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Torquato Tasso (1544-1595)

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Playwright / Dramatist; Essayist; Literary Critic/ Historian; Poet.
Active 1559-1595 in Italy

Born in Sorrento on March 11, 1544, Torquato Tasso was the third child of Porzia de' Rossi and Bernardo Tasso, after a first son who died in infancy, and a daughter Cornelia. Both his parents belonged to the aristocratic class and had roots in Northern Italy: his Neapolitan mother was of Pistoian origin and his father was from Bergamo. A poet and a man of letters, Bernardo was principally occupied as secretary to the Prince of Salerno, Ferrante Sanseverino, one of the foremost figures in the Kingdom of Naples, at the time under the rule of the Spanish empire.

When in 1547 Spain attempted to introduce the Inquisition in Naples, provoking widespread resistance, the Prince of Salerno agreed to expound the objections of the Neapolitan population to King Charles V. As a result of his perceived disobedience to the Spanish crown, he was subsequently exiled by the Viceroy of Naples and his property confiscated. When Bernardo's loyalty to his patron condemned him to the same fate, Torquato initially remained with his mother and sister in Naples, where he was educated in a Jesuit school. At the age of ten he joined his father in Rome, while his mother was forced by her brothers to remain in Naples where she died two years later under suspicious circumstances. Bernardo was convinced that her brothers had poisoned her in order to repossess her dowry – which they subsequently did. They also managed to have Torquato included in the judgment against his father, thus preventing him from obtaining his inheritance.

Father and son fled Rome in 1556 at the news of an impending Spanish invasion occasioned by the hostility between the Pope and King Philip II. They experienced more positive aspects of court life at the service of Guidobaldo II Della Rovere, the Duke of Urbino, where Torquato was companion to the duke's son. In the spring of 1559 Torquato joined his father in Venice, where the latter had gone to supervise the publication of his works: five books of poetry, a collection of letters, and his chef d'oeuvre, *'Amadigi* (1560), a romance adaptation of the popular Spanish poem *Amadís de Gaula*. It was at this time that the younger Tasso began writing an epic poem dealing with the First Crusade that was to be his masterpiece. Entitled *Il Gierusalemme* (*Jerusalem*) and dedicated to Duke Guidobaldo II, this draft consisted of an initial canto of 116 stanzas.

In 1560 Torquato began to study at the University of Padua. Although his father had encouraged him to pursue a law degree in order to be independent of courtly patrons, the following year he switched to courses in literature and philosophy. During this period Torquato wrote lyric poetry, in particular poems dedicated to the Ferrarese noblewoman and singer Lucrezia Bendidio. He also penned two works of substantial length: the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* (*Discourses on the Art of Poetry*), which he would continue to revise, and the

Rinaldo, published in 1562 when he was only eighteen. A chivalric romance in twelve ottava rima cantos, the *Rinaldo* depicts “i felici affanni e i primi ardori” (“the joyous troubles and first passions”; 1.1) of the young hero. Rinaldo's adventures include the successful appropriation of a horse and arms, an amorous interlude with the courteous Floriana, and a rupture with Charlemagne. The romance ends somewhat abruptly with a sanctioned marriage between Rinaldo and his first love, the princess Clarice. Since at the beginning of 1562 Bernardo had entered the service of Cardinal Luigi d'Este, brother of Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara, Torquato accordingly dedicated the work to his father's patron, by whom he would himself be employed three years later.

Tasso transferred to the University of Bologna in 1562. In addition to his studies he continued to write love poetry, now for the young singer and harpist Laura Peperara. In January 1564 he was accused of writing a stinging satire of professors and fellow students and was forced to flee the city to avoid arrest. After temporarily residing in Padua, he entered the Ferrarese court under Cardinal Luigi d'Este in 1565. Although his role as court poet with no specific duties was the kind of position his predecessor Ludovico Ariosto had sought in vain, it also tied him to the patronage system that had ruined his father. Indeed, the exiled Bernardo never regained his status or his property, and would die impoverished and disenchanted in 1569.

Tasso traveled to Paris in the fall of 1570 with the entourage of Luigi d'Este, whose mother, Renée of France, had left Ferrara for her homeland ten years earlier after being accused of Protestant leanings by her husband, arrested by the Inquisition, and forced to recant. Tasso returned to Ferrara the following spring when the cardinal reduced his staff to curtail expenses. His *Lettera dalla Francia* (*Letter from France*, 1571) expresses a variety of first- and second-hand impressions concerning the differences between the two countries, including the sad reflection that while the French enjoyed a strong central government, “il meglio e il più dell'Italia è soggetta a re straniero” (“the best and largest part of Italy is subject to a foreign king”, 46).

In 1572 Tasso passed to the service of Duke Alfonso II d'Este where, with much better pay, he continued to have no other obligation than to write poetry. In addition to encomiastic and occasional lyrics for members of the court, Tasso authored a pastoral drama in five acts, the *Aminta* (1573). The play opens with the shepherd Aminta lamenting that his childhood companion Sylvia has spurned his love and intends to devote herself to the chaste pastimes of the goddess Diana. When Sylvia is seized by a satyr while bathing, Aminta is on hand to rescue her, but the distressed maiden subsequently flees from him; it is only when she believes Aminta to be dead that she realizes and acknowledges her reciprocal desire. First performed at the Estense summer palace on the island of Belvedere del Po, the play was an immediate success.

During this period Tasso was also at work on his poem about the First Crusade which he referred to as the *Goffredo*, but which was later published with the title *Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Liberated*). Completed in 1575 with twenty ottava rima cantos, it was dedicated to Duke Alfonso II. Tasso's poem includes both historical and fictitious characters engaging alternately in epic battles and romance adventures. The Christian Crusaders are led by Goffredo (Godfrey of Bouillon), who seeks to unite the disparate elements of his army in order to conquer Jerusalem. The two most prominent warriors on the Christian side are tied romantically to the poem's three principal Saracen women: in a triangle of unrequited desire, Tancredi is desperately in love with the fierce warrior Clorinda, while the captured princess Erminia is under the spell of his charms, and Rinaldo indulges in sensual pleasure with the maga Armida on her faraway island. The romance strands of the poem are resolved in an unconventional fashion: after Tancredi unwittingly delivers a fatal blow to Clorinda and is eventually wounded by her comrade Argante in return, he is last seen under the care of Erminia who intends to nurse him back to health; Rinaldo, after having temporarily abandoned Armida in order to participate in the capture of Jerusalem, returns to her arms just as the Crusading army is brutally sacking the conquered city. Moreover, Tasso projects a future beyond the poem in which the love between Rinaldo and a newly-converted Armida will give rise to the Estense dynasty. He thereby not only rejects a polarized view of woman as either Circe or Penelope, dangerous seductress or legitimate bride, but also transforms the conventional episode of an epic hero's amorous interlude into a narrative of the ruling family's

origins.

Following the practice of the time, Tasso submitted his work to the scrutiny of friends and fellow poets. The pedantic criticism of the literati was not nearly as threatening, however, as the moral judgment of the poem's religious censors. In fact, members of the prepublication committee formed in Rome by Cardinal Scipione Gonzaga demanded extensive textual changes, including the excision of sections considered lascivious. Although Tasso promised to comply with the censors in order to secure the poem's publication, he also passionately defended the episodes under attack, arguing that the romance elements of love and magic were essential to successful chivalric poetry. Writing to his friend Luca Scalabrino, Tasso emphatically states:

> Voglio difender contra tutto il mondo, chè l'amore è materia altrettanto eroica quanto la guerra; e 'l difenderò con ragione, con autorità d'Aristotele, con luoghi di Platone che parlano chiaro chiaro chiaro, chiarissimamente chiaro.
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> I want to maintain, against the entire world, that love is just as heroic a subject as war, and I will defend it with reason, with the authority of Aristotle, and with passages in Plato that speak clearly, clearly, clearly, extremely clearly. (April 1576)

In another missive to Scalabrino he proclaims his freedom to write as he pleases: “Io non vo' padrone se non colui che mi dà il pane, nè maestro; e voglio esser libero non solo ne' giudicii, ma anco ne lo scrivere e ne l'operare” (“I don't want masters, unless they feed me, nor teachers; and I want to be free not only in my opinions, but also in my writing and in my actions”, May 1576).

This stated desire for autonomy in both his life and poetry hints at Tasso's increasing discontent at the Ferrarese court. Indeed, during this period he secretly attempted to pass to the Medici and other patrons despite Alfonso's ban on leaving his service without authorization. He complained of being beleaguered by malicious and envious courtiers, in particular the newly-appointed ducal secretary Antonio Montecatini (letter of March 1576). Tasso's suspicions and anxieties could not have been simply the fruit of paranoia as is sometimes assumed; in September 1576 the Mayor of Ferrara reported that he was clubbed in a public square by another servant of the court. Tasso himself explains in a letter from the following month that his aggressor attacked him after being slapped in response to an insolent lie. We are not told the specific content of the offensive words on this occasion. We do know, however, that at this time Tasso began to fear that Montecatini and his cohorts were planning to report him to the Inquisition for heresy. A few weeks after the incident Tasso protested that someone had illicitly searched through his private papers, and in March 1577 he requested a trustworthy personal attendant from another city. He finally pre-empted any action against him by voluntarily seeking an audience with the Inquisition in Ferrara: in June 1577 he confessed to his own religious doubts about basic Christian tenets and at the same time denounced his antagonist Montecatini. Not satisfied with the matter being dropped upon his absolution, he then sought to appear before the Bolognese Inquisitor. Alfonso became concerned that Tasso's new confession – especially what he might say about members of the court – would give the Pope a pretext for absorbing Ferrara into the Papal States. The same month he had him arrested on charges of threatening a servant with a knife. After his release, Tasso was placed under guard first in his quarters and subsequently at a Franciscan convent.

Having no real prospect of assistance, near the end of July Tasso escaped from the convent and sought refuge with his sister in Sorrento, traveling disguised as a peasant to escape notice (the old warrant issued by the Viceroy of Naples against him and his father being still in effect). Although thus freed from the intrigues of the Ferrarese court, Tasso lacked the manuscript of his epic masterpiece and his other works. He tried for two years to retrieve his writings through humble letters seeking the duke's pardon and admittance to the court. During this self-imposed exile Tasso composed “Canzone al Metauro” (1578), an unfinished autobiographical poem that looks back on his father's expulsion from Naples and the vicissitudes he suffered as a youth. Likening

himself to Ascanio as he followed “il padre errante” (“the wandering father”, v. 40), the poet sadly recalls growing up “In aspro essiglio e 'n dura / Povertà” (“in bitter exile and in harsh poverty”, vv. 41-42).

After leaving his sister and passing through various cities, Tasso returned to Ferrara in late February 1579 while Duke Alfonso was celebrating his third marriage in the hope of producing an heir to guarantee Estense succession. On March 11, still unsuccessful in gaining possession of his manuscripts, he lost his temper and vehemently denounced Alfonso and his family. Following this public outburst the duke had him chained and taken to the hospital of Sant'Anna on the pretext of insanity. Although his alleged madness is often accepted unquestioningly, it is actually impossible to determine with certainty Tasso's mental state either at this point or in the years that follow. Visitors such as Aldus Manutius (the Younger), who called on him in 1582, did not find him to be insane.

Tasso's master poem appeared in 1581 with the title *Gerusalemme Liberata*, an echo of Giangiorgio Trissino's earlier *Italia liberata dai Goti* (*Italy Liberated from the Goths*, 1547-1548). Although it became immensely popular, with seven editions printed within six months, he received none of the profits from its sale. During his imprisonment Tasso devoted considerable time to his lyric poetry and to prose dialogues on philosophical and moral themes. His twenty-eight *Dialoghi*,completed between 1578 and 1594, treat universal topics such as love, virtue, nobility, courtly style and beauty, but also touch on some of the major issues of his time, including the tension between religious doctrine and intellectual freedom. The autobiographical *Il Gonzaga, overo del piacere onesto* (*The Gonzaga, or Honest Pleasure*, first redaction 1580) reconsiders his father's involvement in the Neapolitan Rebellion.

Tasso wrote the *Apologia in difesa della Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Apology in Defense of Jerusalem Delivered*) in 1585 to defend his work against the criticism of two members of an influential literary academy (Accademia Della Crusca). He also composed theoretical writings on the epic genre that built on his earlier *Dell'arte poetica*. His *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e in particolare sopra il poema eroico* (*Discourses on the Art of Poetry and in particular on the Heroic Poem*, 1587) validates the structural blending of epic and romance elements while frowning on specific romance features, such as authorial interventions which disrupted the suspension of disbelief, and multiple interlaced episodes overtaxing to readers' memories.

From prison Tasso also emitted a voluminous correspondence: many of his approximately 1,700 extant letters stem from this period. He was generally careful to speak well of Alfonso, but on occasion compared him to Caligula and Nero and wondered aloud if the ruling family was acting out of sheer revenge for his having spoken out against its members. Tasso was finally released from Sant'Anna in July of 1586 at the solicitation of the Prince of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga. He never again returned to Ferrara, traveling instead across a number of Italian cities, including Naples, where he attempted unsuccessfully to regain his maternal inheritance.

Tasso continued to write and to revise his previous works. While at Mantua he completed his tragedy *Il Re Torrismondo* (*King Torrismondo*, 1587), begun in 1573-4. Following Aristotelian precepts, the storyline is reminiscent of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*: the King of the Goths unwittingly marries his own sister, and when their error is revealed the horrified siblings commit suicide. In 1592 he wrote a poem in blank verse, *Le sette giornate del mondo creato* (*The Seven Days of the World's Creation*), which elaborates on the opening of Genesis. The following year he published the *Gerusalemme Conquistata* (*Jerusalem Conquered*), a revision of his epic masterpiece begun around 1586. Purged of all passages that could evoke the censure of moralists, the poem was dedicated to his new patron, the Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini, whose uncle had become Pope Clement VIII the previous year.

The Pope and his nephew invited Tasso to Rome in 1594 in order to crown him poet laureate. When the ceremony was deferred because of the cardinal's illness, Tasso remained in Rome under the protection of Clement, who ceded him a pension and some monies derived from his mother's former estate. He took up

residence at the convent of Sant'Onofrio on April 1, 1595. He died there on the 25th of that month at the age of fifty-one without having received the promised laurel crown.

Future generations disagreed with Tasso's critics. The *Gerusalemme Liberata* was not only a success among the literate elite but was also well known in popular culture where it circulated widely both in its original guise and in various adapted formats: until recent decades it was recited by memory in the Tuscan countryside, performed as epic *maggi* (folk opera) in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, and dramatized as puppet theater throughout Sicily. Moreover, many of the poem's episodes, particularly the love stories involving Saracen women, found their way into pictorial and musical compositions in the following centuries. It is perhaps ironic that despite having been considered so potentially scandalous prior to its publication, the poem eventually came to be viewed by many readers as supportive of a Counter-Reformation ethos. It has been available in English since Edward Fairfax translated it into octaves as *Jerusalem Delivered* in 1600.

Bibliographical note: For the specific details of Tasso's life I have relied primarily on his most comprehensive biographer, Angelo Solerti, and his most recent one, Claudio Gigante. (See recommended reading.)

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