

Book Review

Everson, Jane E. *The Italian Romance Epic in the Age of Humanism. The Matter of Italy and the World of Rome.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Pp. 386 + xii.

Jane E. Everson's volume is a much-needed careful examination of the Italian romance epic in the context of humanism. It demonstrates a unique erudition in both Italian and classical Latin texts, including Homer, Virgil, Statius, Lucan, Ovid, Valerius Flaccus, and Silius as classical models in comparison with Petrarch's *Africa*, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*, Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* and Cieco da Ferrara's *Mambriano*. The volume is divided into four parts, nine chapters: Introduction (one chapter); Texts and Contexts (four chapters); New Perspectives, New Readings (three chapters); and Conclusion (one chapter). It is completed with a Bibliography (divided into editions and translations by author; other primary texts; and critical studies) and an Index.

The Introduction and Part I provide Everson's theses and the background for discussion: a pre-history of romance epic in Italy and the paradox of its popularity in the midst of humanism. Background knowledge about the authors Boccaccio, Pulci, Boiardo, and Cieco da Ferrara, and their cities, Florence and Ferrara, make them good choices for study. The author discusses the arrival of all three "matters," those of France, Britain, and Rome, in Italy. She also summarizes the desirability of classical models to humanist epic composers, treating not only epic per se (the *Aeneid*, *Pharsalia*, *Thebaid*, and *Odyssey* and *Iliad* as far as they were available at the time) but also Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, then considered an epic, and historical writings, or "epics in prose," in particular Livy's *Ab urbe conditor* but also Sallust's *Bellum Jugurthinum* and *Coniuratio Catilinae*. These summaries not only offer helpful background for less well-known texts but also demonstrate points of particular interest for those better known. Actual access to the texts by the authors in question is considered text by text, each examined

for possible interest such as where it takes place, type of conflict, and types of characters present.

“Petrarch and Boccaccio: Starting Points, Turning Points, and Blind Alleys,” Chapter 4, looks at Petrarch’s *Africa*, called a blind alley: in Latin, with one man, one theme (Rome), but, the author argues, without the narrative touch that Boccaccio brings to his works. Petrarch’s misjudgement in language choice and structure is carefully and convincingly illustrated. Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, with its classical models in structure but without flashy culture requiring specialized knowledge, on the other hand, is in Italian. His narrative skill and invention (or adoption) of *ottava rima* ensured the poem’s survival and popularity. A useful survey of *ottava rima* use in the three matters follows, including comments on Pucci. Everson thus suggests the 1420s as a beginning date for the “romance epic,” defined as a poem in which all three narrative subjects—Arthur, Charlemagne, and Rome—appeal to all levels of public (p. 121).

Her proof of the popularity of romance epic across a wide social spectrum (Chapter 5, “Books, Readers, and Reception”) forms an important contribution in a contentious field. For a long time, it has been argued that the matter of Britain was popular among the upper class, the matter of France with the lower strata. Her assembled data (including library borrowing records, requests for copies between individuals, inventories, and the later popularity of printed versions of the same texts) argue convincingly that the matter of France was popular among all classes. She does not discount oral knowledge of such tales, though it is hard to prove and not the crux of her argument, which is that the union of epic and romance occurred before Petrarch wrote his *Africa*, well before Ariosto. This chapter is worth consulting by anyone interested in the fate of the three “matters” in Italy.

In her third section, “New Perspectives, New Readings,” Everson reads the selected romance texts in relation to epic definitions offered by Pigna and Giraldi, as well as in contrast with classical models. This important analysis examines how each author incorporated classical epic (and, in some cases, history) into his work, together with how his contemporaries would have perceived this syncretism. In each chapter (6. Mars and Venus—Love

and War; 7. The Figure of the Hero; and 8. The One and the Many: Constructing the Plot), Everson briefly surveys first the classical and then the romance poems according to the subject of the chapter. Summaries cannot begin to do justice to the complete argument in all its details but offer a taste of particularly interesting points and ingenious solutions.

In chapter 6, “Mars and Venus—Love and War,” Everson argues that the question was not which themes to use but how to relate them: as equal portions of the story or as one subordinate to the other? How should they be linked and how related to classical tradition? War can be episodic (traditional) or classically narrated; love or war may be the predominant theme; and classical references, language, or structure may determine a poem’s organization. Looking at each poem, the relation of love to war works differently. In *Teseida*, a military campaign does not form the backdrop, yet there is a duel of the gods and Boccaccio succeeds in placing the two themes within the humanistic context. Everson examines each of the five love stories in *Morgante*, as well as Pulci’s extensive use of war. She notes that the two sides are frequently evenly balanced, and though war is not a game here, the poem lacks a sense of “the horrors and pity of war” (p. 198). In the *Innamorato*, on the other hand, Boiardo insists upon love as the primary theme though the actual poem belies that claim. Angelica produces conflicts between Venus and Mars which frequently lead to death. The detailed analysis produces the interesting fact that stories where love and war conflict in the *Innamorato* are not the major story lines (e.g., Ruggiero and Bradamante). Finally, in Cielo da Ferrara Everson finds a “classical surface texture” of war and love (p. 208). As she demonstrates, Cielo also frequently uses classical references for comparison, thus making the classical element very visible in a way not always the case for the other poems. The two wars are serious, and Mars and Venus are linked, especially in Carandina’s island episodes. The realness of battle may reflect a difference in the date of the text and the experiences of the author.

Chapter 7, “The Figure of the Hero,” notes that the *Aeneid* has a single clear hero with expansion and conquest as his mission and compares the *Teseida* to it, from the title (for Theseus) to the action. A second model, with

a pair of heroes, is presented by Statius's Polynices and Eteocles, two angry men. In each of the romance epics, the model is examined: in *Morgante*, who is the hero? are there two? Everson suggests that our reading in this case depends upon whether one looks at the entire poem or the first part only. She then poses the same question for the *Innamorato*—is its model Virgil or Statius and Boccaccio? And the *Mambriano*? This last poses unique problems in its use of a pagan protagonist, not the least of which is whether or not one should even pose the question. Concluding the chapter, Everson admits that the sample of classical models is too limited to show all possible types of heroes, and sixteenth-century critics found themselves with the same problem. Though Aeneas was initially the only model, and used by Petrarch in his *Africa*, other classical hero types become available through the renaissance, especially from Greek tradition and Livy, multiplying possible models for later authors and critics.

The plot and any reflection of classical practice in it was a primary point of debate in sixteenth-century critical discussions about the nature of the epic. Chapter 8, "Constructing the Plot," takes on that characteristic in each of the epics under discussion, in relation particularly to Cinzio's analysis of *romanzi*. Cinzio, as Everson summarizes, seems to leave both actions and formal structure rather flexible, depending largely upon the poet's skill in uniting actions. She therefore examines "formal structure, narrative disposition, choice of subject matter, and type of plot" in relation to classical models and a possibly new genre (p. 278). For each work, its length, both in number of cantos (and books, where applicable) and in overall line numbers, is compared to the *Aeneid*, *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, and other relevant models. While this seems at first blush rather mechanical, it reveals a surprising consistency and, in one case, an anomaly, that of *Orlando Innamorato*. The projected entire length leads Everson to propose tentatively the vernacular *Divine Comedy* as a model with its one hundred cantos, rather than the classics (p. 292). The number of protagonists, plots and their relationships to each other reveal difficulties of interpretation but also force the critic to develop new categories. For example, Everson proposes geography as the unifying thread in *Morgante*: the Mediterranean basin as theater of action,

much like the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, which furthermore also have a circularity of action like *Morgante*. Close examination also reveals that the *Innamorato*'s classicism appears in its shorter episodes rather than in its central plots. Everson suggests that the myth of Hercules, with no epic of its own, may have been Boiardo's model for Book One: "[...] like a necklace to which beads or episodes can be added or subtracted [...]" (p. 301). *Mambriano* too has multiple heroes and multiple actions and again could fit a circular model with geographical links from Carandina's island. Cielo's choice of Africa, specifically Utica, as a location for Orlando's action suggests Caesar and Pompey, supporting Everson's contention that Cielo uses classical references through allusion and manipulation, with the innovation of seven evenly interspersed *novelle*, as well as comic relief and dialogue. This last text chapter ends with a brief commentary on dynastic themes, generally recognized as part of epic. The socio-political situation of the Italian peninsula precluded the possibility or need for it in these poems, even though reference to a patron was a recognized classical element. As Everson notes, Pulci finesses the issue by praising the emperor in the form of Charlemagne and singing the re-foundation of Florence as a Roman republican foundation (p. 315). The *Innamorato* includes experiments with Hercules before settling on Ruggiero as an ancestor, but there is no nationalistic consciousness in the development (p. 316). Cielo refers to Bradamante in a positive way, probably to praise his first patron, Isabella d'Este, and refers to both Mantuan (in the first part) and Ferrarese (in the second part) place names. Furthermore, Everson suggests that Orlando's voyage to Compostella in *Mambriano* is specifically for Ercole d'Este, who was unable to complete a desired pilgrimage there. She suggests that all poets were aware of the convention but unable to use it for the most part, either because it was inappropriate or might be obtrusive. Though limited, dynastic/nationalistic concerns must be addressed because of their part in the epitome of Italian romance epic, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.

The final section (Part 4: Conclusion, containing Chapter 9, "The Paradoxical Success of the Romance Epic: Ariosto and Beyond") not only pulls together diverse threads of arguments from the entire book but also exam-

ines *Orlando Furioso* in relation to those same elements of analysis (love and war; the hero; the plot structure). Everson argues convincingly that Ariosto continues the interweaving of multiple themes, a tripartite structure also favored by Boiardo (p. 339), choosing one war, one love affair and one dominant theme, the dynastic, among many. Everson demonstrates that, within its social, political, and chronological frame, Ariosto creates a unique blend of classical and romance by supporting his main episodes with classically-based exempla and *novelle* that allow the reader, with the aid of the poet, to follow a central line more clearly than in some other examples of romance epic (such as Boiardo). In Ariosto's use of a predominant dynastic theme, he differs substantially from his predecessors. It is a part of his unique balance and development of the hero, love, and war that makes him the last of the four classic romance epics in Italy.

Everson's volume is truly a tour de force. The excellent organization, convincing and careful argumentation, extensive bibliography, and useful index all contribute to a book one can read and reread and yet continue to gain new insights. Her knowledge of classical and romance epic is encyclopedic and her parallel-structured close readings are more than convincing. It will both push renaissance specialists to reckon with the romance epic and contribute to interest in the *Mambriano*, no longer dismissing it as a relic from earlier times or a popular genre for slumming court poets. This volume belongs on every Italian renaissance specialist's shelf.

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