



Torquato Tasso: *Gerusalemme liberata* [Jerusalem Delivered]

(1581)

- [Jo Ann Cavallo \(Columbia University\)](#)

Genre: Epic, Poetry (any). Country: Italy.

Tasso announces in the opening verses that he will sing of “l’arme pietose e ‘l capitano / che ‘l gran sepolcro liberò di Cristo” (“the reverent armies and the captain who liberated Christ’s great sepulcher” (*GL* 1.1). The poem then gives life to several leading historical figures from the First Crusade (e.g., Peter the Hermit, Godfrey of Bouillon and his brother Baldwin, the Norman Tancred, Raymond of Toulouse) as it draws narrative details from the siege of Antioch and Jerusalem in early Crusading chronicles, in particular William of Tyre’s influential history that had been recently translated into Italian (*Historia della guerra sacra di Gierusalemme della terra di promissione e quasi di tutta la Soria ricuperata da Christiani*, [*History of the Holy War of Jerusalem the Promised Land and Almost All of Syria Recovered by Christians*], 1562). Yet while the poem’s primary plot line depicts the historical conquest of a foreign territory through military violence that precludes peaceful co-existence and seeks the complete annihilation of the Other, the romance episodes invented by the author move in the opposite direction, envisioning male and female characters who desire (and, in some cases, attain) the most intimate form of physical union with an individual from the enemy camp. Given that female protagonists and amorous adventures were lacking in the Crusading histories that served as the basis of the poem’s plot, Tasso draws from literary precedents as well as his own imagination to create a triad of women who inspire or experience the love element that he maintained was fundamental to the “unità mista” (mixed unity) of the heroic poem (*Lettere poetiche*, 434). The romantic vicissitudes involving the three pagan female protagonists Clorinda, Erminia, and Armida, along with the two most prominent warriors on the Christian side, Tancredi and Rinaldo, are not minor episodes, but narrative threads that extend for almost the entire length of the poem and determine the plot just as much as the attempt to conquer the Holy City.

The story of Armida and the Christian knight Rinaldo runs from the maiden’s initial entrance into the Crusading camp in canto 4 until the couple’s reunion in the woods outside Jerusalem in the poem’s final canto. Unlike the other male protagonists, Rinaldo is not a historical Crusader, but an invented character whose name evokes the famous Carolingian paladin featured as the eponymous hero of Tasso’s previous romance epic, *Rinaldo* (1562). Armida, for her part, while in some respects reminiscent of classical and Renaissance female temptations (e.g., Circe, Dido, Alcina), is not limited to a morally dubious phase in the hero’s journey that must be overcome, but evolves and develops as the plot progresses.

Initially, King Idraote of Damascus plans to use his niece Armida to draw Goffredo and the Crusaders away from their duty. Inventing a tale of woe, the alluring damsel in distress asks for ten knights to come to her aid. Goffredo is constrained to draw lots to select the lucky few from among the group of “avventurieri” (knight errants) who had joined the Crusading effort. Since only the impervious leader Goffredo and the already

love-struck Tancredi remain immune to Armida's charms, during the night countless others set out to secretly follow Armida and her ten chosen defenders (*GL* 5.79). Having led the willing knights to her castle on the Dead Sea through her feminine charms, Armida shifts to magic in order to keep them under her command with the intention of sending them as prisoners to Egypt.

Rinaldo's departure from Goffredo's camp in canto 5 is dramatically set apart from that of the other knights by following the pattern of the rebellious hero of the Carolingian cantari. When a fight breaks out between Rinaldo and Gernando, Goffredo is blinded by another knight's biased account and orders Rinaldo's imprisonment. Although the latter would like to challenge Goffredo's unjust pronouncement, Tancredi urges him to leave without an open confrontation since any defense, no matter how well spoken, would be futile. After Rinaldo departs in secrecy to avoid execution (*GL* 5.34), Goffredo sentences him to exile. During his wanderings Rinaldo encounters Armida's prisoners and frees them. In revenge, Armida plans to take his life, but, as she gazes upon his face as he sleeps, her hate is transformed into desire and she carries him off to her enchanted island instead, where the two become lovers.

While Rinaldo is thus detained on a paradisiacal island by the enchantress, it becomes clear that his participation in the war is necessary for a Christian victory. At God's prompting, Goffredo revokes his edict of exile and sends the knights Carlo and Ubaldo to bring Rinaldo back. After guidance from intermediary figures, the pair arrives on Armida's island, a false paradise located in the midst of the Blessed Islands in the Atlantic Ocean. After passing bare-breasted "sirens" frolicking in a fountain (*GL* 15.66) and other sensual temptations, the two knights remain hidden as they watch Rinaldo and Armida engaging in love play (*GL* 16.19). After Armida's departure, the liberators step out of the bushes and persuade Rinaldo to return to his duty. Yet before leaving Armida's island, Rinaldo reasserts his love for her by pledging himself as her knight:

Fra le care memorie ed onorate
mi sarai ne le gioie e ne gli affanni,
sarò tuo cavalier quanto concede
La guerra d'Asia e con l'onor la fede.

In joy and in sorrow you will be among
my dear and cherished memories;
I shall be your knight, as far as the war
with Asia permits, and fealty with honor. (*GL* 16.54)

Armida does not believe Rinaldo's words, and faints.

After his arrival at the Christian camp and indoctrination by Peter the Hermit, Rinaldo succeeds in breaking a magic spell in Ismeno's forest and cuts down the trees desperately needed for a new siege tower. The Crusaders thereby succeed in penetrating the city and then carry out the slaughter of its inhabitants. The final attack on Jerusalem, in line with the Crusade chronicles that depicted Christian warriors killing every man, woman, and child in the city, evokes more horror than jubilation:

Ogni cosa di strage era già pieno,
vedeansi in mucchi e in monti i corpi avolti:
là i feriti su i morti, e qui giacièno
sotto morti insepolti egri sepolti.
Fuggian premendo i pargoletti al seno
le meste madri co' capegli sciolti,
e 'l predator, di spoglie e di rapine
carco, stringea le vergini nel crine.

Every thing was entirely filled with slaughter;
bodies were bundled into heaps and piles.
Here the wounded were lying upon the dead,
and there beneath the unburied dead the sick
lay buried. With locks dishevelled the tearful
matrons fled, clutching their babies to their breasts,
and the predator, laden with spoils and rapine,
was dragging the virgins along by their hair. (*GL* 19.29-30)

Rinaldo is the only knight who does not partake in the final bloody melee. Remembering his earlier promise to Armida, he follows her into a nearby forest and confirms his love for her. Armida in turn signals her readiness to convert to Christianity out of love for him. This concession makes possible her purported role as co-founder of the Estense dynasty, the ruling family of Ferrara and Tasso's patrons.

Part of Armida's fascination as a character stems from her complex literary genealogy: she evokes the classical figures of Circe and Medea, she partially relives the vicissitudes of Dido, and she is described in ways that recall both Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura. The chivalric precedents she most closely recalls and combines are found in the poems of Boiardo and Ariosto. Her initial appearance in the Crusading camp evokes Angelica's entrance in Charlemagne's banquet hall (*Orlando Innamorato* 1.1.20-35), whereas her sequester of Rinaldo recalls the machinations of the fairy Alcina (*Orlando Innamorato* II.13.54-66 and *Orlando Furioso* VI.19-7.32). At the same time, she outdoes former figures of female seduction by succeeding in permanently uniting with her man at the end of the story. In this way, she also unexpectedly assumes the dynastic role of Bradamante, whose marriage to Ruggiero purportedly gave rise to the Estense family. Tasso 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. Perhaps it was the anomaly of a dangerous pagan who ends up as the promised bride of the chivalric hero, thereby becoming the patron's purported ancestor, that led many of the poem's critics to simply disregard or diminish the import of the final reunion of the young lovers and to concentrate instead on the earlier extended episode of Rinaldo's seduction and liberation.

The poem's other two love stories are intertwined. Erminia, the conquered Saracen princess of Antioch, is captivated by Tancredi, who in turn loves the valorous female warrior Clorinda. From her initial appearance in the first canto of the poem until her death in canto 12, Clorinda evokes various female figures from Italian Renaissance epic, in particular the two female warriors who undergo notable transformations in the course of the *Orlando Furioso*: Marfisa, who assumes a Crusading ethos with her conversion to Christianity, and Bradamante, who converts instead to the role of obedient daughter and eventually passive spouse. Neither precedent provides the conclusion to Clorinda's story, however, in which her final confrontation with Tancredi creatively imitates the model of a Saracen knight who converts to Christianity after a fatal blow by Orlando (Agricane in the *Orlando Innamorato* and Ferraguto in the *Spagna*). The subsequent apparition of his beloved ("la sospirata amica") (*GL* XII.91) in Tancredi's dream suggests a transformation from a potentially scandalous and entirely secular love story on earth, to a situation in which the spirit of the deceased beloved watches over the enamored knight from the safe distance of Paradise along the lines of Petrarch's Laura after her demise. Yet Tasso does not leave readers with this reassuring vision, but rather with a bizarre scene in which an infernal spirit, imitating Clorinda's voice, confronts an anguished Tancredi in Ismeno's forest, thus demonstrating that the enamored knight is still obsessed with the maiden.

With a presence that extends from the third to the nineteenth canto, Erminia can be linked to diverse literary precedents. Within the chivalric romance tradition, her pastoral interlude can initially be set against that of Angelica in the *Furioso*. The words that she engraves on trees bear witness not to a reciprocal love like the one Angelica enjoyed with Medoro, but rather to her desperate unrequited love for Tancredi. Nonetheless, in the penultimate canto Tasso reserves for her a final scene that recalls precisely the precedent of Angelica's

encounter with a wounded and unconscious Medoro, thus promising her a happy and fulfilling future. The captive princess not only tends to the knight's physical wounds and returns him to consciousness, but immediately thereafter alludes to a reward she expects from him once he has regained his health: "salute avrai, prepara il guiderdone!" ("You shall be sound, prepare my guerdon meet") (*GL XIX.114*). Citing Erminia's affinity with the motif of the captive woman, Melinda J. Gough interprets her final encounter with Tancredi as an opportunity "to initiate her own transformation from pagan slave to beloved Christian wife" (542). Notwithstanding these promising allusions, Tasso leaves her story tantalizingly suspended. He subsequently mentions in a letter to Cardinal Scipione Gonzaga that she may be destined to end her days as a Catholic nun – a conclusion that would have satisfied his censors (*Lettere poetiche*, 424) – but he stops short of including this new narrative twist in the poem.

Given the centrality of these three love stories, how are we to understand the religious and political mission which is the poem's ostensible subject? Tasso acknowledges that his poem was intended as political propaganda for his patrons and their allies. In a 1565 note to an Estense administrator describing his literary projects in order to justify his stipend, Tasso states that he plans to write two heroic poems on a theme chosen in accord with Cardinal Luigi (his patron at the time). The naming of three possible subjects is followed solely by an indication of their encomiastic purpose. The first listing, which is the subject of the *Liberata*, reads: "Espedizion di Goffredo, e de gli altri principi contra gl'infedeli, e ritorno. Dove avrò occasione di lodar le famiglie d'Europa, che più vorrò" ("Expedition of Goffredo and other princes against the Infidels, and their return. Where I will have the occasion to praise the families of Europe as I choose").

When the Turks appear to be once again threatening western Europe, Tasso writes to his friend Luca Scalabrino: "Il turco, il quale esce fuori con la sua malora, piglierà Messina, pur che si contenti di tanto. Ma girino le cose del mondo come piace a chi le governa..." ["The Turks, who are coming out with their wickedness, will occupy Messina, if they are content with so little. But let the world turn as it pleases those in power"] (March 1576). Although Tasso is concerned about increasing Ottoman aggression, his reference to the Turkish military threat is followed by a stated indifference to political questions. Tasso does not pit East against West, or Islam against Christianity, as much as he distances himself from the machinations of the rulers on both sides. Indeed, the Ottomans were not nearly as personally threatening to Tasso as the Spaniards, who already controlled southern Italy and trying with relative success to crush the indigenous feudal power structure to which his own father was tied. Nor were the Turks ultimately as dangerous to the Este as the Papal States, which would finally succeed in forcing the ruling family out of Ferrara after Duke Alfonso's death in 1597.

If we turn our attention to what Tasso thought of the historical Crusaders that provide the subject of his poem, we find a decidedly cynical view. Ironically, Tasso's disparaging assessment of these warriors comes to us in a letter to Silvio Antoniano, professor of the Collegio Romano and Tasso's most feared and rigid censor. In an attempt to justify his use of "amori" (love stories) in his poem, Tasso explains to this churchman just how degenerate the historical Crusaders actually were:

Se diamo fede a gli storici, molti di que' principi furono non solo macchiati d'incontinenza, ma bruttati ancora di malizia e di ferità: e, s'in vece de l'ingiustizie, de le rapine, de le frodi e de' tradimenti, descrivo gli amori e gli sdegni loro (colpe men gravi); non giudico di rendere men onorata o men venerabile la memoria di quella impresa.

[If we are to give credence to the historians, many of these princes were not only stained with lust, but moreover sullied with malice and savagery, and if instead of the injustices, the plunder, the deception, and treachery, I describe their passion and anger (lesser sins), I don't think I'm rendering less honored or venerable the memory of that undertaking. (March 30, 1576; *Lettere*, 1.146)]

Pointing out the injustices, plunder, fraud, and betrayals of the flesh-and-blood Christian knights may not have

been the most astute way of defending his fictional characters to “the most fanatical of his revisors” (Solerti 1.224), but it does reveal a disenchanting view of the First Crusade, the ostensible subject of his poem.

Tasso’s “Goffredo” – the original title of the poem – was completed in 1575 with twenty ottava rima cantos. Following the practice of the time, Tasso submitted it 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 work’s publication, he also passionately defended the episodes under attack, maintaining that the romance elements of love and magic were essential to a successful heroic poem. 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.

[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)].

The poem appeared without Tasso’s authorization in 1581 with the title *Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Liberated*) – an echo of Giangiorgio Trissino’s earlier *Italia liberata dai Goti* (*Italy Liberated from the Goths*, 1547-1548). Although seven editions were printed within six months, signaling the work’s popularity, two members of the influential literary academy Accademia Della Crusca criticized the poem, motivating Tasso to respond in 1585 with an *Apologia in difesa della Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Apology in Defense of Jerusalem Delivered*). He further defended the structural blending of epic and romance elements in 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).

If, on the one hand, the *Gerusalemme Liberata* met with disapproval on the part of the ecclesiastical censors and the establishment intellectuals, on the other it found favor in both elite and popular culture. The sensual episodes especially became the subject of musical, theatrical, operatic, and artistic adaptations (see Abbrugiati and Guidi). Until recent decades the poem was recited from memory by shepherds in the Tuscan countryside, sung by gondoliers in Venice, performed as epic *maggi* (folk opera) in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, and dramatized as puppet theater throughout southern Italy and Sicily. Introduced into English letters via Edward Fairfax’s 1600 translation, it is now available in modern prose (Nash, used here) as well as verse (Esolan, Wickert).

English translations:

Jerusalem Delivered. Trans. Anthony M. Esolan. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. [Verse]
Jerusalem Delivered. Trans. and ed. Ralph Nash. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987. [Prose]
The Liberation of Jerusalem. Trans. Max Wickert. Intro. Mark Davie. Oxford World’s Classics. Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2009. [Verse]

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