PATRICIA A. PARKER

Inescapable Romance

Studies in the Poetics of a Mode

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Patricia A. Parker

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To My Family

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Dedications are meant, perhaps, to be singular, but this dedication must be made to my family, in every sense.

Inescapable Romance

Studies in the Poetics of a Mode

ABBREVIATIONS

Od.	*Odyssey*
Aen.	*Aeneid*
Met.	*Metamorphoses*
ST	*Summa Theologiae*
Inf.	*Inferno*
Purg.	*Purgatorio*
Par.	*Paradiso*
OF	*Orlando furioso*
FQ	*The Faerie Queene*
PL	*Paradise Lost*
PR	*Paradise Regained*

Introduction

> Thus at length the magic of the old romances was perfectly dissolved. They began with reflecting an image indeed of the feudal manners, but an image magnified and distorted by unskilful designers. Common sense being offended with these perversions of truth and nature . . . the next step was to have recourse to *allegories*. . . . Under this form the tales of faery kept their ground, and even made their fortune at court. . . . But reason, in the end . . . drove them off the scene, and would endure these *lying wonders*, neither in their own proper shape, nor as masked in figures.
>
> Henceforth, the taste of wit and poetry took a new turn: And *fancy*, that had wantoned it so long in the world of fiction, was now constrained, against her will, to ally herself with strict truth, if she would gain admittance into reasonable company.
>
> What we have gotten by this revolution, you will say, is a great deal of good sense. What we have lost, is a world of fine fabling. . . .
>
> Bishop Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*

> Inescapable romance, inescapable choice
> Of dreams . . .
>
> Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening
> in New Haven"

THE study contained in the chapters which follow has a number of related purposes. The first is to continue, and to extend, the work on romance done by such scholars as Ker, Vinaver, Auerbach, and Frye,[1] and to follow its implications into the field of recent speculation on the problem of poetic closure or of narrative "ending."[2] The second is to develop a synthesis of critical insights into particular poems as a way of perceiving both the fertility of the romance imagination and the variations which have marked its appearance in different poets and historical periods. The third is to suggest some of the affinities between the romance and lyric poetry, affinities frequently acknowledged but less frequently analyzed. The last is to provide a context for modern theories of narrative and linguistic "error" by suggesting that "error's" romance, and Romantic, history.

The approach to romance adopted here follows one of its earliest theorists, Bishop Richard Hurd, in focusing less on its content or *materia* than on its form or "design," an approach which allows us to explore not only the structure of narrative romance but also the "brief romance" of the epiphanic or object-centered lyric. One of the problems in discussing the form of romance has always been the need to limit the way in which the term is applied. I have chosen to approach the subject in a way which does not cover all the forms we call "romance" but may provide what a romance poet might call a "prospect" on them.

The studies, therefore, constitute not so much an exhaustive survey of romance itself as a prospect which uses "romance" as an organizing principle for the interpretation of works of four major poets—Ariosto, Spenser, Milton, and Keats—and of the restatement of romance in modern poetry and poetic theory. "Romance" is characterized primarily as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object, a description which Fredric Jameson approaches from a somewhat different direction when he notes that romance, from the twelfth century, necessitates the projection of an Other, a *projet* which comes to an end when that Other reveals his identity or "name."[3] This description has the advantage of comprehending historical difference even as it reveals certain structural affinities. When the "end" is defined typologically, as a Promised Land or Apocalypse, "romance" is that mode or tendency which remains on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, "error," or "trial." When the posited Other, or objective, is the terminus of a fixed object, as in a poem of Keats or Valéry, "romance" is the liminal space before that object is fully named or revealed. Finally, when the end is not, typologically, an apocalyptic fulfillment but rather abyss or catastrophe, as in Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*, "romance" involves the dilation of a threshold rendered now both more precarious and more essential. This connection between naming, identity, and closure or ending remains a persistent romance phenomenon, from the delaying of names in the narratives of Chrétien de Troyes to Keats's preference for the noumenal over the nominal, for "half-knowledge" over "certainty" or "fact." For poets for whom the recovery of identity or the attainment of an end is problematic, or impossible, the focus may be less on arrival or completion than on the strategy of delay. In this respect, though their tendencies are different, Mallarmé's deferral of revelation in the prose poem "Le Nénuphar blanc" falls as much within the sphere of romance as the period before the unmasking of the "Other" in the *Erec et Enide*.

The term "romance" is intended here neither as fixed generic prescription nor as abstract transhistorical category. The former is rendered impossible by the poets' own extension of the term beyond its strictly generic meaning, and therefore is invoked only where appropriate, in relation to Ariosto's deliberate playing of epic conventions off against the "errors" of the *romanzo* or to Milton's decision to write in the style of Homer and Virgil rather than of Spenser. The latter is invalidated by the changing connotations of the word "romance" in the centuries after Chrétien and his Renaissance successors, and by the discontinuities as well as continuities between the manifestations of a form which historically has had an extraordinary resilience, a tendency to turn up, Proteus-like, in a multiplicity of different guises. By the time Keats was writing his "Poetic Romance" *Endymion*, "romance" had acquired connotations well beyond the strictly generic, associations which made it frequently a synonym for the escapism of "pure fiction" or allied it with the passive states of trance and dream. Keats's later willed farewell to the genre of romance as a "Syren" form is therefore less telling than his more subterranean encounters with the romance of "entrancement" or passivity, a struggle which continues in the contest of poetic voice and the "sable charm" of silence in *The Fall of Hyperion.*

Milton's relation to romance is instructive in this regard. His rejection of the genre is explicit and well documented. But the engaging of romance nevertheless may be seen to take, in *Paradise Lost*, more subtle and less readily identifiable forms. The period of "respite" or "dilation" between First and Second Coming—a period which in Spenser resembles the space between the initial vision and hoped-for return of the Faerie Queene—also assumes in Milton a crucial ambiguity, as a time when the end is both "at hand" and yet to come; and its dark doubles are the Satanic maze of endless wandering and the "staying" or dangerous suspension of the "shadowy Type." Milton rejects the genre and *materia* of romance for "the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom / Unsung" (*PL* IX. 31-33). But "patience," even as it turns from the externals of romance to a different, and more inward, subject, continues to inhabit that liminal or preliminary space of "trial" which is the romance's traditional place of testing. The interval which in Milton is both the locus of trial and the threshold of choice shares in the same ambivalence as the dilated or suspended threshold of romance, but this ambivalence enters *Paradise Lost* not directly, or generically, but rather through the poem's constant variations on the problem of "error," and on the "suspensions" or "pendency" of a potential endlessness. The chapter on Milton, therefore, begins not with the epic's explicit references to romance, or with Milton's own reasons for rejecting romance as genre, but rather with the problem of the pendant or pivotal in one of its most crucial Miltonic moments—the interval in which Eve reflects upon her own image in the pool, and the extension of the implications of that interval to Book IV's temporal image of suspension, the realm of evening or twilight, poised between the Either-Or of darkness and light.

One of the problems the writing of literary history inevitably encounters is the problem of continuity and historical change, of suggesting the continuation of a particular line without sacrificing specificity to the Moloch of a particular thesis. The organization of the present work into discrete studies of individual poets is intended to enable the situating of particular works within the concrete associations and implications of "romance" in their time, to attempt what Jameson calls a "genuinely *historical* account"[4] of the form. Each of the chapters is therefore conceived, in the first instance, as an exploration of individual texts, which opens then secondarily upon questions of historical context or relation—the debate over epic and romance in the century after Ariosto, the attack on the "error" of figurative language in the period between Spenser and Milton, the revival and ambivalence of romance in the decades before Wordsworth and Keats. This procedure in part involves turning thematic criticism inside out, starting from the study of texts and working from there to questions of poetic interrelation.

In a tradition in which Spenser inherits the genre of Ariosto, Milton knows intimately the poems of both, and Keats openly records his debts to "old Romance," the borrowings of the poets themselves provide a way of identifying explicit transformations and continuities. But the resilience of romance as a form is also matched by the persistence of certain romance terms and images which provide among these poets a network of more implicit relations. Oliver Goldsmith, in his essay *Poetry Distinguished from other Writing*, pointed to the recurrence of the term "hanging" or "pendant" from Virgil to Milton as an index of the figurative or picture-making power of poetry, and his comments on these related terms provide for those poets a suggestive "concordance." In the texts studied here, a series of images and etymological complexes also emerges and reveals the capacity of romance to generate metaphors for its own description. The fertile multiplicity of the meanings of "error," and its associations—mental, geographical, and narrative—with varieties of "de-viation," inform not only the wandering structure of the poems of Ariosto and Spenser but also the devious romance of figure and trope which Mallarmé identifies with the "erreur" of poetry itself. Ariosto's reliance on continual narrative deferral and on the romance proliferation of different story lines is both continued and transformed in Spenser's version of *dilatio* or "dilation" and in the dilated or embowered moments of Keats's *Endymion*. The series of adventures which, as Auerbach remarks, is raised in earlier, courtly romance to the status of a fated and graduated test of election,[5] is recalled and simultaneously transformed in later versions of the "gradual," in Milton's conception of education by degrees and in the trial of the poet in Keats's *Fall of Hyperion* before steps he must ascend in order to exist at all. Finally, the complex of "suspended," "pendant," and, in Milton, "pensive" and even "penseroso" provides a subtle but persistent link between the suspended threshold of romance and the suspensions of Dante's Limbo, a link only too ominous when the contemplative Miltonic "penseroso" becomes, in Keats, that potentially immobilizing interval of seeing when giant forms weigh "ponderous" upon his senses. The reappearance of this etymological play—in Barthes' concept of the "texte pensif" or Vendler's description of Stevens' "pensive" style[6]—serves to recall the links within this recurrent romance metaphor, from the "sospeso" which in Ariosto is so frequent a term for spiritual, and narrative, irresolution to the "suspens vibratoire" which is Mallarmé's central figure for the liminal and momentary status of poetic language before its "end."

These concepts are not conceived as structuring the recurrence of a fixed form, but their reappearance—and cumulative associations—do provide a way of identifying both continuities and differences. The implied echo of Spenser's indolent Phaedria in Keats's "Indolence Ode" and its counsel to take no thought for the morrow suggests its own history of romance as that form became increasingly synonymous with one of its own archetypes—the protective but potentially indolent bower—and provides an insight into the fortunes of romance in the increasingly commercial world of the English "Mammon," from Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* to the anxieties of Keats and Coleridge. Similarly, the notion of trespass links aspects of both "old" romance and "new": Spenser's "faerie" has much less clear a geography than the cosmos of Dante or of Milton and "trespass" in it is therefore not only a theological and moral concept, but also something much less easy to define; Keats's conception of the poet's "negative capability" blurs the boundaries of individual identity and thus makes even more threatening the possibility of a trespass, or violation, of the self. But the relation cannot be understood simply as quest romance internalized, since it is finally impossible to say what if anything in old romance remains "external." Finally, romance traditionally invokes the past or the socially remote; and Auerbach's perception that chivalric romance both embodied the ideals of a ruling class and, in its retreat from specific space and time, concealed that class's social basis, may equally illuminate more modern romance evasions of the ends of a bourgeois world, a withdrawal which may appear not to be in that world, but may still be of it.

In each of the chapters included here, the intention has been both to offer a reading of the poems themselves and to suggest what, poetically, became of them, their influence, and significance, within the transformations of a recurrent mode. Ariosto's use of romance and its much-maligned "error" as a tool for dismantling hierarchies both generic and social is a revelation of romance as what Frye calls "the structural core of all fiction."[7] To suggest that the *Furioso*'s revelation of the ubiquity of fictions and its subversion of hierarchies founded on stable centers of "truth" is a signal event of the Renaissance is not to set up yet another, historical, hierarchy or naive progressive contrast with what had gone before: what is said of Ariosto here might be said, in part, of any poet of the Lucianic, or deconstructive, mode. But Ariosto's poem, as evidence of a fictive self-consciousness that twentieth-century literary theory has begun to rediscover, does provide a critique, long before the modern texts which this theory so often privileges, of the teleological model of narrative and the "end" or "center" of revelation it presupposes. Etymology and its inevitable offspring, the serious pun, have recently become tools of much critical investigation: Jacques Derrida uses the common etymology of "to differ" and "to defer" in his punning "différance," a neologism for the simultaneous proliferation of difference and deferral of presence, a complex which, as we shall see with Spenser, also includes "dilation."[8] But Ariosto's continual "differire" already suggests the relation between the romance narrative's extension in space and its endless deferral of endings. To point to the reappearance, in Derrida's concept, of a venerable romance pun is not to advocate any literary-historical return of the same or to ignore the Cartesian gulf between the two periods, but rather simply to suggest that Ariosto's critique of presence and his subversion of the teleological model of meaning was, in relation to his predecessors, at least as thoroughgoing and radical.

Similarly, reading *The Faerie Queene* within the context of "romance" involves a consideration of the poem both in its own terms, and time, and in contrast with the later transformations of its central images. Multivalence, or "wandering," is, through most of Spenser's poem, sustained by, and grounded in, the permanent and the eternal, that ordering frame which enables divagation to be a species of delight. But *The Faerie Queene* is also filled with images of a darker strain, which later romance poets were to enlarge upon and develop. To perceive this development is not to substitute a Romantic reading of the poem for a more strictly historical one but rather to explore why Spenser's poem should have been for subsequent romance poets so powerful a precursor, and to suggest a more open conception of poetic history, which would include both the influence of a text on later texts and the changing social circumstances which were to make the opposition between "bower" and Mammon world increasingly more anxious. If we may adopt a concept from a slightly different context in Dante, we may perhaps speak of the way in which a text, like Spenser's (or Virgil's), may be seen retrospectively to have contained, or "prophesied," a strain of which it was itself, so to speak, unaware. Yeats's remark that Spenser let romance suffer at the hands of the Mammon of allegory is thus, however much a misreading of *The Faerie Queene* itself, a perceptive reading of this tension's subsequent history, the cloven fiction of an increasingly remote, or evasive, "faery land" and an increasingly pressing "reality."

Romantic readings tended to attach themselves to different parts of Spenser's mammoth poem and to shift the significance of episodes or images in the very act of making them pasturing places of the imagination. Phaedria and Mammon divide Book II of *The Faerie Queene* between them, splitting and therefore collapsing the dialectical tension of *festina lente*, or between the Gospel injunctions both to "Take no thought for the morrow" and to "Seek and ye shall find." Spenser's distance from both temptations in this Book makes it possible to present clearly their parodic forms—the degeneration of patience into sloth and the perversion of active seeking into the doctrine of acquisition. But the appeal of Phaedria's bower would seem for Keats to be both more complex and more direct; and Spenser's division of his Legend of Temperance between the invitation to careless ease and the figure who urges "care" for this world provides a compelling model for the later poet's struggle to temper the indolence of creative repose and the pressures of relevance.

A similar duality of perspective, from our post-Romantic vantage point, is necessarily involved in the reading of *Paradise Lost.* Milton is, in the history of romance as in so much else, a pivotal figure. The argument over *Paradise Lost* has most frequently been a conflict of historical views, between adherents of Blake's "Of the Devil's Party without knowing it" and the attempt to reconstruct a more theological—or seventeenth-century—reading, behind, or beyond, the Romantic distortions. I have tried, in this study, to point to the tensions within Milton's poem in its own terms—the relation between gradual and "Immediate," between dilation of the threshold state and precipitation of its ending—and then to suggest how certain of the images for this tension come in their historical afterlife to have a significance traceable perhaps only in retrospect to the poem itself. Dwelling on the twilight space of creation or trial is clearly in Milton part of the lesson of patience, of submission to the discipline of time or temperance in contrast to the apocalyptic impulse in its Satanic form. But there is also latent even within this Miltonic twilight a duality which informs both the delight and the despair of subsequent "evening" visions, both a preference for its soothing *chiaro-oscuro* and a species of *melancholia* which might be called a "melancholy of the sign." Gray and Collins celebrate the graduated, gentler light of evening as one of the delights of an *Abendland* or English climate, of a place which, if farther from the sun or "source," yet literally has more latitude. And the countless Odes to Evening which, after Milton, take their inspiration from "Il Penseroso" and Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, move, like the "dewy Eve" of the Mulciber simile, away from polar opposites and the immediate pressures of a decision Either-Or. There is also, however, in this post-Miltonic strain a sense of "evening" as decline or distance, of exile both from Light and from final or definitive meaning, an exile which frequently recalls more the notes of elegy than those of prophecy in the epic's closing lines.

The suspended realm of evening or twilight, therefore, is not only the archetypal space of romance but, for English poets after Milton, an inevitable recall of the lingering "Twilight gray" of *Paradise Lost*, and its power, at the more subtle level of the image, is that it carries with it the stored ambivalence of Milton's more learned use, even after its exegetical content has been forgotten or misunderstood. The romance implications of "pendency" and suspension are conveyed in an image which continues the Miltonic preoccupation with the balance or pivot, even among poets whose chief, if submerged, anxiety is only the precarious or suspended middle of their own social class. Far from shading—as has frequently been suggested—into natural description for its own sake, Evening after Milton seems to become even more intensely a figure for the figural, part of the larger question of the relation of poetic fable to "Truth." Milton's translation of the "error" of romance into the errancy of figures, however impressively that error in his epic might be controlled, provides perhaps part of the clue to the poem's subsequent history. What Marvell glimpsed as a bringing down of Truth to fable—rather than fable in its ruin leading up to Truth—was at least prophetic of the future of Milton's great poem, and of that Romantic descendental movement which was both to undermine more canonical readings of the epic and to heighten the sense of figuration as a threshold which might not lead up at all.

Romantic poetry frequently collapses the distinction between the eternal and the apocalyptic, shifting the permanence which, for Spenser and other Renaissance poets, sustained the temporal, to a fulfillment identified only with time's "end." In the approach to romance adopted in what follows, its characterization as a form which both projects and postpones or wanders from a projected ending may seem, as well, to be tending towards that conflation, an identification appropriate for Romantic poets but not for such figures as Spenser or Milton. The poetry we treat of includes both extremes, the faith in so much of Spenser in a permanence which subtends the natural cycle and the sentence which hangs suspended in *Un Coup de dés* before a catastrophic "period." But even this difference cannot be stated absolutely; and it is romance itself as a form which enables us most clearly to perceive the terms of the problem. Northrop Frye has described romance as "a sequential and processional form."[9] This feature derives from its dependence on the quest, or adventure. One of the implications of the sequential, however, is that it remains, like time itself, within a frame in which presence, or fulfillment, is always in some sense placed at a distance. For Keats, the consequence of this prospective mode is frequently a future- or end-hauntedness, its darkest version a despair of any final fulfillment. But even for the earlier poets, the temporal paradox of the *nunc et nondum*, of an end available "now" and yet still "to come," implies a perspectivism which allies the form of romance to the sequence of history. The threshold or "twilight" space before final revelation or ending is thus not only the veil of an unfolding narrative but part of the nature of all mediation, including the medium of time. In Milton, this paradox takes the form of a tension between the Reformer's sense that every time, or place, is equal before its Maker and the conception of human history as a gradual stepping to Truth. But even in Spenser, the tension emerges, in those *Cantos of Mutabilitie* which contain both an affirmation of the sustaining or permanent and a prayer for its final victory.

The study of romance which follows necessarily focuses on only certain of this form's Protean varieties: it is intended to be suggestive rather than inclusive. It does not pursue the extension of romance into such forms as the Gothic, though the gothic terrors of speechlessness and suffocation reappear to haunt the poet of "Negative Capability" in Keats's *Fall of Hyperion*. Neither does it attempt to include all of romance history. The play on deviation and deferral in the already "late" romances of Ariosto and Spenser is simply not to be found, for example, in the work of Chrétien de Troyes, though the future or prospective mode of *avanture* links this kind of medieval romance with its Renaissance descendants and with the sense of "prospect," virtuality, or perpetual "à venir" in Keats and Valéry. The displacement, and transformation, of romance in the novel is also not expressly treated, though the remarks in the Epilogue on contemporary narrative theory, on Derrida's "différance" and Barthes' "espace dilatoire," are intended to suggest echoes of the novel's romance inheritance, the dilated, or dilatory, space of a form which simultaneously moves towards and delays a definitive resolution or presence.

The chapters proceed chronologically, beginning with Ariosto, a poet for whom romance is already both established and open to an anatomy of its deviance, an anatomy which makes the *Orlando furioso* a sequel not just to Boiardo but to the whole tradition it recapitulates and transforms. The *Furioso* is considered initially as a culmination, and rewriting, of this previous tradition rather than as a quarry for future poets, the subtext it was to become for Spenser. But the intricacies of its influence on later poets emerge, retrospectively, in the chapters that follow, in Spenser's extension of Ariostan deviation, in the echoes of the *romanzo* in Milton's epic, and in Keats's professed preference for the human tales of Chaucer over the marvels of the horn and hippogriff. The exploration of Ariosto's exposure of romance "error" is followed by the study of *dilatio* in Spenser, and its relation to the polarities of romance in the several Legends of *The Faerie Queene*. The chapter on Milton begins with the pendency, or suspension, of Eve and evening, and moves to the implications in *Paradise Lost* of the "shadowy Type." The transition from Milton to Keats is approached through the tension between romance and "enlightenment" in the century after *Paradise Lost*, a tension which provides a context for Keats's own attempts to bid farewell to a siren form. The Epilogue, finally, begins with modern discussions of the aberrance of figurative language and concludes with the restatements of romance in the work of Mallarmé, Valéry, and Stevens.

Bishop Hurd, with others of his century, saw romance as a receding form, a world of fine fabling being crowded out by the advance of mind. Walter Pater described it as an ever-present and enduring principle of the artistic spirit. The hope in this present study of romance—of its transformations and its continuities—is that it might somehow comprehend the insights of both.

I. Ariosto

"Ne point errer est chose au-dessus de mes forces."
La Fontaine

Ariosto and the "Errors" of Romance

AT the beginning of the final canto of the *Orlando furioso*, before the long review of friends waiting to congratulate him on the completion of his labors, Ariosto employs one of the oldest of literary *topoi*—the poetic voyage—to identify his entire poem as a kind of "erring":

> Or, se mi mostra la mia carta il vero,
> non è lontano a discoprirsi il porto;
> sì che nel lito i voti scioglier spero
> a chi nel mar per tanta via m'ha scorto;
> ove, o di non tornar col legno intero,
> o d'errar sempre, ebbi già il viso smorto.
> Ma mi par di veder, ma veggo certo,
> veggo la terra, e veggo il lito aperto.[a]
> (XLVI. 1. 1-8)[1]

The stanza provides, in miniature, a perfect example of the difficulty of knowing just how to take this omnipresent narrator and his frequent comments on the conduct of his narrative. Its "errar sempre" could be the real anxiety the repetition of "veggo" suggests, or it could be just another instance of the famous *sorriso dell'Ariosto*, a sly pretense of anxiety in a writer whose ability to bring together his many separate stories is as little in doubt as the fact that each page turned ("carta" conveniently meaning both "page" and "chart") brings reader and author steadily closer to the book's inevitable end. The possibility of both these readings, or the tension between them, is probably more revealing than either reading by itself. But the image of "error" for a poem which adopts the "materia" of the "cavallieri erranti" and presents itself as a long poetic wandering is in itself a central revelation and suggests a way of looking at the *Furioso* and its interpretation.

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[a] "Now if my map shows me the truth, the harbor is not far out of sight, so I hope to fulfil on the shore my vows to Him who has protected me during such a long journey on the sea, where earlier my face was pale with the fear I would not return with my ship uninjured or would wander forever. But I seem to see, but I certainly see, I see land, and I see the open shore."

The importance of "error" in Ariosto has been remarked by virtually all of his readers, from Renaissance Aristotelians, for whom his choice of the digressive romance form was an aberration from the higher path of epic, to a modern critic who finds in the different senses of "errare" and "errore" a suggestion of Ariosto's relation to the theme of "the One and the Many."[2] To understand how this play upon the notion of error might suggest an interpretation of this long and complex poem, we must first turn to the criticism of the *Orlando furioso* which most clearly judged its "errors" in both senses—as Ariosto's deviation from the epic norm, and as the sin of its weak-willed, errant knights. Raffaello Ramat and others have indicated the catalogue of complaints against Ariosto's poem which grew, both in Italy and in France, as Aristotle's *Poetics* became increasingly the bible of narrative form: its title was misleading in a poem that dealt at least as much with Ruggiero as with Orlando; its language did not meet the standards set by Bembo; its narration, far from being Aristotle's "single action," was frequently interrupted by digressive episodes; its indulgence, finally, in the fabulous material of the *romanzi* disqualified it from the true epic dignity of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, both founded upon serious historical events.[3]

Its irregular mixing of different genres was, it seems, its most obvious departure from the Aristotelian norm, but this structural criticism—of a poem in its form as "errant" as its characters—was inextricably tied to "error" in the moral sense as well. The concept of a hierarchy of genres in *Cin-*

quecento Italy was very much related to other hierarchies, social and moral. For Antonio Minturno in the *Arte poetica* of 1564, not the least of the "Errori degli scrittori de' Romanzi" was the writer's erring in imitation of his own subject, a weakness of poetic will which might gain popularity with the "vulgo" but which inevitably led the poet away from the nobler path of epic:

> *Vesp.* Che monta, che non vi sia quella, ma un' altra dagli Oltramontani trovata, e dagl'Italiani illustrata, e fatta più bella, purché al mondo piaccia, e da lui si vegga meravigliosamente accettata e ricevuta?
> *Min.* Del vulgo io non mi meraviglio, il quale spesse volte accetta quelle cose, che non conosce; e, poiché una volta l'ha con molto suo piacere accettate, sempre le ritiene, e favorisce; né se migliori di quelle poi le si presentino, volentieri le riceve: sì può l'opinione saldamente nella mente umana impressa. Ma non posso non prender meraviglia grandissima, che si trovino alcuni scienziati . . . i quali (per quel, che se n'intende) confessino già ne'Romanzi non esser la forma e la regola, che tennero Omero e Virgilio, e dovervisi tenere Aristotele ed Orazio comandarono, e nondimeno s'ingegnino di questo errore difendere: anzi, perciocché tal composizione comprende i fatti de' Cavalieri erranti, affermino ostinatamente, non pur la Virgiliana ed Omerica maniera di poetare non convenirle; ma esserle richiesto, ch'ella anco errante sia, passando di una in altra materia, e varie cose in un fascio stringendo.[b4]

[b] "*Vesp.* What does it matter that it is not that one, but another one found over the mountains, and made famous by the Italians, and more beautiful, as long as the world likes it and it is marvellously accepted and received? *Min*: I do not wonder at the common people who often accept those things that they do not know, and because they have accepted them with great pleasure once, always keep and favor them; and if better things than those present themselves later, they are not willingly received; this is what an opinion solidly impressed upon the human mind can do. But I cannot help but marvel greatly that there are some learned people . . . who (as far as I understand) confess that in the Romances the form and the rules are no longer as Homer

"Error" is the operative word in this criticism, both as a structural fault and as the danger of a genre whose "endroits fâcheux," according to Madame de Sévigné, might well lead its younger readers astray.[5] If the errant knights of romance were assimilated to the erring will as opposed to the reason, one of the "errori" of the romance form was its appeal to the senses, the counterpart in the hierarchy of the faculties to the "volgari" in the body politic. When Horace was added to Aristotle, Ariosto's error was to come too close to the *dulce* side of the famous Horatian dictum, to succumb to the attractions of diverting fable over the essential, if perhaps less interesting, moral kernel. The *Orlando furioso* was read more widely in France than its condemnation by the rules of *Classicisme* might suggest, but when the poem was condescended to, it was frequently as a mere "divertissement" from more serious concerns, a kind of "jolie péché."[6]

One of the issues raised in the earliest Italian criticism of the poem was the question of whether Ariosto deviated from the Aristotelian epic norms through ignorance or was deliberately writing a different kind of poetry. The problem was, of course, where to fit a poem which was highly popular with a more than merely "vulgar" audience and filled with more epic conventions than the other *romanzi*.[7] He clearly was writing a different kind of poem from that described by Aristotle, however hard his more enthusiastic readers might try to prove that the *Furioso* was as regular as the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*.[8] As early as 1554, Giambattista Pigna had argued that if Ariosto had deviated from the model set down by Virgil, it was because he was choosing another path to Helicon, a genre which was not inferior to epic on its own ground, but simply different.[9] And through the century this voice was heard along with the more rigid Aristotelian condemnations.[10]

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and Virgil followed them, and as Aristotle and Horace ordered that they should be followed, and yet strive to defend this error; in fact, because such a composition includes the deeds of errant knights, they obstinately affirm not only that the Virgilian and Homeric manner of writing is not applicable, but that it is necessary for the poetry to be errant as well, passing from one subject to another, and tying various things together in a single bundle." (trans. mine)

Because the *Orlando furioso* appeared before the controversy over epic had begun in earnest, all of this criticism has necessarily something anachronistic about it. Precisely because it extends so variously the connotations of Ariosto's "errori," however, it provides a highly suggestive starting point for a reading both of Ariosto's poem in itself and of its place within poetic history. "Error" in the *Furioso* ranges from the diversions of chivalric adventure to the terrifying spectacle of Orlando's madness, from a pleasing "divertimento" to a willful deviation from epic and its single path. So insistent are Ariosto's own variations on "errare" and "errore" that they suggest not ignorance but rather a highly deliberate choice of romance and its aberrance, a choice whose implications turn a possible criticism of the poem into a perspective on the nature of all fictions. "Error" is not only a romance pun, sign of the interplay between mental and geographical "wandering"; it is also the concept which connects the diverse aspects of a long and complex poem. We shall proceed, therefore, by exploring what might be called the gradations of error in the *Furioso*, from the author's exploitation, and imitation, of the divagations of his errant knights; through the tension between a deviant narrative and the demands of closure; to the *selva* of allusions which reveal a pattern of "error" or deviation within literary history; and to the revelation, on the Moon, of the error of all poetic constructs or "authorized versions," including even those of Dante and of Virgil.

More than one modern reader has remarked the frequency with which the verb "errare" and its many variants occur throughout the *Furioso*. In the very first canto of the poem, when Orlando's expected possession of Angelica is interrupted by an unforeseen Saracen victory, the narrator comments, "Ecco il giudicio uman come spesso erra!"[c] (I. 7. 2), and one of the most important of the myriad senses of "error" through the rest of the poem is just such a failure of expectation, a misconception about future events. This kind of error seems to be the inevitable result of not knowing the plot in advance, somewhat like Malagigi in the so-called *Cinque canti*,

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[c] "Lo, how often human judgment errs!"