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Orlando Furioso

Ludovico Ariosto · *1516 (final edition 1532)* · *William Stewart Rose translation (1823)*

In the war between Charlemagne and the Saracens, the greatest paladin Orlando falls in love with the pagan princess Angelica and, losing her, goes mad. Around that thread Ariosto weaves dozens of stories: a knight on a flying horse, a witch's island, a trip to the moon, and the love of Ruggiero and Bradamante, the supposed ancestors of Ariosto's patrons, the Este family. The poem is comic, romantic, and shrewd by turns.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What do love, honor, and reason do to each other, and what does it take for a man who has lost his wits to get them back?

Ariosto refuses to settle the question. Love makes great men fools, and the poem laughs at them, yet it lets Ruggiero and Bradamante find a real and lasting love. Orlando's madness is both comic and tragic, and his cure comes through the strange journey of Astolfo to the moon, where lost wits are kept in jars. The poet's tone is that of a worldly man who sees both the folly and the beauty in human desire.

KEY CHARACTERS

Orlando
The great paladin of Charlemagne, who loses his wits for love.

Angelica
A princess of Cathay who is pursued by many and loves a common soldier.

Ruggiero
A Saracen knight destined to become Christian and an ancestor of the Este family.

Bradamante
A woman warrior who loves Ruggiero.

Astolfo
An English knight with a flying horse and a trusting nature.

Rodomonte
A Saracen king, the proudest of the pagan champions.

Charlemagne
The emperor, who is mostly an anxious presence.

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Angelica's Flight

CANTOS I–V

Angelica escapes the paladins who quarrel over her. Ruggiero and Bradamante appear. The story of Ariodante and Ginevra introduces the theme of a slander about a woman's honor.

- The poem begins in the middle of the war.
- Ariodante's story is a self-contained tale of jealousy and trickery.
- Characters repeatedly lose each other and meet by chance.

02

Alcina's Island

CANTOS VI–X

Ruggiero is carried off by his hippogriff to the island of the witch Alcina. He is charmed and then freed by the sorceress Melissa. He rescues a woman from a sea-monster.

- Alcina's beauty hides her cruelty.
- The hippogriff is a recurring means of transport and plot.
- Ruggiero's struggle with desire is half comic, half moral.

03

War at Paris

CANTOS XI–XVIII

The Saracen army under Agramante besieges Paris. Knights are lost, found, and sometimes forgotten. Angelica and Medoro fall in love.

- Battle scenes give way to love stories.
- Charlemagne's court is in real danger.
- Orlando searches for Angelica instead of fighting.

04

Orlando's Madness

CANTOS XIX–XXIX

Orlando learns that Angelica and the young Saracen Medoro are married. He goes mad, tears off his armor, and wanders across Europe.

- The madness is described with both humor and horror.
- The other knights' own love problems pile up.
- His lost wits are not destroyed; the poem tells us where they have gone.

05

Astolfo on the Moon

CANTOS XXX–XXXIX

Astolfo flies to the moon on the hippogriff and finds a valley where lost things are kept, including Orlando's wits, in a jar. He brings them back and Orlando is cured.

- The moon valley is a satire of what people waste their time on.
- Orlando's cure is almost modest.
- The war in Africa shifts the war away from Paris.

06

The Marriage and the End

CANTOS XL–XLVI

Ruggiero is baptized and marries Bradamante after a long series of delays. The war ends, and the duel of Ruggiero and Rodomonte closes the poem.

- Ruggiero's conversion unites love and faith.
- The wedding feast ends with a final duel.
- The poem ends abruptly, as if the story could go on.

Love and Folly | Honor and War | Illusion | The Journey | The Moon

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Ariosto keeps interrupting one story to tell another. Notice where he cuts away and why.
2. He often addresses the reader or his patron. Listen for the humor in his comments.
3. The madness of Orlando is the title, yet it is only a part. Ask what the other stories add.
4. Look for places where women act as warriors, not as prizes.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the William Stewart Rose translation (1823) (Project Gutenberg #615 (Ludovico Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, translated into English verse by William Stewart Rose, London, 1823–1831; Project Gutenberg edition proofed by Douglas B. Killings, with lines and stanzas repaired from the Internet Archive scan of the 1872 Bohn edition, orlandofurioso01ariouoft and orlandofur02ario; Canto 1 also checked against the 1823 first edition, orlandofurioso01arioiala)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/ariosto-orlando-furioso/.