy and is interested in his life's history and the history of his family. When it's her turn to reveal herself, she talks first about her family's history and only at the last moment does she take off her helmet and let her hair fall down. Rugiero then realizes that not only is Bradamante a very good knight, but she is also a very beautiful woman, and he is struck by love. That love which comes near the end of the poem is very much the opposite of the empty infatuation that Orlando shows for Angelica.

#### Boiardo's literary tradition

In writing his romance epic, Boiardo not only took material from the chivalric tradition, meaning the Carolingian epic of Charlemagne and his knights, and the Arthurian romances of King Arthur, Lancelot and even Tristan. He also went back to the classical tradition and incorporated stories from Homer (some themes from the *Iliad*, but mostly from the *Odyssey*, which was much more romance-oriented), from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which was the epic par excellence in the Italian Renaissance, and from Ovid, because *The Metamorphosis* was a handbook of mythological stories that was of use to the readers of the time, because they interpreted them allegorically. Boiardo uses these stories to play with the allegorical tradition.



Jo Ann Cavallo on Boiardo's use of classical sources.

Boiardo also draws from the novella tradition of Boccaccio and the lyrics of Petrarch. He adhered to the practice of creative imitation--reworking earlier texts so as to give a richer meaning to his own. Part of the fun for the reader comes from recognizing the source and comparing the two versions.

One of the Ovidian stories that is repeated most frequently is that of the "Fountain of Narcissus." When characters fall in love with each other as a mere infatuation, they fall in love with a face--even sometimes an immobile, sleeping one--and they project onto that person without knowing anything about his or her personality. By the time we get to the end of *Orlando Innamorato*, we actually come upon a Narcissus fountain.

Although the episode of the



Illustration by  
Leonora Ebel

Orlando encounters  
Morgana

Narcissus fountain is clearly taken from Ovid and the medieval *Romance of the Rose*, this is Boiardo's version, with a sequel in which a nymph named Silvanella comes along and falls in love with the dead Narcissus. She becomes so desperate at not being able to fulfill her love that she dies next to him by the fountain. But, since she's an evil character, in order to find company in her misery she enchants the fountain and creates a spell in which anyone who approaches it will look into the fountain, see figures of dancing nymphs rather than their own reflection, and be unable to move from the fountain and thereby waste away to death.

After many years, Queen Calidora walks by with her husband, King Larbino, and alas, he looks into the fountain. He sees the dancing maidens and is unable to leave and dies. Queen Calidora's reaction is the exact opposite of the nymph Silvanella's. She wishes no one else to share that awful fate, and she calls a knight to stand by the fountain and guard it so that no one else will approach. So, in this case, Boiardo takes a classic story of Narcissus, with its themes of self-love, pride, infatuation and the inability to reach out to the other, and combines it with a contrast between Silvanella's infatuated erotic desire and Calidora's more positive alternative.

Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, while drawing from previous literary traditions, in turn provided material for later writers--and not only those of the Italian tradition such as Ariosto and Tasso. His poem was cited by Milton and praised by Cervantes, and was probably known by Shakespeare and Spenser.

Based on an interview of September 6, 2000, at Columbia University.  
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