

Jernigan, Charles and Irene Marchegiani Jones, eds. and Transs. *Aminta: A Pastoral Play*. Dual Language Poetry. New York: Ithica Press, 2001. Pp. iii, 179. 15.00. ISBN: 0-934-97765-8.

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The *Aminta* (1573), written and first performed two years before Tasso completed the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, provides us with an essential counterpart to his epic poem. Rather than a Crusading army that conquers the city of Jerusalem by the sword, here the shepherd Aminta wins the love of the nymph Silvia with the help of Cupid's dart. Whereas the rich sensuality of the *Liberata* was relegated to the realm of the pagan enemy, here it provides the basis for the Golden Age evoked by the Chorus (Act One, Scene Two). Indeed, the Chorus's wish to return to the time when mankind embraced the laws of nature and love is eventually granted to the play's protagonists. Although at the play's opening the virgin Silvia, the "most cruel nymph / who ever followed in Diana's train", disdains the love of Aminta, by the final act she and Aminta will "lay and love as one".

The sensual force of the play is not presented through the dramatic action, but conveyed through the spoken word. Not only do Silvia and Aminta never appear together on stage, as the translators note, but all the events take place off-stage and are made known to us through the reports of the characters. Given, then, that the real drama of the play is not so much in the action of the plot as in the poetry of the verses, the challenge of any translation is to try to capture the explosive yet delicate expressivity of Tasso's language. In my view, Charles Jernigan and Irene Marchegiani Jones have succeeded admirably. Their translation is a pure joy to read: clear, light, elegant, and musical. They have rendered the play's endecasyllabic blank verse into iambic pentameter blank verse, with shorter lines in English corresponding to Tasso's own shortened verses. Moreover, where the Italian is rhymed, such as for the Chorus that concludes all five acts, the translation follows the original rhyme scheme. It was a treat to find the *intermedii* (interludes) included and translated. Although, as the translators point out, there is some critical controversy as to whether Tasso wrote them for *Aminta*, these exquisite lines of poetry provide an internal frame with strong thematic resonances.

Much useful information is packed into the twenty-four pages that precede the translation. After a brief overview of the pastoral form from its Greek origins to its Renaissance manifestations, attention is given to the plot and characters of the *Aminta*, to the history of the d'Este family that governed Ferrara since the fourteenth century, and to a consideration of the play's reflection of the Ferrarese court in terms of both characters and setting. The section on the *Aminta*'s reception and influence notes not only earlier editions and translations of the play into ten languages, but also performances from its debut in 1573 to the modern period. The following section entitled "literary analysis" offers many insights into the poem, pointing out the play's essential ambivalence, the prevalence of disguises "where nothing is what it seems to be" (xx), and the haunting presence of death as a backdrop to the play's principal theme of love. The translators explain thus the play's interplay between love and death: "Behind all the lamenting in *Aminta* there is the tragic knowledge of death, the brevity of life, and the fact that human beings have only one consolation in the face of the inevitable: not religion, as the Middle Ages would have posited, but love--human, sensual love." (xxiv) The introduction is followed by a biographical chronology and selected bibliography.

The Italian original facing the English text is based on Sozzi's 1957 critical edition. The brief notes that complete the volume provide helpful information to clarify the text when obscure, explain devices of

classical rhetoric used in the play, identify characters with historical figures, point out sexual innuendos, and describe the significance of the mythological figures mentioned. The volume is also graced with illustrations from the 1589 Venetian edition of *Aminta* showing rustic yet elegant pastoral life, on the edge of a sophisticated court, but exposed to the dangers of untamed nature in the form of the satyr. It might be helpful to cite a few passages to give a sense of the play in translation. In the first scene of Act One, Dafne, a nymph now awakened to the world of love, tries to show Silvia that her stubborn vow of virginity goes against nature. After imagining the world of wild animals in love, Dafne envisions an amorousness that embraces all of nature during spring. The almost hallucinatory repetition of the Italian comes through well in the translation:

But did I say that serpents, tigers, lions alone have love's sweet self? No, even trees may love. How much affection you can see, and with how many sweet embracing folds the vine entwines about the one it loves; the fir tree loves the fir, the pine, the pine, the flowering ash, the ash, the willow loves its own, and beech for beech will burn and sigh. (Act One, Scene One, 149-156).

The chorus, which comments on love at the conclusion of all five acts, describes with vivid freshness a scene from the Golden Age of uninhibited love:

the virgin maid, undressed, disclosed her dewy rose, which now we veil and close, and showed the unpicked apples of her breast; and oft in lake or stream her lover frolicking with her was seen. (Act One, Scene Two, 352-357).

The chorus ends its reflection in a more somber and urgent tone:

Let's love, for with the years man's life can have no truce, and disappears. Let's love, for day will die, yet is reborn; for us, though, all its light sinks down, and sleep leads to eternal night. (Act One, Scene Two, 382-386).

The conception of love as that which gives meaning to life in the face of inescapable death is also presented in the second interlude:

through you we find our joy and love along with it until the final, bitter night. You--joy, comfort, peace of lives, which fly and cease, sweet solace for our ills, oblivion's stead-- who more than you can lead us to godhead?

Here human love not only gives pleasure to life, but is presented as the surest path to God. Considering that these verses were written ten years after the Council of Trent was reopened, this play gives pause to those who would consider Tasso a proponent of Counter Reformation morality. The *Aminta*, however, may indeed be the last expression of an uncensored celebration of nature in sixteenth century Italy. Although the play was widely imitated, the chorus's credo of "s'ei piace lice" (do what pleases you) would soon be replaced in Guarino's *Pastor Fido* with "piaccia se lice" (may what is allowed please you).

In sum, Tasso's *Aminta* gives a picture of the Italian Renaissance in all its ambiguous splendor, and this affordable bilingual paperback edition brings this world to the desk of the general reader, the scholar, and the student. In ending I would like to add that I had the pleasure of attending a reading of this translation of the *Aminta* in New York in June, 2001. The English language text, read by a cast that included Giovanni Ribisi and Penny Fuller and directed by Alessandro Fabrizi, largely succeeded in conveying the melodious power of Tasso's verse. Selections of the Italian text, set to music by Marco Schiavoni and sung by Antonella Voce, added a haunting, magical quality to the performance. This bilingual *Aminta* is scheduled to be performed at the American Association for Italian Studies conference in Missouri in April 2002 and repeated in New York later in the year. For me this performance was proof that Tasso's pastoral play, written over half a millenium ago in another language, still retains an immediacy and relevance capable of casting a spell over a contemporary American audience.