CHAPTER 11

Herodotus and Narrative Art in Renaissance Ferrara: The Translation of Matteo Maria Boiardo

Dennis Looney

Introduction

The vibrant town of Ferrara in northern Italy plays a crucial role in the recovery of Herodotus during the course of the Renaissance. Due primarily to the beneficent patronage of the ruling Este family, Ferrara is the site where Herodotus' work is first introduced into the early modern classroom in a systematic way. Readers in Ferrara promote and circulate copies of Lorenzo Valla's Latin translation of Herodotus early on.1 The Este court in Ferrara sponsors the first complete translation of Herodotus into a vernacular language, Matteo Maria Boiardo’s version in Italian, which I will examine in some detail below. Ferrara becomes arguably the site in Renaissance Humanism’s Republic of Letters where the Herodotean text serves most fully and impressively as a repository of classical material and of narrative strategies for subsequent generations of poets and historians,2 not least among them Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso. “I am directing this old Greek to your court, my Lord, commending him and myself to your Excellency”, writes Boiardo in the preface to his translation dedicated to his patron Ercole d’Este around 1490. Once Herodotus made it to Ferrara, he did not leave.

In this essay I examine the engagement with Herodotus by the first major narrative poet of the Italian Renaissance, Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441–1494). After a brief consideration of the presence of Herodotus in the curriculum of the school of Guarino Veronese and the impact of his teaching on the reception of Herodotus in Ferrara, I turn to Boiardo’s translation of Herodotus completed sometime between 1474 and 1491.3 We have evidence of its circulation

---

1 On Valla’s translation of Herodotus, see Foley in this volume.
2 Tristano (2012) addresses the practice of historical writing at the Ferrarese court from the early 14th through the mid-18th century.
3 Reichenbach (1929) 192–7 accounts for the wide range of years.
in manuscript before it is published in five editions between 1533 and 1565. In the two extant early manuscripts, Modena α.H.3.22 and Berlin Hamilton 294, it is referred to simply as a ‘translation’ (traductione) of a ‘history’ (historia), although this latter term, which is first encountered in the work’s opening sentence, does not appear in a title or opening rubric. Publishers in the 16th century refer to the work as Delle guerre de Greci et de Persi. One finds, not surprisingly, traces of the translator’s own encounter with Herodotus in his chivalric poem L’inamoramento de Orlando, retitled by the tradition as Orlando Innamorato (1494). The poet signals his relation with the classical source in a passage near the end of the poem, where he claims to represent a larger war with greater military forces than ever described before: La più stupenda guerra e la magiore / Che racontasse mai prosa né verso (“The largest, most amazing war / Attempted yet in prose or rhyme”, 2.29.1-2). When the forces under the Saracen Agramante muster, they are more vast than anything ever described by Herodotus: Né el gran re persiano in quella vale / Ove Leonìda fe l’aspro decreto, / Con le gente di Sitia e di Etiopia, / Ebbe de armati in campo magior copia (“Nor when that Persian monarch, at / The pass blocked by Leonidas, / Grouped Ethiops and Scythians, / Was there a larger army massed”, 2.29.2.5-8). Boiardo alludes to the army of Xerxes at Thermopylae, which included units from the far reaches of the known world, as far south as Ethiopia and as far north as Scythia, in addition to Persians. This is shorthand to signify that Boiardo draws much of his understanding of the cultures and geography of the ancient Mediterranean world, especially the Middle East and northern Africa, from the Herodotean narrative. His descriptions of military culture, particularly the councils of war and catalogues of troops, often depend on this Greek

---

4 It has not been republished since the 16th century but Valentina Gritti is editing Boiardo's Herodotus, Hystorie, in the Opere di Matteo Maria Boiardo, forthcoming from interlinea edizioni for the Centro Studi Matteo Maria Boiardo.
5 Looney (2012a).
6 Biadene (1887) 339.
7 Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) seems to want to suppress his own encounter with Herodotus in his poem that picks up where Boiardo’s left off, Orlando Furioso (1516). This may be a strategy to minimize the influence of the Greek historian along with that of his Ferrarese intermediary, Boiardo, who was, incidentally, Ariosto’s predecessor at the court of the Este in Ferrara. In another essay I hope to explore the extent to which Ariosto exhibits anxiety about the influence of Boiardo and, through him, Herodotus.
8 I follow the text of Antonia Tissoni Bevenuti and Cristina Montagnini reprinted in Andrea Canova’s edition (2011); I generally follow the translation of Ross (1989).