

Approaches to the Romance Epic

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The romance or chivalric epic constituted the most popular form of literature in Italy at all levels of society, certainly from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Indeed as Dante's two references to Roland in the *Divine Comedy* (*Inf.* XXXI. 16–18; *Para.* XVIII 43–8) reveal, Roland and his companions were figures celebrated and admired even at the highest levels of culture and the story of his tragic death appealed even to the sophisticated. The legendary paladins Roland and William of Orange are judged worthy to take their place in the Heaven of Mars as warriors for the faith, alongside the historical Godfrey of Bouillon and Charlemagne himself. The powerful if ambiguous appeal of the Arthurian tales is also acknowledged in the story of Paolo and Francesca, in *Inferno* V. That tales of this kind, originating in the world of feudalism, chivalry, and the crusading ideal, should continue to appeal strongly in Italy even at the highest levels of society throughout the period associated with Humanism and the classical revival in culture, the Renaissance, constitutes a phenomenon unmatched in the countries of origin of the matter of France and of Britain.

At the heart of the genre of the romance epic in Italy, therefore, as it developed from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, lies a paradox, a paradox which is intellectually very challenging and stimulating, but which normally passes unobserved—namely that precisely the period which saw the birth, development, and flowering of humanist ideas and of literature based on those ideas is the very same period in which the 'medieval' genre of the romance epic saw its major flowering in Italy, culminating in the work of Ariosto. How did these two phenomena coexist? What were the 'contatti e interferenze'—to

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use a phrase favoured by Italian critics—between the dominant cultural movement and what, from the perspective of the readership, was and continued to be throughout the period the dominant form of literature? Histories of literature tend to discuss in parallel, or even in quite distinct chapters, the development of the Italian romance epic (and the associated forms of prose narratives on the same themes) on the one hand, and the revival of classical literature and the development of Humanism as a cultural phenomenon on the other, but they rarely if ever deal with the two together in the same discussion, or consider how the two types of literature and cultural artefact coexisted.¹ Prima facie the enthusiasm for classical forms and models, in literature as in art, would seem antithetical, even hostile, to the continuation of the pre-existing romance epic, whose origins were so clearly bound up with the immediately preceding centuries and the culture defined by humanists as non-classical. And yet in practice this cultural opposition was clearly a positive force. In Italy, unlike in France, its country of origin, the romance epic not only survived but flourished in this environment. The analysis of this paradox therefore is vitally important for an understanding of the success of the genre in Italy, the aims of writers in the genre, and their attitudes towards their work. It is also fundamental for an understanding of their public and that public's reactions, since contact with Humanism and contact with the romance poem coexisted not only in poets but equally, perhaps often more so, in their audience and in particular in their patrons and paymasters. Indeed, in order to address the paradox, it is essential to consider aspects of the social and cultural context alongside experiments in the genre; to consider, together with the aims of writers and their attitudes to the material, the understanding of the same material by their

¹ See e.g. *La letteratura italiana: Storia e Testi* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), vol. ii, pts. 1 and 2, *Il Trecento*, sects. 8–12, 'L'incremento degli studi classici', but for poetry see sects. 47–50, 'Diffusione e persistenza della cultura poetica toscana', and sects. 57–61, 'I poeti delle corti settentrionali'; vol. iii, *Il Quattrocento*, sects. 1–6, 'I principati e l'Umanesimo' and 7–20, 'La cultura umanistica e i suoi centri', but sects. 25–32, 'La letteratura volgare in Toscana', 45–62, 'Pulci' and 76–85, 'Boiardo'; see also S. Battaglia, *La letteratura italiana*, vol. i, *Medioevo e Umanesimo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), ch. 18, 'L'Umanesimo', ch. 19, 'Gli Umanisti', but ch. 23, 'La letteratura cavalleresca'; and V. Rossi, *Il Quattrocento, Storia letteraria d'Italia* (Milan: Vallardi, n.d.), ch. 1, 'Gli Umanisti', but ch. 8, 'La letteratura cavalleresca'.

public, the preferences and interests of readers and audiences at various times through the two centuries of the survey period. A literary genre flourishes especially when it is sufficiently supported and promoted by the surrounding context and exists in symbiosis with that reception climate. The aim of this study is to confront the paradox just defined and, through an analysis of certain features of the selected texts and cultural context, to suggest some possible answers to the questions posed above: how did the romance epic and classical Humanism coexist, what did the romance epic absorb from the classical revival, and how did such classical influences manifest themselves, how can they be discerned, how did they strike contemporaries?

This paradox was first observed by Ruggieri in the 1960s.² In attempting to analyse the phenomenon of the coexistence of the romance epic and of the classical revival, he defined the concept of 'umanesimo cavalleresco' and suggested that chivalry could be presented in the romance epic as a type or interpretation of Humanism, as an alternative or parallel form to 'umanesimo classico'. In his theoretically based study he sought to elaborate the concept of the two Humanisms, defining both as equally 'human' because both are centred on the study of mankind, preoccupied with an analysis of man's exploits, deeds, nature, and aspirations, his dignity and virtues, and both seek to recover and revive the values and ideals of a 'lost' culture from a 'golden age'. In this essay Ruggieri does not proceed from theory to a full-scale textual analysis either of chivalric poems or of humanist writings, though subsequent chapters do address aspects of the work of Boccaccio, Pulci, and, interestingly, Poliziano.³ But the study of the approaches of individual poets, which is central to an examination of the paradox, needs to be carried much further and indeed Ruggieri's work on the individual poems does not consistently set them in their humanist context any more than do the histories of literature.⁴ It is the

² R. M. Ruggieri, *L'umanesimo cavalleresco italiano*, rev. edn. (Naples: Fratelli Conte, 1977), ch. 1, pp. 1-47, 'Umanesimo classico e umanesimo cavalleresco'. Ruggieri's first chapter is still worthy of serious attention and I am happy to acknowledge my debt to it, though I do not share his views on all points.

³ See *ibid.*, ch. 5, pp. 100-20, and ch. 6, pp. 121-48, on Boccaccio; ch. 7, pp. 149-78, on Poliziano and chs. 9 and 10, pp. 217-68, on Pulci.

⁴ Hence in particular the study below, Ch. 7, of the figure of the hero in these poems.

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intention of this book to provide the essential practical corollary to Ruggieri's suggestions, both through setting the texts closely in their humanist context and, in the third section, providing a detailed, textually based study of certain major aspects of especial relevance to the argument. The aim is to offer, for the major figures of the genre in the period to which Ruggieri refers, the detailed analysis, the flesh or clothing (to use Giraldi's metaphors)⁵ for the skeleton which he outlined and which has hitherto been lacking. Ruggieri's study had the merit of trying to analyse how 'il mondo cavalleresco' saw itself 'nell'immagine che ha il colore e il calore del proprio tempo' (p. xx), and hence of firmly placing the emphasis on the need to see texts and writers in their contemporary cultural context in its fullest sense, but his assertion of two Humanisms existing in parallel rather than of a syncretist culture interfused on each side with elements of the other needs to be challenged.⁶ Indeed rather than defining yet another variety of Humanism, in the following study the term will be used to refer to what Ruggieri calls 'umanesimo classico' but which is quite simply the core of Humanism, namely 'lo studio, il culto, l'imitazione delle *humanae litterae*' (p. 8).

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In addition to the straightforward chronological surveys of the genre, covering major and minor exponents, recent studies of the romance epic fall principally into one of two main categories: source studies of a particular poem, or more often of a particular episode of a poem, which form part of the wider study of that poem and its author; and studies of a poem from the perspective of Humanism broadly defined. Both of these approaches pay attention to the surrounding context to some extent, but both have some inherent defects, and neither approach has successfully addressed the paradox of the coexistence of the romance epic genre in a cultural context which

⁵ See below, Ch. 8.

⁶ The point is aptly made by G. Folena in his essay, 'La cultura volgare e l'Umanesimo cavalleresco nel Veneto', in V. Branca (ed.), *Umanesimo europeo e Umanesimo veneto* (Florence: Sansoni, 1963), 141-58.

would appear to be inimical to it. Nevertheless, both approaches contribute to illuminating the interrelationship of text and context in the genre.⁷

Modern studies of sources for romance epic all look back to the most famous and comprehensive of them all, Pio Rajna's *Fonti dell' 'Orlando Furioso'*.⁸ Through its exhaustive analysis of the topoi, motifs, and episodes which underlie Ariosto's narrative, Rajna's work constitutes virtually a history of romance and epic on its own, a compendium of narratives concerning Charlemagne and Arthur, which is invaluable. Nevertheless Rajna's approach begs a fundamental question, which critics were quick to raise (though not to answer), namely could Ariosto have known all these texts, and more importantly did he in fact know them and use them? These questions point up another difficulty in Rajna's approach, namely the assumption that poets operate in the same way as critics and scholars, consciously building a poem made up of information from here, evidence from there. Ariosto does in some ways give his readers and critics this impression, with his references to weaving together disparate strands and his echoes or evocations from various literary traditions, but the modern critic, unlike Rajna, must be on his or her guard against interpreting these as anything other than an authorial pose.

This approach to the study of the romance epic, seeing the genre through the prism of a particular example, has nonetheless, and despite its observed inadequacies, become very attractive again in recent years, as a result of the possibilities offered by computer technology and especially concordance programs.⁹

⁷ See esp. the studies of Boiardo, by F. Battera, 'Per una lettura di *Orlando Innamorato* I xx-xxii', *SPCT* 34 (1987), 85-103; and G. Ponte, 'Le Fontane di Ardena nell'*Orlando Innamorato*', *GSLI* 129 (1952), 382-92; both consider a wide range of sources, including the classical, and though limited to short parts of the poem act as useful correctives to some more recent studies on Boiardo, for which see below.

⁸ P. Rajna, *Le fonti dell' 'Orlando Furioso'* (Florence: Sansoni, 1900). For a useful survey of criticism of the romance epic since the end of the last century, see D. Looney, *Compromising the Classics: Romance Epic Narrative in the Italian Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996), 31-46.

⁹ This was one of the dominant notes of the 1994 Boiardo conference, see *Il Boiardo e il mondo estense nel Quattrocento*, G. Anceschi and T. Matarrese (eds.), *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Scandiano-Modena-Reggio Emilia-Ferrara*, 13-17 Sept. 1994, 2 vols. (Padua: Antenore, 1998).

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It has become apparently much easier than in Rajna's day to pick out sources for particular incidents, allusions, echoes, and figures of speech. The result is the presumption of a much richer intertextuality in the case both of individual poems and of the genre as a whole. Again, as with Rajna's work, valuable insights are thrown up, but the approach still has significant flaws. In particular it ignores the fact that the romance and the epic, both as distinct and as fused genres, were from the outset very syncretist and given to absorbing material, at the level of both content and language, from previous texts, both written and oral, identifiable and not identifiable. As a result, it can be virtually impossible to decide whether a particular source has been absorbed directly from the original or via one or more intermediary texts.¹⁰ This is particularly true for the study of classical sources in the romance epic, where the number of intermediary stages is much larger and where one cannot predict that a cultivated poet has necessarily taken his classical episode directly from an ancient text and not from a medieval version of the same. The aim of these studies of classical sources is, however, important and has links to the one defined above, since the incorporation of classical sources in a romance epic is usually seen as enhancing the epic status of the work and making it a worthy product of a humanist writer or a humanist environment.

A different limitation of source studies of the romance epic is discernible in discussions of Pulci and the *Morgante*. Here where the chief source is readily identifiable and accepted, the emphasis tends to fall, in modern criticism, on internal literary aspects, on the extent to which Pulci has modified his original, the success of such modifications, the literary merits and reasons for them; in short the tendency is for the critic to concentrate on the text to the exclusion of the context or environment.¹¹ Those studies which set Pulci in his Florentine and

¹⁰ Ruggieri's comment, *L'umanesimo cavalleresco*, 19, is valuable in this context, where he stresses that in reinterpreting texts, poets of chivalric epic most often turned to 'gli anelli più prossimi della continuità storica' and not necessarily to the earliest source.

¹¹ See M. Davie, *Half-Serious Rhymes: The Narrative Poetry of Luigi Pulci* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998); R. Cesarani, 'L'Allegra fantasia di Luigi Pulci e il Rifacimento dell'*Orlando*', *GSLI* 135 (1958), 171-214; A. Gareffi, *L'ombra*

especially Medicean context tend to say little about the relationship of the *Morgante* to this, beyond alluding to the original commission from Lucrezia Tornabuoni.¹²

Studies of the impact of humanist ideas on the romance epic genre do not, of course, need to be confined to the study of one poem or poet, though this has in fact been the case. The majority of such studies have concentrated on Ariosto and have given prominence in particular to humanist theories of education, and to the moral and didactic purposes of literature.¹³ Such an approach can be thought-provoking, but often raises questions which are frequently not alluded to or addressed by critics taking this line of analysis. One enters here too on the tricky terrain of trying to establish the author's real aims and intentions in the work, a notoriously difficult task as regards Ariosto, and virtually impossible in the case of poets who say little or nothing about themselves and their aims either in the work or outside it. But there are also questions to be addressed about the demand for moral or educative tracts couched in poetic form, about the readership and the cultural context in general. It is true that the humanists of the early fifteenth century often stressed the moral value of studying poetry, but this is rather different from suggesting that a poem should itself convey precisely this message. How necessary or desirable was it, at any

dell'eroe: 'Il Morgante', (Urbino: Ed. Quattroventi, 1986); C. Jordan, 'The Narrative Form of Pulci's *Morgante*', *Studies in Philology*, 83/3 (1986), 303-29; ead., *Pulci's 'Morgante': poetry and history in fifteenth-century Florence* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986); G. Mariani, '*Il Morgante*' e i *cantari trecenteschi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1953) and esp. the controversial work of P. Orvieto, 'Sul rapporto *Morgante-Orlando laurenziano*', in K. W. Hempfer (ed.), *Ritterepik der Renaissance* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989), 145-53; see also E. Vincenti, 'I protagonisti del Pulci', *Filologia e critica*, 15 (1990), 521-32.

¹² See C. Carnasecchi, 'Per la biografia di Luigi Pulci', *Archivio Storico italiano*, 17 (1896), 371-9; E. Lebano, 'Luigi Pulci and Late Fifteenth-Century Humanism in Florence', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 27/4 (1974), 489-98; S. Nigro, *Pulci e la cultura medicea* (Bari: Laterza, 1972). Honourable exceptions to this separation of the *Morgante* from humanist culture are R. Bessi, 'Pulci, Lucano e i *Fatti di Cesare*', *Interpres*, 4 (1981-2), 58-72, and S. Carrai, '*Morgante* e il mito di Ercole', in S. Carrai, *Le Muse dei Pulci. Studi su Luca e Luigi Pulci* (Naples: Guida, 1985), 95-112, both on Pulci's incorporation of classical elements into his characterization.

¹³ See esp. A. Russell Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony: Crisis and Evasion in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987); C. Carroll, *The 'Orlando Furioso': A Stoic Comedy*, Medieval and Renaissance texts and studies (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona State University, 1997). From a different basis, G. Savarese, '*Il Furioso*' e la cultura del Rinascimento (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984).

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one period in the fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries, to couch moral lessons or arguments about, for example, education within the format of the long narrative poem? How would such supposedly didactic works have competed with the numerous treatises on the same topics? Given the proliferation of humanist dialogues and treatises, was there a place in the market for the transmission of serious moral messages through the narrative poem?¹⁴

The association of the narrative poem with serious intellectual debates is linked, again, to the desire to raise the romance epic to the level of truly classical epic, to make it serious literature. Certainly a poet considering the classical model of Virgil could not have escaped the sense of moral purpose which the Roman poet conveys and might have wished to adopt it for his own times, in his own work. But other classical models, such as Statius, are much less overtly moral in outlook; in the period before Ariosto, these other epic models were at least as prominent, if not more so in some cases. Similarly, in assessing the moral or didactic content of the romance epic, seen as the indicator of a humanist dimension, it is necessary to consider who the expected readers are and what such readers wanted, to consider the demands of the market. This is rarely done, since these moral-humanist studies also tend, like the source studies, to concentrate on a particular poem to the exclusion of the most fundamental part of its context—the readers. As will be indicated, there is ample evidence on the part of readers of an interest in fiction, reading for pleasure, as Boiardo recognizes when

¹⁴ Serious, or at least non-fictional works were produced in *ottava rima*, including the substantial number of 'poemi bellici', accounts of contemporary battles for which see M. Beer and C. Ivaldi, 'Poemetti bellici del Rinascimento italiano: trecento testimoni per una ricerca', *Schifanoia* 1 (1986), 91–9, though most of these date from the last decade of the 15th cent. at the earliest; see also poems in *ottava rima* on the new geographical discoveries such as Matteo di Raimondo Fortini, *Libro dell'Universo*, a fragment of which (three cantos) was edited by L. Formisano in his 'Vespucci in ottava rima', *Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, 4 (1986), 333–89; Matteo's descriptions show a close use of Vespucci's letters, almost a verse paraphrase, in a process similar to versifications of the matter of Rome on the basis of Latin prose accounts, or later to joust poems based on eyewitness prose accounts. There is also a *cantare* by Giuliano Dati entitled: *Storia della inventione delle nuove isole di Channaria indiane tracta da una pistola di Christofano Cholombo*, dating to c.1493, which demonstrates again how momentous contemporary events were rapidly converted into poems.

addressing his audience. The weakness of the moral-didactic approach to the romance epic is that it tends to restrict the readership to a narrow princely elite, linking the didactic and dynastic elements, and to ignore all other levels of readership. Indeed there is very little overt evidence even among the elite of an interest in didactic elements in romance epic.¹⁵ Thus as the study of readership underlines, the assessment of the incorporation of humanist ideas and elements into the romance epic (or indeed any pre-existing genre) has to take account not only of the internal evidence of the texts, but also of the external cultural context, the surrounding environment. It is for this reason that the types of readers, their reading habits and expectations, their sensitivity to, for example, classical precedents or moral messages, has to be considered. It is very easy from the perspective of a modern scholar of Humanism to see in the romance epics elements of humanist thought, since that entire corpus is available to him or her. But the reactions of contemporary readers, the extent to which they found the same elements present in the text, can only be judged from contemporary records, from the study of the readers and their demands and interests.

The re-evaluation of the romance epic in terms which see it as having a strong moral and didactic element is often linked to other modern interpretations which advance the view that the major romance epics, of Boiardo and Ariosto, are amenable to allegorical interpretation. Such an approach often borrows from studies on the epic in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, and thus is not always sufficiently sensitive to differences between the cultural contexts of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Italian city-states on the one hand and of post-Reformation England with its political tensions and undercurrents on the other. The debt of Spenser and Milton to Ariosto and Boiardo is undeniable, but one should not thereby expect to find allegory in the earlier poems. The case for an allegorical reading has to be made on the basis of elements in the surrounding context, in particular the political, intellectual, and religious

¹⁵ As Ariosto has cause to complain in *Satira* I. 94–9 when he has Ruggiero recognize the lack of interest shown by Ippolito d'Este in him, in the dynastic theme of the *Orlando Furioso*.

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climate of the times. Allegory often flourishes when things cannot be said openly, for whatever reason, or when a text is aimed at a closed, select group. But there is no case made which suggests that the poets of romance epic in the fifteenth century could not say openly all that needed to be said, nor that they intended to appeal to a restricted audience. Indeed Pulci and his heterodox views on religion is the proof of this openness of discourse. In placing the emphasis on the actual context of production and readership, as this study does, I aim to provide a firm basis for judging the effective relationship between the poem and its context, and one which has no inbuilt anachronisms or cultural confusion, one which will permit a balanced judgement of the validity of allegorical interpretation of the romance epic before Tasso.¹⁶

Other recent readings of the romance epic, again in particular of Boiardo and Ariosto, have tended to highlight the medieval dimension in their work and to ignore the impact, even the contemporary fact, of Humanism.¹⁷ This too has tended to lead to anachronistic readings of both these two poets, and to isolate them from their context. This is particularly serious in the case of Boiardo in view of his intensely humanist education and culture, his likely humanist readings, the involvement of his family in the classicizing culture of Ferrara from the days of Leonello onwards and Boiardo's own translations, however inadequate, from Greek texts. All these

¹⁶ The application of allegorical readings is least flawed in the case of Boccaccio's works, since there is plenty of evidence for his own interest in allegory, the allegorizing of his biography, for example, but an allegorical reading of the *Teseida* is still problematic. The dangers of allegorical interpretations are well highlighted by Rajna, *Le fonti*, 171–8. Accepting that in episodes such as that of Alcina there is an allegorical input, Rajna nonetheless writes: 'L'allegoria è poco più che l'ossatura dell'episodio d'Alcina . . .' (p. 177); and he warns sternly against the dangers of over-interpretation (pp. 171, 174).

¹⁷ See M. Sherberg, 'Matteo Maria Boiardo and the *Cantari di Rinaldo*', *Quaderni di Italianistica*, 7/2 (1986), 166–81; id., *Rinaldo: Character and Intertext in Ariosto and Tasso*, Stanford French and Italian Studies (Saratoga, Calif.: Amma Libri, 1993); J. A. Cavallo, *Boiardo's 'Orlando Innamorato': An Ethics of Desire* (London and Toronto: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, Associated University Presses, 1993) and the work of C. Ross, 'Boiardo and the Derangement of Epic', *Renaissance Papers* (1988), 77–97; id., 'Justifying Violence: Boiardo's Castle Cruel', *Philological Quarterly*, 73/1 (1994), 31–52.

influences, of the immediate context, must be kept in mind when considering Boiardo's approach to the romance epic.¹⁸ Equally relevantly, such readings ignore the contribution of Boccaccio and the anonymous *cantastorie* to the development of the genre, in short the contribution of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet there is significant influence from the *Teseida* on the major fifteenth-century epics. Similarly the fifteenth century is the period of intense production and consumption of the major *cantari*, narratives that went through many versions and developed in constant symbiosis with existing prose and verse texts. Though these do not aim to absorb classical, humanist culture, these poems were certainly also enjoyed by the cultural elite and it seems inevitable that the latest version of, for example, the *Spagna*,¹⁹ its comparative success or failure, merits and defects, must have formed part of cultivated discourse in the major centres, Florence and Ferrara. Thus one and a half centuries of Humanism, of a classical revival in literature and a new approach to the reading of ancient texts, could not help but have some effect on such a genuinely popular genre as the romance epic, in particular in view of the well-documented interest in it by highly educated, humanist-educated patrons. The need to see the work of Boiardo and Ariosto, the *Orlando Innamorato* and the *Furioso*, as not just the flowering of the vernacular narrative poem but also of the symbiosis of that genre within humanist

¹⁸ The studies of M. Praloran are particularly noteworthy in this respect and for their desire to see Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* in its own context and on its own terms, see his 'Meraviglioso artificio'. *Tecniche narrative e rappresentative nell'Orlando Innamorato* (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 1990), and 'Matteo Maria Boiardo' in L. Chiappini, W. Moretti, and A. Samaritani (eds.), *Storia di Ferrara* vol. vii: *Il Rinascimento: La Letteratura*, ed. W. Moretti, Deputazione provinciale ferrarese di Storia Patria, (Ferrara: Istituto per la Storia di Ferrara Antonio Frizzi, 1994), 216–64. Equally valuable for siting Boiardo's poem in its contemporary context are G. Ponte, 'L'*Orlando Innamorato* nella civiltà letteraria del Quattrocento', in G. Aneschi (ed.), *Il Boiardo e la critica contemporanea. Atti del Convegno di Studi su M. M. Boiardo 1969* (Florence: Olschki, 1970), 407–25; and D. Alexandre Gras, *L'Héroisme chevaleresque dans le 'Roland Amoureux' de Boiardo* (St Etienne: Publications de l'Université de St Etienne, Institut d'Etudes de la Renaissance et de l'Age classique, 1988), with an especially full discussion on the theme of war and the figure of the hero for which see also our discussion below.

¹⁹ Discussed in more detail in Ch. 2 below.

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culture; to encourage modern readers to read the poems of Boiardo and Ariosto precisely in the context of the high point and culmination of humanist culture is thus a central aim of this book. The culture to which Boiardo and Ariosto look back is not only, indeed I would say not primarily, the medieval Latin culture of Boethius and the Schoolmen, but the long-standing tradition of romance and epic, and increasingly the original classical culture of Virgil, Statius, Lucan, and later in the period Homer, and, for historical material, Livy. It is these preceding cultural traditions which will be examined in the first two chapters.

LIMITS

In view of the novelty of this approach, which is not simply literary but also concerned with social and cultural history, it is important to make clear what this study is not. First it is not a comprehensive historical and thematic survey of the Italian romance epic, the narrative poem which culminates in the supreme example of the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto in the early sixteenth century. Such a survey, to be fully comprehensive, would need to cover the productions of the genre from the earliest tales, imported from France, such as the *Chanson de Roland*, through the developments of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the composition on Italian soil by Italian poets of new and modified narratives in the hybrid languages of Franco-Venetian and Franco-Italian, before opening out to consider narratives written in the course of the fourteenth century in forms of Italian by poets operating at all levels of society and culture from anonymous *cantastorie* upwards and finally arriving in the course of the later fifteenth century at the most sophisticated and humanist-educated writers such as Boiardo and Ariosto. Such a survey would also need to cover a time span of at least four hundred years and an unmanageably large gamut of writers, wealth of material, theme and content, and the impossibility of such a task, though highly desirable, is immediately apparent. Indeed almost a century ago E. G. Gardner, moved by the same desire, found himself constrained to restrict his survey of the genre, and in his studies, all still very valuable to the English reader, was obliged to limit himself, where Carolingian epic is concerned, to a discussion of the work

and environment of Boiardo and Ariosto, the romance epic in fifteenth-century Ferrara.²⁰

Secondly, this is emphatically not a survey of the sources, especially the classical sources, used by the chosen authors. The presence of borrowings (perhaps one should say possible borrowings) from classical authors, borrowings of metaphors, figures of speech, descriptive passages, and the like, has been studied for individual writers, for Ariosto most notably, and more recently for Boiardo, and it is an accepted fact in the case of Boccaccio, but none of these particular studies tries to interpret these influences as a response to contemporary Humanism by a pre-existing literary genre.²¹ Moreover they frequently share a common weakness of lack of definite proof, sometimes because insufficient attention is paid to whether a particular author could and did know of and use particular classical texts, sometimes because of the shift from Latin or Greek to Italian or

²⁰ See E. G. Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara: A Study in the Poetry, Religion and Politics of the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries* (London: Constable, 1904), and id., *The King of Court Poets: A Study of the Work, Life and Time of Ludovico Ariosto* (London: Constable, 1906).

²¹ For Ariosto see D. Bonomo, *L'Orlando furioso' nelle sue fonti* (Rocca di San Casciano: Cappelli, 1953); A. Romizi, *Le fonti latine dell'Orlando Furioso* (Turin, 1896); S. Jossa, *La fantasia e la memoria* (Naples: Liguori Edn., 1996); for Boiardo, E. Paratore, 'L'Orlando Innamorato e l'Eneide', in *Il Boiardo e la critica contemporanea*, 347-75; C. Micocci, 'La presenza della tradizione classica nell'Orlando Innamorato', in *Il Boiardo e il mondo estense nel Quattrocento*, i. 43-61; C. Zampese, 'Lucano (e Seneca tragico) nell'Orlando Innamorato', *ibid.* i. 93-112; ead., *Or si fa rossa, or pallida la luna: la cultura classica nell'Orlando Innamorato* (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 1994); and for Boccaccio, see the introduction and notes in *Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*, ed. A. Limentani (Milan: A. Mondadori (Oscar), 1992); M. T. Casella, *Tra Boccaccio e Petrarca. I volgarizzamenti di Tito Livio e di Valerio Massimo* (Padua: Antenore, 1982); W. Wetherbee, 'History and Romance in Boccaccio's *Teseida*', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 20 (1991-2), 173-84; D. Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale: Imitation of Classical Epic in Boccaccio's 'Teseida'* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); J. H. MacGregor, *The Shades of Aeneas: The Imitation of Vergil and the History of Paganism in Boccaccio's 'Filocolo', 'Filostrato' and 'Teseida'* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1991); id., *The Image of Antiquity in Boccaccio's 'Filocolo', 'Filostrato' and 'Teseida'* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); and id., 'Boccaccio's Athenian Theater: Form and Function of an Ancient Monument in *Teseida*', *Modern Language Notes*, 99 (1984), 1-42. A rather different, challenging approach is found in D. Looney, *Compromising the Classics*, where he proposes that the process of incorporation of classical motifs into vernacular romance should be seen as one of thematic allusion, or 'compromise', a process which is here designated syncretism. Looney is largely concerned with the 16th cent.; this study thus forms a complement to his, covering the earlier period.

the simple limits of all languages in dealing with, for example, the description of a battle which results inevitably in close similarities of language use. More importantly they tend not to ask what is the purpose of this reference to a classical source, how it fits an overall pattern, and how, perhaps most significantly, it would have struck the readers and listeners.²² Finally this study is not an attempt to suggest that these poems are 'real' classical epics rather than developments from the earlier narratives on Carolingian themes dating back to the eleventh century. But the element of continuity, as Ruggieri urges, exists for all the relevant literary traditions, classical as well as 'modern' and all authors in the present study were able to draw equally on previous and continuous classical traditions as well as the medieval vernacular ones.²³

In contrast this study attempts to address a number of important questions, which, linking texts, authors, and contexts, highlight the paradoxical success of the genre. First, how did authors of a certain level of culture, working in a cultivated milieu, present their poems in ways which recognize the circumambient classical culture and seek to address it? Secondly, what could readers from the same environment and the same cultural background have identified and appreciated in these poems as in some senses classical culture, even, one might say 'classics made easy'? Thirdly, how might the use of possibly quite traditional material, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a standard classical text and repertoire throughout the Middle Ages, be seen in a new light and used in new ways by poets, in their attempt to repropose a certain dimension of classical culture in their

²² I would emphasize rather that if authors perceived the need to incorporate classical motifs into their works or to give a classical form or veneer to them, this can be identified without necessarily tracing the precise source, much less suggesting a direct reading of a particular text: it is a matter of method of presentation by authors, therefore, not necessarily of detail of content. In this respect I do not share Ruggieri's views that the poets under consideration did not aspire to 'riflettere o a rivalutare o ad imitare il mondo classico' (*L'umanesimo cavalleresco*, 10), since there is plenty of evidence to show that both at a superficial level and at a more concealed level the poets are doing precisely this. But there is some value in his assertion that the techniques of imitation are more of quality, tone, and 'ethics' than of precise *loci*. For an approach similar to the one adopted here see also C. Montagnini, 'Fra mito e magia: le *Ambages* dei cavalieri boiardi', *Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, 8 (1990), 261–85.

²³ See Ruggieri, *L'umanesimo cavalleresco*, 18–19.

poems? Lastly, how was the paradox of the clash of cultures in the middle of the fourteenth century eventually successfully overcome so that from the later fifteenth century the romance epic rapidly became the best-selling genre of the recently established printed book market, evidence of a high level of demand first among the educated public and, increasingly via a trickle-down effect, at more popular and less cultivated levels of society. In short the aim is to provide an explanation as to how in the early sixteenth century the cultural situation was such that Ariosto was in a position to achieve the fullest fusion of classical-humanist and romance elements in any poem of the genre and the *Orlando Furioso* thus to become the best-selling work of Italian literature. In the course of the individual chapters, therefore, the emphasis will fall not just on the content of the poems as evidence of how authors responded to the contemporary understanding of the classical world, but also on reception by the readers of the same aspects of content. The focus will fall mainly on reception at the higher levels of society, at what is sometimes called the level of 'high culture' since clearly the paradox of the continuing favourable reception of the romance epic must be studied at a level at which humanist culture was also actively present and promoted, among the makers of culture and the promoters of cultural fashion, those responsible for setting trends in education and reading, that is chiefly in the circles of humanist-educated rulers and courts.

It follows too that the focus of attention is firmly on those compositions produced by writers of a certain level of culture. This is because establishing the validity of a direct incorporation of new readings of the classics, a direct reaction to humanist culture and an attempt to come to terms with it through a kind of literary symbiosis, can only be done with certainty in the case of writers whose educational and cultural background and environment can be securely ascertained. While it does not equally follow that all of their intended audience must have been of an equivalent level of culture, since the diversity and range of content of the romance meant that it could appeal at many different levels and to many different social classes, it is of course essential that some part of the intended audience can be defined as clearly participating also in humanist culture, as having at some stage been exposed to humanist ideals and

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education. It is vital always to keep in mind the assertion of Pulci and Ariosto that their poems contain 'materia da camera e da piazza', not just of one or the other.²⁴ For this reason the texts selected are chiefly identified with certain precise milieux which were pre-eminent both for their promotion of humanist culture and for their perennial interest in the romance epic, on all subjects, Arthurian, Carolingian, and other. Florence, from the days of Petrarch and Boccaccio, was one of the leading centres for early classical scholarship by humanists, the home of intense literary critical debates at the turn of the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, but also throughout the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries until the time of Pulci a major centre for the composition of *cantari*. Ferrara, increasingly from the beginning of the fifteenth century, was likewise a major centre of humanist debate and endeavour, but also in the same period a major producer and consumer of romances and epics, as was Ferrara's near-neighbour, culturally as well as geographically, Mantua.

The conditions outlined will broadly speaking exclude the *cantari* from these considerations. The vast majority of *cantari* are anonymous or quasi-anonymous, that is the culture of their authors is at the very least a subject of speculation; they were penned for anonymous audiences, whose tastes, judging by the content and structure of the typical *cantare*, were unsophisticated and traditional. Moreover, these *cantari* were composed for public recitation, envisaged mainly as recitation in piazza, and do not presuppose or even expect the level of detailed attention to style, simile, metaphor, and learned allusion presupposed by those later romances composed for more reflective delivery and even discussion, which do intend to come to grips with the reality of humanist culture in contemporary society. This is not to say that the authors studied here assume that all knowledge of their poems will be through reflective reading; but it is to state their assumption that their work will exist in written, canonical form and that for some, the most valued members of their public, that contact will be through reading and study, through precisely the same kind of approach as that expected by the humanist scholar and writer.

This study of the romance epic, is, therefore, based on texts which each have a key role in the development of the genre and

²⁴ See *Morg.* XXVIII. 142: 'Materia c'è da camera e da piazza'.

in revealing particular contrasting and complementary approaches to the central paradox. *Il Teseida* of Boccaccio, written between c.1339 and 1341, is the first major poem in Italian in the new narrative metre of *ottava rima*, a key aspect of the development of the genre in Italy. Boccaccio's poem reveals a fusion of vernacular romance and classical lore which set a precedent in the genre and is particularly useful in analysing the paradox. For the fifteenth century *Il Morgante maggiore* of Luigi Pulci was composed in Laurentian Florence, at the very centre of humanist scholarship, and for an audience intimately informed about and involved with the promotion of classical culture. The *Orlando Innamorato* of Boiardo is virtually contemporary with the *Morgante*, but emanates from Ferrara, where the cultural context was equally characterized by humanist scholarship and the enjoyment of romance epics. *Il Mambriano* of Francesco Cieco da Ferrara was completed in 1502, also in Ferrara, though it had been begun for the Gonzaga court at Mantua. Initially composed for Isabella d'Este and completed for her brother Ippolito, it thus forms a vital bridge between the work and environment of Boiardo and that of Ariosto. For the reasons given, the versions of the *Aspromonte*, *Spagna*, and the *Rinaldo*, datable to the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries, are excluded, even though they would fill the chronological gap, but reference will from time to time be made to the evidence they provide.²⁵ Similarly, for reasons relating to choice of language and metre, the short *cantari* of Antonio Pucci, and others in *terza rima* and *laissez*, together with the prose compilations (of Andrea da Barberino most obviously) and the experiments in Latin epic, from Petrarch on, will not be the central focus, though reference will be made to them to explain developments and indicate the alternatives open to exponents of this type of literature.²⁶ By concentrating on poets working at the

²⁵ For the *Aspromonte* in *ottava rima* see *Cantari di Aspromonte inediti*, ed. A. Fassò (Bologna: Commissione per i Testi di Lingua, 1981); for the *Spagna* see *La Spagna, poema cavalleresco del secolo xiv*, ed. M. Catalano, 3 vols. (Bologna: Commissione per i Testi di Lingua, 1939-40); for the *Rinaldo* see *Rinaldo da Monte Albano*, ed. E. Melli (Bologna: Commissione per i Testi di Lingua, 1973).

²⁶ It follows from this that the Arthurian tales will not be a detailed part of this survey. For a discussion of these see D. Delcorno Branca, *I romanzi italiani di*

highest levels of culture, at the court of Ferrara and in the circle of Lorenzo, the paradox of coexistence between the two apparently antithetical strands of culture comes most sharply into focus and thus can be most satisfactorily analysed. Ariosto and the *Orlando Furioso* are the natural culmination of this process of adaptation and symbiosis, but Ariosto's contribution to the development of the romance epic is well documented, and moreover the environment in which he is working, both cultural and political, is distinct from that of his predecessors in the fifteenth century. The success of the *Furioso* is at least in part a demonstration of the fact that the paradox of coexistence has been triumphantly overcome; the *Furioso* is the tangible, final proof. As a result this survey will consider Ariosto in detail only in the conclusion.

All of the poems which are the focus of examination are by authors whose culture and biography are known, who worked in a clearly defined milieu, for patrons and readers whose tastes and cultural formation and interests are also able to be established; all had contact with the ideas and exponents of Humanism, both in person and through written texts.²⁷ All

Tristano e la Tavola Ritonda (Florence: Olschki, 1968); ead., 'I cantari di Tristano', *Lettere italiane*, 23 (1971), 301-5; ead., 'Il cavaliere dalle armi incantate: circolazione di un modello narrativo arturiano', in M. Picone and M. Bendinelli (eds.), *I cantari: struttura e tradizione* (Florence: Olschki, 1984), 103-26; E. G. Gardner, *The Arthurian Legend in Italian Literature* (London: J. M. Dent, 1930); for Antonio Pucci see '*Historia della Regina d'Oriente: poema cavalleresco del xiv secolo*' (Bologna: Commissione per i Testi di Lingua, 1968) (anastatic reprint of the Bologna, Romagnoli, 1862 edn.); Andrea da Barberino, *I Reali di Francia*, ed., G. Vandelli and G. Gambarin (Bari: Laterza, 1947), and see also the study by G. Allaire, *Andrea da Barberino and the Language of Chivalry* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1997); see also below, Ch. 2.

²⁷ For Boccaccio's contact see G. Billanovich, *I primi umanisti e la tradizione dei classici latini* (Fribourg: Edizioni Universitarie, 1953); id., 'Il Boccaccio, il Petrarca e le più antiche traduzioni in italiano delle *Decadi* di Tito Livio', *GSLI* 130 (1953), 311-37; G. Velli, *Petrarca e Boccaccio. Tradizione, memoria, scrittura* (Padua: Antenore, 1979); for Boiardo, see G. Bertoni, *Guarino da Verona fra letterati e cortegiani a Ferrara (1429-1460)* (Geneva: Olschki, 1921); id., *Nuovi studi su M. M. Boiardo* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1904); G. Reichenbach, *M. M. Boiardo* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1929); and the two conference volumes, *Il Boiardo e la critica contemporanea*, and *Il Boiardo e il mondo estense*; for Pulci, see Carnesecchi, 'Per la biografia'; Lebaro, 'Luigi Pulci'; Nigro, *Pulci e la cultura medicea*, and Pulci's own letters, for which see *Lettere di Luigi Pulci a Lorenzo il Magnifico ed altri*, ed. S. Bongo (Lucca: Giusti, 1886); for Cieco see J. E. Everson, 'The Identity of Francesco Cieco da Ferrara', *BHR* 145 (1983), 487-502; ead., *Bibliografia delle edizioni del 'Mambriano' di Francesco Cieco da Ferrara* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1994);

wrote in Italian using *ottava rima* in these works, and displaying both their sense of the hybrid romance tradition and their awareness of other genres and traditions, classical and contemporary. There does, however, remain the chronological gap as a significant problem in this selection; for while the links between Pulci, Boiardo, Cieco, and, later, Ariosto do not need to be demonstrated, since the period of activity of each overlaps with his successor, giving an unbroken progression running from the 1460s to 1533, this is not true for Boccaccio. Yet Boccaccio is central to the whole thesis, for a number of reasons which will be briefly outlined here.

Though not the father of the Italian language in verse, Boccaccio is the first to use, for romances in verse, a language which is wholly Italian, and one which aims at comprehensibility outside a defined region. He is moreover one of the earliest to implement the new metre of *ottava rima* in a narrative poem and may even have invented this metre, which was subsequently to prove so crucial to the success of the romance epic in Italy. Boccaccio too, though not glorified with the title of father of Humanism, is one of the earliest exponents of the ideals, practices, and aspirations of the humanists and the *studia humanitatis*. Yet his outlook is also influenced by medieval culture, medieval interpretations of the ancient world, and medieval romance. Boccaccio thus bridges the gap, at the beginning of the history of the romance epic in Italian, between Humanism and vernacular culture. His *Teseida* is an early product of his involvement with the rediscovery of classical culture, the rereading and new presentation of it, and its classical, humanistic dimension needs no justification. But, as more than one scholar of Boccaccio has noted, the *Teseida* is also a romance dressed up in a classical garb, absorbing and recasting the traditions of the romances and, perhaps less obviously, the Carolingian epics.²⁸ The *Teseida* constitutes something of a turning point in Boccaccio's writings, and already in the ample provision of glosses by the author, looks forward to his full development as a humanist writer in his later encyclopedic works, such as the

ead., 'Francesco Cieco da Ferrara', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. xlix (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1997-98), 715-18.

²⁸ See *Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*, ed. Limentani, p. vi.

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De Genealogia. His career, as is well known, exemplifies a growing involvement with classical culture and a steady movement away from vernacular literature, though without the public repudiation of the vernacular that characterized Petrarch. One of the major questions which will surface through the various chapters will be why, if these assertions are true, Boccaccio's innovations of writing a romance epic in the age of Humanism remained for so long without heirs, to the extent that a recent biographer of Boiardo, blithely ignoring Pulci, can assert 'Con *l'Innamorato* anzi la poesia torna dalla piazza, dove l'avevano portata i canterini, alla sua sede naturale: la corte'.²⁹

The central part of the work is divided into two, reflecting the dual emphasis, on texts and contexts, just defined. After the introduction, Part II surveys the cultural context in which the genre established itself, the chief influences which it had to confront and absorb from the fourteenth century, and the education, culture, reading habits, and interests of the intended audience, together with the types of material available to the writer of romance epic aiming to revivify the genre and especially to come to terms with the impact of classical culture. In surveying the classical texts available to our poets the intention is to examine what these texts might have offered to the aspiring poet and what links poets and readers could have established between classical and medieval texts. The emphasis, that is, falls on approaches and attitudes to reading and interpretation at the time, on the process of syncretism in writer and reader—it is not intended, as has been stressed, to provide a compendium of direct, definitive sources for particular episodes or passages in the individual poems. In Part III, attention turns to the texts themselves, and, through a detailed analysis of the main themes of these narratives, love, war, and dynastic matters, assesses the extent to which they reveal classical ideas and influences in the way in which these topics are presented. This analysis is complemented by an examination of the portrayal of the hero and of the narrative structure of these poems, discussed from the same perspective of the extent to

²⁹ *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1969), vol. xi, voce 'Boiardo', 211–23, see esp. p. 220.

which they reveal an absorption of classical ideas and motifs. How far the practice of Ariosto reflects these experiments, and how far he branches out in new directions, is addressed in the concluding section.