

The Hero as a Loser

Jamaica Plain, January 29, 2006, Rev. Terry Burke

The American understanding of the heroic is associated with winning. Good triumphs through strength, brains, skill, better arms. The hero is virtually flawless, a John Wayne cowboy. Today, I want to look at a different understanding of a hero from our Western cultural tradition, Roland, a hero who loses. Perhaps this preoccupation with heroic loss stems from the losses I've endured this past month: the death of my close friend and colleague Michael Boardman, the death of our friend and fellow church member John Bianco, and the death of my mother.

Last Spring, I picked up a copy of the poem *Orlando Furioso* at a church yard sale. Orlando is Italian for Roland; *Orlando Furioso* is a 600 page poem written by the 16th century Italian courtier Ludovico Ariosto. Fausta, the director of the KidsArts program at the church, remembers reading portions of the poem in grade school in Italy, much the way schoolchildren here read Shakespeare.

Orlando Furioso was written in the Renaissance era of warring Italian city states, where courts were centers of learning and artistic patronage. The poem is set in the time of the Frankish Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (late 8th and early 9th century) and reflects chivalric ideals. It's crammed with classical learning, and feminist views are espoused. Some of the prominent knights are women, and they fight as well as the best of the men. Ariosto is endlessly inventive in his storytelling, often showing a Monty Pythonesque sense of the absurd.

For example - the beautiful Princess Angelica has been sent by her father the Emperor of Cathay to break up Charlemagne's court by having all the knight fight one other over her. Charlemagne has Angelica sequestered and she flees, pursued by two of her knight admirers. They start fighting each other over her. She escapes the knights and meets a religious hermit, who helps her by conjuring up a spirit knight to tell the fighters they are

needed by Charlemagne back home. The hermit leads Angelica to a deserted place to serve her dinner. He drugs her and takes off her clothes, but, perhaps punished by God or because of his age, he is unable to perform his dastardly deed. The hermit goes to sleep next to her, and Angelica is kidnapped by pirates who need beautiful women to satisfy a deadly orc....

Furioso in many ways seems like a modern work, with the author's vibrant personality and humor shining through. Still, it inhabits a world of magic - rings will make you invisible, horns can make all flee from their sound, and special lances can unseat all foes. The poem is in many ways similar to Edmund Spenser's English imitation, *The Fairy Queen*, though Spenser lacks Ariosto's sense of fun and all of *Furioso's* sex.

The poem has endless subplots, but the main plot lines are the war between Charlemagne's Franks and the Muslims or Saracens, and the love of the Christian knight Bradimant for the noble Muslim knight Ruggerio, even though they fight for different sides. When Ruggerio spends too much time with the female Muslim warrior Marfisa (they're just "good friends"), Bradimant tries to kill her, only to learn magically that Marfisa is a lost sister of Ruggerio. Then there is the title plot line around Orlando and his great love for Angelica (even though he's married to Alda/Auda). Orlando is first among the knights of Charlemagne, who has 12 outstanding knights or paladins who are his peers. When Angelica marries another, Orlando loses his mind and becomes "furioso," throwing off his armour. Naked, he kills a lot of innocent people as a crazed monster. You can see why Handel wrote an 18th century opera about Orlando, *great mad arias*. After weeks of Orlando's madness, during which his military prowess is sorely missed by the Christians, the knight Astolfo is taken to the moon by St. John to recover Orlando's wits (lost things go to the moon). Orlando returns to normal and becomes an exemplary knight again. Still, Orlando is a hero who loses out on his true love and temporarily loses his mind. Also, at one point Orlando and his brother-in-law Oliver are unable to control their conquering troops, who loot and rape

Orlando Furioso made me curious to read the Song of Roland (La Chanson de Roland), an epic Medieval poem about Orlando/Roland (Hroudland) about 400 years earlier. Historically, about 100 years after the great Muslim conquests, in 778, Charlemagne led a Spanish campaign. On the way home to France, Basques massacred the French army in a terrible disaster at Roncesvalles. Official annals were silent on this subject for decades, largely because the ruler had been in charge and presumably made grave errors. The Song of Roland is a heroic cover up that provides an example of Medieval spin doctoring. Still, a terrible sense of grief and loss is conveyed in Roland's death scene, and thousands of sad knights weep and faint. Especially poignant is Charlemagne's calling out for his twelve paladins - no one answers, they are all dead.

While Furioso often has a modern feel, the Song of Roland seems to be not 400 years older than the other work, but about 2,500 years older, in the world of the Iliad. The Frankish fighters seem like ancient Greek warriors with a Christian overlay. Roland's stepfather Ganelon betrays him to the Saracens for money, so that the hero remains behind with the warrior paladins as a rear guard. Attacked by an overwhelming Muslim force, Roland refuses, out of excessive bravery, to blow on his ivory horn and recall Charlemagne's main army. When Roland's forces are down to an overwhelmed handful of knights, Roland considers blowing the horn. His comrade Oliver criticizes him, saying, 'You've killed thousands by your pride and not blowing the horn, now you shamefully suggest blowing it too late.' The fighting Archbishop Turpin tells them, 'Enough already, blow the horn, and at least Charlemagne will avenge us and our bodies won't be eaten by wild pigs.'

In Roland, Muslims are the hated enemy, unlike Furioso, where Christians and Muslims often hang out together when not fighting. In Roland, Muslims are killed in repetitive formulas, thousands killed by the Frankish supermen. Actual Muslims reject any images for God, but the Song of Roland has them worshipping idols named Termagant, Apollin, and Mahomet. Legendary Archbishop Turpin of Rheims tells the troops that if they die they will go straight to Paradise with "the Holy Innocents." The Song of Roland was quoted by Pope Urban II when he preached the First Crusade in 1096.

Parts of this poem make painful reading for a 21st century person. After Charlemagne's troops capture a Muslim city, the king orders all the "idols" of the mosques AND the synagogues destroyed. When the traitor Ganelon is hanged, so are 30 of his family members. There is also a smoking gun on race in the poem. Roland shows changing attitudes on race, which was not terribly important in Greco-Roman antiquity (see Frank Snowden, Blacks in Antiquity, Harvard Univ. Press, 1970, or The Book of Acts, 8:26-39). Shortly before his death, Orlando single-handedly fights off 50,000 Black African Muslims. In Roland, we see the beginnings of a Christian/Muslim, white/black, good/evil dualism in the West.

Roland causes many deaths by his pride, just as Orlando does by becoming "furioso" out of love. Roland is portrayed as a Christ-like figure. Like Jesus, there is a darkness at noon while he dies. He bursts his forehead blood vessels finally blowing his horn, and after his extended passion, he dies praying for forgiveness. The hero Roland causes great loss of life and loses his life.

The two poems have radically different approaches to Muslims. In Orlando, Muslims are worthy adversaries, and knights gladly spent time together when not fighting. Christians and Muslims fall in love, though Muslims have to convert in order to wed. In Roland, Muslims are demonized.

In Orlando we have a hero who loses his love, his reason and mind, and his knightly conduct. In Roland he causes the deaths of his friends and dies in a warrior's passion. Orlando/Roland is a hero who loses. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, as Americans, we associate heroes with winners. One exception is "The Wall," the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., one of the truly sacred places in America.

In Roland, Archbishop Turpin kills thousands of Muslims before he dies. His successors, the American Catholic Bishops, recently called for American forces to leave Iraq in a timely manner. Roland puts a heroic spin on ruler's disastrous military campaign. At

some point U.S. forces will leave Iraq; it will be hard not to feel that we have “lost.” Certainly we should weep and faint for the dead like the Frankish army does at Roncesvalles. There are contemporary Muslim extremists who want to kill us; we need to avoid excessive pride in our military actions or becoming “furioso” in our response. Roland gives us an image of a hero who remains heroic, even in losses, by remaining true to his ideals and code of conduct. May we learn from him.