

Ariosto, Cervantes, and Shakespeare in 2016

Jane E. Everson, Andrew Hiscock and Stefano Jossa on three writers receiving centenary celebrations this year

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2016 marks the fifth centenary of the first publication of the *Orlando Furioso*, the masterpiece of the 16th-century Italian poet, Ludovico Ariosto. This fascinating poem of love and adventure in 'ottava rima' (a rhyming stanza form) tells the stories of Charlemagne's paladins during the war against the Moorish assailants in France. This centenary is, regrettably, being overshadowed in the mind of the general public by two more prominent literary centenaries, those of two deaths, of the national bard William Shakespeare and the Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes, who both died in 1616.¹ Shakespeare and Cervantes will frequently be celebrated jointly this year

in the major world libraries: not so with Ariosto. William Shakespeare needs no introduction, while Miguel de Cervantes may be less well-known to some than his greatest creation Don Quixote – the renowned chivalric anti-hero who unveiled the crisis of the feudal world and gave birth to the modern novel. The works of Shakespeare and Cervantes are milestones of world literature and have certainly attracted much greater attention than Ariosto's. Nowadays perhaps, nobody could be blamed for knowing them better than Ariosto. However, if just the happy few are aware today that both Shakespeare and Cervantes had Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* in their background, in the past Ariosto was at least as prominent in the mind of the British and European public.

Ariosto's epic was translated into Spanish as early as 1549 (seventeen years after the third and final edition) by Jerónimo Jiménez de Urrea, followed by further translations, by Hernando Alcocer in 1550, and Diego Vázquez de Contrera in 1585. When it appeared in English in a version by Sir John Harington in the 1590s, the English verse



Portrait of a Poet (c. 1516), by Palma Vecchio (c. 1480–1528), The National Gallery (NG636). It is presumed that this is a painting of a poet, because the figure has a book in his hands and there are laurels (with which poets were crowned) behind him. And it has further been proposed that it is in fact a portrait of Lodovico Ariosto, the author of the poem *Orlando Furioso*.

translation of *Orlando Furioso* joined Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in a strikingly ambitious venture for English culture – to build on the medieval chivalric tradition to create something completely new. Interestingly, Spenser himself launched into his own undertaking armed with detailed knowledge of the epic which had travelled across the continent from Italy. *Orlando Furioso* was found to deal with human nature, Fate and chaos in such a modern way that a few centuries later Sir Walter Scott had no dif-

1. On 16 May 1916, Professor James Fitzmaurice-Kelly FBA delivered the first ever British Academy 'Master-Mind Lecture', and took as his subject 'Cervantes and Shakespeare' to mark the 300th anniversary of their deaths. *Proceedings of the British Academy, 1915–1916*, pp. 297–317.

faculty in acknowledging its primacy in the development of modern narrative, especially when it comes to the representation of simultaneity in literature. For generation after generation of readers, *Orlando Furioso* is the first piece of early modern literature to question the value of fiction, gender roles, sexual attraction and the complexity of the world. Cervantes and Shakespeare could not help but be attracted by its romantic vicissitudes, the ever multiplying threads to the plot, the elements of trickery, humour and the complex relations between mockery and understanding which it forged.

Shakespeare's sources are much debated among scholars, yet his knowledge, by whatever means, of a key story from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, that of Ariodante and Ginevra from cantos 4 to 6 of the poem, cannot be denied. The plot of *Much Ado about Nothing* is clearly indebted to the story of Ariodante and Ginevra. Don John arranges to make Don Pedro and Claudio believe that Hero, Claudio's betrothed, is unfaithful by making them witness John's associate (Borachio) enter her bedchamber; there, he has an assignation with Margaret (Hero's chambermaid disguised as her mistress). This encounter mirrors the similar trick played by Polinesso on Ariodante to force him to give up his aspiration to wed Ginevra. It is likely that Shakespeare's direct source for the story (perhaps through the translation into French by François de Belleforest) was another Italian Renaissance writer, Matteo Maria Bandello (1485–1561). Bandello had himself borrowed the story of Ariodante and Ginevra in story 22 of book 1 of his *Novelle* (1554), telling the vicissitudes of Sir Timbreo, his betrothed Fenicia and his rival Gironde in Messina at the time of Peter the Great's defeat of Charles of Anjou (1282). Shakespeare's historical and geographical settings, at the time of a certain Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, in Messina, confirm that the story is rooted in Bandello's tale. Nonetheless, Ariosto is undoubtedly part of this complex picture of textual influence and borrowing.

Things become more fascinating, and Shakespeare's knowledge of Ariosto even more likely, when it comes to *Othello*. The famous 'ocular proof' (III.iii.360) demanded by Othello to Iago to confirm Desdemona's infidelity seems to come from the same story of Ariodante and Ginevra, when Ariodante asks Polinesso to provide a similar proof of Ginevra's infidelity (V, 41, 7–8: 'ma ch'io tel voglia creder non far stima, / s'io non lo veggio con questi occhi prima' [But do not think I will believe your lies / Unless I see it with these very eyes]). Later on (IV.1.5) Iago's depiction of Desdemona as 'naked with her friend in bed', repeated by a disheartened Othello, echoes the same expression in similar circumstances in the Ariostan episode (V, 24, 7: 'nuda nel letto', 'naked in bed'). When Othello asked for ocular proof, indeed, he was admonishing Iago 'Villain, be sure thou prove my wife a whore' (III.iii.359), which is in line with Lucranio's conclusion that his brother Ariodante has seen with his eyes what sort of a whore Ginevra is ('poi che con gli occhi tuoi tu

vedi certa/quanto sia meretrice, e di che sorte', V 54, 6). Furthermore, Desdemona's handkerchief is described as woven by 'a Sybil [...] in her prophetic fury' (III.4.70–72) as is Ruggero and Bradamante's pavilion at the ending of *Orlando Furioso* – which was made by the ancient Greek prophetess Cassandra, who had 'prophetic fury' too ('Una donzella de la terra d'Ilia, / ch'avea il furor profetico congiunto' (XLVI, 80, 4). Since *Othello* is one of the most Italian among Shakespeare's tragedies, set as it is initially in Venice and derived from Giovan Battista Giraldo Cinzio's tale 'Un Capitano Moro' ('A Moorish Captain') in

An illustration of the Ariodante story from Canto 5 of *Orlando Furioso*, taken from the edition printed by John Baskerville in the late 18th century.



his collection of stories *Hecatommithi* (1565, from Greek ἑκατόν μύθοι, 'a hundred stories'), references to the most celebrated among Italian contemporary authors are all too possible. The abovementioned expressions might also support the argument in favour of Shakespeare's reading of Ariosto in the original Italian rather than Harington's translation. The debate continues.

Things heat up further with *King Lear*, where, it has been suggested, another reminiscence of the story of Ariodante and Ginevra can be found. The duels that conclude Ariosto's episode – first between the two brothers Ariodante and Lurcanio, and then between the avenger Rinaldo and the evil Polinesso – could be seen to merge in the duel between the brothers Edgar and Edmund (V.iii), the former appearing at 'the third sound' (133) as 'an unknown opposite' (179) (as Polinesso appeared 'sconosciuto [...] al terzo suono', VI 77, 3 and 88, 3). Scholars used to connect Shakespeare and Ariosto also for the writing of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the subplot of which is apparently derived from Ariosto's comedy *I Suppositi*, either in the original Italian or in George Gascoigne's translation. Whether Shakespeare knew Italian is still debated among scholars, yet his debt to Ariosto is undeniable and testifies to the prestige of the Italian poet in Elizabethan England.

Cervantes's primacy in penning the first example of the modern novel, in turn, is widely acknowledged and openly acclaimed. However, most of the reasons for this accolade can be found in *Orlando Furioso* too. Irony, the combination of various threads to the plot, the awareness of the fictional character of the work of literature, the play with the alleged sources, the appearance of the author in the text and self-reflexivity are characteristics that *Don Quixote* shares with *Orlando Furioso*. Cervantes seems to acknowledge this when he makes the curate and the barber burn all Don Quixote's chivalric romances except, among a very few, *Orlando Furioso* – provided it is read in the original Italian rather than the Spanish translation (book I, chapter 6). Cervantes's novel, very much like Ariosto's epic poem, starts with medieval romances, but goes on to convert them into something innovative. There are at least twenty references to *Orlando Furioso* throughout *Don Quixote*, to the point that homage prevails over parody. Thus, *Orlando Furioso* can be rightly seen as the seminal text upon which Cervantes drew to question cultural stereotypes at the time. Like Ariosto before him, and perhaps inspired by Ariosto himself, Cervantes shows the gap between life as it is lived and life as it is represented in works of imagination.

Continuity rather than discontinuity between Ariosto, Cervantes and Shakespeare was clearly acknowledged by the German thinker and literary critic Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) at the dawn of the 19th century, when he defined romantic modernity as the outcome of playful wit

and arabesque as opposed to classical harmony and equilibrium. We find the three major writers of early modern Europe intimately linked when Schlegel suggests 'the divine wit, the imagination, of an Ariosto, a Cervantes, a Shakespeare' as the main source of modern literature (*Letter about the Novel*, 1799). Once notable among the classics of an aristocratic education in Britain, *Orlando Furioso* is now rather forgotten by the general public and his epic can seem unattractive if described solely by its plot summary. Nevertheless, put to the test, Ariosto's poem proves much more in line with Cervantes and Shakespeare's modernity than expected: a notion of modernity based on humour rather than just progress, evolution, revolution, freedom, democracy, science and technology would help us understand that modern literature is more concerned with the joining and separating of the ideal and the real than with the ideological celebration of set values.

Time has split the trio. Ariosto is now certainly less famous than Shakespeare and Cervantes worldwide, with the possible, yet not certain, exception of Italy. However, his name would perfectly fit to complete the title of the recently published and already very popular book *Lunatics, Lovers and Poets: Twelve Stories after Shakespeare and Cervantes* (with an introduction by Salman Rushdie): after all, wasn't he the one who first reinvented the journey to the Moon, represented the widest variety of love cases, and questioned the truthfulness of poetry in early modern Europe? Why should we not urge that Ariosto deserves to be as much celebrated as Shakespeare and Cervantes? Ariosto's poem has reached its fifth centenary, while Shakespeare and Cervantes have only reached the fourth in both cases. Shouldn't numbers have the acknowledgement they deserve? So 2016 is proving a most animated year for remembering – for remembering key anniversaries of the births of monarchs and celebrated writers such as Charlotte Brontë, the publication of seminal works like Thomas More's *Utopia*, for commemorating those who lost their lives in Flanders fields, and for remembering the passing of literary giants in the English and Spanish literary traditions. It seems now more than ever we must make a little more room in our commemorations for Ludovico Ariosto and *Orlando Furioso* which transformed epic writing and ideas of heroism across Europe for centuries to come. ■

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