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## Review of Valeria Finucci, *Renaissance Transactions: Ariosto and Tasso*.

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**Valeria Finucci, ed., *Renaissance Transactions: Ariosto and Tasso*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. 296 pp. ISBN 0822322951.**

**Reviewed by Nancy Dersofi, Bryn Mawr College**

This handsome volume of essays on Ariosto and Tasso addresses the contrasting styles of the two Renaissance epic poets whose works are both a milestone in literary history and a turning point in discussions about the nature of the modern narrative and how to read it. In her introduction, Finucci reviews the sixteenth-century argument that viewed Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1532), digressive, fragmented, ironic, as the epitome of chivalric romance and read Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) as a unified epic premised on a single moral truth, equal to the epic achievements of Homer and Virgil. Recent criticism has taken a different tack, celebrating Ariosto's skepticism and observing discontinuity in Tasso's poetics. Finucci presents her collection of essays as a book designed to explore new perspectives on the poems and to foster dialogue among the various critical approaches they represent. The success of her endeavor is measured in the rich variety of the contributions and their compelling case for future epic explorations.

The volume is divided into three sections, with three essays in each of the first two parts and four in the third. The first part, "Crossing Genres," includes two essays on Ariosto and one on Tasso, all focused on the issue of reading the epic in the context of romance -- chivalric, Arthurian, amatory and magical -- or in the context of classical epic -- moralistic, Virgilian, linear. In the first essay, "Two Odysseys: Rinaldo's Po Journey and the Poet's Homecoming in the *Orlando furioso*," Ronald L. Martinez discusses Rinaldo's journey along the Po in the last cantos of the *Furioso* as an epic homecoming. Identifying the journey as a parallel voyage to the homecoming of Homer's Odysseus, Martinez proposes that Rinaldo follows Ariosto's cultural itinerary among the chivalric traditions of France and epic practices at the courts of Mantua, Ferrara, Urbino, and Rome. By recognizing his work's poetic origins, Ariosto projects an ongoing tradition characterized by flux and change, suggesting continuous poetic renewal as an alternative to the absolute closure represented by Brandimarte's tragic death. In "The Grafting of Virgilian Epic in *Orlando furioso*," Daniel Javitch also addresses the topic of imitation, observing that Ariosto's textual imitations of the *Aeneid* concentrate on episodes involving themes derived from the poem's romantic, Arthurian sources, a practice that highlights the poet's calculated conflation of epic and romance. When Virgilian imitations do occur in non-romantic episodes, as in Rodomonte's destructive rampage in Paris based on the action of Turnus inside the Trojan camp, Ariosto replaces Virgilian continuity with abrupt interruptions that transport the reader inside and outside of Paris. Sixteenth-century criticism faulted such discontinuity as harmful to the narrative unity that epic requires; and, says Javitch, readers still influenced by the neoclassical inclination to privilege epic over romance persist in interpreting Ariosto's poem as somehow flawed in its use of the classical. Postmodern insight, on the other hand, values Ariosto's hybridization with the same enthusiasm as Ariosto's first readers, who read the work "before literary tastes were corrected."

Finucci acknowledges in her introduction that the linking of the sixteenth-century controversy between "ancients" and "moderns" to the contemporary debate between modernism and postmodernism inspired the present volume. One of the papers that most conspicuously modifies

that debate by proposing a revised reading of Tasso's epic is Jo Ann Cavallo's "Tasso's Armida and the Victory of Romance." Cavallo takes issue with the standard view that Tasso wanted to expurgate romance from the *Gerusalemme liberata* in order to write an epic poem celebrating the Christian conquest of Jerusalem. She argues instead that Rinaldo's reunion with Armida in the last canto of the poem calls attention to the dynasty the couple will found. Unlike earlier versions of the temptress in the Italian Renaissance epic, who are portrayed as obstacles to the hero's arrival at his destination, Armida is necessary to the romance that brings the work to epic closure and fulfillment.

The second section, subtitled "The Politics of Dissimulation," focuses on themes of disguise, trickery, lies and other forms of deception operating, says Finucci, as "subversive strategies enacted in the *Furioso* and the *Liberata* when issues of honesty, honor, historical truthfulness, and authorial self-representation are in the forefront" (6). In "Epic in the Age of Dissimulation: Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*," Sergio Zatti proposes that dissimulation of various kinds plays a large role in the *Liberata* because Tasso's text arises from a discourse of dissimulation. His essay, translated into English by Valeria Finucci with Michael Sherberg, explains how the thematics of concealment in false speeches, false sentiments, hidden intentions, and disguised bodies complement the above/below, outside/inside of the poem's rhetoric. Discussions of Armida in canto 4 sowing discord in the Christian camp, Eustazio misusing the chivalric code of courtesy, Erminia concealing her emotions and disguising her body first with Clorinda's armor and then with country clothes, Clorinda's own fatal disguise, Armida's protean identity, and Tasso's poetry of the night document and amplify Zatti's discussion of dissimulation of the truth as instrumental to its poetic representation.

In "Trickster, Textor, Architect, Thief: Craft and Comedy in *Gerusalemme liberata*," Walter Stephens finds that comic genre affects Tasso's representation of authorship and all but overturns the epic ending. Comedy enters the *Liberata* first in the role of Vafrino, modeled on Homer's *Dolon*, the defeated trickster of the *Iliad*; and then in the figure of Erminia, who relegates Vafrino's role to that of comedic tricky valet, her valet, as she assumes the role of cross-dressed comic heroine in pursuit of Tancredi. Overtaking Vafrino's role, Erminia also takes over the role of *architecta* or author. Her model is Homer's Helen of Troy as well as Penelope, insofar as weaving and the language of textiles express her desire to rework the text. Stephens views Erminia as Tasso's "most powerful poet figure," and even though Tasso withholds the happy ending she seeks, the power of her "comedic paradigm" pervades the epic and affects the reader's expectation of what will follow.

In the third essay on the topic of dissimulation, "*Un così valoroso cavalliero*": Knightly Honor and Artistic Representation in *Orlando furioso*, Canto 26," Katherine Hoffman examines the problem posed in the canto where knights take rest at a fountain whose sculptures show contemporary monarchs battling against avarice. Asking what the story implies about real-life knights in Ariosto's day, and what honor and avarice mean in the relationship between poet and patron, Hoffman finds that canto 26 demonstrates the uneasy relationship between selfless honor and greedy avarice in morality, politics, and in art. Two battle scenes in the canto contrast the "courtly dance" performed in the first part with the brawl in the second, presenting an ideal example of knightly honor and a parody of that ideal. Similarly, the episode depicted on the fountain allegorizes an idealized version of sixteenth-century politics that contrasts with the

opportunistic political realities of Ariosto's time. Further, Hoffman finds that canto 26 represents the poet's need to walk a thin line between flattering his patrons for personal gain and criticizing them, albeit indirectly, for the sake of aesthetic morality.

"Acting Out Fantasies" is the title of the third section, focused on performance. In the first essay, "The Masquerade of Masculinity: Astolfo and Jocondo in *Orlando furioso*, Canto 28," Valeria Finucci discusses the tale of two men, King Astolfo and the noble Jocondo, who, having been betrayed by their wives, travel across Europe with the intention of inflicting the same injury on one thousand men. Tiring of their easy success, they decide to purchase from her father a young woman named Fiammetta, whom they share sexually until one night Fiammetta, lying between her two owners, takes a lover to bed. Laughingly, Astolfo and Jocondo return home to their wives. Finucci offers a psychoanalytical interpretation of the men's attempt to assert a masculine identity first by acting out a Don Juan-like scenario of repetitive sexuality, an agenda she terms homosocial rather than sexual, and then by sharing one woman, a project that offers narcissistic gratification rather than sexual satisfaction. Giving up their erotic quest, the men return home to the lives of self-centered fantasy they never really left. Asking what the story tells us about the representation of masculinity in chivalric romance and about gender relations in the sixteenth century, Finucci concludes that in the world of the *Furioso* masculinity, like femininity, is made up and unstable, consisting of performance and masquerade.

Performance in the sense of theatrical pieces staged for an audience is the subject of Eric Nicholson's "Romance as Role Model: Early Female Performances of *Orlando furioso* and *Gerusalemme liberata*." In an essay that traces female stage performances from early commedia dell'arte to the operas of Monteverdi, Nicholson brings into focus the degree and manner in which the epics provided women with female characterizations, plots, scripts, and audiences. Early actresses and singers (sometimes one and the same person) improvised or performed scripted roles derived from the *Furioso* and the *Liberata*. Off-stage rivalries, flamboyant arrivals in new places, hasty departures, and the scandals associated with lives of travel and professional employment made the private lives of actresses matters of public interest. In that atmosphere, their personal behavior sometimes imitated on-stage performances. Flaminia Romana, an actress who headed her own company, imitated Marfisa in physical prowess and Drusilla in theatrical virtuosity. As wanderers - desirable, changeable, sometimes comical - actresses found a model in the fugitive Angelica. Issabella Andreini's renowned respectability recalls Zerbino's chaste Issabella in the *Furioso*, although in the main, actresses and singers, "cortigiane" among them, were regarded as temptresses, like Alcina and Armida. Women singers performing the lament of Ariadne or the death of Clorinda prepared the way for the doomed operatic heroines of later opera.

Nicholson's review of women's roles on the secular stage is followed by an essay by Naomi Yavneh on the role of virgin martyr in religion and in Tasso's epic. In "*Dal rogo alle nozze: Tasso's Sofronia as Martyr Manqué*," Yavneh reads Sofronia's role in the context of female martyrologies, showing that Tasso's poem thwarts Sofronia her desire to serve and imitate Christ by sacrificing her own life to save the Christians in Jerusalem. Although Sofronia rejects Olindo's attempt to martyr himself to save her, the arrival of Clorinda, a female warrior cast in the role of Saint George, transforms Sofronia from virgin martyr to damsel in distress. The rescued Sofronia marries Olindo, thereby conforming to the passivity and grace exemplified for

Christian women by the Virgin and submitting to the romance ending that Tasso's epic allots to women.

The volume's final essay links the woman question to history. In "Writing beyond the *Querelle*: Gender and History in *Orlando furioso*," Constance Jordan argues that Ariosto and indeed sixteenth-century literature on women moved beyond the "praise/blame" discourse of the *querelle des femmes*. Her claim is that prowoman arguments depended on new readings of history, and that in the *Furioso*, Bradamante is the character best able to read and understand these new visions. Three episodes furnish her text: her descent into Merlin's tomb, her visit to the castle on the Rocca di Tristano, and the tent of the Emperor Constantine loaned for the celebration of her marriage. The first of these episodes discloses the relation of women to kinship; in the second, the murals in the castle tell her that there are many perspectives to understanding history, and that history is never fully comprehensible; the third speaks to the ties between women and property. Bradamante is a good reader of history because her sense of justice makes her aware that signs are deceptive and that no reading is conclusive. Her qualities of mercy and chastity as well as her thrift and managerial skill make her symbolically androgynous and thus representative of the new historical, prowoman vision of the time.

Although this fascinating volume may not convert modern readers into postmodernists, or vice versa, it offers solid ground for comparison and debate. Its many perspectives present an overview of epic discourse and a challenge for the further study of narrative forms. Readers with an interest in Comparative Literature will appreciate the deeper understanding of epic genre and genre theory that underlies the book's formation. The studies on themes of dissimulation, disguise, tricks, and deception speak to a broader discourse on the strategies of representation. Performance, especially pertaining to the performance of gender in literature, in history, and on stage, is a topic of research in progress. I also note that the Italian epic's origins in the '*chansons de geste*', Arthurian legend, and the worlds of Virgil and Homer, and the European afterlife of epic tropes and figures in the novella and other narrative forms, as well as on stage, further engage issues of comparative interest.