

## Fiordispina's afterlives

Mac Carthy, Ita

*License:*

None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Mac Carthy, I 2019, Fiordispina's afterlives: from Harington to Ali Smith. in A Hiscock, J Everson & S Jossa (eds), *Ariosto, the 'Orlando Furioso' and English Culture*. Oxford University Press, Ariosto, the Orlando Furioso and English Culture, 1516-2016, London, United Kingdom, 28/04/16.

<[#https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ariosto-the-orlando-furioso-and-english-culture-9780197266502?cc=gb&lang=en](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ariosto-the-orlando-furioso-and-english-culture-9780197266502?cc=gb&lang=en)>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Chapter 7: Fiordispina's English Afterlives: from Harington to Ali Smith, Ariosto, the Orlando Furioso, and English Culture by/edited by Jane E. Everson, Andrew Hiscock, and Stefano Jossa, 2019, reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press  
[#https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ariosto-the-orlando-furioso-and-english-culture-9780197266502?cc=gb&lang=en](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ariosto-the-orlando-furioso-and-english-culture-9780197266502?cc=gb&lang=en)

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## Fiordispina's English Afterlives: from Harington to Ali Smith.<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

‘What happens when an old story meets a brand new set of circumstances?’ The question appears on the back cover of Ali Smith’s 2007 novel *Girl Meets Boy*, which rewrites the classical Iphis and Ianthe myth against the backdrop of twenty-first century debates about gender fluidity, homophobia, sexism in the workplace, consumerism and the environmentally disastrous bottled water industry.<sup>2</sup> In setting ‘a story as old as time’ in an ultra-modern age, Smith celebrates its enduring appeal and reflects on the creative process that renders it newly relevant to successive generations across the centuries.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, she demonstrates distinct if distant family ties to Ariosto and catches the wavelength of his literary enterprise. For this is surely a process that interests him, too, as he weaves a plethora of pre-existing stories into the elegant fabric of his poem. *Girl Meets Boy* makes no reference whatsoever to Ariosto, and Smith acknowledges no direct debts to the Ferrarese author.<sup>4</sup> Yet

---

<sup>1</sup> As well as this volume’s editors, I thank Luca degl’Innocenti, Patricia Palmer, Yvonne Noble and Richard Scholar for their helpful comments on this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 9, ll. 666-797.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Despite the lack of declared links, Smith’s *How to be Both* (2014), is partly set in the fifteenth-century Ferrara where Ariosto was born. Offering a fictional life for the artist, Francesco del Cossa (1430-1477) – whose frescoes line the *salone dei mesi* where *Orlando Furioso* is said to have had its first public airing – it displays a talent

Ariosto, too, recasts Iphis and Ianthe in the Fiordispina episode of cantos 22 and 25 of *Orlando Furioso*. Connected, as if by invisible rope, Fiordispina meets *Girl Meets Boy* in the space where ‘genre-bending conversation[s] between forms, times, truths and fictions’ take place, albeit with very different results.<sup>5</sup> Rope, in fact, is the metaphor used by Smith’s main character, Anthea, to describe the value and power of stories that call for retelling: ‘It was always’, she says, ‘the stories that needed the telling that gave us the rope we could cross any river with’.<sup>6</sup> It is compelling to think of Ovid’s story as giving Ariosto the rope to cross the river of his own historical, cultural and ideological moment and of his story, in turn, providing leverage for numerous others who make it relevant to the circumstances in which they live.

The aim of this chapter is to explore what happens when Fiordispina’s story meets the new circumstances of first Elizabethan and then early Georgian England. It focuses, in particular, on the widely diverging ways in which Sir John Harington (1560 – 1612) and John Gay (1685 – 1732) renew the episode’s relevance in the former’s *Orlando Furioso Translated into Heroical Verse* (1591) and the latter’s ‘The Story of Fiordispina’ (c. 1720) and *Achilles: An Opera* (1732). While Harington’s treatment of Ariosto attracts much attention in translation as well as in English and Italian studies,

---

similar to Ariosto’s for playfully serious literary experiments that test the boundaries between gender and genre.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Smith, *How to be Both* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), back cover.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Girl Meets Boy*, p. 160.

Gay's does not.<sup>7</sup> Yet his translation and later adaptation of the Fiordispina episode open up entirely new vistas not only on Gay and the reception of Ariosto in early Georgian England, but also on the craft of translation more generally and on the creative potential of a poem that invites exercises in imitation and adaptation that are as inventive and meaningful as those it practises itself. Considering Gay and Harington's texts as discrete acts of reading and rewriting, conscious both of Fiordispina's relevance to the authors and of how their readers expected relevance for themselves, my chapter aims to simulate, in a detailed case study, the ebb and flow of reading and rewriting, of reception and reproduction that characterises the 500 years since the *Furioso*'s first appearance.<sup>8</sup>

### *Part I – Fiordispina and Relevance*

Fiordispina's story frames the central event of Ariosto's poem, beginning in canto 22 before Orlando stumbles upon Angelica and Medoro's *locus amoenus* and ending in canto 25 after he has descended into jealous madness. Newly reunited after long separation, Bradamante and Ruggiero are journeying together towards Bradamante's home where they hope to have her parents' blessing on their betrothal when they are

---

<sup>7</sup> A notable exception is Regina Janes, 'Ariosto and Gay: Bouncing Heads', *English Literary History* 70.2 (2003); 447 – 463. Janes's article focuses, however, on Gay's translation of the Isabella-Zerbino-Rodomonte story and its adaptation in the burlesque poem *Trivia* (1715).

<sup>8</sup> See Jane Everson's chapter in the present volume for further insights into the eighteenth-century English reception of Ariosto.

called to rescue a 'young man' condemned to death for disguising himself as a woman so that he can sleep undetected with the Spanish princess, Fiordispina. As they hasten to the scene, the *promessi sposi* get separated and Ruggiero momentarily distracted, so that when he reaches Fiordispina's castle (in canto 25) he finds not a young man but his own beloved licked by flames at the stake and surrounded by a malicious throng. Alarmed and furious, he whirls his sword and disperses the crowd with deadly blows, then escapes with the person he believes to be Bradamante. It turns out, however, that it is not Bradamante at all that he saves (she is elsewhere), but her identical twin brother Ricciardetto who, once safe outside the castle gates, begins to tell his story.

Ricciardetto tells of how Fiordispina, while out on a hunt, happened upon his sister sleeping by a shady brook in the woods. Mistaking her for a knight because of her armour and because she carried a sword 'in luogo di conocchia' ['in place of a distaff'] (25. 28), Fiordispina instantly falls in love and invites Bradamante to join the hunt.<sup>9</sup> The damsel warrior accepts and allows herself to be separated from the rest of the hunt by the somewhat rapacious princess, who takes her to a solitary place and reveals her passion 'con gli occhi ardenti e coi sospir di fuoco' ['with burning looks and fiery sighs'] (25. 29), then summons all her courage to kiss her. Bradamante, taken aback, realizes Fiordispina's mistake and hastens to disabuse her of her false belief that she is a man. But Fiordispina's desire does not abate. She grieves and frets and will not be assuaged. 'Conoscendo che nessun / util traeva da quel virile aspetto'

---

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise stated, translations into English are from Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. by Guido Waldman (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1974).

[‘realizing how little benefit she derived from Bradamante’s apparent masculinity’] (25. 41), she berates love for inflicting upon her such a cruel and impossible torment. It is nearly night-time, and Fiordispina invites Bradamante to share her bed at her nearby castle. While the latter sleeps, the former tosses and turns, ‘che sempre il suo desir sia piú focoso’ [‘her desire ever mounting’] (25. 42). Alternating between despair and the vain hope that Bradamante will miraculously change into ‘il miglior sesso’ [‘the better sex’] (25. 42), she weeps and sighs and moans and reaches across to check whether or not Bradamante is still a woman.

The following morning, Bradamante leaves Fiordispina’s castle and returns home to tell her family what has happened. When Ricciardetto, who had heard a great deal about Fiordispina and been much allured by her lovely eyes and soft cheeks, hears the story, he seizes the opportunity to sneak off to the Spanish castle and to insinuate himself into it. Pretending to be his sister, he spins the unlikely story of how ‘she’ became ‘he’ thanks to a nymph whose life he saved in a local river and who rewarded him with the sex-change he so fervently desired. Eager to believe, Fiordispina welcomes him with open arms and the episode yields to a most explicit rendition of the tried and tested metaphor of sex as joust. Fiordispina’s aberrant desire is ended, hetero-normative attraction is restored and the tale of love and longing reaches its triumphal climax in a joyful, sensual romp. The affair lasts for months till finally they are found out and Ricciardetto condemned by Fiordispina’s father to death, before being saved by Ruggiero from the pyre, bringing the episode to an end.

Many a love story tells how boy meets girl but things are not so simple here. Ariosto’s is a love story of boy meets girl (Ruggiero and ‘Bradamante’), though the girl is

actually a boy (Riciardetto); of girl meets boy (Fiordispina and the sleeping knight), though the boy is actually a girl (Bradamante); of girl meets girl (Fiordispina and ‘Bradamante’), though the girl is actually – at long last – a boy (Riciardetto) and of the abundant gender confusion and sexual desire generated between them. Patricia Parker once wrote that the *Furioso* is ‘suffused’ with an ‘excess of desire with nowhere to go’: nowhere could that statement be truer than here.<sup>10</sup> The desire of the Fiordispina episode is as ambivalent as it is irrepressible. Possible and impossible, overt and covert, hetero-normative and homoerotic, satisfied and denied, it exemplifies Ariosto’s extraordinary talent for communicating along implicit and explicit lines and for telling two stories at once. This talent derives, in large part, from his literary models. From Matteo Maria Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato*, Ariosto inherits the gender-bending opening of Fiordispina and Bradamante’s encounter in the forest (*Orlando Innamorato*, 2.63 – 3.26) while from Ovid, he picks up the latent, underspecified and underdetermined scenario of lesbian desire which he exploits to the full (*Metamorphoses*, 9. 666-797). In the latter, Iphis’s father desperately wants a boy, so her mother brings her up as one, though she is in fact a girl. In adolescence, Iphis finds herself in the awkward position of being betrothed by her father to another woman, Ianthe. During the courtship, they fall deeply in love, but only Iphis and her mother know the truth of her femininity. As the marriage approaches, she berates fortune for its cruelty, bemoans the singularity of her plight and, just like Fiordispina, compares her perverse desire unfavorably to the incestuous, zoophilic and paraphilic gods of Greek mythology. In Ovid, however, this despair is short-lived. On the day

---

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 22.

before her wedding, her mother takes her to the temple of Isis and begs for mercy. Lo and behold, she is transformed into a man. The aberration is corrected, normative gender conventions are restored, and Iphis and Ianthe live happily ever after. In Ariosto, by contrast, Fiordispina's 'plight' goes on for much longer and there are numerous twists and turns not present in Ovid's narrative. Where Iphis only imagines sharing a bed 'defrauded of delights' and lying with Ianthe in 'cold embraces' (Bk 9, ll. 146 and 148), for example, Ariosto provides a bedroom scene, making much of the chance for narrative play offered by his source and describing Fiordispina and Bradamante's encounter in ways that double up as chaste and passionate at the same time. By hamming up the underspecified potential of Ovid's playful narrative, he makes sure no reading can ignore the latent narrative of woman-to-woman love and its possible effects on the reader. Thus, he offers a master class in how to be both: how to be Ovid and himself, how to be an epic and a romance poet, how to be a man and a woman, how to be straight and gay, how to bend genre and gender with equal ease and how to end up compromising on the integrity of neither.<sup>11</sup>

Doing justice to Ariosto's masterful ambivalence has long posed a challenge for translators who, according to modern standards, should seek to replicate rather than spell out its subtlety of humour and to reproduce rather than deduce its latency of

---

<sup>11</sup> For more detailed studies of how Ariosto reworks his sources here, see Novella Primo, 'Ariosto, Ovidio e la 'favola' di Fiordispina', *Carte Italiane* 2.2-3 (2007); 35 – 58; and Giulio Ferroni, 'Da Bradamante a Ricciardetto. Interferenze testuali e scambi di sesso' in Costanzo di Girolamo and Ivano Paccagnella (eds), *La parola ritrovata: Fonti ed analisi letterari* (Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1982).



meaning.<sup>12</sup> Different eras apply different translation standards, of course, but whether word-for-word translation, ‘translation with latitude’, or free imitation is the order of the day,<sup>13</sup> Ariosto’s word-play, innuendo and notorious irony prove hard to render in English. Rich in allusions, metaphors, hyperbole and other non-literal figures of speech, the Fiordispina episode is also replete with references to non-verbal stimuli (gestures, movements, facial expressions) that encode vital information but whose meanings cannot always be imported into a new language simply by translating the words on the page. Where meaning is implied rather than explicitly encoded in language, there is much room for interpretative manoeuvre – though of course Ariosto does guide his readers’ expectations in precise and careful ways – and different readers are *relatively* free to appraise and understand the text according to the cultural codes and conventions pertaining to them.

Harington and Gay – as we shall see – exert considerable interpretative influence on their source text. In an effort to make their translations and adaptations relevant and acceptable to their target readers, they alter their horizon of expectation (to raid the language of Hans Jauss’s reception theory) and guide them towards new, amplified, abridged or alternatively altered meanings. Each pulls certain underspecified undercurrents to the surface of the Fiordispina episode while submerging others.

---

<sup>12</sup> On the assumed invisibility of contemporary translators, see Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 2008).

<sup>13</sup> This is John Dryden’s hugely influential three-part division of translation strategies, as discussed by Jane Everson in the present volume.

Fiordispina's contrasting afterlives in the translations of Harington and Gay thus reveal just how differently one can embrace the liberties offered by Ariosto's indeterminacy. Such interpretative license has often been judged against the criteria of equivalence, loss and gain, with Harington, in particular, being found guilty of having failed to represent his source text faithfully. Yet as Bassnett and Lefevere confirm, translation is always 'a rewriting of an original text', and 'all re-writings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way'.<sup>14</sup> While this is true even in an age when translators aspire to be 'invisible' in their fidelity to their source texts, it is all the more the case in periods such as the early modern, when translators were bound more by culturally and historically determined expectations of relevance than by aspirations to source-text equivalence. The aim of this chapter, accordingly, is not to pass judgement on the so-called successes or failures of Harington and Gay's work. It is, rather, to examine the changes they ring within the historico-cultural moment they lived in, and to pay particular attention to their treatment of the underspecified, non-literal and non-verbal eloquence of the original Fiordispina episode. Here, where interpretative latitude is at its greatest, Harington and Gay turn the *Furioso* now towards epic, now towards romance, narrowing the arc of Ariosto's range and inhibiting his propensity to swing both ways. Yet in altering the original, they render

---

<sup>14</sup> Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, 'Preface to Routledge's *Translation Studies Series*', in André Lefevere (ed.), *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook* (London: Pinter, 1990), p. xi.

it newly relevant,<sup>15</sup> taking up the rope of Ariosto's text to cross the rivers of their own place and time.

## *Part II – Sir John Harington*

Sir John Harington – Ariosto's first translator – saw himself as a writer in his own right and his translation as an independent work of literature, an epic poem for the Elizabethan court.<sup>16</sup> He rewrites the Fiordispina episode even as he translates it,

---

<sup>15</sup> Though space prevents me from foregrounding it here, relevance theory (a theory of communication from pragmatic linguistics) has greatly influenced the writing of this chapter. I intend to undertake in future work a larger study of its potential within translation studies to shift the emphasis from the relationship between source text and target text to the relationship between target text and target audience and to the translator's need to render foreign texts relevant and meaningful for new audiences. As it facilitates a study of the demands placed by relevance on the cognitive processes governing translation, adaptation and reception, relevance theory proves doubly useful to Ariosto scholars because it offers a cognitively inflected approach to the allusive, implicit and non-verbal stimuli on which his poetry (like all communication) depends. For an introduction to relevance theory, see Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, 'Relevance Theory', *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. by Laurence Horn and Gregory Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 607.

<sup>16</sup> Partial translation by Peter Beverly (*The Historie of Ariodanto and Ieneura, Daughter to the King of Scottes*, 1566) and George Gascoigne (*A Hundred Sundrie Floures*, 1573) had appeared, but Harington's *Orlando Furioso Translated into Heroical Verse* (1591) was the first complete translation.

rationalising and moralising its racy content, short-circuiting Ariosto's teasing innuendo and generally straightening out both plot and its errant desire. In a footnote to his 1591 translation, he describes the queer story of the Spanish princess as 'a bad matter not verie ill handled', made up of 'light and lascivious matter' (p. 286). He takes it upon himself 'to temper it [...] or at least to salve it so as it may do least hurt' (p. 286), and sets about compressing, expanding, censoring, moralising, and generally repackaging the episode in a far less explicit narrative.

In the opening octaves of the episode, for example, Harington closes down the gender ambiguity animating Ariosto's original by interrupting the story with a gloss that serves to protect readers from homoerotic desire. When Ariosto's Ruggiero arrives in the castle courtyard to save the young man, he looks at the captive's face and figure with a desire that is at once hetero-normative (in that he thinks it is Bradamante) and homoerotic (because it is actually Ricciardetto). As he storms the castle, this gender ambiguity is kept in play until he and Ricciardetto find themselves safely outside the castle gates. There he looks lustily once more on '*la bella faccia, / e le belle fattezze e 'l bel aspetto*' ['the comely face, beautiful features and attractive appearance'] (25. 20), before learning that the person he has saved is not actually his betrothed.

Harington's narrator, by contrast, rushes in when Ruggiero first sets eyes on 'the wofull youth', explaining lest there be any doubt that the figure tied to the stake 'was Richard etto, Bradamant's brother, but exceeding like Bradamant in countenance' (p. 278). He points readers to 'the morall' at the end of the canto which talks of Ruggiero's 'wonderfull courage and promptness to honorable exploits' and of:

the rare and (as it were) cunning workmanship of nature, admirable as well in making so many sundrie countenances one unlike another as also sometimes in making some so exceeding like, which indeed though it seldomer fortunes and sooner alters in brother and sister, yet in two brothers it is seene many times (p. 286).

The wordy ‘morall’ marvels at the phenomenon of identical boy twins and lists examples witnessed by Harington himself at Eton and at ‘her Majesties court’, so that by the end of it, it has eclipsed the humour and racy innuendo of the original. We do not share in Ruggiero’s gender confusion, nor do we find ourselves gazing through his eyes on the face and figure of a man we think is a woman.

Harington’s use of commentary is not always wholesome, with morals frequently offering shortcuts to the juiciest parts of the poem.<sup>17</sup> In this case, however, commentary serves as prophylactic, enhancing the censure enacted upon the original text, disambiguating Ariosto’s racy ambiguity even further and, thus, rendering it less tantalisingly homoerotic. He ‘tempers’ the episode’s embodied nature too, and ‘salves’ us from the unashamed sensuality of Ariosto’s version. Where Ariosto’s Ricciardetto emphasises the physicality of Fiordispina’s desire – the way she looks at Bradamante, what she sees and feels as she gazes upon and embraces her – Harington’s Richardetto describes her mental imaginings, what she thought and said. Compare what happens during Fiordispina’s sleepless night of lustful yearning. In Ariosto, the bedroom scene is practically audible with Fiordispina’s sighs and moans:

---

<sup>17</sup> For more on this, see Luca degl’Innocenti in this volume, p. 000.

Comune il letto ebbon la notte insieme;  
ma molto differente ebbon riposo;  
che l'una dorme, e l'altra piange e geme  
che sempre il suo desir sia più focoso.

[‘That night they shared a bed but they did not rest equally well. The one slept, the other wept and moaned, her desire ever mounting.’] (25. 42)

In Harington’s version, by contrast, Fiordispina quietly ruminates on ‘straung dreames’:

That night they lay together in one bed,  
But sundried and unlike was their repose.  
One quiet slept, the tothers troubled hed  
Still waking, or if she her eyes but close,  
That little sleepe straung dreames and fancies bred: (25, 36)

In both authors, the ‘straunge dreams’ are likened to the night-time delusions of an ailing man, but in Ariosto even Fiordispina’s dreams, those mental projections of her physical desire, focus on the body. Ariosto’s ailing man hallucinates about every drop of water that has ever passed his lips just as Fiordispina’s imagination, the epic simile implies, throws up as many images of that which will satisfy her desires:

Come l’infermo acceso di gran sete

s'in quella ingorda voglia s'addormenta  
ne l'interrotta e turbida quiete  
d'ogn'acqua che mai vide si ramenta,  
così a costei di far sue voglie liete  
l'immagine del sonno rappresenta.

[‘If a thirst-tormented invalid goes to sleep craving for water, in his turbid, fitful rest he calls to mind every drop of water he ever saw. Likewise her dreaming mind threw up images to requite her desires.’] (25. 43-44)

Harington's feverish man, by contrast, does not spend his night evoking water and neither does his Fiordispina fantasize about male anatomy. The emphasis here is not on what he dreams about but on the fact that when he wakes he feels his ‘thirst persevere / And to be greater than it was at first’ (25, 37). Likewise, Fiordispina ‘whose thoughts from love sleepe could not sever’ awakes, ‘her hope still lesse and her desire still more’ (25, 37). The desperate imaginings of that which she desired yield to an abstract thirst for love more generally.

As Harington dispenses with Fiordispina's lusty imaginings, so he does away with her nighttime caresses. Ariosto's princess interrupts the second half of the epic simile with a furtive shift from the cognitive (her dreaming mind) to the haptic (her searching hand): ‘si desta, e nel destar mette la mano, / e ritrova pur sempre il sogno vano’ [‘she wakes, and on awakening lays her hand, / only to find each time her

dream to be empty’] (25. 43).<sup>18</sup> Banishing the phantasmagorical visions of male body parts, she reaches out and touches Bradamante’s female body instead. Bitterly disappointed, she surrenders herself to fervent prayers to Allah that she be transformed into the so-called better sex. Lamenting the futility of one’s impossible love is, of course, a stock feature of love poetry from Dante to Petrarch and beyond. While improvising on the *topos*, however, Ariosto also conjures up a vision of a woman in love with another woman and hints at what might happen in the intimate secrecy of her bed. Harington chooses to ignore the hint: his Fiordispina does not spend the night between fitful sleep and caresses. She has strange dreams, it is true, but appears to wake just once. On waking, Harington says, she ‘felt and found it as before / Her hope still lesse and her dream still more’ (25, 37). No probing hand intrudes upon the scene: it is not clear whether she ‘felt’ with her heart or her hand or whether the ‘it’ she felt was Bradamante’s body or the vain and impotent situation of her futile love.

Harington’s readers are given less access to the homoerotic potential of this early part of the Fiordispina episode. Where Ariosto opens up space for same-sex desire, Harington closes it down. He revels, instead, in the riotous hetero-normative conclusion of the tale but here, too, he chooses not to reproduce the subtlety of his source. In a rush towards the triumphal sex as joust metaphor, he sacrifices the sensual romance and delicate foreplay of the original: what was amorous, even

---

<sup>18</sup> My translation here and throughout the rest of part II.



arousing, in Ariosto becomes crude and coarse in Harington.<sup>19</sup> Those ‘baci ch’imitavan le colombe’ [‘kisses to imitate doves’] (25. 60) in Ariosto become ‘dovelike billing’ (25. 59), kiss-less murmurings that no longer ‘davan segno or digire, or di far alto’ [‘gave signal now to advance, now to stand firm’] (25. 68). Gone, too, is the touch that mirrors Fiordispina’s earlier caress of Bradamante, when finally ‘trovò con man la veritade espressa’ [‘her hand found the truth manifested’] (25. 65). Harington switches the all-important recognition scene from the haptic to the hands-off with ‘on sight of evidence she gave her vardit’ (25. 56). Meanwhile, the lithe tangle of ‘flanks and arms and legs and breasts’ likening the two lovers to ‘supple acanthus’ entwining ancient columns and beams in Ariosto also lose their frank romance (25. 69). Harington leaves us, instead, with a cloying image of Fiordispina, rehabilitated and clinging to Ricciardetto like ‘no ivy doth embrace the pillar’. Finally – lest the outstanding image in the reader’s mind have anything to do with the beauty of the naked human body – the translator introduces an awkward and unbidden analogy to Apes who could find no ‘more toyes / Then we young fooles did find to make us merry’ (25. 60).

With as much prurience as prudishness, Harington steers Fiordispina away from queer desire towards straight fornication revealing a more general move throughout the translation away from ‘compassionate amorousness’ towards what Patricia Palmer has

---

<sup>19</sup> See Patricia Palmer on this, *The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 58.

dubbed 'hetero-normative smut' (pp. 57 and 59).<sup>20</sup> As he eradicates Ariosto's sensual romance, he silences its innuendo and wipes the famously ironic smile off its face. This is part of what Massimiliano Morini calls Harington's campaign to 'turn the *Furioso* into an epic', a heroic poem in heroical verse (as the title announces) befitting the didactic purposes he claims for it in his various allegories and morals.<sup>21</sup> Equally important in this campaign is his repeated curtailing of Ariosto's narrative digressions, so characteristic of romance, in favour of epic's straight-lined march towards narrative conclusion.<sup>22</sup> As he straightens out the plot, he straightens the aberrant desire as well, charting the course of his translation along heterosexual,

---

<sup>20</sup> Luca degl'Innocenti's chapter in this volume adds further grist to this mill, showing how he enhances the '[heterosexual] wantonnes and love and toying' of the original with graphic images.

<sup>21</sup> Massimiliano Morini, *Tudor Translation in Theory and Practise* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 124.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Lee adds Harington's rationalization of the marvellous as a further sign of his epic turn in 'The English Ariosto: The Elizabethan Poet and the Marvelous Author(s)', *Studies in Philology* 80.3 (1983); 277 – 299.

alpha-male lines.<sup>23</sup> An ambivalent response, according to certain critics,<sup>24</sup> to the ignominy of being rusticated by Queen Elizabeth for his translation of the scurrilous Giocondo episode with its incorrigibly inconstant women, this suppression of homoeroticism also discloses an imperial imperative and greater concern for ‘le arme’ than for ‘gli amori’. Indeed, Colin Burrow goes so far as to say that for Harington ‘the *Furioso* is about killing love’.<sup>25</sup> ‘In general’, he explains, ‘the translation moves with less amorous sympathy than its original. Moments of love never just emerge from a general environment of desire: they are forced to happen’ (p. 150). This is certainly true in his Fiordispina episode. Offset in Ariosto by a compassionate and sensitive telling, here love’s battle scene becomes the over-determined main point of the story.

---

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Patricia Palmer for first phrasing the link between straight plot lines and straight sex in her (as yet) unpublished research paper ‘Flirting with Sappho: Straightening Women Out in Early-Modern Ireland’. Others read Harington’s translation as inherently anti-feminist as well as an assertion of straight masculinity. See Selene Scarsi, *Translating Women in Early Modern England: Gender in the Elizabethan Versions of Boiardo, Tasso and Ariosto* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> On the ambivalence that enables Harington both to suppress and accentuate the raciness of the original, see Miranda Johnson-Haddad, ‘Englishing Ariosto: *Orlando Furioso* at the Court of Elizabeth I’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 31. 4 (1991); 323 – 350; and Joshua Reid, ‘Translation as Transformation: Sir John Harington Englishes the *Orlando Furioso*’, *La Fusta: Journal of Italian Language and Literature*, 13 (2004 - 2005); 53 – 58.

<sup>25</sup> Colin Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 165.

A wilful act of inference, it is also a chest-pummelling act of literary colonization. For Burrow, the newfound ‘roughness’ in Harington’s text reflects a quintessentially English wish to redirect the Italian poem’s desire towards Glory and ‘an active love of virtue’ (p. 152) rather than of women. For Patricia Palmer, it also reflects the author’s real-life misadventures in the Tudor conquest of Ireland.

Most Harington scholars cite Queen Elizabeth’s court and his rural retreat in Kelston Manor, Somersetshire, as the primary historical backdrop to the *Furioso* translation.<sup>26</sup> As Palmer points out, though, he ‘completed the translation in between colonial stints in Ireland, first in 1586 as a would-be planter in Munster and then in 1599, as a captain of horse in the Earl of Essex’s 16,000-strong army’.<sup>27</sup> Instead of suppressing the rebellious Irish who deigned to resist colonization and beating them into submission, however, he read to them from his translation.<sup>28</sup> Returning home disgraced, he sprinkled a smattering of marginalia and textual references to the Irish

---

<sup>26</sup> Jane Everson offers a broader view of the impact of England’s civil wars, uneasy religious settlements and role in the discovery of the new world on Harington’s translation in ‘Translating the Pope and the Apennines: Harington’s Version of the “Orlando Furioso”’, *The Modern Language Review* 100.3 (2005); 645 – 658.

<sup>27</sup> Palmer, *The Severed Head*, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> On 18 October 1599, Palmer reports, the Queen’s Lord Lieutenant Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex, entered serious negotiations with Irish chieftain Hugh O’Neill in the wake of his failed colonial campaign in the Southern Irish province of Munster. While Devereux negotiated, Harington read from his translation of *Orlando Furioso* to O’Neill’s sons (pp. 36 – 37).

campaign.<sup>29</sup> Subtler traces of his experience appear in the preference he shows for epic closure over romance *entrelacement*, for ‘the matter of dispatch’ (be it of character or of plot) over ‘its mannered execution’ (p. 55). It is not hard to imagine, Palmer suggests, that such preference reflects a real-life ‘investment in the possibility of closure’ as far as the ill-fated and bloody conquest of Munster was concerned. Colonizing Ariosto’s poem where he failed to colonise Munster, Harington ushers Fiordispina through the tantalizing dalliance of her romance with Bradamante towards the conclusive climax described thus by Ricciardetto:

This battell hazards neither limbe nor life.  
Without a ladder I did scale the fort  
And stoutly plant my standard on the wall,  
And under me I made my foe to fall. (25. 59)

In so doing, Harington gives the distinct impression of a man more eager than Ariosto to sound the metaphorical drum-roll of victory and to crown his Fiordispina episode – and indeed the poem as a whole – with lines of acquiescence and attack.

### *Part III – John Gay*

If Harington was keen to turn the *Furioso* towards the straight lines of epic, John Gay delighted in the romance qualities of the original, to which he adds twists and curves

---

<sup>29</sup> See Palmer, p. 52, for a telling example of this when Harington’s rival in Ireland, ‘il conte di Desmonda’ (10. 87), becomes the less threatening ‘Earl of Ormond’ (10. 74).

of his own. He is thought to have translated the Fiordispina episode between 1718 and 1720, just one of the two *Furioso* episodes that he chose to translate (the other episode being the Isabella-Zerbino story).<sup>30</sup> His ‘Story of Fiordispina’ is the most sympathetic rendering of the original before the modern age. Gay passes no judgement on its morality, either in paratextual notes or in interventions upon the text.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, he is one of those readers who revel in the episode’s sexual innuendo and who offer English readers as much serious play as the original – if not more.

No longer an episode embedded in a larger epic romance, ‘the Story of Fiordispina’ is a lively novella in rhyming couplets that shifts the perspective from Ariosto’s dynastic heroine to the Spanish princess from its very title. Still narrated by Ricciardetto (as the caption ‘Ricciardetto relates the Story to Ruggiero, who sav’d him from being burnt’ announces), it chops the prelude in which he and Ruggiero are the protagonists and cuts straight to the encounter between the two ladies in the forest. Ricciardetto is very much on his beloved Fiordispina’s side from the start, offering a more deferential introduction to her than Ariosto’s original. Embellishing her underwhelming stage entrance in Ariosto (‘Fiordispina di Spagna soprarriva, / che per cacciar nel bosco ne veniva’ [‘Fiordispina of Spain, who had been hunting in the

---

<sup>30</sup> The most recent critical edition by Dearing and Beckwith dates the translations to 1720. *John Gay: Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Vinton A. Dearing and Charles E. Beckwith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), vol. 1, p. 271.

<sup>31</sup> The autograph manuscript of the translations in the British Library contains various editorial revisions but no commentary; see Add. MS 6419, ff. 61 – 5v inclusive.

forest, arrived’], 25. 27), Gay’s Ricciardetto emphasizes instead her Diana-like regality:

It chanc’d, a Princess of the blood of Spain,  
Diana-like, with all her hunting train,  
Pass’d near the slumb’ring Maid, in quest of Game,  
(Fiordispina was her Royal Name)... (ll. 17 – 20)

Throughout the episode, further subtle changes of this kind increase our sympathy for a more dignified Fiordispina while also exploiting the erotic potential of her encounter with Bradamante. This latter, meanwhile, is released from her destiny of dynastic parentage, losing the cool rationality (so necessary in Ariosto) that had previously cast the Spaniard’s lust into such relief. Invoking a more evenly shared (though still futile) desire, Gay refrains from translating Bradamante’s reluctance to pass the night with Fiordispina (‘non le seppe negar la mia sorella’ [‘my sister did not know how to decline her invitation’], 25. 40), as well as her haste to leave the ‘impaccio’ the next morning (‘Bradamante ha del partir già detto, / ch’uscir di questo impaccio avea gran voglia’ [‘Bradamante, having a great desire to escape this mess, had already said she would be leaving’], 25. 45). In so doing, he restores to Bradamante the ardent complicity with Fiordispina shown in Ariosto’s predecessor, Boiardo, in whose version of events – suspended after that fateful encounter in the forest (along with the *Orlando Innamorato*) itself – ‘l’una de l’altra accesa è nel disio’ [‘both women burned with desire’] (3. 9, 25). Eager, no doubt, to protect her dynastic dignity, Ariosto hastened to extricate her from the affair and to make it very clear that she slept soundly that night while Fiordispina moaned and groaned. Gay reverses his

move, cutting out that very detail and implying, instead, that the Spanish princess is not the only one for whom ‘long sighs and Complaints deny’d repose’ (l. 123). The commonality of their desire is further emphasised in Gay by the newly introduced pathos of their parting:

Adieu, she cryd; yet prest her still to stay;

They part. Awhile she pensive stands and mourns (ll. 148 – 149).

Implicating Bradamante in the matter in such subtle ways, Gay renders Fiordispina’s desire less aberrant and risible. Though she still bemoans (Iphis-like) the singularity of her passion, Bradamante ‘shares her pain’ (l. 103) and her tale becomes less like ‘an outrage on all female decency’ (as Sir John Hoole described it in his 1783 translation) and more like the unbidden but shared ardour of two ingénues seeking ‘joys neer tryd before’ (l. 125).<sup>32</sup> It is not that Gay wants their love story to be taken too seriously: his, too, is a humorous, playful text. Yet he does invite closer engagement with the real-life questions it poses. By removing at least one position of critical distance (Bradamante’s) from which Ariosto’s readers had been able to view it, he encourages deeper reflection on crucial questions of gender, sex and desire.

Under Gay’s pen, Fiordispina is at once more sympathetic and more adventurous. Unfazed by the physicality of the original, he delights in the play of echoes and pre-echoes and maximises the potential for prolonged foreplay in the woman-to-woman

---

<sup>32</sup> John Hoole, *Orlando Furioso: Translated from the Italian of Ludovico Ariosto* with notes by John Hoole, in five volumes (London: Ottridge and Son, 1799), pp. 235.



part of the story. Where Harington truncates that scene, Gay lingers on it, furnishing in full the sighs and moans, the hopes and tears. Where Harington censures Fiordispina's nocturnal caresses of Bradamante's body, Gay plays them up and has her stretch 'her curious hand' (l. 137) not once, but twice. Curious, but soft, her 'gentle' strokes are hesitant preludes to more decisive action later on, and to the moment when 'oer [Ricciardetto's] side her glowing hand she threw' (l. 301). For the time being, however, they occupy the space created in Ariosto for same-sex desire that is both patent and latent, enacted and subtracted. Gay goes so far as to enlarge that Ariostean space, replacing Bradamante's denial of the possibility of lesbian love ('né dar poteale a quel bisogno aiuto' ['nor could she ever help her in her need'] 25. 30) with a more open-ended rhetorical question: 'But how shall Woman Woman's wish content?' (l. 40). One cannot help but think that Fiordispina's repeated nocturnal fumbblings are at least a partial, if wickedly tongue-in-cheek, answer.

If Gay relishes the opportunities for same-sex innuendo and sensuality in the Fiordispina-Bradamante half of the story, he tones down the eye-wateringly explicit performance of male dominance in the Fiordispina-Ricciardetto half. In the second bedroom scene, he banishes the triumphalism of Ricciardetto's sexual conquest and makes sure that both parties enter into the 'am'rous fray' as equals. The man, here, no longer scales the woman's fortress walls, nor plants his standard, nor thrusts his foe beneath him. Instead:

... murm'ring kisses, like the billing Dove

Mark'd every action in this field of Love (ll. 321-322).

Gay's most conspicuous alteration of Ariosto, this deliberate emasculation of the original yields a Fiordispina-Ricciardetto love scene that mirrors as much as it contrasts with the Fiordispina-Bradamante one. Different in the sense that 'sighs and complaints' now give way to 'joyous talk and pleasing jest', it is similar because neither here nor there is there a need for metaphorical 'standards' and the associated expression of gender-specific jostling for the straight staff. There is no need, in other words, to establish male supremacy and female passivity in love. Instead, 'arms with Arms & Legs with Legs' entwine till it is no longer clear where one body ends and the other begins. As moons roll by, the lovers lie 'close as Acanthus leaves wreath'd Columns bind', a perfect image of sensual, consensual love.

'The Story of Fiordispina' concludes with a parting thought for Fiordispina abandoned, now that their secret has been disclosed, to her royal father's anger. Only implied in Ariosto's Ricciardetto's 'God knows the sorrow it leaves me with' ['Dio sa ben con che dolor ne resto'] (25. 70), Gay's Ricciardetto's pity is more explicitly altruistic:

But let me never know  
the dreadfull Torments she must undergo! (ll. 133-4).

Once more, the eighteenth-century Englishman courts sympathy for his heroine and adds to the latent narrative of Ariosto's text implied settings and sentiments of his own.

In his spirited translation, Gay adopts what translation theorists would call a

domesticating strategy, making the text his own and adapting it to tastes and interests more relevant for his times. It is a strategy he makes explicit in a verse epistle he writes to Bernard Lintott about the miscellany of neoclassical imitations he is about to compile (1712).<sup>33</sup> In the epistle, Gay urges Lintott to include translations that are ‘made our own’:

Translations should throughout the work be sown,  
And *Homer*’s godlike muse be made our own ;  
*Horace* in useful numbers should be sung,  
And *Virgil*’s thoughts adorn the *British* tongue. (ll. 29 – 32).

A published translator of Ovid, as well as of Ariosto, Gay’s approach was to make foreign ‘thoughts adorn the *British* tongue’ so that readers could access them without linguistic or cultural barriers. The more easily such texts could ‘charm the list’ning ear’, the more brightly they would ‘shine’ and impart their underlying wisdom.

Excessive domestication tends nowadays to be viewed as an act of ‘ethnocentric’ violence upon original texts, erasing cultural specificity and eliminating the linguistic otherness that ‘foreignizing’ translations retain.<sup>34</sup> Yet in a cultural milieu increasingly concerned with diversion and with making foreign-language works as delightful and (therefore) useful as possible, translations that were ‘entirely English’ (as Gay’s friend Alexander Pope says in his introduction to ‘To Augustus’) were the order of

---

<sup>33</sup> See the Dearing and Beckwith edition, vol. 1, p.40.

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 1998).

the day.<sup>35</sup> Curiously, Gay's translation of the Fiordispina episode was never published during his lifetime, not appearing in print until almost two hundred years later (1909). It is impossible to ascertain whether he intended but failed to publish it, or translated it simply for his own personal delight and instruction. What is ascertainable, though, is that he well and truly 'Englished' Ariosto not just by translating him but also by redeploying relevant material for his own literary purposes later on.

Gay accepts with gusto Ariosto's invitation to draw out what lies implicit in his poem. He accepts it in his translation, but even more so in his burlesque ballad operas, studies of which fail to list the Ferrarese poet amongst Gay's many sources. Yet a number of Gay's works delight in the art of innuendo he practised while translating Ariosto, as well as in the serio-comic possibilities offered by the many cross-dressed, gender-bending characters of the *Furioso*. *Polly* (1729), for example, features Polly Peacham in drag fleeing to the West Indies after her beloved highwayman, Macheath; but it is *Achilles: An Opera* (1733) that really harnesses the narrative potential of Ariosto's original and develops it in new and newly relevant directions.

---

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 635. 'To English' is, of course, an alternative verb for 'to translate', as in the titles of Simon Garth's popular *Metamorphoses Englished* (1717, 1720, 1727) to which Gay contributed (amongst others). On Gay and Pope's shared approach to neoclassicism and translation, see Timothy Dykstal, 'Provoking the Ancients: Classical Learning and Imitation in Fielding and Collier', *College Literature* 31.3 (2004), pp. 102-122.

A three-act ballad opera, *Achilles* tells the story of the gender and genre confusion caused in the Greek household of King Lycomedes and Queen Theaspe when the goddess Thetis persuades her mortal son Achilles to dress as a girl, 'Pyrrha', to avoid the Trojan war. Unwilling to risk his honour by hiding from his martial duty, Achilles is even more reluctant to disobey his immortal mother, and as a result gets caught up in what he calls 'a chain of perplexities' as first King Lycomedes and then his warrior companion Ajax falls in love or, more precisely, in lust with him/her. Meanwhile, he himself falls in love with Lycomedes's daughter, Deidamia, and conducts an illicit affair with her while cross-dressed, before marrying her in the end when converted back from 'Pyrrha' into Achilles.

Drawing on a plethora of ancient sources, *Achilles* lifts the classical hero out of 'old Greece' (as the prologue declares) and positions him 'But how? 'tis monstrous! In a Comic Piece' (l. 16).<sup>36</sup> Most conspicuously, he draws on Statius, Ovid and (pseudo-) Bion who supply him with notable plot features such as 'the clandestine amour with King Lycomedes's daughter Deidamia, Achilles's engagement in women's work (spinning), the presence of a group of daughters (or court maidens), the use of a

---

<sup>36</sup> Classical sources include Apollodorus, Bion, Euripides, Paulus Silenarius, Pausanias, Philostratus the Younger, Horace, Hyginus, Ovid, Pliny, Seneca, Sidonius, and Statius, many of whom Gay quotes directly in his play. See Yvonne Noble, 'Sex and Gender in John Gay's *Achilles*', *John Gay and the Scriblerians*, ed. by Peter Lewis and Nigel Wood (London: Vision Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 184 - 215.

trumpet call as part of Ulysses's ruse, and Achilles's adoption of the name Pyrrha'.<sup>37</sup>

Close acquaintance with and clear appreciation of ancient literature, in other words, provides the mainstays of Gay's Achilles-in-petticoats story. Yet it is his experience of Englishing Ariosto, I suggest, that empowers him to exert his influence on those source materials and to alter them for his own satirical ends.

Gay's most significant impact on the classical original is his addition of the Lycomedes sub-plot. None of the ancient sources portray the King's cack-handed attempt to seduce and then rape his would-be protégée. If Gay foregoes the homoerotic humour of Ruggiero's liberation of Ricciardetto by commencing his 'Story of Fiordispina' after the liberation had occurred, this is his (rather belated) chance to smuggle it back in, as the arrogant king tries but fails to woo 'the aukward Creature' (I, vi, 14) he finds so 'infinitely agreeable' (I, v, 14). The fact that the audience is privy, behind the character's back, to the knowledge that 'Pyrrha' is actually a man renders the flawed offensive humorous. Doubly funny, however, is the fact that Lycomedes seems aroused not by Pyrrha's femininity, but by decidedly manly qualities that 'her' transvestism cannot suppress. 'Pyrrha' is not very good at hiding 'intolerable Strides' (II, ii, 60), 'so very masculine' oaths (II, ii, 72-3) and 'agreeably impudent' looks (II, ii, 77), so that Lycomedes' homoerotic desire is concealed to none but himself. Despite the petticoats, 'she' is undeniably masculine and that is what the lusty king simply cannot resist. Wilfully interpreting 'her' alarm and annoyance at his advances as 'little vixen humours' (I, v, 4-5), he is increasingly inflamed by what he calls the 'Spirit and Vivacity, [...] not more than is becoming of

---

<sup>37</sup> Yvonne Noble, 'Sex and Gender', p. 186.

the Sex' (I, vi, 6) as she repels him. He twists and distorts 'her' forceful rejection of him, proclaiming 'her' words the 'thousand necessary Affectations of Modesty, which Women, in Decency to themselves, practice with common Lovers before Compliance' (II, iv, 26 -28). In the end, he resorts to violence and thrusts himself upon his unwilling prey.

Prefacing his assault is a further nod to Ariosto and to that other main omission in Gay's translation of Fiordispina, the analogy of sex to joust, penis to weapon, woman to fortress and hero to sexual conqueror. Of course, Ariosto can stake no claim to this ancient analogy (a favourite of Ovid's as well), but the fact that Gay expunges it from his translation of the Fiordispina episode only to re-elaborate it here is surely relevant. It is as if he has finally found a way to redeploy it that he is comfortable with: not as a means of asserting male dominance over women or heralding a return to heteronormativity, but as a means of exposing sexual harassment for the gross abuse of power that it is. Just before trying to force himself on 'Pyrrha', Lycomedes sings:

Lycom.        *When the Fort on no Condition*  
                  *Will admit the gen'rous Foe,*  
                  *Parley but delays Submission ;*  
                  *We by Storm shou'd lay it low. (II, iii, 52 – 55)*

'Pyrrha', being Achilles, is of course too strong for 'her' aggressor. Pushing him away 'with great Violence', 'she' knocks him to the ground. Pinning him down, 'she' delivers 'her' sung response:

Ach.           *What Heart hath not Courage, by Force assail'd,*  
*To brave the most desperate Fight?*  
*'Tis Justice and Virtue that hath prevail'd ;*  
*Power must yield to Right.*

The oh so familiar metaphor gets turned on its head and used not to celebrate male sexual aggression but to reveal it as an arrogant and ill-founded presumption of male entitlement. For once in literature, the lady fights back not just with words and reproachful looks, but by braving 'the most desperate Fight'. Here, at last, might yields to right and the lady comes out on top, leaving the predatory king symbolically as well as literally (the following lines suggest) exposed.

In the real world, of course, not many hearts could brave that most desperate fight, no matter how courageous. Pyrrha's clear advantage over fellow victims of attempted rape is poignantly highlighted as the ineffectual courtiers who rush onstage inspect 'her' (and not the emasculated king) for 'the Dagger'. The king, by contrast, whines 'How have I expos'd myself?' then asks that his 'over-officious' friends leave him and 'say nothing of what they have seen' (II, ii, 12-14). Behind the humour of this scene lies a dark message. Gay has launched a vicious attack on bourgeois England with its suffocating mother-son relations dramatized through Thetis and Achilles, its bickering spouses represented by Theaspe and Lycomedes, its oppressive but ineffective parenting of young girls enacted by Lycomedes/Theaspe and Deidamia and – crucially – its abject neglect of chaste young women exposed time and again to predatory males in positions of power as played out by 'Pyrrha' and Lycomedes. Happily, 'Pyrrha' is actually Achilles, and audience members know that 'she' is never



in any real danger. The full atrocity of rape can be played out in a safe environment and provoke an immediate response not of shock but of laughter. Yet on returning home from the opera, only the most insensitive few could fail to apprehend the messages about the double standards applied to men and women; the gross injustice of sexual harassment particularly in the home; and the vulnerability of women in an aggressively patriarchal society.

Yvonne Noble has written eloquently about the timeliness of Gay's attack on eighteenth-century English approaches to rape.<sup>38</sup> The *Lycomedes* plot responds to a 1730s context in which a high profile, wealthy man, the infamous Colonel Francis Charteris, could be convicted of raping a woman at pistol-point on a public road, then pardoned by King George I. The same man was later sentenced to hang for raping a hired serving-maid, but pardoned again, this time by King George II. By placing a male character in the prospective rape victim's shoes, Gay satirizes eighteenth-century legal justice but also literature, and authors like Henry Fielding who, in his play *Rape upon Rape* (1730), casts the crime as a legal fiction invented by the ladies. Gay's critique of societal and institutional attitudes to rape in the *Fiordispina* episode affords satirical interventions that 'interfere [with] pointed rage' and 'lash the madness of a vicious age'.<sup>39</sup> *Achilles* riffs on the narrative potential of Ariosto's text and casts the old material in a new and profoundly relevant mould. Further removed from the original than the translations of Harington and his younger self, it

---

<sup>38</sup> Yvonne Noble, 'Sex and Gender', pp. 184 - 215.

<sup>39</sup> John Gay, 'On a Miscellany of Poems to Bernard Lintott' in Dearing and Beckwith, vol. 1, p. 40.

nonetheless draws inspiration from the *Orlando Furioso* and constitutes a creative act of inference governed by the need to speak comic truth to power and to the Londoners of his day.

### *Part III – Conclusions*

This essay offers one means of celebrating Ariosto's ageless relevance across space and time and his extraordinary ability to swing both ways. Sir John Harington directs *Orlando Furioso* towards epic, John Gay curves it towards romance then later points it toward satire. Each text looks to the *Furioso* for relevance, finding in its under-determined allusions and kinesic eloquence the space to render it relevant to their own readerships. Ali Smith, with whom this chapter began, offers a final set of metaphors for the impact of old stories on brand new circumstances. In lines that reverberate with echoes of Ariosto, she describes the ripple-effect caused in the cultural imagination of old but enduring stories:

Rings that widen on the surface of a loch above a thrown-in stone. A drink of water offered to a thirsty traveller on the road. Nothing more than what happens when things come together, when hydrogen, say, meets oxygen, or a story from then meets a story from now, or stone meets water meets girl meets boy meets bird meets hand [...] meets thirst meets hunger meets need meets dream meets real meets same meets different meets death meets life meets end meets beginning all over again, the story of nature itself, ever-inventive, making one thing out of another, and one thing into another (p. 160).

From the thirst-quenching water to the concentric circles linking boys to girls, thirst to hunger, dreams to reality, Smith evokes the language and imagery of the Fiordispina episode. The concatenation of ‘stone meets water meets girl meets boy’, in particular, recalls Ricciardetto’s spurious encounter with the magical water nymph, an allegory in its own right for the transformative power of old stories which are themselves transformed in the retelling. Doused by the nymph with enchanted water, Ricciardetto’s fable goes, his erstwhile female body turns male, Fiordispina’s dream turns real and Ovid’s story begins all over again, travelling in directions the original author could never have foretold. A cock-and-bull story, to be sure, this feigned metamorphosis illustrates the story-teller’s agency in the time-honoured tradition of making ‘one thing out of another, and one thing into another’ in the service of relevance. Each subsequent retelling – in translation, adaptation or improvisation – transports the old story upstream, casting it in a new light and drawing to the surface inferred undercurrents that best serve its brand new set of circumstances. In so doing, each successive rewriter enters into the spirit of *Orlando Furioso*, honouring Ariosto’s commitment to ever-inventive readings, and taking up his invitation to craft ever-inventive rewritings of his or her own.

Ita Mac Carthy,  
University of Birmingham