Figure 1: (O_Ar_1) Portraits of Ariosto and Handel

Ariosto was 42 when he published the first edition of *Orlando furioso*, he was 47 at the time of the revised second edition, and still in his 50s when the third definitive edition appeared in 1532, not long before his death. It was an instant and enduring success all over Europe. If a young English nobleman in the eighteenth century took Italian lessons in preparation for his Grand Tour, it is more than likely that a tutor would have let him cut his teeth on the poem, knowing he would find it hard to put down.

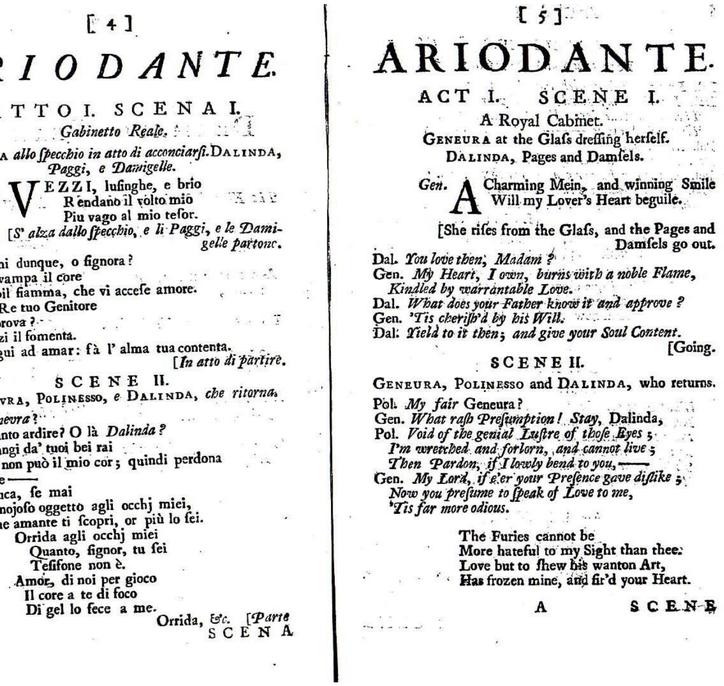
Handel became 47 in the year 1732. During the next three years, he composed no fewer than three operas to libretti derived from *Orlando furioso*—three of the very last, and three of the very best—*Orlando* (premiered 1733), *Ariodante* (January 1735), and *Alcina* (June 1735). Unlike the general public in London, Handel knew Italian very well, having spent three years in Italy as a young man; he had set a great many texts in the language, and set them very expressively and idiomatically. So, although he took his three libretti off the peg (they had been published up to twenty-five years earlier), it is at least possible that his choice was a conscious act of homage, perhaps following a re-reading of the *Furioso* when he was the same age as its author had been.

I do not want to labour that point, though, because at a deeper level, there is a real congeniality between the two—between Handel's music of any period and Ariosto's poem as a whole—which would exist whether or not Handel had ever read a word of the poem in the original.

Orlando furioso is a very long poem (40,000 lines) and you cannot understand the implication of its title unless you realise that it began life as the completion of another man's equally long poem, left unfinished at its author's death, the title of which was *Orlando innamorato—Roland in Love*. In its day, that had been a challenging title, for it told the audience that the author, Boiardo, was consciously trying to unite two literary traditions: the courtly romance, most closely associated with the court of King Arthur, and the chanson de geste, most closely associated with the court of Charlemagne. The romances had gone upmarket and become refined, idealising the emotions of love and appealing to a female audience. But the chansons, particularly in Italy, had gone downmarket, to the city square, and were concerned chiefly with fighting: at their lowest ebb, they were as full of joyous clichés as football reports in the popular press today.

Ariosto's title was equally programmatic. He took the transformation of Roland into a courtly lover to its logical conclusion: just as the Arthurian knights Lancelot and Yvain had run mad for love, so now will Roland. But the adjective Ariosto chooses to describe his hero's madness, *furioso*, rather than *matto* or *impazzito*, is also a pointer to an even greater ambition. He was consciously trying to write the perfect poem. In content, construction and style, he was trying to blend the best of Arthurian romance and the best of Carolingian epic with the best of classical poetry—Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and ancient tragedy. His title is by way of a homage to a play by Seneca, *Hercules furens*, and he duly appealed to Apollo for inspiration—or, rather, for a better set of tools: for the time being he will chip off rough flakes with his inept chisel, but if the god will grant him better instruments, fit for carving stone of this quality, he will labour until he has set down his beautiful images in a work of perfection:

> Se instrumenti avrò mai da te migliori



[4]

ARIODANTE.

ATTO I. SCENA I.

Gabinetto Reale.

GINEVRA *allo ſpecchio in atto di acconciarſi.* DALINDA, *Paggi, e Damigelle.*

Gen. VEZZI, luſinghe, e brio
Rendano il volto mio
Più vago al mio teſor.
[*S' alza dallo ſpecchio, e li Paggi, e le Damigelle partono.*

Dal. Ami dunque, o ſignora?
Gen. Avvampa il core
Di nobil fiamma, che vi accese amore.
Dal. Il Re tuo Genitore
L' approva?
Gin. Anzi il fomenta.
Dal. Segui ad amar: fà l' alma tua contenta.
[*In atto di partire.*

SCENE II.

GINEVRA, POLINESSO, *e* DALINDA, *che ritorna.*

Pol. *Ginevra?*
Gin. Tanto ardire? O là *Dalinda?*
Pol. Lungi da' tuoi bei rai
Viver non può il mio cor; quindi perdona
Se a te——
Gin. Duca, ſe mai
Foſti nojoſo oggetto agli occhj miei,
Or che amante ti ſcopri, or più lo ſei.
Orrida agli occhj miei
Quanto, ſignor, tu ſei
Teſifone non è.
Amor, di noi per gioco
Il core a te di foco
Di gel lo fece a me.
Orrida, &c. [*Parte*

SCENA

[5]

ARIODANTE.

ACT I. SCENE I.

A Royal Cabinet.

GENEURA at the Glaſs dreſſing herſelf.
DALINDA, Pages and Damſels.

Gen. A Charming Mein, and winning Smile
Will my Lover's Heart beguile.
[She riſes from the Glaſs, and the Pages and Damſels go out.

Dal. *You love then, Madam?*
Gen. *My Heart, I own, burns with a noble Flame,*
Kindled by warrantable Love.
Dal. *What does your Father know it and approve?*
Gen. *'Tis cheriſh'd by his Will.*
Dal. *Yield to it then; and give your Soul Content.*
[Going.

SCENE II.

GENEURA, POLINESSO and DALINDA, who returns.

Pol. *My fair Geneura?*
Gen. *What raſh Preſumption! Stay,* Dalinda,
Pol. *Void of the genial Luſtre of thoſe Eyes;*
I'm wretched and forlorn, and cannot live;
Then Pardon, if I lowly bend to you,——
Gen. *My Lord, if e'er your Preſence gave diſlike;*
Now you preſume to ſpeak of Love to me,
'Tis far more odious.

The Furies cannot be
More hateful to my Sight than thee:
Love but to ſhew his wanton Art,
Has frozen mine, and fix'd your Heart.

A SCENE

Figure 2: (O_Ar_2) Facing text edition of *Ariodante*

The descriptive or novelistic parts of the play—stage directions, the evocative descriptions of the scenery, and in many cases description of spectacular stage effects, were given in full in the libretto. And, if an angel swoops down on your puppet ('ein Engel, der die Bälge hochreisst'), if you are lucky enough for your words to be set by a great composer ('Über uns hinüber spielt dann der Engel')—then a very minor poet could gain a kind of immortality, if only as the singable syllables in his name: not 'Do re mi Fa Sol La', but 'An-to-ni-o-Sal-Vi'.

NOTES

FIXME: What needs to be addressed in this lecture is the notes on this page, and everything in RED in the document (so I've not marked individual FIXMEs in the document)—Reuben.

Pat hasn't looked at these yet.

- I have not included the image of the Raphael fresco, as in essay form that seems a better place to reproduce the passage from the poem. Similarly with the Fragonard image—its role is tangential, perhaps we could discuss how (if?) to illustrate the lecture/essay.

- Discuss how best, if at all, to speculate about Salvi's abbreviator.

- I am unsure as to whether I have described 'Polinesso's aria (A)' correctly in the body of the text.

- I'm of two minds as to whether the conclusion to the lecture works in a printed form; given the quotation of the apposite parts of Rilke's elegy in-line, I have not included the final slide of lines 55–62, though it could be inserted as a postscript.

- I am slightly concerned that the abstract I have put together doesn't fully capture the dialectical (trialectical?) relationship between librettist, composer and convention which you set out in the second half of the lecture.

- The list of Verbesserungen prefixed to the typescript of the lecture do not, I fear, give me enough to go on to make the necessary corrections/ameliorations myself. I have reproduced them below, in case you want to have them in mind as you read through my first draft:

a. Albania = N. Scotland. Polinessso is 'a Caledonian duke'.
b. Antonio Salvi was a very well-known librettist, active in reform of opera in early 18thC.
c. Ariodante's first arioso CAN be called a cavatina, like Ginevra's.
d. Not a window but a door in the ruins.
e. Ginevra in Act 2 has premonition, then hears of A's death, then is accused and sentenced, then has her dreams.
f. The director defended the subtlety of Dalinda (almost as though he had read Ariosto and was taking account of her psychology there).
g. Mention Lurcanio X Dalinda in the list of changes.
h. you must restore sentence near beginning about Roland being famous for indifference to women.