FORTUNE OR FATE: AMBIGUITY IN ROBERT GREENE'S 'ORLANDO FURIOSO'

In a recent essay Norman Gelber recognizes a certain degree of ambiguity in Greene's *Orlando Furioso*, and suggests that this ambiguity is created by the dramatist's treatment of women.¹ Yet Greene's dramatic handling of women in this play based on Ariosto's heroic romance appears to be only superficially ambiguous. While Gelber points out that there are three anti-feminine speeches in the romance, he admits (p. 266) that they only provide a 'topical framework and moral foil for the heroine'. The anti-feminine comments 'are negated by the exemplary conduct of the heroine' (p. 264). While Greene is concerned with women in the play, it is hard to agree that the 'major theme concerns the moral quality of the heroine Angelica' (p. 264). There really is no problem with an Angelica whose main qualities are 'fidelity, patient sufferance, and forgiveness' (p. 266). This hardly seems to represent a serious division in Greene's dramatic presentation. However, there is another kind of thematic ambiguity that Gelber does not note, and which is not so readily resolved. In fact, Greene may not be able to resolve it at all.

The problem that Greene raises is one that is concerned with the incompatibility of the several systems under which one may perceive humanity to operate in *Orlando Furioso*. Such ambiguity is hardly uncommon. For example, it presents itself in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as well as in many another dramatic romance. Prospero has two apparently exclusive explanations of certain similar events of his life. When Miranda asks how they came ashore on the island, Prospero declares, 'By Providence divine' (1.2.159).² Yet his enemies have been brought ashore by something quite unlike Providence. Prospero comments on this event:

By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune,
(Now my dear lady) hath mine enemies
Brought to this shore.

(1.2.178)

The rather disparate attitudes towards the universal forces at work reflect a thematic and metaphysical ambiguity that is quite common in Shakespeare's romances. In *Orlando Furioso* Greene had raised similar problems about the nature of the powers he may have felt were manipulating human existence.

Yet this dichotomy is not always taken as seriously as it should be. In reference to *Pericles*, John Danby sees ultimately little problem. He suggests that the main theme is one of '“doutous fortune” and the Providence that smiles while it seems to frown'.³ The familiar theme of Giraldi Cinthio has been described as 'the fickleness of Fortune . . . counterbalanced by the righteousness of divine Providence'.⁴

¹ Norman Gelber, 'Robert Greene's *Orlando Furioso*: A Study of Thematic Ambiguity', *MLR*, 64 (1969), 263-6.

² *The Tempest*, edited by Frank Kermode, new Arden edition (London, 1954). All citations in my text are from this edition.

³ *Poets on Fortune's Hill* (London, 1964), p. 99.

⁴ Marvin T. Herrick, *Tragicomedy: Its Origin and Development in Italy, France, and England* (Urbana, Illinois, 1962), p. 79.

Returning to Shakespeare, Carol Gesner comments upon the effect of his debt to Greek romance:

Even in the fury of Leontes' unreasoned jealousy, the ugly cynicism of Iachimo's treachery, the ghoulish horror of Imogen's awaking in the cave, there is a note of unreality, an assurance of only temporal agony which seems to calm reader and spectator alike with a quiet awareness that eventually all will be well.¹

Fortune can only frown temporarily; Providence will smile.

Such resolutions, however, may be oversimplifications. While Shakespeare's treatment of Fortune, Providence, and Art in the romances is too complex for the scope of this paper, obviously juxtapositions of apparent metaphysical opposites exist in these plays. Autolycus's attitude towards life, for example, weighs against the system implicit in the saving oracle. Such a juxtaposition — the idea that there may be no more to life than accident and chance against the kind of view made explicit by Jupiter when he materializes to guarantee a just outcome to *Cymbeline* — forms part of the thematic ambiguity of *Orlando Furioso*. It may not be enough to say that Providence smiles in the end.

A certain confusion of attitude is introduced into Greene's play when Angelica falls in love with Orlando. She declares that her love is caused by 'Fortune or some deep inspiring fate . . .' (l. 163).² The metaphysical division suggested follows the pattern implicit in Prospero's distinction between 'Providence divine' and 'Fortune'. Angelica is saying much the same thing. She is unsure whether the moving force is accident or Providence. My question is whether by the end of the play this apparent confusion will be resolved.

In Greene's romance itself the villain Sacrepant is the primary believer in the absolute supremacy of Fortune, a metaphysical notion that brings one very close to the conception that life is chaotic and amoral — in artistic terms the philosophy would create a drama that would ignore poetic justice. His attitude relates him, of course, to the Vice figure of medieval drama. Thus undisturbed by the possibility of a Providence that orders existence purposefully (justly), Sacrepant in his philosophy is free to use any means to gain his ends, Angelica and a crown:

My dreames are Princely, all of Diademes,
Honor: me thinks the title is too base.
Mightie, glorious and excellent:
I these my glorious Genius sound within my mouth
These please the eare, and with a sweet applause,
Makes me in tearmes coequall with the Gods.

(l. 264)

His concerns are temporal and honour will not serve to win a temporal crown, nor Angelica. Like Tamburlaine he asserts he can be 'coequall with the Gods'. What Sacrepant's metaphysic suggests is that in an amoral universe the gods may not matter at all.

Sacrepant begins his plot by leaving false evidence that suggests that Angelica has been unfaithful to Orlando.³ The hero, in the manner of romance, immediately

¹ 'Cymbeline and the Greek Romance: A Study in Genre', in *Studies in English Renaissance Literature*, edited by Waldo F. McNeir (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1962), p. 105.

² *The History of Orlando Furioso* (1594), edited by W. W. Greg, Malone Society Reprints (Oxford, 1907). All citations in my text are from this reprint.

³ See Gesner pp. 105 and 117. The situation is typical of romance plots. Gesner points out Shakespeare's debt to the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus for this element, among many others, in *The Winter's Tale* (through Greene's *Pandosto*) and particularly in *Cymbeline*.

goes mad, and the enraged peers of France demand the death of the slandered heroine:

We sue for law and justice at thy hand,
We seeke Angelica thy daughter out;
That wanton maid, that hath eclipt the joy
Of royall France, and made Orlando mad.
(l. 1141)

A dweller in the psychologically unrealistic realm of romance, her father readily agrees and it appears that 'law and justice', those elements associated with a providentially structured world, will prove a mockery. The wheel of Fortune does not resemble the balanced wheel of Providence.

As E. C. Pettet comments, Greene relies on 'an abundant and sustained use of coincidence, accident and chance'.¹ All of these dramatic elements tend to impose upon an audience a sense of the formless nature of human existence. The same critic notes however that Greene 'also makes a considerable use of dream, magic, and the supernatural' (p. 61). These elements, as they do in Shakespeare's romances, suggest something quite different, that there may be some complex but finally intelligible order beneath the surface confusion of life — while Posthumus cannot interpret the book left by Jupiter, a Soothsayer can. Thus, while Fortune in its amoral workings has made Sacrepant ascendant, the supernatural can be called upon to reorder the dramatic world properly. It can be made to create for us the satisfaction of poetic justice with its metaphysical implications.

To establish the desired order Greene employs an enchantress who gives the mad Orlando a curative 'glass of wine' (l. 1232), and as the stage directions note: 'Hee drinkes, and she charmes him with her wand, and lies downe to sleepe' (l. 1252). What follows is his recovery, then a brief explanation of Sacrepant's plot, and her final absolute assertion:

Muse not at this, for I have tolde thee true,
I am she that cured thy disease,
Here take these weapons given thee by the fates,
And hie thee Countie to the battell straight.
(l. 1336)

Orlando can no more challenge her than Pericles can challenge Diana, or the family of Posthumus, Jupiter, or Leontes, Apollo's oracle. Divinity has taken proper control of the stage world and is not to be questioned.

It is also significant that this supernatural character refers to the 'fates' who arm the hero. Recalling Angelica's division between Fortune and Fate, the audience can recognize the enchantress as an agent of the only force beyond the human that is presented as conventionally purposive — the audience can sympathize with a power that is moving towards justice rather than unconcern. The enchantress, perhaps the intervening 'sacred Goddess' (l. 1340) Orlando terms her, at least adumbrates some purpose in events. The hero has been cured to bring punishment to Sacrepant and reward (rescue) to Angelica; he is to shape the proper romantic conclusion that mirrors a rather consoling and perhaps unrealistic image of life. In any case, she is as necessary to the conclusion as any of the divine manifestations (and Prospero whom I hesitate to apotheosize) in Shakespeare's last plays.

¹ *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (New York and London, 1949), p. 61.

With Angelica about to be executed, she, like Hermione, swears:

But by the heavens whereto my soule shall flie,
Angelica did never wrong Orlando.

(l. 1469)

Yet the heavens, through the enchantress and the restored Orlando, can apparently operate in temporal affairs. In a dramatic world that would deny or ignore the possibility of tragic logic, the hero rescues the heroine and destroys the villain. Then Orlando defines the fall of Sacrepant, not as an example of the wheel of Fortune, but as an example of divine justice, though the terms are pagan:

And now Revenge leaping from out the seate,
Of him that may command sterne Nemesis,
Hath powrde those treasons justly on his head.

(l. 1575)

'Justly' is the crucial word. In a world where one can find justice, the power of amoral chance or Fortune is certainly diminished.

It is this conflict between the power of Fortune and the power of 'inspiring fate' that creates the actual thematic and metaphysical ambiguity of *Orlando Furioso*. A question, however, remains concerning the resolution of this ambiguity. The romance convention itself tends to shape a providential resolution that leaves the audience mentally satisfied, though hardly purged. While Greene's romance fits this pattern generally, as we move towards the happy ending there seems to be some confusion in the dramatist's mind concerning the metaphysical conflict he has been treating. Greene may be no more sure than Angelica whether Fortune or Providence rules — of course she believes she knows at the end of the play. But what of Greene? His philosophic attitude may be as split at the close of the romance as it appears to be at the start.

Symptomatic of this continuing division is the odd double death of Sacrepant. As the villain lies dying, the unrevealed Orlando, in a typical mixture of paganism and Christianity, reminds him of the after-life:

... Then let me at thy dying day intreate,
By that same sphere wherein thy soule shall rest,
If Jove denie not passage to thy ghost,
Thou tell mee whether thou wrongdst Angelica or no.

(l. 1385)

Sacrepant repents and confesses, trying to relieve a Faustus-like hell within the self. The character who lived in hope of Fortune and without fear of a system that operates 'justly' discovers that fear:

O thats the sting that pricks my conscience
Oh thats the hell my thoughts abhorre to thinke . . .
O thus I wrongd Orlando and Angelica.

(ll. 1391, 1398)

The dramatist is moving Sacrepant and the audience to one kind of conclusion: the gods are just but merciful as well. Any metaphysics involved here are clearly Christian no matter what the overlay of language.

But as the romance moves towards the resolution of its conflicting metaphysics through the just death of Sacrepant, Orlando brutally rejects the repentant Sacrepant and praises the Fortune that brought him into his hands:

Then dead is the fatall authour of my ill,
 Base villaine, vassall, unworthie of a crowne,
 Knowe that the man that strucke the fatall stroke,
 Is Orlando the Countie Palatine,
 Whome fortune sent to quittance all my wrongs
 Thou foild and slaine, it now behoves me straight
 To hie me fast to massacre thy men,
 And so farewell thou devill in shape of man.

(l. 1400)

Apparently Fortune, elevating Orlando on its wheel, is creating the proper conclusion. Any sense of a dialectic between the philosophies involved gets lost in confusion.

In fact, Sacrepant must begin dying again. He rejects the ideas of hell and conscience, functions of a providential world, and laments over the event and not his guilt. He complains that 'the fates' let Orlando be his slayer. But these fates do not seem to be those of Angelica. He associates them, if not precisely with accident and chance, with forces that are specifically amoral. His life is ending not because of a metaphysical system that demands justice, but because the period of his life is over; questions of morality and repentance do not arise. Thus Sacrepant moves towards a second death accompanied by a cry not of remorse but of dismay at the Fortune that Orlando so praised. Sacrepant begins:

Hath Demogorgon ruler of the fates,
 Set such a balefull period on my life,
 As none might end the daies of Sacrepant,
 But mightie Orlando rivall of my love.

(l. 1409)

This scene, like the play, presents split and at times confusing perceptions without any actual resolution. One death seems to suggest the triumph of justice (and even mercy) and of a metaphysic that implies a purposeful Providence. The second suggests that Fortune, without regard to moral worth — and this approaches the metaphysics of disorder — has turned its careless wheel once more. Thus any resolution between the conflicting philosophies implicit in the romance is vitiated by this double death and by Orlando's delight in Fortune, the very force least responsible (keeping in mind the enchantress as an apparent agent of a morally concerned Providence) for the romantic conclusion. Perhaps the most that can be asserted is that for our ease, and for Greene's, justice seems to coincide with luck. But the metaphysical ambiguity remains.

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