

Orlando furioso, Barbara Reynolds, and the Warrior Maidens

Linda C. McCabe

Barbara Reynolds, famed Italian scholar, developed a deep and collegial friendship with Dorothy L. Sayers. Reynolds wrote the biography, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her life and soul*, and when Sayers passed away before finishing her translation of Dante's *Paradiso*, Reynolds completed the task for publication. Furthering her scholarship with Dante, Reynolds translated his *La Vita Nuova* as well as writing the biography, *Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man*.

Reynolds was also known for translating *Orlando furioso*, Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem. *Orlando* is not as famous as Dante's work, but it was one of the most popular books published in the sixteenth century. It has appeared in almost fifty separate editions being republished many times over and translated into many languages including French, Russian, German, Portuguese, Polish, Hebrew and Japanese.

Numerous operas were created to dramatize scenes and portions from this heroic tale, composers including such luminaries as Handel, Haydn, Piccinni, and Vivaldi. Ariosto created a sprawling tale with a cast of thousands, dozens of major characters, a myriad of interweaving plotlines, and diverse locations spanning three continents and ranging from the depths of Hell to the summit of Terrestrial Paradise while also including a magical trip to the moon. The legends of Charlemagne are still popular on the island of Sicily where there are many theatrical troupes performing *opera dei pupi*.

Orlando furioso recently celebrated two landmark anniversaries. The year 2016 marked the 500th anniversary of its original publication, and with the recent 50th anniversary of the moon landing there were many mentions of the first literary journey to the moon done in that epic poem.

The titular storyline features Orlando's unrequited love for Angelica, the beautiful princess of Cathay. His love for her began in the predecessor poem, *Orlando innamorato*, written by Matteo Maria Boiardo, but the story was left unfinished with the death of the poet in 1494. The patrons, the noble house of d'Este in Ferrara, hired Ludovico Ariosto to finish this tale.

Here in a nutshell is the story of Orlando and Angelica:

Angelica arrived at the Pentecost tournament hosted by Charlemagne that included Christian and Muslim warriors. She was accompanied by her brother, Argalia, and four giants who served as bodyguards. This unexpected entrance interrupted the banquet and all eyes were focused at the beauty speaking to Charlemagne. She announced a challenge for all the knights in attendance to joust against her brother. Anyone victorious in a single pass would win her as the reward, but those who lost would become a prisoner. Every man in attendance burned for her and without a second thought threw their names into the list for competitors.

This had been an elaborate plot by Angelica's father, King Galafron of Cathay, to seize the best warriors for himself and he sent his son with enchanted armor designed to be invincible. However, things did not go as planned as Angelica's brother was killed by the second jousting who refused to admit defeat and instead insisted on a duel. Chaos erupted after the death as multiple knights chased Angelica and she used magic to return to her father's kingdom in Cathay.

Angelica arrived home and discovered her father had agreed for her to marry a king she despised. She rebelled and sought refuge in a castle that was soon besieged by several armies. Archetypically, I view Angelica as being similar to Helen of Troy. She is the object of desire for every man who sees her and is the cause of a war.

Orlando followed her to Cathay, joined the army defending her, and championed her in many daring escapades and magical realms. He believed her when she claimed to love

him for his bravery and acts of chivalry. The circumstances of the war became dire and Angelica returned with Orlando to the Frankish Empire where another war was breaking out.

During a battle against the North African Muslim army, Angelica was being protected by one of Charlemagne's dukes. She became fearful and escaped. Orlando became a knight errant and searched for her all over the Frankish Empire. This led to many more fantastic adventures until he finally came upon proof that his beloved had given her body and soul to another. He saw Angelica's name written on the bark of a tree along with the name Medoro. He grasped at finding an innocent explanation for this, but after finding a shepherd who told of giving hospitality to a princess who nursed a wounded common foot soldier from Death's door - Orlando could not deny the reality she did not love him. The couple had become lovers and left eastward to her father's kingdom in Cathay. Orlando lost his mind at this news. He not only lost his wits, he threw off his armor, uprooted trees and became feral. He could no longer speak or understand spoken language. He was a danger for any living thing in his path as he reacted by instinct and lacked all reason.



On the left is Orlando feeling despair that he cannot find Angelica. Above is Angelica linking her name with Medoro on a tree. On the right is Orlando after he has gone "furioso."

Ariosto Room in Il Casino Giustiniani Massimo Al Laterano in Rome, Italy. Mural by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. Photo credit 2016 Marco Ferrara, used with permission.

Orlando's cousin Astolfo went on a quest to the moon where all things lost on the earth are found. There Astolfo retrieved Orlando's wits which were housed in a large bottle. Astolfo later was able, with the help of a team of men, to subdue Orlando and have the wild man breathe in his wits and be restored to sanity. He then returned to being Charlemagne's most valuable paladin and helped end the war against the North African Muslim Army.

This is an unusual theme for romances: boy meets girl, boy falls for girl, girl is uninterested in boy but leads him on until he finally realizes she will never love him, boy goes insane, boy goes on murderous rampage, then boy is restored to sanity and all is forgiven because the boy is a brave hero. This plotline about Orlando's unrequited love for Angelica has inspired numerous operas. Perhaps it is because the men who composed the opera understood the pain of unrequited love and sympathized with the idea of letting go of propriety when they realized their own love would never be returned. Perhaps. Orlando's plotline is not what draws me to this classic piece of literature. Instead it is the story of impossible love between Bradamante and Ruggiero.

Now I feel compelled to explain how I came to read *Orlando furioso* back in 2003. I was involved in the online Harry Potter fandom and engaged in theorizing with other fans where we thought the unfinished series was going. There was a theory regarding hippogriffs as potentially being a symbol of love and that there might be some significance of Harry and Hermione flying alone on the back of the winged magical creature. During my research I learned that the first time a hippogriff was used as a character in literature was in Ariosto's masterpiece. My first attempt at reading his poem was using the online version from Project Gutenberg. I had difficulty following it when I tried reading it on my computer screen, so

I printed portions out hoping that seeing text on the page would make things easier. It didn't. I was confused, perplexed and lost. Then, I discovered the translation by Barbara Reynolds.

“Of ladies, cavaliers, of love and war,
Of courtesies and of brave deeds I sing.
In times of high endeavor when the Moor
Had crossed the sea from Africa to bring
Great harm to France, when Agramante swore
In wrath, being now the youthful Moorish king,
To avenge Troiano, who was lately slain,
Upon the Roman Emperor Charlemagne.”

Those opening words in her translation set forth an expectation of a grand tale encompassing war, romance, and heroic acts. It was like a light had been turned on in a darkened room. All of a sudden, I was able to read, understand, and enjoy the story. By the third canto I found myself astounded that this classic tale had, Bradamante, a warrior maiden and niece of Charlemagne, receiving the Call to Adventure to rescue her beloved being held prisoner in a high tower – by a wizard. This was the inverse of what I had come to expect from tales of knights and princesses. It was always the fair young royal maiden being held captive and a brave knight who risked his life to rescue her. Instead, here was a fearless young woman being sent to rescue a knight and also instructed to take the lives of specific people who could stand in her way of marrying her beloved.

I started thinking about Joseph Campbell's thesis about the “hero with a thousand faces” and how the hero – raised in obscurity – was given the Call to Adventure, generally by a mentor/wizard. Ariosto instead gave a young maiden, who was a respected warrior, the Call to Adventure in a cave by the enchantress Melissa. She was being asked to rescue her beloved from an enchanted castle, convince him to convert to

Christianity from Islam, and then marry her so that she would bear a son who would lead to an entire line of future heroes.

In feminist iconographic terms, a crone was calling a maiden to become a mother. This was being done in a cave, and caves are recognized as a symbol of a womb. And this was not just any maiden, but a warrior (symbolized as a blade) being transformed into a mother (chalice).



In Melis's cave, Bradamante is greeted by the beneficent sorceress Melis (3-9).

Doré's Illustration for Ariosto's "Orlando furioso." Dover Books. New York. 1980. Page 7. Illustration is in the public domain.

Archetypically I see Bradamante as a combination of Joan of Arc (*Jeanne d'Arc*) and the Greek goddess Athena. She is a warrior who rides on the back of a white horse, carries a white shield, has cropped hair and disguises herself as a man at times, and her nickname is "The Maid." All those are pointers to *Jeanne d'Arc*. However, Bradamante has a much better character arc than the real-life heroine who was condemned to death for being a religious heretic. The similarities with the Greek goddess include both being respected warriors with minds for battle strategy. The difference is that Bradamante

falls in love and wants to marry and Athena is committed to being a virgin goddess.

As I made it farther into the poem, I found myself skimming the storylines that weren't about Bradamante and Ruggiero. The tale has numerous interweaving plotlines, and my interest featured on knowing more about the "impossible love" between lovers on opposing sides of a holy war. Their story having to keep their love for each other secret because it would be seen as disloyal to love "an enemy" was powerful. It also lasts throughout the entire poem with numerous and repeated obstacles to their union as a couple.

Ruggiero as the hero was also quantifiably different than expectations of fantasy literature. He *was* the prophesied hero raised in obscurity, but there was not a single prophecy about him – there were two. The two prophecies had divergent fates with dueling magical forces trying to determine which one would come to pass. This hero was also of a different faith than the heroine. Archetypically I see him as being in the mold of Hector of Troy, considered to be the perfect knight. Ruggiero is descended from this iconic hero and strives to live up to his image and will put honor before all else. I found all of this to be heady stuff.

I remember crying as I read the climax of the story where Ruggiero was willing himself to die so Bradamante could honorably marry another. He had gone into the wilderness and was refusing food and water in the hopes of dying from dehydration, starvation, and exposure to the elements. All so his beloved might live with honor. I sat outside on a patio during my lunch break and I wept by the power of this 500-year old story.

As I reflected on the story I finished, I felt cheated. I had not heard of this incredible warrior maiden from literature, nor of her struggle to marry for love in a time when nobles' marriages were arranged for political alliances. I knew about Guinevere and her messy love triangle with King Arthur and Lancelot – that didn't end well – but I had never heard of

Bradamante and Ruggiero. I wondered why I had never heard of their incredible love story.

Two years later in 2005, a writing project I had been working on ended. As I cast about for a new project, I remembered my thoughts upon finishing *Orlando furioso*. I then made the decision to embark on an ambitious writing project that is still ongoing. I decided to adapt Bradamante and Ruggiero's love story into novels for modern day audiences to enjoy. It has been an odyssey that included expanding my source material to include *Orlando innamorato* since it was in Boiardo's unfinished poem where the two characters met, fell in love, and were cruelly separated for the first of many times. I immersed myself in researching medieval history, customs, religious practices of the time both in Christianity and Islam, as well as traveling to France to see the places I was writing about.

As part of my writing process, I have consulted the source material frequently and in close detail. I realized as I began outlining plot sequences that the poets were marvelous storytellers, lousy historians and even worse geographers. There were aspects of the story that would need to be changed in order to satisfy continuity requirements for modern day readers. For example, there is an enchanted castle holding Ruggiero as a prisoner and it appeared in the storyline multiple times, but it was not in a fixed location. Instead, the castle moved and was in three different locales. First it was off the coast of Brittany, second time it was near Paris, and then the third time it was in central France. The poets took great poetic license with their works of fantasy, but I feel the internal logic of the story as it is retold needs to be held to higher standards. That is why I fixed the location of the enchanted castle to being inside the Gresigne Forest east of Montauban.

I have also examined the various plot threads and have only kept those which impact the Bradamante and Ruggiero through-story. Even by paring it down to focusing on Bradamante and Ruggiero, I still have an immense storyline

that includes Orlando losing his wits, Astolfo going into the Underworld and the moon, and a restored Orlando helping end the war.

At times, I refer back to the source material for inspiration and will find a passage that needs clarity. At those times, I will consult both Reynolds and Guido Waldman's versions. Occasionally, I will compare a passage to other translators' work as well. In doing so, my appreciation for Barbara Reynolds' craft has increased. I am indebted to those who have the knowledge of the Italian language and can translate the meaning into something I can understand. And, the poem wasn't written in modern Italian, it was written in *archaic* Italian. I have Italian friends who, when asked about *Orlando furioso*, will wince and mention how they disliked being required to read it, because it was in archaic Italian. I have a similar difficulty reading Chaucer in old English. So, Reynolds not only had to understand the Italian language, but she had to have an understanding of how that Romance language has changed and evolved over the centuries.

I have been working on this adaptation since 2005 and in the last fourteen years, I have two volumes of my trilogy done. I am uncertain how many more years it will take for me to finish this project, but I can take comfort in the knowledge it will be less than the original composition by the poets. Boiardo began writing his poem around 1476 and stopped in 1494, for a total of eighteen years of writing. Ariosto began his writing around 1505 and the first publication of *Orlando furioso* was in 1516, eleven years later. Combined it makes twenty-nine years. However, Ariosto continued to add to his masterpiece and the final version was published in 1532. So, in total it took the two poets forty-five years to write this massive story. I am optimistic that I can finish this project in only a few more years' time. That will be far less than the time it took for Boiardo and Ariosto.

My reading of this poem started by following a wild theory about hippogriffs in the Harry Potter series, and it

ended with my wanting to share the love story of Bradamante and Ruggiero with others. My hope is that my writing will introduce a new generation to this marvelous tale of chivalry, heroism, and romance. I hope readers may be inspired to go to the source material and read the poem for themselves. Tales of chivalric literature are classics that should be discovered by each generation and valued as literary gifts from the profound minds of the mediæval world.

Linda C. McCabe is the author of *Quest of the Warrior Maiden* and *Fate of the Saracen Knight*. Her website is www.LindaCMcCabe.com and she can be reached at Linda.McCabe@gmail.com.



Bradamante on the back of a horse fighting Atlante the wizard who is in the sky on the back of a hippogriff. Jean-Honoré Fragonard etching. Scan performed on a plate owned by Linda C. McCabe.