



## Cavallo, Jo Ann. The World beyond Europe in the Romance Epic of Boiardo and Ariosto

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tout, un poème chrétien, où les divers éléments de la terre constituent des exemples d'un fonctionnement de la nature englobante qu'est la Création.

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**Cavallo, Jo Ann.**

***The World beyond Europe in the Romance Epic of Boiardo and Ariosto.***

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 377. ISBN 978-1-4426-4 (hardcover) \$85.

University of Toronto Press has added another original and scrupulously researched book to its impressive list of studies about the West's engagement with the worlds beyond it. Jo Ann Cavallo's richly documented, award-winning monograph about the two most important epics of the Italian Renaissance, Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* and Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, has appeared in the prestigious Toronto Italian Studies series, which the press has developed with great success over the years.

Cavallo explores the places that are invoked in the two epics: northern Africa, Asia, the Middle East, but also Cathay, Syria, Tartaria, Persia, Russia, and Uzbekistan. They are faraway destinations to which the chivalric quests and "calling" (212) take the romance heroes in their arduous chivalric voyages. The geography of these epics is vast. Cavallo's attentive close readings show persuasively that the line between factual and fictional accounts of the worlds beyond Europe was fluid in the early modern period. The spaces of heroic battles and adventures, or romantic and territorial conquests, mirror to varied degrees the mercantile and crusading routes undertaken by Western merchant adventurers and their knightly precursors as they pushed farther away from the West. However, the worlds beyond Boiardo's and Ariosto's Italy are spaces of their poetic imagination. Cavallo demonstrates how the distant, dangerous, enticing, heroic, and complex worlds beyond Europe intertwine and interact in generating, specifically, the narratives of friendship and heroism in these two epics. Both epics, Cavallo argues, came out of the combination of an expanding globe of geographic and commercial endeavours and the ambitious explorations of early modern Europeans. At the same time, Cavallo shows,

the material conditions of knowing other worlds were concomitant with the expanding literary imagination, already projected onto the romance epic, involving new geographical discourses and narratives.

Cavallo's engrossing book shows that global romance studies ought to continue to grow as an important direction in early modern criticism, especially at this moment when globalization has acquired new meanings and attributes. We have been accustomed to consider romance epics as popular literature—serving national and class concerns—but Cavallo proves that we should also think of this literary genre as one having transnational and cosmopolitan orientation and significance.

The book is conveniently organized into five parts—based on the geographical spaces fictionalized in the epics—which take us from Cathay, the far East in Asia, via the Ottoman Empire of the Mediterranean coast of Northern Africa, and by way of the Middle East back to Africa and Charlemagne's Europe.

The introduction sets out to establish the cultural, geographical, and literary foundations for an exploration of group identities and the narratives of travel, by sea and over land, in these epics. It shows that the Ottoman involvement in European politics, as both a threat and, occasionally, as an ally as well (13), set the stage for romance writers' imagining of other worlds beyond the Ottoman Mediterranean, and beyond and across national and religious lines.

Cavallo approaches the two works from several angles: religion (especially religious conversion), long-distance sea voyages, the Crusades, and the narrative tradition that preceded, but strongly influenced, the two epics. However, there is less discussion about actual spaces and their Western representations than one might expect in a book suggesting that physical spaces and geography shape epic narrative. It would have been good if the book had contained a map to help the reader trace all the imagined and real places mentioned in the two epics.

Cavallo first explores the narrative and stylistic features of individual episodes in both epics in detail; only then does she delve into a broad discussion of the epics' transnational orientation. This sounds like an obvious critical method in literary analysis, but the author's scrutiny of the details of story telling, rhetoric, themes, topics, and geography shows that in the absence of systematic knowledge about the extent to which early modern writers actually knew and used the accounts of geography and travel, such cross-literary

analyses provide a more nuanced and livelier critical story about how literature imagined the worlds beyond Italy. The fact that those worlds are “beyond” acts as a conceptual push for the two writers to imagine what epic writing could be like beyond the limits of the familiar structure. The contexts for Cavallo’s argument, therefore, are mostly literary. When she draws on historical, geographical, or military material, she uses it concisely to sharpen the focus of her literary analysis.

While Cathay features as a place from whence East Asian characters come to the pages of *Orlando innamorato* (even if they at times have Christian names), North Africa is the subject of an extensive analysis as a backdrop for various military campaigns associated with Rugiero, the main knight-protagonist in Boiardo’s epic, launched in order to defend Latin Christendom. The eastern Mediterranean and what we now call the Middle East are the subjects of a chapter with an ethnographic orientation. Geographical places and their inhabitants, courts, festive ceremonies and rituals are brought together to revive the world in which the Middle East is not merely a foreign “other” but a place by which fiction “imagine[s] a universal chivalry crossing religious and regional boundaries” (151). The places beyond the European West are both celebrated and registered at the points of their destruction (as in the case of Bizerte, in Tunis) as places of religious conversion, cultural annihilation, and heroic victories of the Western knights. This is a book that maps both a literary history and a history of cultural discourses about romance and war, conquest and conversion, contacts and exchanges between the Latin West of Europe and the non-Christian diversity of places across a wide horizon of “other” places, the horror and frenzy of war, and the sexual allure of bodies that come from foreign parts as inspirations for romance writing—writing known for its absorptive and syncretic nature when it comes to creating its own world out of many others that lie beyond it. The glossary of fictional and factual names is very useful.

This engagingly written book is indispensable not only for Italianists but for students and scholars of romance and epic and any other literature of the European West.

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