John Stewart of Baldynneis and Orlando Furioso

Timothy G. A. Nelson

The University of New England, New South Wales

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

TIMOTHY G. A. NELSON

John Stewart of Baldynneis and

Orlando Furioso

Sixteenth century translators and imitators of Ariosto often found “such dainty Italian fruits”¹ as Orlando Furioso rather difficult to transplant. In France, Desportes refined and neoclassicised Ariosto; in England Sir John Harington, going to the other extreme, produced a chartry and colloquial version in which, it has been said, the “exquisite elegance” of the original is entirely lacking.² But though the spirit of the original proved difficult for non-Italians to capture, it was quite common for the various imitations and translations to attain distinction of a different kind. In particular, they tended to take on a distinctive flavour from the soils into which they had been transplanted. They generally reflected less of the culture and attitudes of Italy than of France, Scotland, England, or whatever country had produced them.

This is especially true of the Abbegement of Roland Furioso, composed, apparently in the mid-1580’s, by the Scottish poet John Stewart of Baldynneis.³ One might have expected that, after so influential a figure as Gavin Douglas⁴ had publicly savaged Caxton for producing a mere travesty of the Aeneid, a scholarly approach to translation would have become the rule in Scotland. But Stewart, in his attempt to domesticate Ariosto’s masterpiece, shows no scruples about taking liberties with the text. In the first place he chooses to follow only one of Ariosto’s narrative threads, the story of the Eastern princess Angelica: in this he may have been consciously following the example of Desportes, whose Roland Furieux also isolates a single motif.

¹Dedication to the queen in John Harington’s Orlando Furioso in English Heroical Verse (London, 1591).


⁴See the celebrated Prologue to his Aeneid.

[105]
from Ariosto's poem. Whatever his precedents, Stewart managed to free himself from translator's conscience—he not only abridged, but elaborated, where he saw fit. As a result much of the *Abbregement of Roland Furioso* ranks as creative imitation rather than as translation. The relation of the imitation to the original is rather like that of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* to Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*: most of the fundamental differences between Stewart's poem and Ariosto's stem from Stewart's dissatisfaction with—and perhaps bewilderment at—Ariosto's treatment of traditional genres. Ariosto's habit is to mingle genres, to cross one with another, to stand back and view each ironically in the light of the rest. But Stewart's irresistible urge is to put everything back in its pigeonhole: the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target, the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o' th' sere, and the lady shall say her mind freely—everyone shall play his expected and predestined part.

The most startling example of this conventionalizing process is Stewart's treatment of the complaint of Sacripante from Ariosto's first canto. The Circassian king, engaged in a fruitless search for Angelica, has just heard news which suggests to him that the princess has yielded herself to his rival Orlando. As he stands by the river bank Sacripante utters a speech of lament. Angelica has shown little bounty to him, much to another: why, then, does he have to go on caring for her? The tender virgin (he reminds himself) is like a fresh rose, adored by all; but once the rose is plucked—once she has granted her favours to one man—the damsel loses all the attractions she used to have for her other lovers. The logical conclusion to which this should lead Sacripante is that he will be able to get over his disappointment comparatively easily and forget about his former love. But he can see only too clearly that this is not going to work in his case, and at the end of the speech he turns around and argues against himself:

Dunque esser può che non mi sia più grata?
dunque io posso lasciar mia vita propria?
Ah, più tosto oggi manchino i di miei,
Ch'io viva più, s'amar non debbo lel! (I, 44)

*Whether or not Stewart was acquainted with the renaissance theory of literary "kinds," he would certainly be familiar with the mediaeval practice.*

Ariosto's attitude to Sacripante's plight is ambiguous. The prince's situation is genuinely pathetic, but it also affords the author an opportunity for ironical comment on certain set attitudes towards love. According to the rules of the game lovers must remain faithful to their mistresses—but only so long as those mistresses remain unattainable not only to themselves, but to others. Once the rose is plucked by one aspirant the others are released and lose all affection for the lady—"il pregio ch'avea inanti/perde nel cor di tutti gli altri amanti." But (alas for Sacripante!) human emotions do not work to rules, and it is only too easy in real life to remain enslaved to a lady even when one knows that she has given herself to another man. However, this is not the only satiric point Ariosto has to make. It is equally ironical that Sacripante, despite his lyrical encomium of virginity, really laments nothing more than the fact that it is another man, and not himself, who (he believes) has taken Angelica's virginity away:

Che debo far, poi ch'io son giunto tardi,  
e ch'altri a cõrre il frutto è andato prima?  

This suggestion of Sacripante's less courtly proclivities prepares us for his attempted rape of Angelica later in the Canto.

Stewart, by contrast, shows—at least in the passage under discussion—no tendency to present Sacripante or his situation in an ironical light. If he realised that Ariosto had done so (and it is possible that he did) he presumably regarded this as a breach of decorum: Sacripante's speech is a love-complaint, a genre in which humour and irony normally have no place. Hence the Scots version of Sacripante's speech is full of elaborate figures of repetition, and traditional (if on the whole rather successful) exercises in aureate diction—a lofty style is cultivated to suit the occasion. Stewart's version of the complaint is, moreover, more than twice the length of the original (seventy-eight lines to Ariosto's thirty-two), and the earthy suggestions of some of the lines are toned down ("altri a cõrre il frutto è andato prima" becoming "I bruise in baile, Ane vther baths in blis"). In the Scots the "La verginella" passage slides naturally into a slower tempo, and a more traditional and proverbial form of utterance, than it had in the original. Conventional as it is, it is one of Stewart's most successful performances:

O Cumilie chast virginetie Maist cleine,  
Reasembling rycht the Recent Rose serene,  
Qhilk sueitlie smels in guidlie garding fair,  
So naturall douce vpon the branchis greine;

1 See Roland Furiouz, loc. cit. note 6 above. Stewart mistakenly renders "verginella" as "virginetie."

[ 107 ]
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

The tender dew, the snawe, And holsum air,  
And Phebus face, Adorns it growand thair,  
fresche vith maternall moisture Rubie Reed . . .  
(II, 216-222)

But

The virgin . . quha dois hir vorschip vrap  
Vith venus vyce degraths hir hie Renouve.  
for quhat auails formosetie or hap  
Quhan that hir honor Is suppressit doune,  
The cheif Charbuncke of hir cumlie crowne,  
Qhiik said preseruit be moir pretius deir  
Than helth or lyf?  
(II, 229-233)

But the most remarkable difference between the Italian and the Scots versions of Sacripante’s complaint is in the ending. Ariosto’s prince — though moderately certain that all hope is past, and that the prize has already been carried off by another — resolves to go on loving in spite of all. Stewart’s, by contrast, though still convinced half way through his speech that

Hyre haif I lost, The certantie is plaine,  
for scho is reft, Quha dois beraif my braine . . .  
(II, 208-9)

finally reaches the solution adopted by every mediaeval lover worth his salt when confronted with unpalatable rumours about his lady — he simply refuses to believe them:

Sall I the leiwe for teils that trailers tels?  
That may I not, Deth sall me first denoir.  
(II, 245-6)

And he concludes, of course, on a note of hope:

xis, I beliwe Thy beutie sall me bring  
from noy to loy, in spyt of fortoune feed.  
In hoip heirof, Althocht scho me maling,  
I sall continew thyn vnto the deed.  
(II, 253-6)

Ariosto has taken the conventional set-piece of the love-complaint and has done something most unconventional with it. Stewart, by contrast, has rehabilitated the convention. His Circassian king says exactly what he would have said if he were the traditional and typical courtly lover, he would inevitably say.

It has already been suggested that Stewart infuses a heightened seriousness into Sacripante’s speech mainly because it belongs to a genre — the love-complaint — which is inseparably associated in his mind with a mood of dignified pathos. This is borne out by the fact that, when Stewart is dealing with a person or situation that he finds essentially undignified, he no longer tends, as he does in the passage already discussed, to play down Ariosto’s comedy. Indeed, at one point he jestingly announces his preference for “vanton verse” and says that
JOHN STEWART AND ORLANDO FURIOSO

he finds it easier to deal with than tragical or, as he puts it, "mirthles" matters. That he had a real talent for broad comedy is amply illustrated in the passage to which we now turn—that in which a disreputable old hermit makes an attempt on Angelica's chastity, and is finally restrained by (to employ Harington's tactful phrase) his impotency rather than his honesty. When dealing with a situation of this kind, Stewart makes as much use of the figure amplificatio as he does in more serious contexts. In Ariosto the tentative advances of the hermit to Angelica, his unsuccessful attempt on her chastity, and his final undignified lapse into sleep are all described in the space of twenty-nine lines. In Stewart these are expanded to sixty-seven. One part of the expansion (nine lines of Scots to one of Italian) consists of a detailed sensuous description of the beauties of Angelica as she lies helpless before the "virius vieillard" who "mycht tak/ Of hir his plesour At his awne deuyis" (he has sent her to sleep with a "liqueur" concocted "till repress the eine"). Another part (twenty lines in Stewart, eight in Ariosto) is taken up with a much elaborated account of the failure of the hermit's physical powers to rise to the occasion ("Bot feiblit corps mycht not vith vill repair"). The latter of these two expansions looks very like an attempt by Stewart to overgo Dunbar's frank descriptions of sexual debility in The Twa Marit Wemen and the Wedo. The corresponding passage in the Italian, though its meaning is perfectly clear, achieves a kind of restraint, describing the hermit's recalcitrant member by means of an extended, though modestly worded, simile about an old horse being vainly coaxed to go over a jump. Stewart adopts (and greatly elaborates) the simile, but abandons the restraint: Ariosto has nothing as explicit as "He neuir start Nor onie stirage meed,/ Thocht oft he hyst him vith his harskie hand." Besides, the Scot weaves into the texture of the main simile a number of minor ones—the senescent member is likened to a drooping standard, and to a pocket pistol which will not go off because its firing mechanism is in poor repair ("His dag misga, the snapvark vas not fyn"). Here again we find Stewart—somewhat impatiently this time—snatching a passage out of the hands of Ariosto and firmly placing it in a genre with which he, heir of a vigorous Scots literary tradition, is thoroughly familiar.

The same kind of attempt to help Ariosto out—to take for him the opportunities he has failed to take for himself—can be seen in

*Roland Furiours, XI, 13-20.*

*Harington, Orlando Furiours (ed. cit.), notes to canto VIII.*

*Roland Furiour, III, 260-337; Ariosto, Orlando Furiour, VIII, st. 47-50.*
third example, the last to which it will be necessary to give extended treatment in this essay. The passage, an elaborate description of the pastoral backdrop against which the courtship and marriage of Medoro and Angelica take place, contrasts strongly in tone and subject with those already discussed.\textsuperscript{11} Ariosto, having placed the two lovers in an idyllic pastoral setting, confines his description of it to a few deft stanzas and then hurries the couple off in the direction of Spain: provocingly, he refuses to indulge in the expected rhapsody in which the joys of Medoro and Angelica would be seen reflected in the beauties of nature and the pastimes of simple shepherds. Stewart remedies the deficiency with a digression of more than a hundred lines, of which by far the greater number — including one passage of fifty at a stretch\textsuperscript{12} — have no equivalent in the Italian. The whole is a skilful blending of the apparatus of a mediaeval maying with that of a classical pastoral. The classical element is stronger here than in earlier maying-poems and wedding-celebrations like Dunbar's The Thrissile and the Rois: "Pan And his troupe thair seimlie did conveine"; "That day from seis ouslscht the great Triton/ for to salure lord Pawmus In his tron"; "Not Tyrers did on his quhissill play/ Vith greater mirth Than thay did all reiois." But the traditional passages are more successful:

Sueit vas the sesone seimlie to be seine,
The feilds annamelt vas in euerie part
Vith dyuers hews be lustie flora queine,
All hogs thay blum, And vods vas growand greine,
Quhairin thir loifers dalie meed repaire;
Quhyls vnder schaddow solitar thay beine,
Quhair birds ousbirstit doulest verblies rair,
Quhyls in the dalis, the dens, And midows fair
besyds the fontans, And the plesand parks. \hfill (X, 110-118)

These lines, like the rest of the pastoral digression, exemplify Stewart's instinct for blending plain and aureate diction in just the proportions suitable to the occasion. The expanded celebration of the marriage of Medoro and Angelica seems, indeed, to be embarked on for no other reason than to allow Stewart to bathe in the fountain of eloquence. It represents the most extreme example yet encountered of his elaborations on Ariosto.

The vivid contrasts between the three passages so far discussed give some idea of Stewart's versatility as a poet. He himself, however, expresses — at the beginning of his eleventh canro, where he is preparing

\textsuperscript{11} Roland Furioui, X, 110-212. Cf. Ariosto, Orlando Furiouo, XIX, st. 35-36.

\textsuperscript{12} Roland Furioui, X, 149-197.
JOHN STEWART AND ORLANDO FURIOSO

to deal with the madness of Orlando—some doubts about his ability
to deal adequately with tragic themes. He ruefully admits that he is no
genius, and claims that such talent as he possesses is best brought out
by comedy—tragedy only depresses it:

... vanton verse moir aptlie dos aggric
To pouse the pithies spreit vith sum supplie,
Quhilk I posses, lasking the curius vaine,
Than mirthles maretis that ameis me,
And doubill duls my dolorus dullit braine. (XI, 16-20)

This, however, is partly conventional self-depreciation. Stewart’s ability
to deal with serious themes is convincingly demonstrated in the
Sacripante episode, and his rendering of the “La verginella è simile a
la rosa” speech shows that he was not really lacking in the “curius
vaine.” Even in the pastoral digression on the marriage of Medoro
and Angelica, the least lively of the passages examined above, there are
lines which go beyond the merely conventional: for example, the line
“Quhair birds outbirstit doulcest verblis rair” successfully suggests,
through effects of rhythm and diction, the bubbling energy of the birds’
spring song. Stewart is, in fact, versatile enough to handle almost any
kind of set piece, sometimes with competence and sometimes with
distinction. We should not take too much notice of his modest
protestations.

Unfortunately Stewart’s versatility and his fondness for elaborate
set pieces combine to prevent him from being a very good adaptor of
Ariosto. That he should have changed the character of the original
need not have prevented him from creating a finished work of art of
his own, obeying its own laws and possessing its own inner unity. But
unfortunately his inventiveness led him into inconsistencies. For ex-
ample, when Sacripante utters his love-lament Stewart, as we have seen,
invests him with a dignity which Ariosto denies him, suppressing the
ironies of the original and making him express sentiments that are
almost wholly altruistic. But in making these alterations he set himself
a problem of which he hardly seems to have been aware; for the events
which follow Sacripante’s speech are hardly consistent with the lofty
character given to the prince by Stewart. Immediately after Sacripante’s
complaint, Angelica, his loved one, appears from behind a bush and
assures him that Orlando has not enjoyed her favours after all.
Sacripante’s reaction to this is that Orlando’s failure to exploit such an
opportunity is one which he himself does not wish to emulate. He
prepares to rape Angelica:

[ 111 ]
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

My stamp shall first upon the Seal Imprint

Stay will I not my propis for refuse,
But shall incarri my intent till end.    (II, 337; 341-2)\textsuperscript{19}

In Ariosto certain hints in Sacripante's previous speech have left us not wholly unprepared for this turn of events. But in Stewart the Sacripante who utters the complaint and the one who attempts the rape a few lines later are two different people.

Another of Stewart's inconsistencies is in his attitude to Angelica herself. It has sometimes been said that Stewart is sympathetic towards his heroine.\textsuperscript{14} This is certainly true at the beginning of the poem in the passage where Angelica meets Sacripante.\textsuperscript{15} In Ariosto, Angelica's attitude to the prince is thoroughly calculating. Overhearing his speech of love for her, she realizes that she may be able to make use of him: he is the perfect person to escort her back to her own country. Once she is safe she will, of course, become as distant towards him as ever; but just now, she realizes, he will have to be given a little encouragement. She even gives him a big hug, a thing she would never have done at home ("... Con le braccia al collo il tenne stretto, quel ch'al Catar non avria fatto forse"). When Sacripante makes his attempt on her virtue we feel, then, that she has brought it upon herself: she has been playing upon his affections for her own selfish ends. With Stewart, Angelica's selfish motives are played down, and furthermore, when Sacripante first runs to embrace her, we are not told explicitly that she returns the embrace — only that "scho resaisf him kyndlie in that place/ Vith modest myrth, and gratius cumlie cheir." Stewart's emphasis is very different from Ariosto's. At an even earlier stage than this we find Stewart expressing sympathy for Angelica's ill fortune in having to spend most of her time escaping from unwanted suitors:

This lustie dame obtiene culd na repoys
for hot persute of euerie voidie knyght.    (II, 69-70)

This reaction to Angelica's situation, though probably universal among modern readers, was rare among sixteenth century critics. Later, Stewart even makes a flattering comparison between Angelica and the Emilia of Chaucer's \textit{Knight's Tale}. But this sympathetic presentation is not sustained. We have noted already that Stewart waxes lyrical in his

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Ariosto, \textit{Orlando Furioso}, I, 57-8. Instead of toning down Sacripante's words to make them concur with his previous presentation of him, Stewart makes them more blunt and colloquial than they are in the original.

\textsuperscript{14} E.g. McDiarmid (op. cit. note 3 above), p. 17.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Roland Furioso}, II, 278-304; Ariosto, \textit{Orlando Furioso}, I, 49-55.

[112]
JOHN STEWART AND ORLANDO FURIOSO

description of the bliss of Medoro and Angelica in the enjoyment of their mutual love. But what we have not noted is that, when Angelica first falls in love with Medoro, Stewart allows himself a comment, still more explicitly disapproving than Ariosto's, about her lack of taste in accepting the love of a poor squire after rejecting that of the many mighty champions who have performed valiant deeds for her sake:

In doube thou baths Quyting the fontane cleir.
The gouldeyn lyn, helas, quhy dois thow lois
To catche ane frog And tyng the perle but peir?
The Trojan Creseid thow presentis heir,
Quhais treuth to Trustie Troyalus vas psyche;
Scho ffor ane king did change hir luifer deir.
 Bot thow elects ane vofull sempill vicht . . . (IX, 69-75)

And in the next canto:

So Medor now possessith at his vis
Bot onie merit or occasion just
The Recompans Qubilk campions did mis . . . (X, 97-99)

It is clear that Stewart's attitude to Angelica, far from being consistently sympathetic, oscillates between almost unqualified sympathy and almost total disapproval.

The Abbregement of Roland Furious has now been examined in some detail, and it should therefore be possible to suggest answers to the two main questions raised by the poem: what was Stewart's attitude to Ariosto, and to what extent does his imitation rank as a work of art in its own right? To the first question we may answer that there are several features of the Italian poem which Stewart fails to grasp, or does not attempt to reproduce. Whereas Ariosto interweaves several narrative threads—frequently tantalising his readers by breaking off one narrative at the most exciting point and passing on to another—Stewart isolates one motif, the Angelica story, and follows it through to the end. Secondly, the Scottish poet does not approve, or does not understand, Ariosto's ambiguous, shifting attitudes towards his characters: his tendency is towards simplification and conventionalization. This approach inevitably leads to inconsistencies: a given character will be treated at one point sympathetically, at another satirically, whereas in Ariosto the two attitudes always coexist, but in differing proportions according to the different circumstances. Ariosto's habit is to sketch each situation quickly and deftly and then to pass on to something else: Stewart enjoys amplifying and underlining what Ariosto merely suggests. It is not surprising that Stewart's methods result in confusion and contradictions. But if the Abbregement fails to achieve the status of a coherent work of art, it must be admitted that the
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

various parts have considerable merit. Taken separately, the complaint of Sacripante, the marriage of Medoro and Angelica, and the comic fiasco of the unholy hermit all achieve, in their different ways, a measure of distinction. Present Stewart with the task of dealing in a thorough-going manner with one of the traditional modes, and he will rise to the challenge. The fact that the various set-pieces which he attempts do not blend into a satisfying whole should not be allowed to obscure the achievement which each, individually, represents. Stewart is a versatile poet whose instinctive feeling for the niceties of diction enables him to settle himself quickly and easily into any one of a number of poetical modes. The faults of his poem are those of the courtly amateur. If he had gone back over it and corrected it he would probably have achieved more than he has: the latter parts show a better understanding of Ariostan irony, and fewer inconsistencies, than the former. But even as it stands his Abbregement is one of the more fascinating achievements of the Scots renaissance. Stewart offered to his countrymen a version of Orlando Furioso that was at least as interesting as the ones Desportes offered to his.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND,
NEW SOUTH WALES

[114]