

# In the first frenzy

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Ludovico Ariosto

ORLANDO FURIOSO SECONDO LA  
PRINCEPS DEL 1516

Edited with an introduction by Marco Dorigatti,  
with Gerarda Stimata  
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When Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* was first published in 1516, it was, so E. M. W. Tillyard claimed, "an event of capital importance in the history of every kind of narrative verse in western Europe". Tillyard's assertion, however, overlooks the fact that *Orlando Furioso* appeared in three different versions during Ariosto's lifetime, and assumes that the poem made an immediate impact on its first publication. As this new edition makes clear, that is a questionable assumption.

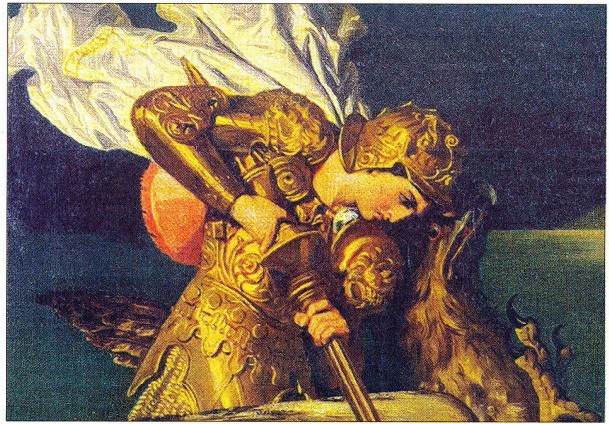
*Orlando Furioso secondo la princeps del 1516* is a strikingly novel, original undertaking. As its title indicates, this is the text of Ariosto's first version, that Marco Dorigatti urges us to consider as Ariosto's first poem, an independent composition to be read and judged on its own terms. It is not known precisely when he began to compose his long narrative poem. Certainly, by 1507, he had made good progress with it when he went to Mantua to read it to Isabella d'Este as she recovered from the birth of her son. The poem was completed by 1515 and was printed in Ferrara, handsomely supported financially by Ariosto's patron, Cardinal Ippolito d'Este. This is the version which Dorigatti has put back into circulation, after centuries of neglect in favour of the final, 1532, version.

What occasioned this neglect? Chronologically speaking, the primary responsibility lies with Ariosto himself. He was an inveterate tinker of his own compositions. He regularly amended his poem to take account of the comments of fellow poets and courtiers on matters of both style and content, and was present, day by day, at the printer's, correcting his poem as it went through the press. After it was printed, Ariosto seems to have been disappointed with the poem's reception by his patron, who is said to have asked him where he found such nonsense – a story which Ariosto later exaggerated, in his first satire, to claim that Ippolito told him to use it as lavatory paper. The reception of the first *Furioso* among the wider reading public was also limited. By comparison with the numerous repeated printings of other chivalric narrative poems between 1516 and the 1530s, printings of *Orlando Furioso* are surprisingly few, in particular in the early years. Again Ariosto himself is in part to blame. In an age in which authors enjoyed no copyright protection, he was more successful than many in controlling the printing of his text and, dissatisfied with aspects of his poem, was reluctant to sanction further editions of it. In 1521, he produced the second version of the poem, with linguistic and stylistic revisions, but the same content and number of cantos (forty). Yet still he remained dissatisfied, and continued to tinker, producing further cantos for insertion in the poem, and taking to heart the increasingly canonical views of Pietro Bembo in matters of language and style. The result was the publication, in the last year of the poet's life, 1532, of the third and final version of *Orlando Furioso*, in forty-six cantos, which immediately imposed itself on the market and has remained the version ever since read.

So why should we return to reading the

first version of Ariosto's poem, if he himself rejected it? Dorigatti makes the case for three important reasons: linguistic, literary and bibliographic. The 1532 edition is written in a form of Italian strongly influenced by the linguistic theories of Bembo, and the increasingly prevalent opinion that written Italian should be based on a literary form of Tuscan. Such a language was by no means Ariosto's natural form of expression. The first, 1516 version represents, in Dorigatti's view, Ariosto's language before the influence of Bembo's ideas. From this edition of the poem, he argues, we can gain not only a more accurate picture of Ariosto's "native tongue" but also of "la lingua cortegiana" and of the phonetics, morphology and syntax of north-eastern varieties of Italian at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

From the literary point of view, the availability of the 1516 edition is likely to prove equally valuable. Dorigatti stresses in his 180-page introduction that all modern critics and readers suffer from a kind of Darwinian approach to literary fame and the literary canon, by which later versions must of course be better than earlier ones. But, as Dorigatti neatly puts it, literary composition is not subject to evolutionary theories; first thoughts may well be preferable to later revisions. Literary criticism has almost always concurred with the view that Torquato Tasso's earlier *Gerusalemme Liberata* is a better poem than his later, revised *Gerusalemme Conquistata*, but the lack of a current and reliable edition



"Ruggiero rescuing Angelica" (1819) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres

of the 1516 *Furioso* has prevented that theory being tested on Ariosto's poems. Even more cogently, the 1516 edition links Ariosto much more closely and intimately to his fellow poets in the genre of the chivalric epic in the critical years of the 1490s and the first decade of the sixteenth century. Here truly, in this first version of the poem, we come close to a poet writing against a background of perpetual warfare, shifting political alliances and economic catastrophe, and seeking to address the crisis provoked in the genre by the conflict between fictional French heroes and the brutal realities of the French invasions.

In establishing the text of the 1516 edition, Dorigatti has drawn on the techniques of textual bibliography, pioneered for Italian literary texts of this period by Conon Fahy. Dorigatti has followed Fahy's methodology closely, collating, by the use of transparent sheets, the twelve surviving copies of the first

edition, noting variants both typographical and linguistic, and establishing the total number of states of the edition. His editorial approach is to put before the reader the text as nearly as possible in the form in which it left Ariosto's hand and was approved by him in the course of printing. He has consequently adopted an "original spelling" approach, arguing that variable usage of, for example, single and double consonants, is an important reflection of Italian spelling at the time, and that variant spellings are almost certainly present with Ariosto's approval, given his constant presence during the printing process. This bibliographical approach enhances the linguistic aims of the edition and, though possibly controversial from the point of view of the reader, is nonetheless based in sound arguments supported by Ariosto's known habits.

An additional section of Dorigatti's introduction will be of particular interest to historians of the book. He has painstakingly traced the history and provenance of the individual surviving copies, an exercise in which he has been impressively successful. Here students of English culture should find much to interest them. For the 1516 poem seems also to have been well known and sought after by the English elite of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, judging by the number of copies once held in libraries in England. The presence of copies of the 1516 version alongside those of the 1532 edition should prompt reflections on which version of the poem was better known and drawn upon by English writers.

As a physical object this is a splendid book. Though none of the copies has been printed on vellum (as some of Ariosto's original presentation copies were) nor beautifully illuminated (like the copy the poet presented to Francis I of France), this is a volume of great beauty; printed on superb paper, with pages gilded, and still, as is thankfully often the case with Italian printed books, properly stitched and bound. It is also a work of the most impressive scholarship.

## Patent Pending

The slightest movement of the body, whether of genuine revival or only a false alarm caused by pockets of air trapped in the abdomen, triggers a highly sensitive release mechanism housed in a spring-loaded ball positioned over the heart.

If this ball is disturbed by so much as a twitching nerve-end, a message is transmitted to a box on the surface, which immediately flies open, admitting air to the coffin. A flag rises in warning, a bell rings for half an hour, a lamp burns after sunset.

HUGO WILLIAMS