EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION | In the summer of 2000, a cast of American students and Italian actors brought to life a Renaissance tale of chivalric love and legend in the first known dramatic production of the romance epic Orlando Innamorato. Jo Ann Cavallo (right), a professor of Italian and the director of Columbia University's Summer Program in Scandiano, describes the process of adapting Boiardo's poem for the stage and how the themes of the story resonate with audiences today.

Fathom: What steps did you take to adapt Boiardo’s poem into the play Orlando Innamorato in Commedia?

Jo Ann Cavallo: I had been studying Boiardo, Ariosto and the chivalric tradition for about 15 years, and I realized that I was reaching a restricted audience of literary scholars. The stories of the poem Orlando Innamorato are so entertaining that I thought it would be great to have them as a play. I was trying to popularize it, make it a text that would be familiar to the reader today, because its themes are universal.

Not only Americans but even Italians tend to skip Orlando Innamorato in school, and when I teach the course on Boiardo and Ariosto in a summer program in Scandiano, Italy, I always try to convince the Italians that they should read Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato. So this summer, for the first time, we offered a theater course, the Italian Theater Practicum, and we had the American students put on this play along with Italian actors.

Orlando Innamorato is a romance epic; it's written in verse—in ottava rima—and has many intertwining stories. One possibility would be to have the poem recited, but at that point one could just read it at home.
So I came up with the idea of taking some episodes from the poem and transforming them into a play, in fact a comedy, because there's more comedy and drama than there is tragedy in the poem. I focused on Orlando and Ranaldo as the two main characters in order to be able to follow thematically the contrast between the two. To a certain extent, I kept the technique of interlacing so that there are various characters, in fact 41, in the play, and the scenes alternate between love scenes and battle scenes; Orlando and his wanderings while looking for Angelica; and Ranaldo, who is way-laid by other characters with problems to solve. I went through the various episodes of the poem so that I could come up with a coherent story.

I now have material for five comedies, and we are going to present the second one next summer in Scandiano. The first was a big success: we had a full house the three nights that the play was performed.

Fathom: Was the poem Orlando Innamorato ever recited in its time?

Cavallo: It's possible and even probable that Boiardo recited his own poem. There's a letter from Isabella d'Este to Boiardo asking him to send her the most recently written cantos, and he answers her saying he only has the ones in his bad handwriting and he would have to have them recopied. So it appears that when she visited him he read to her, and in fact the narrator's position is that of someone who narrates a story. He tells his audience to be quiet and listen, in the tradition of the cantastorie (ballad singers) of medieval times.

Fathom: Is this the first time Orlando Innamorato has been performed?
Cavallo: There have been no theatrical productions of the *Orlando Innamorato* before ours, so this is absolutely a first. There have been some of *Orlando Furioso*, but not in this faithful way. We preserved maybe 95 percent of the poem in Boiardo's original language, and the adaptation was in two stages. My job was the first stage, which was to select episodes from the poem and to turn it into a two-act comedy. At that point, I had a collaborator who transformed the narration into dialogue. The original poem was almost ready to be performed, because it has so much dialogue already—perhaps 20 percent dialogue and 80 percent narration. In order to make it stageable, we needed to reverse the ratio and have a good 80 percent dialogue and 20 percent narration, and that was the task of Paolo Tartamella, who was my collaborator on the project.

Fathom: How did you research and design the costumes and the settings?

Cavallo: We were very lucky to have the collaboration of an association in the territory of Reggio Emilia in Italy, where a seamstress had designed medieval costumes for historical processions during the past 20 years. She lent us 40 costumes that we picked out according to the type of character and the size of the actor or actress.

As far as the setting goes, we used the courtyard of Boiardo's castle in Scandiano. The interior courtyard was already very much suited for this atmosphere. The courtyard has a second floor with windows, so while most of the action took place in front of the spectators, some took place from the windows on the second floor. Instead of having a stage for the spectators and the audience in chairs, we used the entire courtyard for the actors and had the audience up on bleachers. That way they would be away from the scene and have the sense that the play was not taking place on a stage or on a platform but in...
the courtyard itself.

The production was a lot of fun, but it was a lot more work, I think, than anybody anticipated. We found ourselves working from morning to night taking care of details, from the necessary props, such as the flower petals that Angelica would drop on top of Rinaldo while he was sleeping in order to wake him up and try to seduce him, or a live horse that we borrowed for three of the scenes. We also found a hairdresser who was able to do up the hair of all of the women in the production according to Renaissance styles. Each small detail of the production required extensive coordination.

Fathom: After having adapted Orlando Innamorato for the stage, do you have ideas for other projects on Boiardo?

Cavallo: Right now I'm working on another project that has to do with Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato, and that is turning it into a children's story. I have now selected episodes that would work for a younger audience, and I am working with an illustrator who is from Scandiano to present the text to children's publishers. Who knows, maybe we will see it as a Walt Disney film someday.

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