

ORLANDO FURIOSO, ROBERT GREENE'S ROMANTIC COMEDY

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The puzzling and unsolved textual problems due largely to the substantial discrepancies between the two quartos (*A*, 1594 and *B*, 1599) and the Alleyn Manuscript seem to have prevented most scholars from seriously discussing Greene's *Orlando Furioso* as literature. Although the play obviously does not command our respect as much as Shakespeare's romantic comedies such as *The merchant of Venice*, *As you like it* and *Much ado about nothing* certainly do, perhaps a more attentive literary examination of the play is now in order.

Greene's play dramatizes the romantic love story found in Lodovico Ariosto's epic, *Orlando Furioso*; in the play Orlando goes insane through jealousy of his supposedly successful rival Medor and through his fury at Angelica who, he thinks, has betrayed him. At the palace of Marsillus, the emperor of Africa, several suitors have previously attempted to win Angelica's hand. The scene reminds one of the three-casket scene in *The merchant of Venice*, although the latter is far more suspenseful and more skillfully structured than Greene's comedy. Orlando, drawn away from Charlemagne's court by the "fame of fair Angelica", is her choice, which her father, Marsillus, firmly endorses. Yet, her choice and her father's endorsement invite the fury of her unsuccessful suitors, some of whom then declare a war against Marsillus. In the courtly love tradition this reaction is more or less expected, and it functions as the exciting force in the plot.

Sacripant, a poorly drawn Machiavellian character, on the other hand, attempts to fulfill his Tamburlaine-like ambition by marrying Angelica in spite of her professed love for Orlando. "Sweet are the thoughts that smother from conceit" (Hayashi 1973 : 25), says Sacripant; similarly his chair is "a throne of majesty", and his thoughts are "drawn on a diadem". Thus he aspires to become "Coequall with the gods" (1973 : 26). Flatly rejected by Angelica, however, Sacripant soon tricks Orlando into believing Angelica's seeming love affair with Medor and causing Orlando's subsequent madness. Yet, in the play Sacripant, unsuccessful in winning his lady and keeping his throne, is eventually

destroyed by a "madman". If this play is a perversion of the Tamburlaine motif, it may also be a burlesque on the Senecan tragedy, a form popular in Greene's time (Dickinson 1909: 39).

Like Shakespeare in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and like Kyd in *The Spanish tragedy*, Greene uses insanity as an important theme, but he fails to achieve the tragic effects of Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd, whose Hieronimo in *The Spanish tragedy* Greene is sometimes believed to be parodying. At any rate, Greene's use of Orlando's madness is conventional; yet he fails to make his madman more than a source of entertainment. In the first place Orlando's violence is so remarkable that he represents a slapstick element of the play. Unlike Shakespeare and Kyd, however, Greene achieves a humor of situation and manners without tragic impact; he tears a shepherd limb from limb offstage, for example, and reappears with a leg upon his shoulder, thinking that it is Hercules' club and that he himself is Hercules. In this situation, Greene's mock-heroic tone stands out when the scene is supposed to be serious and pathetic as a result of Orlando's sudden madness. Thus his insanity is not at all tragic, but absurd, not pathetic but comical and burlesque.

Secondly, Orlando's madness takes a more rhetorical turn. His hyperbolic ranting is of a classical and Senecan vein, especially in Act II, Scene 1. The hero feels "the flames of Aetna" (Hayashi 1973: 36) rise in his heart; he calls Medor's servant, who has been forced to stay at his side, "a messenger of Ate". He bids him speak lest he should send the captive to "Charon's charge" (1973: 37). While Sacripant's Man, disguised as a shepherd, tells Orlando about Angelica's love affair with Medor, the hero invokes the Arcadian nymphs and the nieces of Titan. His verbal blast reaches its climax in the Latin quotation from Mantuan's *Eclogues*, IV, 110 - 111: "*Foemineum servile genus, crudele, superbum*" ("To be born feminine is to be born a slave, inhuman, haughty") (Soellner 1958: 309 - 334).

Greene seems to follow another Elizabethan dramatic convention, that a good woman is often mistaken for a disloyal bitch; thus he stresses the universal theme of appearance vs. reality. To enforce this theme, Greene depends more on situation than on characterization, since most of his characters are mere stereo-types, not complex individuals; much of their action deriving from an improbable situation in which love is subjected to severe and undeserving strain. Incredible as it is, Angelica's own father most willingly and most cruelly banishes her from his empire like Lear and helps the Twelve Peers of France find her for execution. He may represent "justice", but there is neither mercy nor the "milk of human kindness" in him. This kind of improbable element in the play effectively fortifies Greene's "appearance vs. reality theme", since it dramatizes the juxtaposed sense of value, as in *Much ado about nothing* and *Measure for measure*.

Green's classical allusions also seem to be so heavily interwoven into the

text that they tend to prevent smooth flow, keen insight, emotional impact, and popular appeal. Perhaps Greene intended to ridicule Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* through Sacripant, a villainous antagonist and a poorly drawn "pseudo-Tamburlaine". It is true that the villain has grand and wild dreams of love, power, and conquest, but he comes repentant to a premature ending, slain by Orlando in the single combat (Jordan 1965: 179, 193 - 195; Woodbury 1916: 385 - 194; Parrott and Ball 1958: 71).

M. C. Bradbrook, who made an original observation on the structure of Greene's *Orlando Furioso*, points out several unique features of this romantic comedy. First of all, *Orlando Furioso* has the unity of an old wife's tale. Here Orlando is a "wandering knight", one of the Twelve Peers of Charlemagne who appears in the final scene: when the disguised Orlando fights with three of them, he is recognized as the man they have been seeking, the search for a lost comrade unifying the drama throughout. Furthermore, in the beginning of the play, four monarchs appear and woo Angelica in pompous, Tamburlaine-like terms, in such case concluding with the same couplets:

But leaving these such glories as they be,

I love my lord, let that suffice for me (II. 57 - 58).

Their wooing, Angelica's choice of Orlando, and the rejected suitors' fury and subsequent war against Marsillus similarly unify in a peace-chaos-war-peace cycle.

Secondly, the love-hate theme also unifies the play. Orlando's madness is caused by the wicked Sacripant, who plots to destroy the union between Orlando and Angelica by hanging love poems under the trees of the grove as Orlando does in *As you like it*, and by this suggesting Angelica's apparently secret love affair with Medor. Yet, in the end it is Orlando, who once sought to kill Angelica, who rescues her when she is about to be executed at the demand of the Peers of France. Thus the love-hate-restored love cycle supports the structure, while echoing the peace-chaos-peace pattern of the work; in short, personal fate is microcosmic of the larger fortune and misfortune.

Thirdly, Melissa, a Good Fairy under the disguise of a poor old enchantress, charms Orlando to sleep with her wand and proceeds to recite her invocation in Latin to restore his sanity. Furthermore, Orlando himself recites Italian when he is insane; impossible as it seems, he beats the clowns and later leads an army of clowns equipped with spits and pans to victory. At the climax he re-enters, dressed as a "poet" and preparing to storm both heaven and hell, while comparing himself to Hercules and Orpheus. This attempt to unify old fairy tales with an Italian plot, with scraps of Latin and Italian learning, and borrowings from the popular Ariosto, is glued together by such stage devices as the procession of kings by Orlando's rivals at the beginning, and by the combat of the Twelve Peers at the end. The play's natural harmony lies in its fairy-tale fantasy, an element which binds the play together in spite

of such obvious shortcomings as an improbable situation, unmotivated action and insufficiently developed characters, and a heavy and undiscerning use of classical allusions (Bradbrook 1955: 77 - 78).

To sum up, Greene's *Orlando Furioso* relies heavily on the following dramatic devices: (1) an abundant and sustained use of accident, coincidence, and chance, as Orlando's timely recovering and saving of Angelica; (2) a frequent but not fully successful use of disguise on the part of several characters, including Orlando (as "a mercenary soldier"), Angelica (as "a poor woman"), Marsillus and Mandrecart (as "palmer"), and Sacripant's Man (as a "shepherd"); (3) a considerable use of magic and the supernatural in the fabrication of a romantic make-believe world as, for instance, in the good enchantress Melissa's representation of the fairy-tale element by suddenly restoring the hero to sanity and by revealing the truth about Sacripant, the author of Orlando's misfortune and the banishment of Angelica; and, finally, by a use of incredible, unaccountable, motiveless action, as in Marsillus' unhesitant endorsement of the Twelve Peers' intention to persecute his own daughter.

First, it is definitely Greene's weakness and/or immaturity as an artist that he fails to create the illusion of plausibility in the motivation of such characters as Orlando, Marsillus, Mandrecart, Sacripant, and Melissa. Yet his work, following the romantic tradition, is full of tenderness, goodness, mercy, and justice; it offers a glimpse of wickedness that triumphs temporarily. Second, there are no really wicked characters, such as Iago, Richard III, or Edmund. Third, the virtuous and innocent, who function temporarily as misunderstood victims of circumstances, are ultimately rewarded. Fourth, the ending is typified by forgiveness, reconciliation, and love, a dramatic convention which comes from the Greek romances and which Shakespeare was to follow more successfully in his own romantic comedies (Pettett 1949: 54 - 66).

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