

«Ariosto and the Arabs»: Contexts of the *Orlando Furioso*

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Abstracts

Among the most complex and engaging artifacts of early modern Italian culture, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, first published in 1516 and twice revised before its definitive edition in 1532, emerged from a world that was rapidly expanding on a number of fronts while simultaneously subject to a disastrous breakdown of political, social, and religious certainties. Taking inspiration from the celebrated poem by Jorge Luis Borges, "Ariosto y los Arabes" (1960), this interdisciplinary conference will focus on the role of the Muslim world as the essential 'other' in Ariosto's text. Our aim is to investigate the composite political, religious, and linguistic landscape as well as the relational systems that might be reconstructed around the *Furioso*, from the various perspectives of its earlier sources, contemporary resonance, and subsequent reception. Situated at the apex of one of the foundational European literary traditions – the *chansons de geste* that issued from the fictional rout of Charlemagne's troops at Roncisvalle – subsequently grafted onto Crusade narratives and embedded in the histories of the European conflict with the Ottoman empire, Ariosto's poem presents itself as a prism through which to examine the various links in the chain of interactions that characterized the Mediterranean region from late antiquity through the medieval period, into early modernity, and beyond.

Key-note

Endings: Storytelling from a Mediterranean perspective

Karla Mallette (University of Michigan)

This talk examines important threads in narrative traditions and how they traveled in the Mediterranean in the centuries leading up to the life of Ariosto. Some medieval tales seem as compulsively mobile as Ariosto's characters: a joint intangible cultural heritage, shared among the traditions that ring the Mediterranean. Indeed, both narrative motifs and storytelling strategies were shared across the pre-modern Mediterranean, although at times it's impossible to reconstruct how they passed from one language to another. This talk will examine what we know about stories that traveled between Arabic and Italian narrative traditions, what we can't know, and why. I will focus on two framed narrative traditions, both of which originated in Arabic, generated multiple versions in multiple languages, and appeared in Italian in new print versions in the half century after Ariosto's death. The Seven Sages of Rome, a European version of the Arabic Sindbad al-Hakim tradition, was published in a significantly revised version as *Erasto* in 1542. And the work known in Arabic as *Kalila wa-Dimna* passed through multiple Greek editions in order to generate an Italian translation that appeared in 1583 as *Del governo de' regni*. Both works were attested in multiple forms in late medieval Italy and both would be brought to life again as printed books during the sixteenth century. In this talk, I will discuss these abundant narrative traditions as part of the literary environment of Ariosto's Italy. And I will focus on endings for two reasons. I wish to situate Ariosto not as the beginning of a modern literary lineage but as the culmination of medieval Mediterranean narrative traditions. And I am interested in the ethical interpretations that endings supply. I'll argue that the ethics of imaginative narrative was crucial to both Italian and Arabic rhetoric and literary theory, a fact that is particularly evident in traditions with a strong political dimension – like the Seven Sages and *Del governo de' regni*.

Textual contexts: inside the *Furioso*

Between Two Worlds: Ariosto's Religion

Stefano Jossa (Royal Holloway University of London)

Traditionally neglected on the grounds of Italo Calvino's (in)famous statement that "being of a different faith does not mean in *Orlando Furioso* much more than the different colors of pieces on a chessboard," Ariosto's approach to identity and otherness has become an increasingly popular topic in recent scholarship. Exploring the relevant passages in the poem where issues of faith, ideology and belonging are raised – Charlemagne's prayer in Canto 14; Medoro's prayer in Canto 18; the allegory of heresy in Canto 26; Astolfo's voyage to Hell and subsequent dialogue with Saint John in Canto 34; and variously represented conversions: of Agramante (attempted), and of Ruggiero and Sobrino (successful) in Cantos 41-43 – this paper will tackle the much debated topic of Ariosto's religious engagement from the viewpoints of the epic/romance dialectic (Quint) and the invention of the enemy (Eco). Related to both narrative concerns and ideological matters, the Christian/Islam divide in *Orlando Furioso* will prove part of a broader framework that can no longer be overlooked.

***Orlando furioso*: the Saracen perspective**

Maria Pavlova (University of Oxford)

Orlando furioso features over 130 Saracen characters. What role do they play in the poem's intricate, intertwined plots? To what extent are they defined by their faith? In what ways, if any, is Ariosto's portrayal of the cultural and religious Other innovative? This paper attempts to answer these and other questions by analysing the Saracens' contribution to the pivotal themes of *armi* and *amori*. In particular, it considers the disastrous war waged and lost by the African King Agramante as well as a selection of love stories involving Saracen women (Angelica, Isabella, Fiordeligi). It locates Ariosto's non-Christian characters within the broader context of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century literary representations of Saracens, drawing attention not only to Ariosto's profound indebtedness to Boiardo, but also to the similarities between *Orlando furioso* and lesser known chivalric works, such as the *Vendetta di Falchonetto* (1505) and Nicolò degli Agostini's *Quinto libro* (1514). The chivalric universe Ariosto creates is one of bewildering complexity, where characters and events are often open to different interpretations. The author himself encourages us not to take anything at face value; as John the Evangelist famously tells Astolfo, «E se tu vuoi ch'el ver non ti sia ascoso, / tutta al contrario l'istoria converti» (XXXII 27, 5-6 AB; XXXV C). This tongue-in-cheek yet striking and thought-provoking remark could serve as an epigraph to the present examination of Ariosto's complex, multi-layered portrayal of the Saracen world.

Textual contexts: around the *Furioso*

Chivalric Plurilingualism as a Motif in Italian Literature from Pulci to Ariosto.

Jacopo Gesiot (Università di Udine)

Apart from fictional conventions, the theme of intelligibility between languages was a common concern from the beginnings of the Carolingian tradition, and it was already a familiar topos by the time of the medieval Italian *cantari*. Starting with Pulci's *Morgante* (published in its final form in 1483), in which miscommunication is an object of jesting, polyglotism as a thematic concern in epic literature began to diminish as it came to be taken for granted. In addition to outlining this transformation, my talk aims

first to highlight how Ariosto transformed this traditional subject in *Orlando furioso*. In the celebrated episode of Orlando's madness, for example, the very fundamentals of knowledge are put into question: once the paladin is able to decipher Medoro's love poem written for Angelica in Arabic, the reader is compelled to ask what good the mastery of multiple languages serves if such a skill leads, ironically, to derangement. Specific references in Ariosto's text to *Mambriano* of Francesco Cieco da Ferrara confirm this interpretation. It is also relevant to emphasize the newly established interest in the early sixteenth century for written as well as spoken Arabic, given that this language had earlier been associated with sorcery. It may be the case that several verses situated in an oriental setting and printed to be read from right to left in *La morte di Cassio* of Cassio di Narni were inspired by Arabic right-to-left writing. The final part of the talk considers how the narrator of *Orlando furioso* and *Cinque canti*, occasionally playing an active role in the narrative, deals with loanwords, particularly from Arabic and Persian.

Jews and Judaism in Ludovico Ariosto's literary production

Fabrizio Lelli (Università del Salento)

Recent scholarship has probed the major role played by Ariosto's *Furioso* in Jewish literary education of the late Renaissance, and several versions of the poem – composed either in Hebrew or in other languages spoken by European Jews and written in Hebrew characters – are evidence of such engagement. We might ask whether Jews appreciated Ariosto's poem only because of its immense popularity or also because they found themes or traces of ideas articulated in it that could be traced back to Jewish traditions. Italian Renaissance Jews did indeed seek to highlight the affinities of their own culture with intellectual trends common among their non-Jewish contemporaries. The latter, in their turn, pursued similar analogies in order to formulate the basis of a sort of universal human knowledge. Grounding my analysis in the *Furioso* as well as in Ariosto's comedy *Il negromante*, I will examine aspects of Ariosto's literary production which reflect analogous motifs current in contemporaneous Jewish speculation that were also valued by non-Jewish scholars. From such textual analysis, I aim to assess the real extent of Ariosto's knowledge of Jews and Judaism, direct or indirect.

“A un giovine Aphrican si donò in tutto”: The Marriage of Africa and India in Ariosto and Camões

Vincent Barletta (Stanford University)

The impact that Ariosto's epic had in the Iberian Peninsula throughout the sixteenth century is difficult to overstate. It was ultimately banned in Portugal (1581), but not before Luís de Camões had used it to give form to his own epic, *Os Lusíadas* (1572). In this talk, I examine the union between Angelica and Medoro as a model for similar (albeit more culturally and historically differentiated) "marriages" between India and the Maghreb in Camões's epic. Focusing primarily on the disappearance of the Tunisian trader Monçaide in the erotically charged ninth canto of the epic, I reconstruct a key aspect of Camões's reading of Ariosto and discuss how the Portuguese struggled more generally to understand their Indian Ocean empire within a (fictional) Mediterranean frame.

Literary Life in Mamluk Syria and Egypt (1250-1517)

Thomas Bauer (Westfälische Wilhelms Universität, Münster)

Long neglected and even disparaged, the Mamluk period has only recently begun to be acknowledged as among the most productive and vibrant periods of Arabic literature. At one end of the spectrum, elite poets and prose authors created some of the most sophisticated and elegant texts in the entire Arabic literary tradition; but at the same time popular poets and storytellers entertained the common

peoples of Syria and Egypt, where a larger segment of the population than ever engaged in the literary marketplace as producers and/or consumers.

This paper will give an overview of the most common forms and genres of Arabic literature in this fertile period. It will deal both with the diminishing role of courts and court poetry and the increasing role of civilian elites and the middle classes in the production of poetry and 'artistic' prose in the form of letters and the *maqāmah* (a characteristic Arabic literary genre). Oral transmission remained important even as books became ever more easily available, not only through the flourishing book trade but also in the many libraries of the *madrasah* (institution of Islamic education).

Popular literature experienced a boom in the Mamluk period, blurring the borders between 'high' and 'low' registers. Strophic poetry in the vernacular, *zajal*, was popularized even in educated circles. But unlike the Italian *volgare*, vernacular Arabic never became an 'official' language. Other genres of Mamluk vernacular literature such as the shadow-play and popular epic will be briefly touched upon in order to complete the picture.

Orlando and the World of the Arabian Nights

Claudia Ott (Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen)

Arabic storytelling as represented in the Arabian Epic (*sīra sha'biyya*) and, above all, in the Arabian 'nights', has influenced epic narratives throughout the world. This paper will discuss references in *Orlando Furioso* to the world of the Arabian 'nights' in general and to the newly rediscovered medieval Andalusian *Hundred and One Nights* in particular. The Aga Khan Museum owns an Arabic manuscript dated to the 13th century, by far the oldest extant testimony of the *Hundred and One Nights* and one of the most important manuscripts of the world of the Arabian 'nights'. The *Hundred and One Nights*, the smaller sibling of the *Thousand and One Nights*, had its heyday in the west of the Arab world - Andalusia and North Africa - but has its own very close ties to the 'literary Orient' - India and Iran. Like the *Thousand and One Nights*, it has a frame story with Shahrazad telling the nightly stories, but only few of these are also to be found in the longer work. In a fascinating collection of concise tales - every single one with its happy ending - the *Hundred and One Nights* comprises the most varied of genres, protagonists and settings: stories dealing with castles, hunters and camels; heroic sagas of knights and warriors, lindworms and virgins; anecdotes about unfaithful wives; adventures with flying machines, and the first motion detectors of world literature. It is this hitherto almost unknown work that influenced medieval European literature far more than did the *Thousand and One Nights*, whose traces we find only following its first translation into a European language in 1704. The impact of the *Hundred and One Nights* on European was registered far earlier, however, and one of its earliest signs is in several passages of *Orlando Furioso*.

Ferrarese contexts

“Popul la più parte circonciso”: Ariosto in Ferrara and the Muslim world of his time

Giovanni Ricci (Università di Ferrara)

Although *Orlando Furioso* recounts in literary terms the struggles between Christians and Moors, historical Arabs (and particularly Turks) terrified the Christian world in the late medieval and early modern periods. The Ferrarese chronicler Bernardino Zambotti, a close associate of Ariosto's, expressed a common sentiment when he wrote that «the danger for Christians is extreme, I fear that we will fall into the hands of infidels». Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople Turkish power seemed to be unstoppable. Who were, then, Ariosto's 'infidels'? In search of an answer, I will divide my presentation into two parts: in the first, I will trace within the poem the memory of the great religious and political dynamics of the time: the Islamization of Byzantium after 1453 and the definitive end of Islamic rule in Spain in 1492; the so called North African renegades; as well as the rituals, behaviours,

and beliefs of the Muslim world. Secondly, outside the text, I will seek to account for Muslim traces in Ferrara, where Ariosto lived the better part of his life and wrote his great poem: the documented presence of domestic and public slaves; material objects displayed in public spaces (carpets, arms, etc.); and in immaterial terms, the propagation and diffusion of prophecies that foretold the end of the 'Mohammedan sect'. Ariosto is a tangential intermediary with the Muslim world, his city more provincial and less exposed to intercultural exchange than frontier capitals. Nevertheless, the threat of the 'infidel' – actual ones or their phantasms – weighed significantly on the artistic production as well as on the social and political life of Ferrara.

Geocartographic culture at the Este court between Ptolemy and the *Furioso*

Massimo Rossi (Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, Treviso)

The decades that followed the Latin translation of Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographike hyphegesis* [Geographical Instruction], commonly known as the *Geography*, were a particularly important period for the Italian reception of the second century CE work of the Alexandrine polymath. To be sure, distinct signs of the *Geography* regularly manifested themselves in Western culture well before its Florentine 'rediscovery' in 1406, as witnessed in *La delizia di chi desidera attraversare la terra* (1154) [The Delight of the Would-be World Traveler], written by the geographer Al-Idrisi for the Norman King of Sicily, Roger II. The circulation of Ptolemy's ideas in Estense Ferrara was confirmed with the 1466 arrival there of the Benedictine monk Nicolaus Germanus who prepared several manuscripts of the *Geography* that were subsequently used by Pellegrino Prisciani for his history of Ferrara. There were extraordinary cartographic artifacts in the Este library curated by Prisciani, among which a Catalan-produced globe datable to the mid-fourteenth century and the so-called *Carta del Cantino*, a map produced in 1502 for the Ferrarese ambassador to Portugal, Alberto Cantino, that shows the 'discoveries' of Columbus and Vespucci. Through the routes that define the trajectories of the *Furioso*'s vast cast of characters, Ariosto evokes the great geographic voyages undertaken with the patronage of the Iberian monarchs, continental journeys toward the Asian Empire of the Seres, and African pilgrimages in search of the Kingdom of Prester John. Ariosto's direct knowledge of Ptolemy's work is clearly legible in the long wake of toponyms traced by the poem's itinerant knights.

The Image of Rodomonte: the Ambiguous Appeal of the Enemy in the *Furioso* and its Figurative Tradition

Vincenzo Farinella (Università di Pisa)

The grandiose figure of the cruel and savage Rodomonte dominates several cantos of the *Furioso*. A fundamentally negative portrait in which many early sixteenth-century fears and stereotypes of the 'Turk' are concentrated, one can nevertheless read between the lines of Ariosto's poem a kind of equivocal fascination on the part of the poet in the face of such a boundless and overwhelming personage. The idea that I wish to argue here is that Ariosto in the first edition of the *Furioso* was alluding in this character to a specific historic actor: Sultan Selim I (the Grim or Resolute; 1515-20), famous for his brutality - that led him to eliminate all of his blood relatives who might have compromised his absolute power - and for his extraordinary conquests, both factors that induced the West to adopt a politics of prudent and tolerant coexistence. I will also take into consideration the figurative afterlife of the poem, beginning with one of the earliest pictorial translations of a specific passage of the *Furioso* - the painting of Dosso Dossi now in the collection of the Hartford Atheneum dedicated to the duel between Rodomonte and Orlando - as well as its principal sixteenth-century illustrated editions. Here too the image of Rodomonte appears subtly ambiguous, the cruel and arrogant 'infidel' re-interpreted and translated with a discernible degree of sympathy by painters, engravers, and other figurative artists.

Performative contexts

“. . . and of these things a dream was left behind called ‘Antar’: Arabic Performative Traditions and Epic Poetry

Dwight F. Reynolds (UC Santa Barbara)

The lengthy heroic tales of Arabic oral and written tradition have come down to us in many forms and in many different performance modes: sung in verse to the accompaniment of musical instruments, declaimed in coffeehouses from written manuscripts, narrated in public squares by storytellers, recited at Sufi *mulids*, recounted as folk tales in domestic settings, printed as cheap chapbooks and then sold in marketplaces and on blankets spread on urban sidewalks, told against painted backgrounds scrolled through the “Box of the World” (*ṣandūq al-dunyā*) or the “Box of Wonders” (*ṣandūq al-‘ajā’ib*), marketed on cassettes, portrayed in films and soap operas, even preserved in proverbs and riddles.

These stories are anchored in a distant, but historical (rather than mythic) past. They are peopled by central figures who actually lived and left their imprint on history, accompanied by fictional and even supernatural characters that storytellers have created over the centuries. Their geographies are half real (such as Baghdad, Cairo, Cyprus, and Jerusalem) and half imaginary (Jabal Qaf, the Isle of Waqwaq, the land of Shirinbat wa-‘Alam, etc.).

As in Borges’ *Ariosto and the Arabs*, these half real, half imaginary tales of heroic feats, dramatic loves, victories and defeat, exist in a space between ‘dreams’ and ‘books’ -- the performance space. This paper addresses the many different types of performance spaces and performance modes that have promulgated these heroic epic traditions, with a particular focus on the role of the audience and on audience-performer interactions that constantly reshape and give new meaning to ancient tales.

Performing the Medieval Greek Romance from *Digenis Akritis* to the *Erotokritos*

Adam Goldwyn (North Dakota State University)

This paper presents a survey of the performance context of the Byzantine romances, a corpus of a dozen or so works of imaginative fiction composed between the 10th and 16th centuries and, geographically, from the Arab/Greek borderlands of modern-day Turkey in the east to Venetian occupied Crete in the west. The earliest of the romances, *Digenis Akritis*, began as a compilation of oral folk songs, sung in the language of everyday speech. In the 12th century, the so-called Komnenian novels (or romances, named after the imperial dynasty under whose patronage they were produced), were markedly different. No longer songs of the frontier, these romances were the work of highly educated elite Constantinopolitan writers, who performed their works for the emperor, the imperial family and elite court circles in a competitive setting called the ‘theatron.’ As a result, they are written in a high style deeply influenced by Classical literature and marked by displays of rhetorical virtuosity. The Palaiologan romances, written in the 15th century, are shaped by yet another performance context. Written often for local rulers in various parts of the shrinking empire, these romances are marked by the influence of western European themes: in terms of plot and at the level of linguistics, these works show the influence of Old French and Italian, complete with ideals of chivalry and courtly love, western European loan words, and even borrowed western European heroes such as King Arthur. After the Fall of Constantinople, many Greek intellectuals found refuge in the Republic of Venice, and Venetian occupied Crete saw the flourishing of the so-called Cretan Renaissance in Greek letters, represented by its two crown jewels: Vincenzo Kornaros’ *Erotokritos*, a folk song in the high style which combines both the structure of the Greek romance tradition with the subject matter of western romances – indeed, its chief source is the *Orlando Furioso*; and Georgios Hortatzis’ *Erophili*, a romantic tragedy that was among the first works of dramatic literature in Greek since the end of the Classical period.

‘Trobar’, ‘Cantar’, ‘Recitar’ : The Performance of Chivalry from Andalusia to Ferrara and Palermo to Cairo

Michael Wyatt (Independent scholar)

Benoit Grévin has written of the “auditory landscapes” of medieval Latin and Arabic literature, and Deanna Shemek reminds us that pre-modern poetry reached its largest audience “by traveling through the air, in vocal performance.” This talk will thus first explore how orality is inscribed into the fabric of the Western chivalric tradition and its hybrid sources, initially examining the development of the songs of the medieval Occitan troubadours and their contested relationship to earlier Iberian Arabic ‘*taraba*’, material that through various channels of transmission and contamination with other literary and historical texts led to the complex Carolingian epic poems of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Italy. Boiardo and Ariosto, like their predecessors, performed their poems before an audience in the course of writing them, and the *Orlando furioso* in particular frequently conveys on the printed page the energy of sung language. In the second part of the talk, my focus will turn to the fusion of orality with materiality in two more recent responses to the epic tradition: the *opera dei pupi*, a puppet-theater tradition dating in Sicily from the first half of the nineteenth century whose repertory is drawn almost exclusively from the cycle of stories recounting the conflict between Christians and Saracens in Carolingian Europe; and the Egyptian artist Wael Shawky’s extraordinary video project, *Cabaret Crusades* (2010-15) that reimagines the early Crusades that began less than two hundred years after the death of Charlemagne and the eventual disintegration of the European empire he had united, employing the accounts of Arabic chroniclers of the period and utilizing different communities of puppets in each of the three films to enact a narrative that serves as both a reflection upon and critique of the long reach of Western chivalry and the values it monumentalized.