Act I

The princess Bradamante is destined to marry her beloved Ruggiero so that they can establish a noble lineage and house. However, Ruggiero has been secluded in an enchanted castle by the sorcerer Atlante, who wants to prevent him from marrying her because of the prophecy that Ruggiero will die when he fathers a son. Bradamante comes to free Ruggiero from Atlante’s castle. She knows that the thief Brunello has a powerful ring against spells, so she captures him, seizes his magic talisman, and proceeds to the castle.

Atlante flies in on a Hippogryph—a magic creature with the body of a horse and the wings and head of an eagle—when he sees Bradamante approaching. He reveals an enchanted shield, which has the power to blind and overcome anyone struck by its light. Though the ring protects her from the shield, Bradamante pretends to be blinded by it, and thinking her helpless, Atlante dismounts from the Hippogryph whereupon she overpowers him. Bradamante spares the elderly sorcerer’s life on the condition that he undoes his spells. Atlante feigns acceptance and destroys the magical urns that created the castle.

Ruggiero and the other knights are liberated when the castle vanishes, and Bradamante and Ruggiero are reunited. Attempting to tame the Hippogryph, Ruggiero mounts it, but he is immediately carried away by the flying beast, with Bradamante in pursuit. The creature is secretly controlled by Atlante, who hopes that by having sent it and its passenger to a remote land, Bradamante will never see Ruggiero again. Brunello offers to aid Atlante and both leave, plotting their revenge.

Bradamante returns, having failed to find Ruggiero. Melissa, a sorceress who has seen the favorable omens stemming from the couple’s eventual marriage, vows to help them, and causes the exhausted and despairing Bradamante to fall asleep. She then conjures up aerial spirits to carry Bradamante to Cathay. The sorceress invites the freed knights to celebrate the glory of the future lineage of Bradamante and Ruggiero.

Angelica, the long-lost daughter of Galafro, the king of Cathay (China), arrives in her homeland with her new husband, Medoro, a simple soldier with whom she fell in love while tending his wounds. Disguising herself as a shepherdess, Angelica decides to go to her father’s palace to find out whether her overdue return would be welcomed, and tells Medoro to wait for her. But Galafro happens on Medoro, and suspicious of his motives for being in China, has him seized and jailed. When Galafro sees a gloomy Orlando arriving and discovers that the knight’s sadness stems from absent love, he offers him the hand of his daughter Angelica should she be the one Orlando is pining for. Orlando, thinking that Angelica is far away, privately expresses his sad state, torn between love and glory. Still under Melissa’s spell, Bradamante is brought to Cathay.

Angelica returns to the place where she left Medoro, but he is not there. She is filled with jealousy, fearing that he has been seduced by another girl. Suddenly, Angelica is assaulted by ruffians but is saved by Ruggiero, who has flown in on the Hippogryph. Ruggiero promises the shaken Angelica that he will not leave her side. Angelica thanks Ruggiero for his chivalrous help, and the two speak of their loved ones. Bradamante awakens and sees Angelica and Ruggiero together. She leaves filled with jealousy, suspecting Ruggiero of unfaithfulness.

Orlando intervenes, thinking he has recognized Angelica, but Angelica denies her identity. Orlando asks Ruggiero his opinion, and Ruggiero, who does not recognize her in her disguise, says to Orlando that she is a shepherdess who he has saved from the hands of robbers. Orlando laments that he does not know whether he has been tricked by his eyes or by Angelica, but he ultimately consoles himself, saying that he never wants to cease being faithful to her, no matter how deceitful she may be.

Orlando is obsessed with Angelica, who continues to deny her identity. When Ruggiero arrives, Orlando hides to spy on them. Angelica and Ruggiero lament the absence of their respective loves. Bradamante, who has been listening in, thinks that they are in love with each other, and accuses Ruggiero of being unfaithful. Angelica doesn’t understand their jealousy; she just wants to find Medoro.

Orlando arrives with Galafro, and confronts Angelica, who continues to deny her identity, even to her father. Galafro does not recognize her and, infatuated by her
beauty, he is happy to believe her. The guards arrive with Medoro, and when Angelica claims that he is her brother, Galafro releases him and promises asylum to them both. Left alone, Angelica and Medoro rejoice at being reunited, and she explains why she must keep her identity a secret: she is afraid of the jealousy of her other suitors. Observing this in hiding, Orlando discovers he has been fooled and is wracked by jealousy. He falls into a jealous rage and threatens revenge on Angelica, Medoro, and Galafro. In the midst of this frenzy Bradamante calls to him. Orlando, now completely delusional, thinks that she is Angelica, and speaks to her of his passion; Bradamante, full of pity, humors him. Ruggiero sees them and, unaware that Orlando lost his mind, blames Bradamante for being unfaithful. In return, she accuses him of dallying with Angelica.

Meanwhile, Angelica resolves to withdraw from the prying eyes of the king. To avoid suspicion, Angelica asks Medoro to stay and observe the goings-on at court while Ruggiero accompanies her to find a pastoral refuge where she and her husband will live incognito. Galafro asks Medoro about Angelica’s whereabouts, and Medoro pretends to know nothing. The King, languishing with love for Angelica, orders that she be found and returned to him. Galafro is puzzled that neither his age nor his imperial position can protect him from such wild passion.

Orlando mistakes Medoro for Angelica, and Galafro, pitying him, decides to imprison him to prevent his sad condition from becoming known. Brunello tells Galafro that he knows the whereabouts of the shepherdess (Angelica) and is sent to retrieve her. Bradamante finds Medoro: both hope that they will be happy again. Brunello finds Angelica with Ruggiero and has them both seized and taken to prison. Atlante has seen in the stars that the union of Bradamante and Ruggiero is inevitable and sends Brunello to find Bradamante and bring her to Ruggiero.

In the isolation of the dungeon, Orlando returns to his senses. Angelica and Ruggiero are imprisoned where Orlando is being held. In this desperate situation Angelica admits her true identity and tries to explain why she deceived Orlando, who realizes that Angelica cannot return his love. She tells him how she loves Medoro and appeals to Orlando’s generosity. Orlando agrees to abandon his love for Angelica for her sake. Ruggiero asks why Orlando was pursuing Bradamante; the knight doesn’t remember, and Ruggiero quells his jealousy.

Bradamante and Medoro are thrown into the same jail by Brunello. Medoro and Angelica reassure each other of their love while Bradamante confronts Ruggiero, who explains that he never was looking for Angelica.

King Galafro realizes that Orlando is cured and asks his guards to release him from his chains. Galafro inveighs against the beautiful shepherdess for her deceitful ways, but Atlante reveals the identity of Angelica and the others and asks the emperor to forgive his daughter. All beg Galafro to fulfill the lovers’ wishes. Galafro blesses the union of Angelica and Medoro, and Bradamante is reconciled with Ruggiero. When Galafro suggests that these happy events should be celebrated elsewhere, Atlante intervenes: the prison was also a magic illusion. The magician waves his wand and frees everyone. Bradamante teases Orlando about the fact that he is left alone but Orlando claims that his happiness is complete: he sees that the one he loves is content. They all celebrate the generous heart of one who has conquered himself and understood true Love.

—Gilbert Blin and Ellen Hargis