

*The Dragon and the Storm*  
The Saracen anti-knight  
in *Orlando furioso* and *Gerusalemme liberata*

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When Peter the Venerable commissioned Robert of Ketton to translate the Qur'an in 1142 CE, under the title *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*, it was with done for the express purpose of refuting Islamic doctrine and winning Muslims over to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Like many church officials of his day and for generations to come, Peter saw the Qur'an as a satanic perversion of the Bible, intended to sow discord among the Christians and spread heresy throughout the land; similarly, many contemporaneous *vitae Mahometi* viewed Muhammad as a former Christian who had "renounced his faith and preached a heresy derived from Christianity."<sup>2</sup> Some centuries later, Martin Luther similarly believed that "the mission of Islam was to bring about the total destruction of Christianity," even if it did display some admirable characteristics that could be emulated by reforming Christians.<sup>3</sup> Part of the reason for these anxieties, old and new alike, can certainly be attributed to the many similarities that exist between the two faiths, and the corresponding ease of conversion from one to the other—especially in light of the Reformation, in which many of the complaints raised against the Catholic Church mirrored sentiments found in the Qur'an. From the Catholic perspective, Europe was imploding on itself, the northern Protestant nations eager to ally themselves with the Ottoman Empire against their fellow Christians; Elizabeth I even wrote in a

1. Thomas Burman, "Tafsīr and Translation: Traditional Arabic Qur'ān Exegesis and the Latin Qur'āns of Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo," *Speculum* 73, no. 3 (1998): 704, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2887495>.

2. José Gázquez and Andrew Gray, "Translations of the Qur'an and Other Islamic Texts before Dante (Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries)," *Dante and Islam, Dante Studies*, no. 125 (2007): 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40350659>.

3. Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: a study in sixteenth-century polemics and apologetics* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 104.

letter that her religion was closer to Islam than Catholicism.<sup>4</sup> Both Protestants and Catholics claimed the Turks were God's punishment for the other side's excesses and heresies, and meanwhile the Ottomans seemed poised to overrun all Europe, defeating the Venetians at Lepanto in 1499, seizing Budapest in 1526, and laying siege to Vienna in 1532.

No wonder, then, that an important theme to appear in the literature of the period was the need for Christian unification against the infidel threat. Two of the most significant authors of Italian verse, Ludovico Ariosto (d. 1533) and Torquato Tasso (d. 1595) obliquely make this call in their re-telling of classic moments from the European literary imagination when such a unification was said to have occurred, the Carolingians' rebuttal of the Moorish invaders in *Orlando furioso* (The Frenzy of Orlando), and the First Crusade in *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered), respectively. In this context, the Muslim—typically referred to as the Saracen, the Moor, the pagan, or the infidel—exists in a very strange and not quite stable position *vis-à-vis* the Christian protagonist. To be sure, he is an outsider, an enemy of the faith, a follower of a distorted and twisted form of monotheism; yet at the same time, any observer would realize that there are numerous and undeniable similarities between themselves and the people he is engaging with. Muslims are also worshippers of a single, almighty God, they share the same esteem for personal honor and dignity that the Christians profess, and they are worthy adversaries on the battlefield. The fragile nature of the line that divides believer from infidel is a constant site of discomfort in these narratives; at times, the one is not easily distinguished from the other, and these categories of belonging are not so firm that they cannot be disrupted.

This essay seeks to examine the literary figure of the Saracen in these works as an "Other" against whom the Christians must struggle if they wish to preserve their faith and civilization from disaster. Such a topic is, of course, far too vast to be undertaken in a short study, so we will be limited here to discussing a distinctive type that appears within this repertoire of characters: the bestial and monstrous Saracen. Although all Saracens are liminal characters to a degree, given their existence on the borders of a Christianity that they were once members of and to which they could, perhaps, be once again restored (more on that later), the bestial Saracen is particularly so, in that he not only treads the border between good and evil, order and chaos, and justice and tyranny, but indeed poses the question of what it means to be human at all. Typologically, they should be the quintessential anti-humans; if civilized man is distinguished by his virtue, eloquence, reason, and piety, the monstrous Saracen will be correspondingly immoral, inarticulate, irrational, and impious. If the paragon of nobility is the knight-errant, so the Saracen should provide the anti-knight, a character who twists

4. Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 123.

knighthood into a parody of its true self.

Such a figure is found in the characters of Rodomonte in the *Orlando furioso* and Argante in the *Gerusalemme liberata*. They are very distinctive personalities among the Saracen host, for the majority of their heroes are distinguished by very positive, sympathetic traits: courage in battle, honorable comportment, intelligence, and the power to command; as Esolen says in his introduction to the *Gerusalemme liberata*, none of the Saracen rulers are an embarrassment to obey.<sup>5</sup> These features are necessary to make them worthy adversaries for the Christians. In his *Discourses on the art of poetry*, Tasso writes that epic poetry must feature subjects “of the first rank of nobility and excellence” if they are to display the “heroic virtues” the genre demands of them.<sup>6</sup> However, Rodomonte and Argante are both presented as utterly deficient in redeeming qualities; they are the anti-heroes of the anti-heroes. Arrogant and prideful to the extreme, they recognize no authority but their own, enforced by their brute strength; the only god they serve is their own glory. In battle, they surrender their reason to rage, while at court, they challenge their own masters. While they may be wonderful to look at as physical specimens, they are morally detestable brutes who deserve nothing but to be brought to justice—the true Others of the narrative.

In principle, these Saracen types are best read reflexively, that is, they do not exist for their own sake, but rather provide a mirror by which the heroes of the story (and their audience) may confront the struggles and challenges that await themselves and their communities. However, in the hands of Ariosto and Tasso, the bestial Saracen emerges as a figure in his own right, thereby complicating and enriching the moral problems embedded in the narrative and multiplying the possible readings it has to offer. Although they were living and writing in an atmosphere of virulent anti-Islamic sentiment (hardly avoidable given the times), it seems clear that both poets take a much more nuanced and indeed ambivalent view towards these characters, who begin from a common typological basis but then grow and diverge in radically different ways as they pass through the story. In doing so, they cease to function merely as adversarial mirrors for the Christian protagonists and become something more akin to doppelgängers, embodiments of being in the realm of alterity, in possibility, in the choices that might have been made. The Christians’ encounter with the Other, then, ceases to be a meeting of opposites, the knight versus the anti-knight for example, and morphs into a dialogic relationship of alternative selves, in which neither party is in full control and is thus forced to acknowledge the other’s position as ‘the I that could have been—and may yet become.’

5. Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered (Gerusalemme liberata)*, trans. Anthony M. Esolen (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 5.

6. Lawrence F. Rhu, *The Genesis of Tasso’s Narrative Theory* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 108–109.

The *Orlando furioso* was published in 1532, the same year the Ottomans were at the gates of Vienna. Responding to the subsequent call for Christian solidarity, most of the poem's dramatic tension is found in the relationships between various members of the Christian community, while the Muslim characters are comparatively featureless, their relationships unremarkable, with some notable exceptions to be discussed presently. As figures like Orlando, Charlemagne, Marsilio, Rinaldo, Ferraù, the kings and knights of Spain, France, the Italian states, the British Isles, and Scandinavia scramble to unite against their common foe, the united Saracen forces take advantage of this disarray to lay siege to Paris. Of the leader of this assault, the Moorish king Agramante, we are told very little, only that he is young and seeks revenge for his father's death (I.1), shows some tactical acumen in war (xiv.65–67), and is a good mediator who listens to his champions and commands their respect, as seen in his arbitration of the dispute between Ruggiero, Mandricardo, Rodomonte, and Gradasso (xxx.21). In short, he is a good enemy, brave, skillful, dedicated, and dangerous, but there is not much beyond that to be either praised or reviled, no personal foibles or depravations, no wanton cruelty or blasphemous impiety. In fact, his motives for going to war are grounded on principles that would be immediately fathomable and even render him a sympathetic character for any reader—any prince worth his salt would attempt to avenge his father's death, be he Christian or Muslim. Thus, it is not so much the nefarious purposes of the invading force that gives the poem its moral urgency, but rather the need for the Christians to unite in the face of a common foe.

There are, of course, a number of Saracen heroes who show much richer personalities than Agramante, but they fall within a character type that casts them in a very different light from that of the bestial Other embodied by Rodomonte and Argante. The issue that surrounds these characters and gives them depth is the prospect of conversion or domestication, i.e., the prospect of being neutralized as an outside threat. Such is the case of Ruggiero and Marfisa, two magnificent, honorable fighters who provide no end of headaches for the Christians until they eventually convert and join the other side. Conversion is a powerful literary and rhetorical tool in the hands of the poet, for it is a two-fold gesture that simultaneously affirms the Christian message of universal redemption while undermining the Saracens' claim to moral legitimacy. Rather than followers of a genuine faith, these Saracens are understood within the usual trope as fallen or misguided Christians. If they show themselves to be principled, virtuous people by nature, conversion should be a natural, almost automatic process; thus we see that Marfisa, when she learns of her Christian parentage, immediately converts, while her brother Ruggiero takes only enough time as is needed to complete his sworn duties to his liege Agramante so he can then defect with his honor intact. Both hero and heroine are strong characters who gain a lot of depth as Christians *in potentia*, instinctual believers who, like other Christian sects, have gone astray but may be led back into the fold. The chivalrous comportment of Marfisa and Ruggiero makes this possibil-

ity immediately manifest in our minds as their characters develop in the story—they aren’t bad people at all, and they could indeed be brought over if they could just see reason. Rodomonte, unfortunately, is a character incapable of reason, and he is thus immediately excluded from such a charitable outcome.

## Rodomonte

In contrast to the noble Saracen, Rodomonte represents the untameable Other of the poem, the living embodiment of the ferocity, arrogance, and cruelty that barbarizes the Saracens and justifies their slaughter. This alienating portrayal is accomplished through a series of images and references that cast him in the realm of the sub-human and even demonic. This paradigm needs little explanation: if Christianity is the natural state of those who are guided by their rational souls and incline towards wisdom, virtue, and nobility (Petrarch was not alone in claiming that Plato would have been Christian if he had only been born in the right age),<sup>7</sup> disbelief is automatically the product of an unreasoning, ignoble, slavish, and spirited soul—the soul of an animal. Unlike Agramante, whose cause for the invasion is bound up with a code of honor and fealty that goes beyond religious motives, Rodomonte has come for no other reason than to slake his thirst for destruction: “He, more than anyone else at this parade, was an enemy to our Faith” (xiv.26).<sup>8</sup> Although brave and valorous in battle, he shows no sign of the refinement or moral virtue that come with civilization; in a manner that foreshadows later European portrayals of African and American colonized peoples, he is little more than a wild, savage creature, perhaps worthy of some admiration for his physical power, but ultimately a threat that, if it cannot be tamed, must be destroyed. Rodomonte’s character overflows with animal similes; he descends upon the citizens of Paris “As the tigress treats a peaceable herd . . . as the wolf treats the goats and ewes” (*la tigre de l’armento imbelle . . . o ’l lupo de le capre e de l’agnelle*, xvi.23);<sup>9</sup> elsewhere, he is likened to a wild bull, tossing the people on his horns (*egli or questo or quel leva sul corno*, xviii.19).<sup>10</sup> Even his armor is a dragon’s skin, a memento of his ancestor, the Babylonian king Nimrod, whose legendary pride in defiance of the gods adds an orgulous lineage to his person (xiv.118–19). These bestial characteristics help explain his super-human strength and his seeming invulnerability to fatigue, pain, or toil, which is immediately evident upon his entrance to the field of battle in Canto xiv:

7. Francesco Petrarca, “On his own ignorance and that of many others,” in *Invectives*, ed. David Marsh, The I Tatti Renaissance Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 321–22.

8. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Guido Waldman (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 140. All English citations, unless otherwise noted, are from this prose translation.

9. *Ibid.*, 168.

10. *Ibid.*, 196.

He took the moat at a rush, indeed he flew at it, up to his neck in water and slime. Mud-stained and soaked through, he plunged into the flames and stones, arrows and slings like a wild boar in the reedy plains of our Mallea, which uses its chest and snout and tusks to break passages wide open wherever it goes. Bearing high his shield, the Saracen advanced unshaken, scorning Heaven, let alone the wall.<sup>11</sup> (xiv.119–20)

A few stanzas later, he comes across a trench, where we are treated to another amazing display of strength that combines avian, canine, and feline similitudes:

*il re di Sarza (come avesse un'ala  
per ciascun de' suoi membri) levò il pondo  
di sì gran corpo e con tant'arme indosso,  
e netto si lanciò di là dal fosso.  
Poco era men di trenta piedi, o tanto,  
et egli il passò destro come un veltro,  
e fece nel cader strepito, quanto  
avesse avuto sotto i piedi il feltro.*

Rodomont, as though he had a wing attached to each limb, lifted his ponderous frame and cleared the trench at one leap—and he was in full armor. It was a good thirty feet across, and he cleared it as deftly as a greyhound, hitting the ground as soundlessly as though he had landed on felt.<sup>12</sup> (xiv.129–30)

These monstrous features of Rodomonte's character are compounded by a second layer of images that associate him with the demonic. Right after this *mirabil salto* over the trench, the French set it alight, casting the Moorish soldiers trapped inside into a horrible inferno (*l'affocata buca*, xv.4) in which they are consumed. This hellish scene is the harbinger of Rodomonte's metamorphosis into a figurative devil.

*Rivolge gli occhi a quella valle inferna;  
e quando vede il fuoco andar tant'alto,  
e di sua gente il pianto ode e lo strido,  
bestemmia il ciel con spaventoso grido.*

He turns his eyes to that infernal trench, and when he sees the flames rising most high, and hears the cries and screams of his people, he curses Heaven with a terrible roar.<sup>13</sup> (xv.5)

As he descends upon the hapless Parisians in fury, Rodomonte's victims would have been hard pressed to doubt that the Devil himself was among them: "The impious

11. Ariosto, *OF*, 151.

12. *Ibid.*, 152.

13. Translation mine.

king, master and chief of all the wicked, assuaged his wrath not only in human blood: he turned also against the houses, setting fire to the fair dwellings and desecrated shrines” (xvi.26).<sup>14</sup> These images of blood sacrifice (*sangue uman*), desecration (*profanato*), and unholiness (*empio, empietà*) build off the prior metaphor of Rodomonte as the rampaging bull to connect him with the arrival of the satanic host. A final, clearly marked simile occurs when Rodomonte attacks the palace, one hand wielding his sword while the other scatters fire: “At the gate stood the Algerian king; he head and chest were clad in glistening steel. He was like a serpent issued forth into the light of day [*come uscito di tenebre serpente*]: . . . his triple tongue vibrates, his eyes flash fire; wherever he moves every creature falls back” (xvii.9–11).<sup>15</sup>

In this menacing web of images and metaphors, Rodomonte is both animal and demon, the hornèd bull and fire-spewing snake of Satan, a raging *maledetto* who threatens not just physical ruin, but the destruction of reason and the established hierarchies of civilization and society that are its trust. Consumed by his rage, Rodomonte is unable or unwilling to distinguish (*discernere*) the master from the servant (*né al servo né al signore*), the righteous from the sinner (*al giusto, al peccatore*), nor between sex, station, or age (*sessò, ordine, etade*), a move that essentially strips the established codes of warfare and chivalry of any meaning or purpose. The prospect of such total anarchy and chaos provides the moral urgency needed to justify Ariosto’s call for harmony among the Christians; like Domitian and Caligula, Attila and the Huns, the arrival of Rodomonte and the Saracens are a sign from God that “our sins have passed the bounds of forgiveness” (xvii.1), and salvation is only possible through unity and reform.<sup>16</sup> The question of Rodomonte’s redeemability is never asked; unlike other the Saracen knights, the only sympathy or affect that can arise between the reader and Rodomonte is the same kind of awe one holds for a massive storm or a powerful animal. The narrator expresses such (grudging) admiration when Rodomonte, finally realizing that no more damage can be done, escapes by swimming down the Seine in full armor.

*Con tutte l’arme andò per mezzo l’acque,  
come s’intorno avesse tante galle.  
Africa, in te pare a costui non nacque,  
ben che d’Anteo ti vanti e d’Anniballe.*

In full armor, he breasted the water as though he were buoyed up with air-bladders. I tell you, Africa, though you may boast of Anteus and Hannibal, you never bore a man the like of Rodomont.<sup>17</sup> (xviii.24)

14. Ariosto, *OF*, 169.

15. *Ibid.*, 178.

16. *Ibid.*, 177.

17. *Ibid.*, 196.



Rodomonte, then, is a force worthy of our fear and awe, but never to be trusted. With no capacity for kindness, no comprehension of nobility, and no sense of piety, he is little more than a rampaging animal, beyond help and beyond redemption.

Or is he? Up to this point, Ariosto has deployed a colorful, but anticipated, series of metaphors to exile Rodomonte from our sympathetic imagination and establish him as the embodied agent of blasphemy and chaos, manifest in this context as the Saracen threat. If this was the extent of his story, he could be easily written off as a stock character with no real personality of his own, existing in the work solely to motivate the plea for Christian solidarity implicit in the poem and provide the heroes a worthy adversary against whom they may prove their mettle. However, right after his escape from Paris, Rodomonte, though invincible in combat, reveals a vulnerability in a form that might not come as a surprise to readers of medieval romances: he is capable of love. As he pulls himself from the riverbank, we see that the one thing that can clear his mind of rage is the thought of his betrothed Doralice, for when he sees her servant the dwarf approaching, his features smooth (*serenò la fronte*) and his spirit glows within (*e si senti brillar dentro il coraggio*, xviii.32); yet when he is told that she has been lost to another man, he flies into such a rage it prompts another stanza-long simile from the poet:

Imagine a tigress, when she has gone in vain into her empty lair and visited every corner of it, and finally realizes that her darling cubs have been taken from her: she will blaze up in such a passion, her anger will take her to such lengths that neither mountain nor river, neither night's darkness, nor hail-storm nor even distance can restrain the hatred which drives her in pursuit of the predator. Thus was the Saracen, goaded to madness.<sup>18</sup> (xviii.35–36)

This display of rage both reflects what we already know about Rodomonte and reveals a new dimension in his character. As a creature ruled by his passions, or in Plato's terms, the concupiscence and irascibility of the animal spirit, we can expect such violence and ardor to emerge from the jealous man. However, this is the first time we have seen him in love, and to be capable of loving is indicative of a certain degree of nobility. The title character of the poem, Orlando, is a paragon of chivalry who is cast into frenzied state hardly distinguishable from Rodomonte's when he sees the evidence of professed love between the Saracen Medoro and his beloved Angelica. In a reverse movement, Rodomonte shows signs that Love has awakened some latent potentiality within him when, in his search for Doralice, he encounters Ippalca with Ruggiero's horse, and finds himself at a loss: "He had sworn to seize by force the first steed he came upon . . . but he would have deemed it wrong to seize him from a damsel.

18. Ariosto, *OF*, 197.



And yet he longed to possess him, and was in two minds (*in dubbio stasse*)” (xxiii.34).<sup>19</sup> Doubt is not an emotion one would associate with Rodomonte, nor is this hesitancy to do wrong to a woman, he who had just so indiscriminately slaughtered the Parisians irregardless of sex. Again, in the next scene, another unexpected act: in the middle of fighting his rival Mandricardo, he is persuaded by Doralice to lay down his arms and declare a truce for the common good of the Saracen cause (xxiv.113), and even as the conflict grows among the Saracen champions, Rodomonte is unwilling to let his love of battle overcome this pledge. Arisoto writes: “But today Rodomont surpassed Job: curbing his ferocity and arrogance, he refused battle—and he the most persistent seeker after broils!” (xxvi.92).<sup>20</sup>

Just as Love is the only force able to tame and redirect Rodomonte’s rage, so it is the agent of his abasement and eventual fall. He has already been neutralized as a threat to the Christians; since hearing of Doralice’s betrayal, the only fighting he has done has been against his fellow Saracens. The next blow comes when he is publicly rejected by Doralice for Mandricardo; astonished and humiliated, Rodomonte quits Agramante’s service and resolves to return to his native Algiers. He takes to drink and becomes a staunch misogynist, hurling such slanderous curses against women that Ariosto the narrator is compelled to disavow himself from such sentiments (xxvii.122–24). His passions play another trick on him when, on his way through Provence, he meets Isabella and falls in love with her. Not surprisingly, she spurns his advances, and when she realizes that he is prepared to rape her to satisfy himself, she tricks him into murdering her instead.

This series of blows that cast Rodomonte into committing ever more shameful acts displays in full force the way Love is capable of both ennobling and debasing the lover. His longing for Doralice inspires him to adhere to universal principles of honor and loyalty he had heretofore ignored; this pattern conforms with a model of sublime love that had long been the subject of medieval love lyric and romance, which Ariosto’s work nostalgically invokes. At the same time, his inability to love properly reflects the debased, crude, and animal-like aspect of his personality, a trope which is also an important component of love-theory that can be traced at least as far back as Plato’s *Symposium*. Among the many theories of love suggested in this work, the theory of Pausanias, is the idea that virtuous love will always elevate and honor the lover, while he who loves vulgarly will dishonor himself.<sup>21</sup> The Neoplatonic philosopher Avicenna (d. 1037) has a more elaborate version of this theory in his *Treatise on Love*, in which he says:

19. Ariosto, *OF*, 270.

20. *Ibid.*, 318.

21. Plato, *Plato on love: Lysis, Symposium, Phaedrus, Alcibiades, with selections from Republic, and Laws*, ed. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 185b–185c, p. 42.

If a man loves a beautiful form with animal desire, he deserves reproof, even condemnation and the charge of sin, as, for instance, those who commit unnatural adultery and in general people who go astray. But whenever he loves a pleasing form with an intellectual consideration, in the manner we have explained, then this is to be considered as an approximation to nobility and an increase in goodness.<sup>22</sup>

In his uncontrolled and uncontrollable reaction to Love, Rodomonte demonstrates his true limits as a thinking, rational creature. He *is* capable of loving “with an intellectual consideration,” as we see in his unexpected chivalrous turn. However, these moments are fleeting, and it is ultimately the spirited animal component of his soul that wins out in the end, precipitating his self-defeat. From the invincible warrior capable of storming a city single-handed, Rodomonte has degenerated into a drunkard and killer of women, a sad parody of knighthood, as he well knows. The death of Isabella casts him into such shame and self-loathing (*vergogna e scorno*, xxix.30) he withdraws from errantry altogether, choosing instead to construct a tomb for her and to live like a troll at the nearby bridge, challenging any who would dare to cross; in this way he hopes he might be cast into the water and be absolved of his sins. His emasculation is not yet entirely complete; that distinction lies in the hands of another woman, Bradamante, to be carried out. In revenge for Isabella, she confronts Rodomonte, unhorses him, and strips him of his pride and joy, the arms and armor of Nimrod. It is perhaps fruitful to speculate that the old Rodomonte would never have consented to engage in any contest that could separate him from his armor while he was still alive, but now, he feels constrained to follow his word and the rules of combat, even if it means the ultimate debasement:

The pagan remained dumb with amazement that a woman should have unseated him. He could not, or would not, answer—he was as one crazed, stupefied (*pien di stupore e folle*). Silent and glum he picked himself up, took five or six steps, then pulled off his shield, his helmet and all the rest of his armor and threw them against a rock. Then he vanished alone and on foot, not omitting first to instruct one of his pages to go and carry out the promise about the captives, according to his word.<sup>23</sup> (xxxv.50–51)

In this act of chivalry, Rodomonte loses the thing that gave him his terrible strength: the bestial-satanic fury, symbolized by his dragon-skin armor, that respected no law, human or divine. Without this protection, Rodomonte is just a fallen knight, strong, but beatable. Following his defeat, he takes a vow to forswear all combat and live for a hermit for a year, a month, and a day (“Thus knights in those days used to punish

22. Emil L. Fackenheim, “A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sina,” *Mediaeval Studies* 7 (1945): 221.

23. Ariosto, *OF*, 427.

themselves,” XLVI.102),<sup>24</sup> and following this penance, challenges Ruggiero to a final showdown, even though the war is lost and Agramante long dead. Without his armor, Rodomonte is helpless against Ruggiero’s blows, and although he refuses to surrender, he essentially bleeds out before he is finally dispatched—an ignoble end, although perhaps the only one he could have aspired to at this point. So ends his story, and the *Orlando furioso*.

Perhaps more than any other Saracen in this story, Rodomonte shows himself to possess surprising depths of character, despite the highly stylized language and imagery that accompanies his first major appearance at the siege of Paris. It is not an exaggeration to say that he is more monster than human, a slave to his passions rather than master of them; yet his simultaneous fall and redemption at the hands of Love fosters an uneasy ambivalence around his character. Is his death an act of passion, brought about by the same rage and bloodlust that propelled him through the streets of Paris while slaughtering innocents, or is it a pre-meditated decision, a voluntary self-destruction by a man who has finally come to realize what it means to be a knight, and that he is unworthy of such a title? He did, after all, have 396 days to think about it. If he is aware that, as far as honor goes, his life is forfeit (as Bradamante tells him, “Why do you make the innocent do penance for your crime, you brute (*tu bestial*)? It is with your own blood that you should placate her [Isabella],” xxxv.42), it stands to reason that to die in combat with an avowed enemy would be his only way out of an untenable existence that could still recover his dignity, even if the war is over and the gesture in itself meaningless. At the end of the day, Rodomonte conforms with the image of the Saracen Other in that he is sub-human, a monstrous creature who has no capacity for noble aspirations; yet when Love’s ennobling touch strikes his heart, he is first tamed, shamed, and neutralized, then effects his own destruction, as if he knows that there is no place for him in this liminal state between nobility and depravity.

## Argante

Like Ariosto, Tasso relies on fairly standard character types that quickly identify his Saracens as members of the foreign Other. In Canto 11, we meet Ismeno, Alete, Clorinda, and Argante, each representing a specific kind of Saracen that the Christians must confront. Ismeno and Alete are probably the worst sort of person to be found among the Saracens; the former a sorcerous convert to Islam who “confounds the two religions ignorantly” (11.2), the latter a sycophant and liar “who most accuses when he seems to praise” (11.58).<sup>25</sup> Both characters maintain the image of the Sara-

24. Ariosto, *OF*, 568.

25. Tasso, *GL*, 36, 47.

cen as the worst agent of fraud, the liar and falsifier, as seen in Dante's placement of Muhammad and Ali with the sowers of discord in the *Divina commedia*;<sup>26</sup> this, of course, may be contrasted with Godfrey, who responds to Alete's flattery with "frank sentiments in simple words and few" (II.81).<sup>27</sup> Clorinda, like Ariosto's Bradamante and Marfisa, is a valiant heroine who follows the way of Diana, "for in the field too chastity can stand" (II.39).<sup>28</sup> She displays a nobility of character that immediately suggests her internal goodness, for even when fighting the Crusaders she insists on respecting the laws of combat and chivalric conduct; she argues, for instance, against Ismeno's suggestion that he protect the city of Jerusalem by placing a charmed icon in the al-Aqsa mosque, saying that such a deed is sacrilegious and the king would do better to trust in forthright steel (II.51). Towards the end of her life, she discovers that she was born a Christian (as was Marfisa) and accepts baptism on her death-bed, thereby confirming her status as a true believer who had the misfortune of being ignorant of her lineage.

Tasso's answer to Rodomonte is Argante the Circassian:

*impaziente, inessorabil, fero  
ne l'arme infaticabile ed invitto,  
d'ogni dio sprezzatore, e che ripone  
ne la spada sua legge e sua raggione*

impatient and inexorable and fierce,  
tireless in fighting, invincible—in short,  
despiser of every God, he puts his trust  
in might—his sword determines what is just.<sup>29</sup> (II.59)

Like Rodomonte, Argante has no respect for natural hierarchies or sacred law; the only thing he values is physical strength: "nor does he think or care / about the ancient rules of war he breaches" (II.95).<sup>30</sup> Believing himself to be the strongest, he is extraordinarily arrogant, a feature that appears time and time again in the epic, such as when he challenges Crusaders to a man-to-man duel: "The proud man smiled, and scornfully replied, / 'What's Tancred up to then? Where does he stay? / He threatens war on heaven, then has to hide" (VII.85),<sup>31</sup> or in the midst of battle: "the fierce Argante starts to jeer, / 'The first one's down—who's next to meet his fate?'" (XI.36).<sup>32</sup> More prevalent still are his bestial characteristics; epithets such as "savage" (*fero*), "wild" (*feroce*),

26. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xxviii.31–32, p. 434–35.

27. Tasso, *GL*, 52.

28. *Ibid.*, 43.

29. *Ibid.*, 47.

30. *Ibid.*, 55.

31. *Ibid.*, 151.

32. *Ibid.*, 220.

“raging” (*irato*), and “mad” (*folle*) are often coupled with his name, and at various occasions he is likened to a wounded bear (vi.45), an enraged bull (vii.55), and a ravenous wolf, thirsting for the blood of his enemy (vii.106). In his first fight against Tancredi, the contest is depicted—or at least understood by the Christian onlookers—as a battle between unleashed fury and controlled strength, between passion and skill: “would fury defeat virtue? would patient strength compel the neck of arrogance to bend?”<sup>33</sup> (vi.55). That Argante is furious and reckless as a fighter is certainly beyond doubt: he “longs for revenge with such inflamed devotion / risk and defense are a forgotten notion” (vi.45).<sup>34</sup> However, Tancredi too loses his cool, abandoning stratagem and skill to wild fury (*Vinta da l’ira è la ragione e l’arte*, vi.48), and so the two are evenly matched. This establishes a parallel relationship between the two characters that will grow more significant as the plot continues. Perhaps the most stunning example of the beast within Argante is when Tancred taunts him in the lead-up to their battle:

“You were brought up in a thieving Arab horde  
or some other barbarous crew. Go flee  
the light, go to the woods to find your lair  
and with the other beasts be cruel there!”

The pagan bit his lip, consumed with fury—  
he was not used to suffer such talk before—  
and wanted to say—but the sound came out confused (*ma il suono esce confuso*)  
and garbled in an animal growl or roar.<sup>35</sup> (*sí come strido d’animal che rugge*) (vi.38)

In this moment, Argante is so overcome by his rage he literally loses his power of speech and can only roar in inarticulate fury, a sure sign for Tasso’s audience that he is, like animals and madmen, irrational. As in the case of Rodomonte, it is the irrational element that is the most threatening from the Christian perspective. Sane enemies can be negotiated with, and even won over; wild animals must be destroyed. It is important to note, however, that while Argante is guilty of a sacrilegious pride that reaches Nimrodian levels (he is twice compared to the Babylonian monarch, although he is never connected to him by direct bloodline),<sup>36</sup> there is little of the demonic imagery that so distinguished Rodomonte’s assault on the city of Paris; when it does occur, it is more intended in a cosmic sense, in that the denizens of Hell are aiding the Saracens as a whole (“Syrians and demons still pursue their chase,” vii.120),<sup>37</sup> rather than in association with a particular knight among the Saracens, many of whom are brave and heroic in their own right.

33. Tasso, *GL*, 122.

34. *Ibid.*, 120.

35. *Ibid.*, 118.

36. *Ibid.*, II.91; vii.69.

37. *Ibid.*, 158.

This brings us to an important distinction between Rodomonte and Argante, for while the former is shown to lack the ability to govern his passions and eventually falls prey to them, the latter remains master of himself throughout his life, devoted to the acquisition of honor and glory, letting himself go only in battle, where his rage can best serve him. The fact that he places himself above all others and lives only for his self-glorification is certainly a signal that the code he lives by is foolish, vainglorious, and rather blasphemous, a distorted inversion of proper chivalric values—but it is a code nonetheless, and he follows it with unwavering self-discipline. In addition, it makes him a completely self-sufficient entity, a free agent who lives the law of his own diktat. So sure is he of his own power, he seeks to write his own destiny and forge his own path, as seen in the following speech to Aladine, the king of Jerusalem:

What of this life of mine? A settled case—  
fixed by the fates above, decided on—  
but not my fall! I shall not die without  
the thrust of sword, and leave my fame in doubt! (VI.5)

Instead of fate and fortune, my right arm  
can grant you triumph in this war, and end it! (VI.8)

But I, I am sufficient for myself;  
this hand alone secures my liberty.  
Then while the others rest here, let me go  
down to the plain for battle. I shall be  
a private knight (*privato cavalier*), and not your champion.<sup>38</sup> (VI.13)

Such independence and commitment to self-determined principles are not unbecoming features in a knight, and they are the cause for much admiration among the Crusaders. Most importantly, however, they shield Argante from the arrows of Love, which had proved so fatal to Rodomonte. Argante is unmarried and never shows the slightest interest in women, save Clorinda, whom he respects and admires for her courage and prowess in war. He is thus an intractable force; moved neither by the virtue of his opponents nor the beauty of a beloved, he suffers no lapses and remains as dangerous and determined by the end of the poem as he was at its outset. His immunity to any outside influence allows him to establish and live by the criteria by which his life is to be valued by himself and by others. In this way, Argante treads an alternative path of virtue that is created solely through the power of his word, awarding him the esteem of his peers and rivals, in spite of the self-idolizing pride from which it stems. He distinguishes himself from the knights of the Crusaders in this regard. Tancredi, for example, is far more erratic than he. His love for Clorinda paralyzes him in the midst of combat, causing another to die in his place, leads him to imprisonment

38. Tasso, *GL*, 112–13.

at Armida's fortress, and forces him to miss his appointed duel with Argante. On the other end of the spectrum, Rinaldo's abandonment of the Crusaders in a moment of wounded pride all but spells disaster for their cause.

As in the case of Rodomonte, Argante's character deepens dramatically upon the unintended murder of a woman, that of Clorinda by Tancredi. This is a continuation of the series of inversions that link Tancredi to the beastly Rodomonte, while Argante's oath to avenge her elevates him in nobility, tempering his wanton thirst for violence with the moral vehemence of a just cause. In light of this shameful act, Argante's scorn for his enemy has grown twofold. Upon seeing him arrive at the walls of Jerusalem, surrounded by siege towers, he greets him thus:

You've come late, and you haven't come alone!  
All right, I'll fight you, I'll try myself once more,  
though you don't come now as a champion  
but an inventor of machines of war.  
Good for you! Make a shield of your own men,  
depend on weapons never seen before.  
But you, brave murderer of women, shall  
not flee death by my hands!<sup>39</sup> (xix.3)

With these words, Argante attacks Tancredi on the basis of the very chivalric principles he is supposed to live by, in which no knight should seek protection from other men, place his trust in machines, and certainly not be killing women! This second complaint is an echo of Ariosto, who devotes seven stanzas of the *Orlando Furioso* to proclaim the ignominy of gunpowder weapons, which he calls a despicable technology straight from the Devil's hands:

Wicked, ugly invention, how did you find a place in human hearts? You have destroyed military glory, and dishonored the profession of arms; valor and martial skill are now discredited, so that often the miscreant will appear a better man than the valiant.<sup>40</sup> (*OF*, xi.26)

Tasso also invokes Ariosto in his description of the Crusaders' sack of Jerusalem, a bloody, merciless event that recalls the ignoble deeds of Rodomonte in Paris—now it is the Christians, represented by Tancredi, who are murdering women and children (Tancredi does not even refute Argante's accusation of being an *uccisor de le femine*). This second inversion is coupled with another intertextual reference when Argante turns back to gaze on the walls of the city he had so long defended, now lost to the Crusaders, a gesture that recalls Aeneas's sentiments as he surveys the sack of Troy:

39. Tasso, *GL*, 358.

40. Ariosto, *OF*, 109.



I'm thinking of the city, of the queen  
of all Judea and its ancient reign,  
now falling to defeat. And I have been  
a prop against its ruin, all in vain;  
and that your head, which heaven destines for me,  
will be a small revenge for my disdain.<sup>41</sup> (xix.10)

And Aeneas:

O final flames  
that take my people, ashes of my Ilium,  
be you my witness that, in your disaster,  
I did not shun the Danaan blades or battle:  
if fate had willed my end, my hand had earned it.<sup>42</sup> (ii.579–583)

When Tancredi and Argante first crossed swords, they were clearly marked by a set of typical features that distinguished the noble, civilized, and chivalrous from the barbaric, bestial, and destructive, the same set of features found in the *Orlando furioso*. However, in that first battle, Tancredi was forced to fall to Argante's level, to fight fury with fury. This begins a patters in which the Christian hero sinks while the Saracen rises, culminating in the final contest in which the roles of the two combatants have effectively been reversed relative to each other. Whereas before, Argante fought as a beast, his reason given way to rage, he is now a practitioner of a martial art that is as fine as Tancredi's: "but proud Argante, open and erect, / shows in his different style as fine an art" (*dimostra arte simile, atto diverso*, xix.12), and he fights with a moral outrage guiding his strokes.<sup>43</sup> Although he is finally bested, Argante demonstrates a similar force of will and determination that we saw in Rodomonte; unwilling to admit defeat, he bleeds from his wounds until he collapses under his own weight, a fitting end for the indomitable knight. As he dies, Tasso offers a small eulogy to his memory that would not seem out of place had he given it in honor of one of the fallen Christians:

*Moriva Argante, e tal moria qual visse:  
minacciava morendo e non languia.  
Superbi, formidabili e feroci  
gli ultimi moti fur, l'ultime voci.*

Argante died, and died just as he lived:  
menacing to the last, and mightily;

41. Tasso, *GL*, 360.

42. Allen Mandelbaum, *The Aeneid of Virgil: a verse translation* (Toronto; New York: Bantam Books, 2004), 42.

43. Tasso, *GL*, 360.

formidable and fierce and proud in death.  
Such were his final acts, his final breath.<sup>44</sup> (xix.26)

It seems as though Argante, originally presented in the same mold as his predecessor Rodomonte, has found his own way to dignity. Through a steadfast devotion to principles of honor, glory, and self-sufficiency founded on the integrity of his own word, he lives an exemplary ideal to which few knights could have aspired. Tancredi, his mortal enemy in life, is very aware of this honor, as he chastises his companions:

“We leave the valorous  
Argante here to be the prey of crows?  
For God’s sake let’s not cheat him of his due—  
a decent burial, and praises too.  
With that mute, bloodless trunk I have no more  
to battle; and he died, brave to the last.  
It is then right that we should grant him honor,  
earth’s only legacy when life is past. (xix.116)<sup>45</sup>

While Tancredi clearly remains the hero of the poem, and Argante the villain, it is remarkable they have found themselves in a position in which Argante can accuse the Christian hero of moral degeneracy—and seem to be in the right. To return to the doppelgänger metaphor of the introduction, it seems arguable that Argante succeeds in living the chivalric ideal in a way that eludes his counterpart for the majority of the poem, and it is only through the process of vanquishing his Saracen alternate that Tancredi can gain the experience and strength of character he needs in order to rise up to the standard he is meant to epitomize. A similar parallel exists between Rodomonte and Orlando, who both lose their minds in the frenzy of carnal desire. Here, however, it is only God’s intervention, and not personal fortitude, that can restore their sanity, and only the pious Orlando, of course, is destined to receive such grace.

This final point may help solidify an important site of divergence between the two poems and also indicate the anchor that provides their common referent. The bestial Saracen, the anti-knight of the *Orlando furioso*, is marked by two great flaws: his proud scorn of any higher power, and an uncontrollable appetite for violence and pleasure. It is the latter that proves his physical undoing, but it is the former that places him outside the prospect of redemption. Other Christian knights are no better at controlling their passions than he, but thanks to their faith, they are given a second chance. Rodomonte is then a powerful example of to what depths knighthood can degenerate, if it is not bolstered by righteous belief and a humble spirit. He shows

44. Tasso, *GL*, 363.

45. *Ibid.*, 381.

himself possessed of all the other virtues required of a champion, and he even demonstrates his capacity to behave nobly, but as long as his arrogance places himself above all others, there is no hope of salvation. Let him then be a lesson to all knights, that without piety, their strength and courage make them their own worst enemies.

Argante is a much more ambivalent character. He, too, is cursed with the same irreligious vanity of Rodomonte, but it is moderated and tempered by an iron-clad devotion to his own honor that no knight on the Christian side can match, save Godfrey. By elevating himself through such a code, he proves that there is an alternative path to nobility that must be acknowledged by even his most bitter enemies. His death, out of all the Saracens, is given the most heroic conclusion, and the most touching eulogy—a fact that cannot help but surprise when one recalls his introduction as the most wild and godless of them all. In providing such a model, he ceases to be an example of what the knight should avoid and rather demonstrates in stunningly humanist fashion what the man who is his own god can make of himself. It is a value totally foreign to the traditional rubric of the pious chevalier, and for that reason he simply cannot succeed in a contest that is all about being on God's side; it is inevitable that he who recognizes no master should fall to Tancredi, who is observant of a higher power. Yet we cannot help but be reminded of the speech of God to Adam in Pico della Mirandola's *On the dignity of man*, which reads:

In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. . . . Thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. That canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine.<sup>46</sup>

It is possible that, from a stock figure of the bestial Saracen, Tasso has transformed the sacrilegious anti-knight into a self-created and self-actualized figure, who refuses to his dying breath to abide by the literary categories and conventions that would define him. Nobility can be his with or without divine grace, a fact that even the Crusaders are compelled to acknowledge. If Rodomonte is the image of a fallen knight, Argante suggests the possibility of redefining the categories of what makes a knight in the first place. If such a reading holds, the criteria that define the potential outcomes between Muslim-Christian encounters—conversion, nobility, brutishness, and otherness—are effectively sidestepped, allowing new possibilities of relation that are contingent upon independently defined values.

46. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 5.

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