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Ludovico Ariosto's Olympia: Faithful or Foolhardy?

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Situated in cantos 9, 10, and 11 of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, the Olympia episode is made up of three narrative blocks recounting three distinct events. In canto 9, Olympia tells her tale of forced separation from Bireno, her lover. Orlando unhesitatingly takes up her cause. He unites the lovers and punishes the villain, King Cimosco. In Canto 10, Bireno sets sail from Holland with Olympia on board. He abandons her on a deserted island and sails off with King Cimosco's young daughter instead. Finally, in canto 11, Olympia is plucked from the deserted island by pirates who offer her as a human sacrifice to the sea orc at Ebuda. Orlando intervenes once more. He saves the damsel and offers her in marriage to Oberto, King of Hibernia. I will concentrate mostly on the first of these three narrative blocks in this paper.

Olympia is declared an exemplary model of feminine virtue, a paragon of fidelity by the *Furioso's* narrator:

Fra quanti amor, fra quante fede al mondo
mai si trovâr, fra quanti cor constanti,
fra quante, o per dolente o per iocondo
stato, fêr prove mai famosi amanti;
piú tosto il primo loco ch'il secondo
darò ad Olympia: e se pur non va inanti,
ben voglio dir che fra gli antiqui e nuovi
maggior de l'amor suo non si ritruovi [. . .] (X,1)

Among all the lovers in the world who ever gave proof of constancy, through adverse times and in prosperity, however renowned they be, I should award the first place, yes, the first to Olympia. And if she be not the first, I shall still

maintain that, in olden times as today, no one takes precedence over her as a lover.¹

I argue, however, that the Dutch princess is more foolhardy than faithful. I compare her unfavourably to other Ariostean damsels in distress and to Bradamante, Ariosto's true *vergine saggia*. I argue that by explicitly declaring Olimpia a "paragon of fidelity" and then implicitly describing an ingenuous and often cruel princess, Ariosto stealthily injects an element of harsh realism and cynicism into his epic poem.²

It is important to bear in mind that Olimpia's tale is among a number of additions inserted into the third edition of the *Orlando Furioso*, published in 1532. In the eleven years between the last two versions of the *Orlando Furioso*, critics have noted an "intensification" and a "darkening" of narrative tone.³ It is said that Ariosto's growing disillusionment and mistrust of human affairs in light of the turbulent internal politics of Italy and its frequent invasions from abroad is given expression in the sharpened sense of cruelty and violence of his later work. While nothing new has been introduced into the last *Orlando Furioso*, an older and more mature poet seems intent on developing to greater extremes those themes and motifs already present in the earlier editions. Indeed, in the Olimpia episode, events featured in the earlier *Furioso* are repeated and reworked. Previously introduced themes and motifs are reintroduced and developed by a sharper and more critical Ariosto. Previously presented

¹ Editor's note: all translations have been added from Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Guido Waldman (London: Oxford UP, 1974).

² To interpret the narrative commentary of the *Orlando Furioso* as indicative of the poet's views is often dangerously short sighted. For further discussion of Ariosto's narrative techniques see Zatti, *Il Furioso fra epos e romanzo*.

³ See Binni (*Due studi critici*), Blum ("Pillars of Virtue"), Caretti (Introduction to Ariosto, *Opere minori*), Moretti (*L'ultimo Ariosto*), and Saccone ("Appunti per una definizione de *cinque canti*").

stories are modified somewhat and infused with elements of social upheaval and moral corruption, apparently in an effort to redress previously insufficiently treated themes.

In the story of Olimpia's affair with Bireno, for example, the tale of Bradamante's betrothal to Ruggiero is recalled. Both women have chosen their own suitors, but both are being set up by their parents to marry others. By telling the tale of prenuptial relationships and political matchmaking not once but twice, Ariosto affords insights into his views on the correct management of the chastity of young women. Comparison of Bradamante and Olimpia reveals the poet's vision of the *vergine saggia* (Bradamante) versus, as we shall see, the more foolhardy than faithful maiden (Olimpia).

In the *Orlando Furioso*, the narrator explicitly recommends that young women take lovers. However, he urges caution in the choice of lover and the degree to which young men are to be trusted. In the somewhat tongue-in-cheek preamble to canto 10, he informs his female readership that in order to effect faithfulness in lovers it is necessary to manipulate their desire and to administer favours sagaciously:

Non vi vieto per questo (ch' avrei torto)
 che vi lasciate amar; che senza amante
 sareste come incolta vite in orto,
 che non ha palo ove s' appoggi o piante.
 Sol la prima lanugine vi esorto
 tutta a fuggir, volubile e inconstante,
 e còrre i frutti non acerbi e duri,
 ma che non sien però troppo maturi. (X, 9)

Not that I am telling you to resist being loved—that would be quite wrong of me: without lovers you would be as vines growing wild in a vineyard, with no stakes or shrubs for their support. But I do urge you to avoid the downy-cheeked lad, flighty and inconstant, and to avoid plucking fruits which are bitter and unripe—though neither should they be overblown.

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It is in the management of their chastity that Olimpia and Bradamante's fates begin to diverge. The true nature of the princess's sentiments is questioned when her youth and inexperience are emphasised:

«La bellezza e l'età ch'in lui fioriva,
e li non più da me sentiti amori
con poca guerra me gli fêr captiva [. . .]» (IX, 23)

“Handsome and young he was, and ready as by then I was to offer my heart's love, he conquered me with scarcely a struggle [. . .]”

She recognises a reciprocity of affection between herself and Bireno swelling during the days of their brief courtship which she expresses tentatively:

«[. . .] tanto più che, per quel ch'apparea fuori,
io credea e credo, e creder credo il vero,
ch'amassi et ami me con cor sincero.» (IX, 23)

“[. . .] the more easily in that from all appearances he honestly loved me, and still loves me: so I believed and still believe, and I am sure I am right to do so.”

Overemphasis on the verb *credere* ‘to believe’ and use of the verb *apparire* ‘to appear’ underline Olimpia's insecurity about Bireno's feelings. Her own words suggest an implicit doubt as to the correctness of Olimpia's perception. No evidence of the duke's commitment to Olimpia is provided. Nevertheless, Olimpia unwisely entrusts her virginity and her realm to the errant young duke.

Bireno responds to Olimpia's gift by immediately departing to try out his chances in Frisia, taking the king's daughter with him as his prisoner. This latter, he claims, will provide a suitable wife for his younger brother. Soon, however, it is disclosed that Bireno's intention is to aban-

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don Olimpia in favour of the princess of Frisia with whom he himself had fallen enamoured:

Di sopra io vi dicea ch'una figliuola
del re di Frisia quivi hanno trovata,
che fia, per quanto n'han mosso parola,
da Bireno al fratel per moglie data.
Ma, a dire il vero, esso v'avea la gola;
che vivanda era troppo delicata:
e riputato avria cortesia sciocca,
per darla altrui, levarsela di bocca. (X, 10)

I was telling you how they came upon a daughter of the King of Frisia, whom Bireno, from all accounts, intended to give as wife to his brother. But truth to tell, he fancied her for himself: she was too dainty a morsel, and he would have considered himself a fool to pass her up in order to give her to another.

Before conceding realm, body, and self to Ruggiero, Bradamante, on the other hand, puts her lover through a series of trials. Even with the assurance of Melissa and Merlino, Bradamante protects herself from the compromising situation in which naive Olimpia places herself. On occasion of their second reunion in canto 22, Ruggiero and Bradamante joyfully embrace each other.

At a strategic point in the embrace, Bradamante withdraws herself from Ruggiero's hold. Willing to concede only what a wise virgin will, unlike Olimpia who impetuously gives herself to Bireno, Bradamante calculatingly withholds the *ultimi frutti*.

Bradamante, disposta di far tutti
i piaceri che far vergine saggia
debbia ad un suo amator, sí che di lutti,
senza il suo onore offendere, il sottraggia ;
dice a Ruggier, se a dar gli ultimi frutti

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lei non vuol sempre aver dura e selvaggia,
 la faccia domandar per buoni mezzi
 al padre Amon: ma prima si battezzi. (XXII, 34)

Bradamant was ready to concede all the pleasures that an honest virgin may give to a lover in order to keep him from sadness without hurting her own honour. Now she suggested to Ruggiero that if he was not to find her forever restive and stubborn about giving him the ultimate fruits, he should ask her father Aymon, in due form, for her hand—after accepting baptism.

Elsewhere the poet expresses his understanding of sexuality as an impulse driving both sexes towards each other and concedes that neither partner should receive blame for indulging in sexual relations. For Ariosto, who appears to share Rinaldo's views, sexual relationships in themselves are without fault, even laudable:

S'un medesimo ardor, s'un disir pare
 inchina e sforza l'uno e l'altro sesso
 a quel suave fin d'amore, che pare
 all'ignorante vulgo un grave eccesso;
 perché si de' punir donna o biasmare,
 che con uno o più d'uno abbia commesso
 quel che l'uom fa con quante n'ha appetito,
 e lodato ne va, non che impunito? (IV, 66)

If the same ardour, the same urge drives both sexes to love's gentle fulfilment, which to the mindless commoner seems so grave an excess, why is the woman to be punished or blamed for doing with one or several men the very thing a man does with as many women as he will, and receives not punishment but praise for it?

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However, where the negotiation of a future marriage or the assurance of male fidelity is desired, the woman must be aware of the essential fickleness of youthful passions and must learn to manipulate them to her own advantage. To this end, virginity is used as the most powerful currency for the acquisition of a partner's fidelity. By allowing Bireno's appetite for her to be assuaged, *Olimpia* demonstrates ignorance of this keystone law of human commerce and sets herself up for imminent abandonment. In contrast, *Bradamante*, the *vergine saggia*, keeps *Ruggiero* in a constant state of desire, aspiring towards her *ultimi frutti* until they are safely married.

Bradamante and *Olimpia* have both chosen partners, and both refuse those husbands chosen by their parents. In attempting to reconcile their parents' social aspirations and their own desires, the two maidens once again differ greatly. Both lovers insist on remaining faithful to their chosen men. *Bradamante*, however, is successful in eventually pleasing parents, public, and king while at the same time achieving her desires. *Olimpia*, instead, instigates the destruction of her family and people and eventually loses her lover too. In the face of adverse parental will, *Bradamante* again proves the wiser and more successful.

Olimpia refuses *Cimosco's* political marriage proposal by relying on the indulgent affection of her father. She cries. She threatens suicide:

«Io ch'all'amante mio di quella fede
 mancar non posso, che gli aveva data,
 e ancor ch'io possa, Amor non mi concede
 che poter voglia, e ch'io sia tanto ingrata;
 per ruinar la pratica ch'in piede
 era gagliarda, e presso al fin guidata,
 dico a mio padre, che prima ch'in Frisa
 mi dia marito, io voglio essere uccisa.» (IX, 26)

“Unable to forswear the promise I gave to my beloved—and even had I been able to do so, I would not have been willing, for Love would not have let me be so fickle—I told my father, in order to put an end to the affair, which

was well advanced and indeed almost concluded, that if I was to be wedded to the Frisian I would sooner be killed.”

Equally impulsive and sentimental is her father who, apparently without explanation to Cimosco, abruptly breaks off the marriage negotiations in order to comfort his daughter:

«Il mio buon padre, al qual sol piaceva quanto
a me piaceva, né mai turbar mi vòlse,
per consolarmi e far cessare il pianto
ch'io ne facea, la pratica disciolse [. . .] » (IX, 27)

“My dear father, whose only pleasure was my pleasure and who could not bear to see me unhappy, broke off the negotiations in order to comfort me and dry my tears.”

In Olimpia's story, no attempt to reconcile the conflicting private and public aspirations of participants is made. Olimpia ignores her duty as noblewoman, playing on her father's sentimentality to aid her personal desire. Her father, in turn, responds equally impulsively, disregarding his public duty for thoughts of his daughter's sorrow. Cimosco, understandably indignant at the unexplained breakdown of political negotiations, overlooks Olimpia and the count's personal motives, taking the gesture as purely political and offensive. The impulsive, reactive, and violent chain of events results in the destruction of both the Dutch and Frisian families and realms.

In contrast is the far more complex diplomatic and political process by which Bradamante avoids parental plans for her marriage to Leone. Initially, Bradamante ostensibly complies with her parents' wishes, obediently remaining in isolation from Ruggiero at Roccaforte. Although unguarded, Bradamante stays there, apparently submissive and obedient:

Sta Bradamante tacita, né al detto
de la madre s'arrisca a contradire;
che l'ha in tal riverenza e in tal rispetto,

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che non potria pensar non l'ubbidire. (XLIV, 39)

Bradamant remained silent, not daring to contradict her mother, whom she so worshipped and respected that the thought of disobeying her would never have entered her head.

To many, Bradamante's submission to Beatrice and Amon undermines the poet's earlier presentation of a relatively emancipated warrior damsel. For her meek compliance with her mother's commands, Bradamante becomes the cause of disappointment for many feminist readers. However, Bradamante's silence in the face of her parents' proposal is ambivalent. It is both a wish to avoid filial disobedience and a refusal to accept their intentions. By initially feigning compliance with Beatrice, Bradamante avoids openly disobeying her parents. Through her initial silence, she demonstrates strategic sensitivity to the delicate balance between her personal objectives and her filial duty. After contemplating the arguments for and against her union with Ruggiero, she eventually defies her parents in a far less brazen manner than Olimpia. Rather than cry or threaten suicide, tactful Bradamante approaches Charlemagne with her dilemma. After paying due tribute to her mother's will, Bradamante takes the issue of her marriage to a higher authority. Her suggestion is that the dilemma be resolved with a duel between herself and any contenders for her hand:

«Il don ch'io bramo da l'Altezza vostra,
 è che non lasci mai marito darme,”
 disse la damigella “se non mostra
 che più di me sia valoroso in arme.» (XLIV, 70)

“Here is the boon I crave, Your Majesty,” requested the damsel. “Permit no husband to be bestowed upon me until he has demonstrated greater prowess at arms than I possess.”

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At Roccaforte, Bradamante's duty as a daughter is in conflict with her desire for conscientious self-governance. By having the matter transferred into Charlemagne's jurisdiction, an overly conflictual conclusion of the dilemma is avoided. Her suggestion to the emperor is that the issue be resolved by a duel. Whosoever should vanquish her in a military arena will fairly win her hand. In this way, the conflict need not be pushed to a conclusion in the political domain. Neither she nor her parents need cede to the other in the controversy between tradition and individuality. Bradamante safely posits the resolution of the dilemma in the more diplomatic arena of military competition.

In contrast to Bradamante, Olimpia now appears to be more foolhardy than faithful. Far from an exemplary figure of female excellence, the Dutch princess in this light appears ingenuous and boorish next to her diplomatically tactful counterpart. What could have been read as a tale of female martyrdom now appears to be an account of senseless cruelty.

Within Olimpia's narrative, the story of her marriage under duress to Arbante is grafted. To avenge her dead family and dispossessed kingdom, Olimpia conspires to murder her betrothed, Cimosco's son. In this insert, Isabella and Drusilla of the earlier *Orlando Furioso* are intentionally recalled. In canto 29 (*ottave* 3-26), it is told how Isabella offers her bare neck, supposedly protected by a magic herb, to a drunken Rodomonte, her captor. Rather than jeopardise her chastity, Isabella chooses to die at the hand of her sexual aggressor:

Quel fe' tre balzi; e funne udita chiara
voce, ch'uscendo nominò Zerbino,
per cui seguire ella trovò sí rara
via di fuggir di man del Saracino. (XXIX, 26)

Her head bounced thrice: from it a voice could be clearly
heard pronouncing the name of Zerbin, to follow whom
she had found so novel a way to escape from the Saracen.

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Similarly in canto 37 (*ottave* 51-75), Drusilla poisons both herself and Tanacro during their marriage ceremony in preference to surrendering to her husband's murderer:

«Finí il parlare insieme con la vita;
 e morta anco pareva lieta nel volto
 d'aver la crudeltà così punita
 di chi il caro marito le avea tolto.
 Non so se prevenuta, o se seguita
 fu da lo spirto di Tanacro sciolto:
 fu prevenuta, credo; ch'effetto ebbe
 prima il veneno in lui, perché piú bebbe.» (XXXVII, 75)

“Speech and life died in her at once; but, dead, the smile still lingered on her face, happy to have punished the cruelty of the man who has wrested her dear husband from her. I do not know whether she was preceded or followed by the departing spirit of Tanacre—preceded, I suspect, the poison acting more quickly upon him as he had drunk deeper.”

Olimpia's instincts for self preservation prove stronger than her counterparts'. She will live to enjoy her revenge on Arbante, or more precisely on his father. Not only is she ingenuous and foolhardy, then, Olimpia is also cruel and vindictive. A new and resilient breed of female figure has been introduced into this final *Orlando Furioso*.

Again, as when marriage to Arbante is initially proposed, Olimpia's thoughts turn to suicide. First, however, revenge must be achieved.

«Io che sforzar così mi veggio, voglio,
 per uscigli di man, perder la vita ;
 ma se pria non mi vendico, mi doglio
 piú che di quanta ingiuria abbia patita.» (IX, 36)

“Seeing myself constrained in this way I looked to death as the only way to elude him; but to go without first avenging myself would have been far more bitter to me than all the hurt I had suffered.”

Like both Drusilla and Isabella, Olimpia will feign complacency until the moment of her vendetta arrives. On their wedding night, Olimpia’s faithful servant remains concealed behind curtains until Arbante approaches the princess. At the right moment, he emerges and splits the prince’s head open with an axe. To finish off the job properly, Olimpia herself leaps at Arbante and slits his throat. It is in this act and Olimpia’s next line that the essential difference between Olimpia and her counterparts is revealed. After recounting her superfluous gesture on a dead man, she reveals no remorse towards her victim. On the contrary, she reveals a chilling disregard for human life, expressing her satisfaction at having claimed revenge not on the dead man himself but on his father. Both Isabella and Drusilla punish an actual adversary. Olimpia triumphantly mutilates an innocent pawn in the cruel match between herself and Cimosco:

«Come cadere il bue suole al macello,
cade il mal nato giovene, in dispetto
del re Cimosco, il piú d’ogn’altro fello [. . .]» (IX, 42)

“Like an ox felled at the slaughterhouse—so fell this young man of evil birth, thus spiting the king, the most wicked of men. Cimosco was the villain’s name [. . .]”

Ariosto’s paragon of fidelity is capable first of obstinacy which leads to civil war and then of treachery which leads to her cold-bloodedly mutilating the body of her dead husband. To the traditional tale of romantic female martyrdom, an older Ariosto has injected an element of harsh and, at times, sadistic realism. In the later *Orlando Furioso*, the princess’s lover is not always worthy and faithful; the damsel-in-distress is not al-

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ways passive and innocent; and the knight-errant who comes to her rescue, as we shall see, is not always heroically successful.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the self-contained narrative units featuring the plight of a distressed damsel are essentially concerned with the benevolent knight-errant who intervenes on her behalf ("Docile Damsels"). I believe that the damsel-in-distress is frequently a narrative device employed to develop the hero protagonist's character and to refine the themes treated in the rest of his/her story.

In effect, Orlando's identity as faithful lover and defender of the traditional concept of chivalry is significantly developed in the Olimpia tale. Therein he defends Olimpia, the paragon of fidelity, and punishes Cimosco, the antichivalric foe. When he dumps Cimosco's thunderbolt weapon in the ocean, he clearly attacks devastating modern warfare. In addition, not only his character but also his individual quest is developed in the Olimpia episode. His pursuit of Angelica, fraught with anxiety over her fidelity and chastity, is recalled when he defends Olimpia, the symbol of fidelity. In ensuring the princess's reunion with her lover, he conjures up an illusion of the fulfilment of his own quest.

In this light, Olimpia, like her damsel-in-distress counterparts, functions as a narrative device facilitating the development of the hero protagonist's character and individual quest. As events unfold, however, Orlando's role in Olimpia's tale and the success of his venture are complicated. Explicitly, Orlando's steadfast devotion to Angelica and his allegiance to the chivalric code are celebrated in the episode. Implicitly, however, as we shall see, those very values themselves are put into question before the end of the story.

In canto 10 we learn that the uniting of Olimpia and Bireno and the vanquishing of Cimosco provide only temporary closure for the Olimpia story. Rather than fading into Orlando's history, Olimpia soon reappears, abandoned by Bireno on a deserted island. Orlando's victory as champion of fidelity is weakened by Bireno's subsequent infidelity.

Orlando's conquest in the name of chivalry is also temporary. The disposal of the *archibugio*, Ariosto informs us, is a mere postponement of the dominance of modern warfare and the parallel decline of chivalry. Next we learn that while Orlando's course to Ebuda is delayed by con-

trary winds and his adventure in Holland, Ruggiero frees Angelica from the sea orc (X, 92-115). Rather than indicating proximity to his own goal, the Olimpia adventure has proved to be a detrimental deflection from Orlando's individual quest. Furthermore, when Olimpia is betrayed by Bireno soon after the apparent closure of the adventure, Orlando's ultimate failure, and not the eminent achievement of his individual quest, is presaged.

At first glance, then, the Olimpia episode facilitates the development of Orlando's identity as invincible champion of fidelity and chivalry. From a closer viewpoint, however, Orlando's exploits in Olimpia's story may be considered quixotic. The errant-knight's chivalric behaviour does not suffice to ensure a *lieto fine* for Olimpia and Bireno. It would appear that the ideological and political framework that once supported society has evolved, and Orlando's faithful adherence to the chivalric code is ultimately ineffectual against the emerging order. The Olimpia episode appears to function in the final edition of the *Orlando Furioso* as an added insight into Orlando's eventual insanity. It is here that the process of degradation which terminates in Orlando's madness in canto 23 begins.

Once more it becomes clear that an older Ariosto is intent on injecting a novel element of harsh realism into the traditional tale of romantic knightly heroism. In the later *Orlando Furioso*, the damsel-in-distress is more foolhardy than faithful. Her lover is more wily than worthy, and the chivalric hero is more enthusiastic than effective. As an older Ariosto tires of the constant foreign invasion of Italy, the romance and romantic heroism of his earlier poem changes tone and colour. As a more cynical poet wearies of the irreconcilable polemics between the nation-state leaders of Italy, he portrays traditional archetypes in a negative and colder light. In the Olimpia episode, as perhaps in sixteenth-century Ferrara, elements of social upheaval and moral corruption seep in. In the Olimpia episode, as perhaps in a turbulent, pre-Reformation Italy, distressed damsels, lovers, heroes, and miscreants become both victim and villain at the same time.

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NOTE

I would like to thank Prof. John C. McLucas of Towson University for sharing with me his unpublished article, "The Unlikable Lady and the Can(n)on of Chivalry: the *Archibugio* Episode in *Orlando Furioso*" (delivered at the Kalamazoo conference of 1995) and relevant passages from his dissertation, "Ariosto and the Androgyne: Symmetries of Sex in the *Orlando Furioso*" (Yale 1983). I saw these after the writing of this paper.

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