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1-1

Orlando Ridiculoso

Any momentous change in the world is inevitably later reflected in culture. When writers of a certain era contemplate an age recently passed, they don't just mark history's transitions. They give posterity a sense of the momentousness of the changes their society has undergone. It is normal for such works to utilize history and historical forms when drawing contrasts between major epochs. In the case of Ludovico Ariosto's "Orlando Furioso" however, the author takes a different tack. Ariosto deliberately mangles medieval history by subverting that time period's preferred literary form, the epic poem. Through the liberal use of hyperbole, sarcasm and silliness, "Orlando Furioso" becomes arguably the world's first absurdist epic poem. However, instead of producing a work of pure nonsense, Ariosto gives voice to the Renaissance's new mindset. He does so by pillorying the epic poem and the Middle Ages with their own ridiculousness, therefore drawing a contrast between the sensibilities of the two eras. Whereas many works immortalize real-world events by using them as a skeleton to build upon, Ariosto does the reverse. Namely, he signifies the dawning of the Renaissance in "Orlando Furioso" with history's destruction.

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One of the poem's most easily recognizable devices is the liberal use of anachronism. The easy explanation is that it just goes in hand with the overall absurdity of the work. If considered deeper however, anachronism is essential to the dismantling of the epic poem. Anachronism in this case mimics the chivalric epic's tendency to play loose with facts and events in service of a particular narrative. One of the more glaring anachronisms of the book is the appearance of a "thunder-machine" (108) during the

time of the crusades. While one explanation for a gun or cannon in the poem is an indication of the author's marking the death of pre-ballistic warfare, there is another purpose at hand. The fact that the cannon, the crusades and the reign of Charlemagne all occur on top of one another serves to flatten many centuries of history into what feels like one single, homogenized (and confusing) set of events. The fact that no crusade ever reached Paris or that the only crusade to take place on European soil never involved Muslims only serves to further cheapen the value of historical realism. In Ariosto's hands a long and richly variegated era of human history is seemingly stripped of its nuance and depth and rendered a one-dimensional stereotype.

The term "suspension of disbelief" could hardly be better applied to any genre but the chivalric epic. The larger-than-life exploits of the warrior class can easily be traced back to the writings of Homer or even "The Epic of Gilgamesh" but the medievals more than held their own in imbuing characters with superhuman abilities and totems. Much like the giant green knight who can function normally with a severed head and a sword buried in a rock that only Arthur Pendragon can dislodge, Ariosto peppers his poem with enough magical exceptions to thoroughly addle any attempts to keep them straight. Magic swords, horses, armor, lances, enchanted dragon-skin, the strength to fashion and wield weapons made of entire oak trees, etc. are all unbelievable enough if taken singly. Ariosto, however, piles them so deep upon one another that the reader is no longer able to maintain the suspension of their disbelief. Far from being random silliness, this can also be interpreted as mocking the ridiculousness of the chivalric epics by employing their own devices against them.

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Ariosto parodies the chivalric code itself by nothing more than simply drawing out to their illogical conclusions the tenets and practices that so stereotypically defined the genre for centuries. Consider a knights obligation to adhere to the rules of chivalry. Whether the obligation is to submit to the orders of one's king, a vow of service or to abide by customs regarding rightful property, the duty of a knight to adhere to these confusing and contradictory rules is deadly serious. Ariosto again only needs to extrapolate stereotypical knightly behavior a short distance before it becomes obviously

silly and at odds with itself. For example, horses, armor and armaments change hands frequently throughout the poem, often as the rightful prize one knight receives after challenging and defeating a rival, but also through loss or outright theft. The conflicting claims that arise between many of Agramant's top warriors over coveted armaments devolves into chaos so quickly and so completely, Ariosto likens the scene to the goddess Discord herself visiting the camp and starting fires throughout. Eventually, Agramant has to step in and, like a babysitter, organize a system of battles to settle the disputes. The reaction of the disputants then is predictably fitting for a group of people who deserve to be babysat:

3-1

> At this Ruggiero broke in: 'I won't have the pact broken or the lots confounded. Either Rodomont enters the field first, or his battle must come after mine. /If Gradasso prevails with his notion of first winning the weapon with which to fight, then you are not to use my white-winged eagle until you have wrested it from me. However, what I have willed I don't mean to retract: the second combat shall be mine if the first is Rodomont's. / But if you upset the order in part, I shall upset it completely—I do not intend to leave you my escutcheon unless you fight me for it here and now.' 'If each one of you were Mars, you'd neither of you keep me from possessing the good sword or the noble arms,' retorted Mandricard in a rage, / and, stung to fury, he laid into Gradasso with his fist and landed him such a blow on the right hand as to make him drop the sword: Gradasso never imagined that Mandricard could be so insanely reckless and, taken off guard, found he had lost hold of Durindana. /Thus humiliated, he blushed, with shame and anger; what made it all the more painful was that the incident took place so publicly. (330)

Ariosto cleverly shows how thin the line is between a knight standing firm and defending his or her honor, and the meaningless conflict of elementary school recess. What's more is that they put their rage aside willingly at Agramant's request, just long enough for him to devise the convoluted schedule of bouts. However, they instantaneously resume their childish bickering at the slightest provocation. It's almost as if the chivalric code has ill-prepared them to deal with carrying out more than one aspect of their sworn duties at one time. None can decide whether obedience to their

king, their own personal honor or ownership of enchanted armaments has supremacy over the others.

Another example along these lines involves Ruggiero's allegiance to Agramant. Reasonably early in the poem, Ruggiero and Bradamant become smitten with one another and expend the bulk of their energies toward reuniting. All this so Ruggiero can convert to Christianity, clearing the way for them to be married. Despite the burning need to be with his beloved, Ruggiero continually delays implementing this decision because of the obligation he feels to fulfill his vow to serve Agramant. The fundamental irrationality of his constantly deferring his return to Bradamant and continuing to fight and kill Christians, long after he has resolved to become one himself, suggests a possible conflict in the rules. Even after it becomes clear that Agramant has disgraced himself by breaking his truce with Charlemagne and run back to Africa, Ruggiero cannot shake the notion that he still owes him his service:

> All that day and the following night he remained alone, and the next day too, cudgelling his perplexed brain as to whether to follow Agramant or stay behind. In the end he decided to follow his liege back to Africa: conjugal love had a great influence over him—but fealty and honour even greater. (483)

As above, two important aspects of the chivalric code are unprepared to coexist with one another without causing great vexation. In devising these simple premises, Ariosto seems to be hinting that the narrative of the chivalric epic is far too ridiculous to actually be practiced in the real world.

4-1

Lastly, again consider the concept of love in chivalry and how Ariosto treats it in the poem. Defending the honor of and/ or fighting to win the hearts of women is among a knight's greatest pastimes. In Ariosto's hands, instead of fitting seamlessly in the chivalric code, it seems an impediment to the other tenets. Consider the case of Orlando himself. The bravest and most invincible of all knights is neutralized by his infatuation with Angelica. At the book's outset Orlando is introduced as "a man who had been always esteemed for his great prudence" (1). By the halfway point of the book he has been reduced to roaming the countryside naked, uprooting trees, killing bears in hand-

to-hand combat and even swimming to Africa for no good reason. Instead of his love for Angelica edifying him and giving him strength and purpose, as in the generally adhered to script of chivalry, it becomes an affliction, robbing him of his wits. Orlando's mania is literally the furioso in "Orlando Furioso" and Ariosto treats it as a mental illness. What's more is that this mental illness is the one thing that prevents Orlando from executing all of his other knightly obligations. It really is no stretch to claim that Ariosto paints love and the martial duties of a knight to be much more incompatible with one another than as complementary facets of the same code.

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In the end, it can be argued that fidelity to historical facts is the last thing necessary to "Orlando Furioso". The chivalric epics that Ariosto imitates pay little attention to details like facts, historical realism, the laws of physics, etc. This intentional inaccuracy then is the tradition that Ariosto actually remains true to. As mentioned above, nothing in the poem strays too far from the ridiculousness of the medieval epics it satirizes. The question then remains as to how the reader is able to discern the absurd tone of "Orlando Furioso". While it's not really possible to gauge how literally the readers of the medieval epics took those works, it's important to note that Ariosto's contemporaries presumably are able to make the distinction. What is clear is that Ariosto doesn't need to venture too far from the stereotypical epic to enter absurdity. Maybe this suggests his readers are already accustomed to rolling their eyes at the excesses of the genre and that it only needs a small nudge to be killed off completely. It's no secret that the renaissance is a cathartic time for virtually every European institution. Society finds itself suddenly (relatively, at least) out from under the yoke of a cultural hegemony which it would be no stretch to refer to as total and complete. A world so awash in new ideas and sensibilities is naturally inclined to first differentiate itself from what has recently passed. As mentioned before, "Orlando Furioso" destroys its predecessors with nothing more than their own ridiculousness and aversion to facts and historical fidelity. It brings to mind Picasso's notion that to make great art, a person needs to kill one's father.

Notes

1-1 Ha! If Mad Magazine ever did a sendup of the poem, I now know what the title would be.

I see where you're coming from in the paper, but don't agree 100%. It's a good conversation to have, though.

1-2 No, seriously - this has to be put-on. When did you start talking like this!.

1-3 An interesting proposition. I wonder if there care other possible precursors out there.

2-1 I see where you're going with this, but I wonder about the possibility that he's just having fun with the absurd possibilities of the generic conventions and expectations, without necessarily casting doubt on them. For a weird contrasting example, think of Tarantino. He's a technically gifted filmmaker who spends a lot of time with B-movie and Z-movie genres, but not with judgment towards them.

3-1 It almost seems like the Muslim characters are a bunch of different characters who happen to possess the same name. It's very odd to see mass-murdering infidels in one scene become the subject of sitcom schtick in the next.

4-1 I don't necessarily disagree that he's subjecting chivalry to stress to see where it fractures. I'm not sure it's his only motive. He seems to take heroism of a kind seriously. All that stuff about how great his patron and his patron's brother and family were is partially over-the-top flattery, but not all of it. The chivalric code was intended in part to regulate the destructive, selfish, and rapacious impulses of men. That function as still relevant, I think, especially at a time when there were still serious enemies in the world.

5-1 I'll take a knight and St. John the Divine riding to the moon in Elijah's chariot of fire any day over the more correct scientific version