

# The Substance of Sicilian Puppet Theater

## Past and Present

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**I**N FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA'S *The Godfather: Part II*, a Mafia boss walking through New York City's Little Italy stops in front of an outdoor puppet theater performance to watch two knights wielding swords, then quickly turns away, remarking that the action is too violent for him. While his response is meant to be ironic for the viewer—the notorious *mafioso*, in fact, is about to be assassinated—I'll admit that until a couple of decades ago I might have had the same reaction if I had chanced upon one of the fierce swordfights that are the hallmark of the genre. But in the late 1990s, a friend presented me with Catanese souvenir puppets named Orlando, Rinaldo, and Angelica, and told me that Sicilian puppeteers were staging the same epic narratives that I was teaching at Columbia University. Although I hadn't previously given any thought to this performance tradition, those three two-foot-tall puppets dangling in my living room proceeded to stare at me daily until I decided to go see for myself how Sicilian puppet theater brought to life the

medieval and Renaissance poems that had driven my research since my graduate student days. Twenty years and several trips to Sicily later, you could say I'm a bona fide *opera dei pupi* enthusiast. In addition to bringing puppet theater into my scholarly studies and teaching, I created a website (eBOIARDO) to make the chivalric matter staged in puppet plays (as well as in other performance and artistic traditions) more widely available to students and the general public.<sup>1</sup> Although Sicilian puppetry is often advertised as "folklore," puppeteers are actively engaged in nothing less than dramatizing in a meaningful way masterpieces of medieval and Renaissance Italian (and European) literature. This essay first outlines the principal chivalric narratives that found their way into traditional Sicilian puppet theater, and then turns to how today's puppeteers are refashioning the stories for contemporary audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> The website eBOIARDO (Epics of Boiardo and Other Italian Authors: a Research Database Online) can be found at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo).



Locating the distant starting point of Sicilian puppet theater narratives takes us out of Italy and into the Pyrenees where, in the imaginary world of medieval Carolingian epic, Charlemagne's rearguard, led by the paladin Roland, is ambushed by Spanish Saracens at the mountain pass of Roncevaux as a result of betrayal by the emperor's treacherous brother-in-law Ganelon. It was of no matter that according to the historical record Charlemagne's rearguard was actually attacked by local Basques as his army returned from fighting in Spain alongside Muslim (Abbasid) allies in 778. In the ensuing literary tradition, Christendom was locked in inexorable conflict with the Saracen enemy because, as Roland famously says in an early twelfth-century version of the *Chanson de Roland*, "Pagans are wrong and Christians are right" (*Song of Roland* l. 1015). Refusing early on to call for reinforcements, the hero eventually succumbs alongside his companions and is taken to heaven, leaving his fiancée Aude to die of grief back home at the news of his demise, and compelling Charlemagne to return with his troops to avenge the rout with a definitive victory over the Spanish Saracens and their allies. The Frankish paladins' spirit of sacrifice and devotion to king, God, and country thus lent moral support to military efforts against the "infidel" in Spain and the Holy Land.

Yet the story of the battle of Roncevaux underwent substantial changes before it first appeared on the puppet theater stage. Some early Italian versions shifted the war's motivation from the need to liberate Spain from Saracen rule, to Charlemagne's desire to bestow a Spanish kingdom upon his nephew Orlando (Roland), with the paladin vowing not to consummate his marriage to Aude (Aude) until he could make her a queen.

Luigi Pulci's late fifteenth-century *Morgante* acknowledges this nepotistic incentive when announcing Charlemagne's plan to invade Spain. The emperor thus becomes doubly responsible for the ensuing tragedy, first by his reckless decision to attack a foreign realm for selfish reasons, and subsequently by his choice of Gano (Ganelon) as his messenger. Pulci also introduces the knight Rinaldo (Renaud in the medieval French rebel baron cycle) into the battle as the hero who returns from the East and singlehandedly transforms a tragic defeat into an ultimate victory, saving all of Christendom in the process (*Morgante* 25.170). Having previously recounted Charlemagne's unjust persecution and banishment of Rinaldo, Pulci's depiction of the paladin's heroism at the battle of Roncevaux superimposes the themes of rebellion and vindicated rights onto a familiar story of religious warfare.

Another fifteenth-century poet, Matteo Maria Boiardo, opens his *Orlando Innamorato* (1482-3) announcing a scandalous backstory that he claims had been kept hidden to save Orlando from embarrassment: Charlemagne's allegedly stalwart paladin had actually fallen hopelessly in love at first sight with Princess Angelica of Cathay and had deserted both the emperor and his own wife to traverse the globe as a would-be Arthurian knight-errant seeking to win the damsel's affection. Yet we are advised not to be shocked at the news of Orlando's enamorment since

*No strong arm, no audacity,  
No blade well-honed, no shield or mail,  
No other power can avail,  
For in the end Love conquers all*  
(*Orlando Innamorato* 1.1.2).

Indeed, Boiardo emphatically affirms the superiority of Arthurian over Carolingian themes due to the fact that King Arthur's knights

*displayed their worth in many battles  
and sought adventure with their ladies*

whereas Charlemagne's court

*closed its gates to Love  
and only followed holy wars*  
(Orlando Innamorato 2.18.1-2).

Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533) brought a conclusion to Boiardo's unfinished poem imagining that Orlando's love and jealousy had led him to a state of insanity—thus the poem's title *Orlando Furioso*—before the knight eventually regained his epic stature thanks to the English prince Astolfo's trip to the moon to recover his wits. Although Ariosto's continuation did not take Charlemagne's army into Spain, it did imagine a decisive Christian victory over the Saracens of North Africa culminating in a singular battle of three against three on the island of Lipadusa (the historical Lampedusa).

Puppeteers were already dramatizing episodes from Pulci's *Morgante*, Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, among other works, in the early nineteenth century. A transformative moment for puppet theater occurred in 1858-60, however, when the Sicilian Giusto Lo Dico incorporated these epics into his monumental prose compilation entitled *La storia dei paladini di Francia cominciando da Milone conte d'Anglante fino alla morte di Rinaldo* (The History of the Paladins of France from Count Milone of Anglante to the Death of Rinaldo).<sup>2</sup> This interlaced chronological succession of events, comprising almost 3000 pages and stretching from the vicissitudes of Orlando's father Milone to beyond the battle of Roncevaux, was so universally adopted by puppeteers that it has often been referred to as their "Bible." In 1895-96 Giuseppe Leggio published an expanded version with additional episodes, including Charlemagne's birth and youth taken from an early fifteenth-century prose account by Andrea da Barberino (*Reali di Francia*).

2 For a complete list of Lo Dico's sources, see Pasqualino, *L'opera dei pupi*, 66-70.

Thanks to various prequels and sequels, some puppeteers extended the timeline even further, linking the cycle back to the exploits of Alexander of Macedonia and forward to the Crusades. It would typically take a year or more of nightly performances for puppeteers to complete just the cycle of the paladins of France. For example, the Palermitan puppeteer Mimmo Cuticchio refers to a sequence of 371 plays in his family's repertory, while the Catanese-American puppeteer Agrippino Manteo staged a cycle consisting of 394 consecutive plays in his New York City theater in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-1950s, however, television in the home, the post-war economic boom, and an unprecedented indifference toward local cultural traditions led audiences to abandon this form of entertainment. Most companies sold their puppets to collectors and were forced to seek their livelihood through other means. The tradition did not die out completely, however. Since the revival of the 1970s, a small number of remaining, reactivated, or newly formed puppet theater companies have offered a much reduced repertory to accommodate audiences largely unfamiliar with the subject matter. Contemporary puppeteers often stage one of three episodes taken from the medieval and Renaissance epics mentioned above: the first is the rivalry between Rinaldo and Orlando for Angelica, which condenses an extended narrative sequence from

3 Although most extant scripts are jealously guarded by puppeteer families and their heirs, Agrippino Manteo's *canovacci* were donated to the Italian American Museum of New York by his descendants and should soon be available online. For more information, see [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-scripts](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-scripts).

**Orlando.** Stanley Marcus Sicilian Marionettes Collection. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.





Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* into a single performance; the second is Orlando's descent into madness from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*; and the third is the battle of Roncevaux, whether based on Pulci's *Morgante* or the earlier *Song of Roland* version.

### ***Duel of Orlando and Rinaldo for Angelica***

In 1981, Antonio Pasqualino reported that the *Duello di Orlando e Rinaldo per Angelica* was the episode preferred by the educated public during the puppet theater revival of the previous decade, noting that it had been performed "a thousand times by all the puppeteers in the area of Palermo" and was still being performed continuously at the time.<sup>4</sup> This episode remains the puppeteers' *pièce de résistance* two decades into the twenty-first century, especially in the province of Palermo. Puppet companies perform it either in their permanent puppet theaters mainly for tourists and schoolchildren or in the public squares as scheduled summer events for both the local population and vacationers. This episode may be especially welcome today as puppeteers tend to downplay the *opera dei pupi's* traditional backdrop of Christian-Saracen conflict. Even though one can expect a final battle scene in which the heroes face Saracen attackers outside Paris, the principal focus is two rivals fighting over an attractive damsel. The play was recently performed with the title "The Great Duel between Orlando and Rinaldo for the Beautiful Angelica's Sake" by Mimmo Cuticchio and his Figli d'arte Cuticchio company during their U.S. tour in October and November of 2018 (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

The play is sometimes titled *The Arrival of Angelica* in Paris when the action begins with Angelica's entrance into Charlemagne's court

(from the first canto of the *Orlando Innamorato*). As Mimmo Cuticchio explains: "The Arrival of Angelica is one of the traditional public's most loved episodes because the most beautiful stories, interlaced with love, duels, and enchantments, begin from this point."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Cathayan princess's presence and subsequent disappearance not only send Charlemagne's hitherto most dutiful paladin wandering across the expanse of Europe and Asia, but also open the Carolingian epic setting to the love adventures and magical enchantments of Arthurian romance. The arrival scene was subject to creative imitations in subsequent fiction, not only via the character of Armida in Torquato Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*), but also, spilling over into the historical novel, via the "Angelica" characters in Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*) and, most recently, Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*.

Despite many common features, plays staging this episode today also offer meaningful variations. Many puppeteers temper Angelica's more compromising moments, perhaps to avoid any behavior that would be considered outside accepted norms. For example, in the opening scene of the Compagnia Gaspare Canino di Salvatore Oliveri's *Storia dei paladini di Francia*, it is no longer Angelica who addresses Charlemagne, as in Boiardo's poem, but her brother, while the maiden remains silently at his side (Figure 2). The fact that Argalia offers his sister's hand in marriage to the winner of the tournament also lessens the scandalous nature of Angelica's original proposal in which she offered herself ("la mia persona," she says) to the winner of the joust without any reference to marriage (*Orlando Innamorato* 1.1.28). When Oliveri subsequently gives voice to Angelica's thoughts via a soliloquy, the princess reveals to the audience that she fell

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4 Pasqualino, "Tradizione e innovazione nell'opera dei pupi contemporanea," 9.

5 Scenes from this play can be viewed at edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/orlando-contro-rinaldo-per-la-bella-angelica-figli-darte-cuticchio.

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6 Cuticchio, 50.



**Figure 1**  
 Orlando prepares to battle Rinaldo. *The Great Duel between Orlando and Rinaldo for the Beautiful Angelica's Sake*. Associazione Figli d'arte Cuticchio. Puppeteers: Mimmo Cuticchio (Orlando), Tania Giordano (Angelica), and Giacomo Cuticchio (Rinaldo). Foellinger Auditorium, University of Illinois-Urbana, October 30, 2018. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Associazione Figli d'arte Cuticchio.

**Figure 2**  
 Angelica and Argalia in Charlemagne's court. *Storia dei paladini di Francia*. Compagnia Gaspare Canino di Salvatore Oliveri. Puppeteer: Salvatore Oliveri. San Vito lo Capo, Sicily. August 2003. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Salvatore Oliveri.



in love with Rinaldo at first sight and that she plans to beg her father for his hand in marriage when he arrives in Cathay as a captive.<sup>7</sup>

An unabashedly proactive yet stately Angelica can be found in Teatroarte Cuticchio's *La morte di Truffaldino* (*The Death of Truffaldino*). Closely following Boiardo's poem, the play features scenes of Angelica taking bold action to pursue her objectives. After falling in love with Rinaldo thanks to the Fountain of Love and attempting to woo him in vain, she rescues the "knight in distress" as he is about to be eaten by a monster in a dungeon prison. With her fortress under siege, she addresses the warriors who serve her and then secures the help of Orlando by rescuing him from an enchantress's palace (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

Other puppet theater companies, on the contrary, have presented Angelica in patently unconventional ways. The Compagnia dei Pupari Vaccaro–Mauceri, for example, has depicted her as Indian, complete with a bindi, nose earring, and Henna tattoos. One might assume that this rendition was intended to underscore the character's geographical origins since in the *Innamorato* the princess claims that her native realm of Cathay lies within India. (In Boiardo's time, the term "India" was commonly used to refer to the vast expanse of Asia.) As it turns out, however, the puppeteer Alfredo Mauceri (b. 1975) offered an unexpected explanation as to why he had chosen to portray Angelica as Indian:

*The Angelica with a violet dress and the bindi on her forehead and the earring in her right nostril arose from the fact that we constructed her during the time of the New Age (and Madonna's "Ray of Light" album),*

*and being young (easily influenced by what was fashionable) we decided to give an Indian touch to the character in addition to decorating her hands with Henna tattoos.*

Thus, we have traditional Indian culture influencing the American pop icon Madonna whose album, in turn, influenced a Sicilian puppeteer. Yet this example of hybrid culture, while reminding us of the permeability of local traditions, is not a case of passive acceptance of global trends, but rather a process of continuous negotiation and innovation. The Mauceri brothers currently use an Angelica puppet in Middle Eastern dress which, as Alfredo explained, although anachronistic, allows them to distinguish her from the European clothes worn by the other female characters.

### The Madness of Orlando

In the *Orlando Furioso*, Ariosto's narrator muses that being in love is already a form of insanity: "For what is love but madness after all?" (24.1). In Orlando's case, however, the transformation from enamored (*innamorato*) to insane (*furioso*) occurs after he discovers that Angelica has given her love to another man. The puppet plays staging Orlando's loss of his reason, identity, and humanity sometimes extend the narrative sequence to include additional scenes based on the *Orlando Furioso*, primarily Angelica's amorous encounter with the North African foot soldier Medoro, Astolfo's journey to the moon, and Orlando's recovery of his wits.

One immediately striking difference among companies staging this play regards the physical depiction of Angelica's lover. Most companies present a fair-skinned Medoro in accordance with Ariosto's description of him. The Mauceri brothers, however, continuing to break with convention, present a darker-toned Medoro puppet dressed in a white robe and turban

7 See "Angelica's entrance" and "Angelica's soliloquy" at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/storia-dei-paladini-oliveri](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/storia-dei-paladini-oliveri).

8 The scenes are available at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/morte-di-truffaldino](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/morte-di-truffaldino).





**Figure 3**  
 Angelica saves Orlando. *La morte di Truffaldino*. Associazione Teatroarte Cuticchio. Puppeteers: Girolamo, Carmelo, and Franco Cuticchio. Scandiano, Italy. July 1, 2001. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Franco Cuticchio.



**Figure 4**  
 Angelica encounters Medoro. *Angelica, la Fuga* Compagnia dei Pupari Vaccaro-Mauceri. Puppeteers: Alfredo and Daniel Mauceri. Siracusa, Sicily. August 2002. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Compagnia dei Pupari Vaccaro-Mauceri.



**Figure 5**  
 Angelica and Medoro *La pazzia di Orlando*. Teatro Drammatico dei Pupi Onofrio Sanicola. Puppeteer: Onofrio Sanicola. Marsala, Sicily, August 22, 2003, Italy. July 1, 2001. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Onofrio Sanicola

recalling traditional Arab garb, thus reminding us of the fact that Ariosto's character was after all a native of Ptolemais, an ancient port in present-day Libya conquered by Arabs in the mid-seventh century.<sup>9</sup> The performance steers clear of the sexuality central to Ariosto's episode and places the emphasis instead on the value of individual sentiments. Angelica comes across the wounded Medoro at night, near a well, with stars in the background, and proceeds to administer healing herbs (Figure 4). Restored to health, the grateful youth expresses the first stirrings of an emotion that will lead to the couple's future union: "I feel something born within me, I don't know whether gratitude or something stronger. Time will give me the answer." They almost share a kiss before exiting arm in arm.

Onofrio Sanicola, a puppeteer from Marineo, Sicily, who currently lives and stages his plays mostly in Milan, presents an even more iconoclastic episode depicting the love affair that leads to Orlando's madness in his version of *La pazzia di Orlando*. After the enamoured knight falls asleep near the front of the stage, Angelica, an overtly sexualized figure through her fully exposed breasts, appears in the background, together with a bare-chested Medoro. But skimpy clothing is nothing new in the portrayal of the lovers in the European artistic tradition. The novelty—with respect to both painting and puppet theater—is that Sanicola represents Medoro as a black African infantryman, using one of the small anonymous Saracen puppets generally brought on stage to die after a few sword strokes (commonly referred to as the "little soldier who dies at the first hit" or, in Sicilian, *suddateddu d'incolpo*). After inscribing their names on a tree, the lovers embrace and then lie down together as soft music and colored lights help set the mood for their romancing,

<sup>9</sup> See "Angelica encounters the wounded footsoldier Medoro" (in particular 1:46–5:26) at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/angelica-la-fuga](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/angelica-la-fuga).

rendered via Medoro's slow, stylized dance-like motions (Figure 5).<sup>10</sup> Does the play aim to promote diversity through its biracial love scene? Does it attempt to adhere more faithfully to Ariosto's stated origin of Medoro as a Moor from Africa and humble military rank as a foot soldier? Or is the scene surreptitiously meant to further justify Orlando's ensuing insanity in the context of the play just as Ariosto subsequently referred to Medoro as an African ("african"), a vile Barbarian ("vilissimo barbaro"), and a Saracen ("Saracino") when signalling Rinaldo's rage upon learning of Angelica's sexual autonomy (*Orlando Furioso* 42.38–40)? My students have had diverse reactions.

Some companies insert comic touches into this dramatic sequence. The puppeteers from Palermo tend to underscore the humour in Orlando's distortion of reality, depicting him at one point trying to kiss a shepherd whom he mistakes for Angelica. The Napoli puppeteer family of Catania provides comic relief through the bickering of Angelica and Medoro's rustic hosts.<sup>11</sup> The moment of Orlando's madness, however, is generally rendered in a highly dramatic fashion, with the paladin flinging away his arms and then pieces of his armor as he falls victim to insanity (Figure 6).

The end of Orlando's madness comes about when God sends Astolfo to retrieve the paladin's wits contained in a phial on the moon. Ariosto fashions this moment in a satirical vein to lay bare human illusions, claiming that the moon contains whatever is lost on earth, from lovers' tears to monarchs' crowns, all found on the lunar surface (*Orlando Furioso* 34.73–81). Mimmo Cuticchio's son Giacomo takes advantage of the extra-literary potential of the episode to include a

<sup>10</sup> See "Angelica and Medoro" (in particular 1:14–3:48) at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/pazzia-di-orlando](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/pazzia-di-orlando).

<sup>11</sup> See "Angelica and Medoro take leave of their shepherd hosts" at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/amore-e-follia](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/amore-e-follia).

**Figure 6**

Orlando goes mad. *Amore e follia di Orlando*. Marionettistica dei Fratelli Napoli. Palermo, Museo Internazionale delle Marionette Antonio Pasqualino. November 19, 2009. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Fiorenzo Napoli.



**Figure 7**

Astolfo, the hippogriff, and St John on the moon. *Viaggio di Astolfo sulla luna*. Giovane Compagnia Figli D'Arte Cuticchio. Puppeteers: Giacomo, Sara, and Tiziana Cuticchio. Castellammare del Golfo (PA), Sicily, August 2003. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Associazione Figli d'arte Cuticchio.



reflection voiced by Astolfo on the insanity of aggression and warfare: “If men only understood the evils that they commit on this earth, one could live in peace, without war, without offending each other, without the need to fight to help the righteous and the weak” (Figure 7).<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Battle of Roncevaux***

The third puppet play that travelers to Sicily are likely to see is the legendary battle of Roncevaux, which is, in fact, one of the two chivalric episodes most staged in Italy dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the other is, not surprisingly, the Battle of Rinaldo and Orlando over Angelica).<sup>13</sup> The play, however, conveys quite opposing ideologies depending on whether the puppet company follows Lo Dico’s (and thus, ultimately, Pulci’s) version featuring the rebel Rinaldo, or goes back instead to the spirit of the early medieval Carolingian narratives like *The Song of Roland* in which Orlando is the sole hero.

In *L’Oro dei Napoli*, an original play first performed in 2002, the Marionettistica dei Fratelli Napoli stage two scenes that occur prior to the battle of Roncevaux in the traditional puppet theater repertory: Charlemagne’s banishment of Rinaldo and the paladin’s farewell to his beloved wife Clarice.<sup>14</sup> In the first scene, Orlando pleads with the emperor to pardon Rinaldo, but Gano counters by telling his “dearest brother-in-law” that the “rebel thief Rinaldo must be destroyed completely and that’s that.” After Rinaldo arrives with Clarice and submits to Charlemagne’s authority, Gano interrupts by urging his execution: “Your highness, let’s murder him, let’s murder him now that he’s in

our hands.” When Charlemagne orders the slaying of Rinaldo without hesitation, Orlando steps in not only to remind the emperor that he is sentencing to death a knight who has saved him from powerful enemies a hundred times over and without whom he would not be ruler of the Franks, but also to signal the readiness of the paladins to die fighting to defend their companion (Figure 8). While Charlemagne accordingly mitigates his sentence to permanent exile, Gano comes up with the idea to imprison Rinaldo’s sons and Clarice as hostages. The odiousness of Gano’s scheming is emphasized not only through the tone of voice used by the speaker (*parratore*) Fiorenzo Napoli, but also through his scowling facial expressions and contorted hand movements while speaking Gano’s lines in full view of the audience.

In the ensuing scene in which Rinaldo and Clarice are left alone on stage, the paladin regrets leaving his wife in the hands of his “butchers” while Clarice expresses her affliction and fear for Rinaldo’s life. The public is drawn into their sorrow not only through their dialogue, but also through the puppets’ tender embrace and reciprocal caresses, the melancholic music and soft lighting, and the plaintive voice and desolate facial expressions of the offstage *parratori* who read the part of Rinaldo and Clarice. The play does not go on to stage the battle of Roncevaux, but members of the audience familiar with the cycle would have anticipated both Clarice’s death in prison and Rinaldo’s subsequent vindication on the field of battle.

The Associazione Figli d’Arte Cuticchio, directed by Mimmo Cuticchio, includes *La rotta di Roncisvalle* in their traditional repertory, which they continue to perform at their theater in Palermo.<sup>15</sup> The play begins with a council scene in which Charlemagne has just heard the (fake) news of Rinaldo’s death and explains that he has assembled the knights in order to speak about the

12 See “Astolfo on the moon” at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/viaggio-di-astolfo](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/viaggio-di-astolfo) [2:35–3:13].

13 Li Gotti, 27–33, 146–47.

14 See “Rinaldo exiled” at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/oro-dei-napoli](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/oro-dei-napoli).

15 For scenes from this play, see [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/authors/roncisvalle](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/authors/roncisvalle).





**Figure 8**

Clarice, Rinaldo, Orlando, Charlemagne, and Gano. *L'Oro dei Napoli*. Marionettistica dei Fratelli Napoli. Militello di Catania, August 30, 2002. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Fiorenzo Napoli.



**Figure 9**

Rinaldo slicing off the face of a Saracen giant. *La rotta di Roncisvalle*. Associazione Figli d'Arte Cuticchio. Puppeteer: Mimmo Cuticchio. Palermo, December 28, 2002. Photograph by Jo Ann Cavallo, used by permission of Associazione Figli d'arte Cuticchio.

“undertakings of the great paladin and of how, although dead, he forced me to rebuild the castle that I had destroyed, that of Montalbano.” Cuticchio’s play thus privileges Rinaldo from the opening scene through Charlemagne’s recognition of the paladin’s merits and acknowledgment of the destruction and reconstruction of his castle. When Charlemagne subsequently plans to make good on his earlier promise to Orlando by conquering a kingdom in Spain for him, Gano proposes sending a messenger to the Spanish king Marsilio in order to first try to appropriate Spain through nonviolent means. Although Gano’s intention is to betray his king and comrades, his speech underscores the dubious nature of the endeavor and gives spectators reason to pause. Why does Charlemagne want to invade the kingdom of his brother-in-law Marsilio in order to place a crown on the head of his nephew Orlando?

In the meantime, Rinaldo, while praying to God, not only explains his current vocation but also voices a sweeping rejection of military pursuits: “I lost my wife, suffering made me realize that weapons lead only to death and destruction.” Although Rinaldo had decided to forever abandon his armor and weapons, he nevertheless agrees to fight in Roncevaux when an angel relays God’s command to undertake this final battle. His subsequent arrival in Roncevaux after a dying Orlando was led away by his horse occasions a complete reversal in the tide of the battle. In just a few minutes the paladin single-handedly defeats his attackers and puts the rest of the Saracens to flight (Figure 9). Rinaldo and the bishop Turpino then decide to seek out Orlando, who “will have need of us.” Even while limiting the narrative to the barest essentials, the play nevertheless succeeds in underscoring Rinaldo’s prominence, from his presumed death initially lamented by Charlemagne to his final triumph witnessed by the spectators.<sup>16</sup>

16 For more on this episode in Pulci, Lo Dico, and Sicilian puppet theater, see Cavallo, “The Ideological Battle of Roncevaux.”

The above-mentioned plays attest to the fact that Sicilian puppet theater, even in its present reduced state, is a living art form open to innovation as it continues to draw its subject matter from Italy’s monumental literary heritage. As in the past, one can expect to find dramatic struggles as knights experience and fight against injustice, face obstacles, fall in love, make mistakes, suffer, die, and grieve. In addition, we can find performances (especially recent ones) that actively question confrontations based on ethnicity or religion, challenge conventional societal attitudes, and seek to promote understanding across borders. In this way, Sicilian puppeteers not only continue to entertain their audiences, but also voice their views on pressing issues of our time through their art. A

**Note:** *A few rare puppet collections can be found in the United States, notably the Stanley Marcus collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (see photos on pages 140 and 143), and the Manteo family’s collection at the Italian American Museum in New York City.<sup>17</sup> Renewed interest in Sicilian puppet theater since the 1970s has also occasioned a number of studies of this tradition.<sup>18</sup> Today many puppet theater companies publish their own materials, maintain websites (some with English translations), and post news and photographs to their Facebook pages.<sup>19</sup> This essay was first presented as a Cesare Barbieri Endowment for Italian Culture lecture at Trinity College, Connecticut, in April of 2019.*

17 A description and photographs of the Stanley Marcus collection appear in Maria Xenia Zevelechi Wells.

18 For studies in English on Sicilian puppet theater, see McCormick; Pasqualino, “Transformations of Chivalrous Literature in the Subject Matter of the Sicilian Marionette Theater”; Croce; Buonanno; and Cavallo, “Where Have All the Brave Knights Gone?”

19 For links to information available online, see “Sicilian puppet theater” at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater). Scenes from additional plays can be found on [eBOIARDO](http://eBOIARDO) at [edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays](http://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays).

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