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Tasso's First Discourse on the Art of Poetry as a Guide to the *Gerusalemme liberata* by

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The relationship between Tasso's early *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* and his *Gerusalemme liberata* needs clarification for a variety of reasons. The existence of a later poetics—the *Discorsi del poema eroico*, which modifies and expands the earlier version—has frequently side-tracked readers into a text that more properly pertains to Tasso's later version of his epic, the *Gerusalemme conquistata*. The availability of the second poetics in English, while the first remains inaccessible to readers without Italian, has also encouraged this inappropriate pairing. Further, the current vogue of literary theory tends to promote a view of Tasso's poetics as an important moment in the history of ideas and in the Renaissance assimilation of Aristotelian aesthetics which, though entirely valid in its own right, isolates Tasso's philosophical and critical text from his creative performance. Tasso's poetics, however, are anything but disinterested speculation; this fact requires full acknowledgment because certain basic ambitions of literary theory as a mode of discourse often obscure it.

For example, the appearance of an objective review of representative texts in order to derive or demonstrate an hypothesis can lead us astray simply by its failure to acknowledge the immediate interests of the writer conducting that review; and Tasso's style as a theorist warrants no special exemption from such skepticism about his motives. He wrote his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* while he was in the midst of writing his epic. For them to bear no partisan and explanatory connection to his poem would entail a miracle of detachment. Likewise, Giraldi Cinthio, Tasso's chief theoretical rival in the argument over unity of plot, illustrates this same point. Giraldi wrote his own *Discorsi* on the composition of romances while he was also writing a romance of his own. For him, unity of plot could legitimately derive from unity of character, and he structured his poem, the *Ercole*, on this principle. Although what may seem an objective survey of past works and the straightforward mechanics of reason support his theoretical conclusions in this regard, his own personal practice as
a poet naturally conditions the outcome of his arguments. It is the middle
ground between theory and practice that occupies my attention in the pages
that follow because Tasso, like Giraldi, undoubtedly traversed that terrain
time and again.

Although this essay contains two sections, both of them share the same
goal. They aim to examine the first of Tasso's Discorsi dell'arte poetica as a
source of useful critical ideas for reading the Gerusalemme liberata. Since it is
necessary to set forth Tasso's thinking about the poetics of epic before I can
explain its relation to his creative efforts in the same field, I begin the first sec­
tion with a thorough and sequential exposition of Tasso's ideas. Then I turn to
a central issue among these ideas, the relationship between history and fiction
in epic, and consider how it works itself out in Tasso's poem with reference to
his main historical authority, William of Tyre. The second section addresses fur­
ther key issues that derive from Tasso's first discourse: the role of religion in an
epic poem and the shortcomings of Trissino's Italia liberata da' goti in the light
of Tasso's theorizing about history and religion. Because Ariosto was Tasso's
unavoidable precursor, his presence makes itself felt throughout my reflections,
as it did throughout Tasso's entire literary career. Since the ideas Tasso ex­
presses are major generalities that lead into far reaches of literary history and
theory, I have not pretended to treat comprehensively the inevitably various
topics I address. Rather, I have tried to keep my two central texts in steady
focus with the hope of clarifying some of the light they shed on one another.

I

Reflections on the relations between history and imagination in Tasso's
major epic can take as their almost inevitable point of departure Aristotle's
brief discussion of the same topic in his Poetics. By the middle of the sixteenth
century Aristotle's volume of literary theory had already occasioned consider­
able debate among the literati since it had begun to gain widespread currency
through the publication of Alessandro de' Pazzi's Latin translation of the text
in 1536 (Hathaway 179); and Tasso's own poetics, early and late, derive from a
developing tradition of affirmation and revision of basic tenets of Aristotelian
thought. On our present topic Aristotle most notably remarks that Herodotus,
turned into verses, does not qualify as poetry because the poet transcends the
historian's concern with specific events. The poet focuses on probability and
general truths, the sort of things that could happen in all likelihood because
they are in the nature of human affairs and thereby arise from a deeper reality
than the merely particular and circumstantial. However, Aristotle does imme­
diately proceed to claim that historical names from familiar legends can win
conviction in the minds of an audience because they are ultimately reminders
of supposedly genuine characters and their actual lifestories. What actually
has occurred, he continues, is much more credible than something made up,
though, when a strong sense of probability governs the artist’s imagination, his fictions still ring true to fact. Indeed, Aristotle seesaws here momentarily between the powers of history and those of imagination before coming down strongly on the side of the latter (IX [1451b]).

No such wavering gives Tasso any pause in his early Discorsi dell’arte poetica of 1564 or thereabout.\(^1\) This treatise on the epic, whatever its actual date of composition within the accepted range of possibilities, constitutes an essential guide to Tasso’s ambitions in Gerusalemme liberata; one recent critic of merit aptly calls it a “primer” for that poem (Kates 50) while another asserts its “organic” connection to Tasso’s masterwork (Poma in Tasso, Discorsi 226). In the first of the three discourses, where the young poet addresses the issue of appropriate subject matter for an epic, he concludes that such a poem should draw its material from history because epic deals with illustrious events and it is unlikely that affairs of this order would pass unrecorded by historians. If such events have passed unrecorded, people will deem them untrue, and readers will not readily yield their feelings to poems based on undocumented stories (4-5). Further, Tasso departs from Aristotle’s endorsement of plots that remain true to probability even though they are entirely made up, like Agathon’s Antheus (IX [1451b]); Tasso maintains that the power of invention shows itself to better advantage in freshly structuring an established story than in concocting a completely new and unprecedented one (5-6).

Inevitably, given the spirit of his post-Tridentine age, Tasso next turns to religion. Once he has affirmed history as the right place to find an epic theme, he broaches a double issue: first, history includes religion, whether a false or a true one; and second, epic requires wonder, the marvelous. Then, while acknowledging the complexity of the process, he neatly combines his two concerns by asserting that only true religion can sponsor credible wonders; thus, verisimilitude entails not merely historical sources but Christianity as well, since no one in his age would credit a miracle occasioned by a false, i.e. non-Christian, god (6). He can now return to his most fundamental Aristotelian premise, that poetry is the imitation of an action, with all of his latter-day addenda securely in tow. Imitation requires verisimilitude and, as we have seen, history and Christianity can together assure that prime desideratum (7).

Tasso’s subsequent exploration of how to fulfill the formulae he has thus far deduced in his treatise enables him comfortably to co-opt the romance material of his immediate predecessors in Ferrara while accommodating his mid-sixteenth-century literary and religious scruples. Tasso now inquires into the nature and period of an apt historical theme for a Christian epic, and he repeatedly concludes that the stories of Charlemagne and Arthur both meet the requirements he has formulated and elude their pitfalls. A poet with Tasso’s ambitions must steer clear of certain kinds of material that would inhibit his imaginative chances. Sacred history, for example, is unchangeable since it serves to underwrite precious Church doctrines; ancient history, while
distant enough in time to allow ample room for invention, still involves curious and outmoded customs. Modern history, on the other hand, is altogether too familiar, and a poet thus invites controversy when he takes any imaginative liberties with it. So, he should find a Christian story not so holy as to prove inalterable and from a time in the middle distance, neither too remote and therefore full of obsolete and unfamiliar fashions, nor too modern and therefore well-known and easily contestable, limiting thereby the poet's opportunities for invention (9-10).

Again we can note how well the tales of Arthur and Charlemagne fit the bill, as Tasso has here drawn it up, and how readily that affiliates him with prior Ferrarese poets, Boiardo and Ariosto most especially. Though Tasso chooses this moment to make a break from Aristotelian precept that in turn establishes a potentially good reason for him to reject the approach of his most conspicuous antecedent among the romanziatori, Ludovico Ariosto, he defers that gesture in its most decisive form until an even more opportune occasion in the following discourse. There, Tasso specifically and at length indicts Ariosto on the issue of unity of plot (22–42). Here, he actually cites a character of Ariosto's, Bradamante, as an illustrious paragon of one aspect of the heroic virtue that epic, by its very nature, portrays (12). But despite Bradamante's virtue, which is indeed constancy, as Tasso claims, and which is impressively hers for the claiming, he nonetheless fails to mention the abundant instances where Ariosto irreverently subverts the apparent entitlement to such grandeur on the part of his "heroes."

Rather, he proceeds to distinguish epic from tragedy. Since the former achieves a different effect from that of the latter, which aims to move its spectators to terror and pity, Tasso asserts that these two types of poetry must differ inherently in terms both of the actions they imitate and of the characters who carry out these actions, notwithstanding Aristotle's opinion to the contrary. It is in moral stature that epic actions and characters surpass their counterparts in tragedy, for they embody the highest ideals as well as the lowest vices (12–13). The drift of Tasso's argument here suggests the inspirational purpose behind heroic poetry, which uplifts while it instructs by representing extremes of human achievement. Tragedy, on the other hand, serves a cautionary and cleansing function that it effects through characters of a more intermediate moral nature, however high their social rank and however mighty the public consequences of their actions may be. Further, given these ambitions, the epic poet does well to select a theme that affords him an abundance of grand and notable events of major importance, such as the arrival of Aeneas in Italy or the expulsion of the Goths by the Italians or similar enterprises undertaken on behalf of the Empire or the Faith (13).

Tasso, then, summarizes his chief points thus far about the requisite qualities in what he calls the "raw material" of epic: the authority of history, true religion, freedom for the imagination, an appropriate period of time, and
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events both grand and noble (13–19). Thereafter, he addresses one final topic, the size of the chosen subject; this enables him both to make another brief and tentative critique of the local laureates, Boiardo and Ariosto, and to reaffirm another primary difference between history and poetry. In the first case, he proposes the gargantuan chore of reading the *Innamorato* and the *Furioso* together as a single book to demonstrate the overabundance that an excessive subject may entail (15). In the second, he distinguishes history from poetry in terms of both plot and style by specifying the problems too large an historical subject has caused such writers as Lucan, Silius Italicus, and Giovan Giorgio Trissino. Their choices allowed them no room for ornaments of style and episodic intervals within their main story. Their verses echo and reduce even further the spare technique of the chronicler (14–15).

We do not have to look far in the *Gerusalemme liberata* to find Tasso’s theories in action. Though we should not expect too precise and consistent a correspondence between ideals and their practical implementation, doing so would, sadly enough, be in keeping with our author’s unhappiest inclinations. For the creative tension that often obtains between actuality and our highest standards became increasingly tense and constrictive in Tasso’s experience, and the sober assertion in the Yeats epigraph that “in dreams begin responsibility” achieves a somber realization in this poet’s biography, as in the story of his age. Bringing up such aspects of history, the biographical as well as the highlights of a more general chronicle of a given period, is hardly beside the point in literary study, however keen an ambition for “purity” and for freedom from “extra-literary” factors may sponsor critical inquiry. Inevitably, to one degree or another, personal experience and social milieu impinge upon the poetic imagination.

Tasso, who chose to create an epic from an historical topic, was himself the creature of a given history. In 1559, when Turkish corsairs sacked Sorrento, young Torquato’s hometown, he was accompanying his father in Venice, where both of them suffered weeks of uncertainty and apprehension over the fate of Cornelia, Torquato’s sister (Brand 8). That misfortune merely exemplifies in small the ordeal of an epoch embroiled in feuds between Moslems and Christians, Turks and Italians, that culminated in Sultan Selim’s offensive against the Venetian possession of Cyprus in 1570. Though that attack did not serve to rally a united Christendom, sure signs of the old spirit clearly emerged. Pius V, for example, perceived in this occasion a welcome opportunity to organize a great Crusade against the infidels (Vernon 129). The entire affair played itself out in the famous encounter at Lepanto in October of 1571, the largest galley battle in naval history (Donnelly 167).

Probably in his sixteenth year, while in Venice in 1559, young Tasso made his first attempt at the epic theme that would occupy him, with some intermissions, virtually for the rest of his life. As we have seen, both private and public promptings make themselves felt in the beginning poet’s chosen topic, and his
consultation of the chronicler William of Tyre’s *Belli sacri historia* is certainly indicative of the latter sort of influence. The initial publication in 1549 of this twelfth-century archbishop’s Latin account of the Crusade, as well as its subsequent publication in Italian in 1562, amount to just a fraction of the volumes issued around the middle of the sixteenth century that addressed the topic of the holy war of the Christians against the heathens in the East and that certainly gained a Western readership sometimes intimately concerned with a continuation of that conflict even nearer to home (Brand 54-55; Raimondi 181).

The so-called *Gierusalemme*, a 116-octave fragment that Tasso soon abandoned for both the *Rinaldo* and, soon enough, the *Discorsi dell’arte poetica*, bears the unmistakable mark of young Torquato’s reading of William of Tyre. Since over half of its stanzas survive in their original form in the *Gerusalemme liberata*, which itself manifests an extension of Tasso’s debt to his major historical source, this early effort can serve as a preliminary gauge of his imaginative adaptation of prose records of his subject. Moreover, the general conclusions reached in a comparative study of the young poet’s rendition of the Christians’ march toward Jerusalem after the seizure of Antioch should not surprise anyone possessed of a more than passing familiarity with the style of the *Liberata* and its underlying narrative principles. For example, among some of the stanzas that survive (*GI* 75, *Gier* 16; *GI* 79, *Gier* 14) we observe a shuffling of their original sequence but a preservation of their intense poeticism. These saved octaves are both extremely stylized, the former with its sustained series of negatives and the latter with its litany of proper names, while those dropped, though quite informative, are discernibly more prosaic. Of course, Tasso’s manner of composition frequently involves such intensifications of language and their evocative effects. But an examination of the passage in William of Tyre from which Tasso derives his epic version will also show that in both its initial and subsequent form Tasso has bypassed an opportunity for an episodic interlude, preserving instead his single-minded purpose and the narrative drive that carries it forward (330-332).

If we consider the problem of unity of plot versus multiplicity of action abstractly, it hardly makes much sense that Tasso should choose otherwise. He is close to the start of his story and thus has no time for a break until the plot’s main purpose gains a secure footing on the page and in the mind of the reader. However, a glance at the first canto of the *Orlando furioso* should quite concretely betray any such abstract confidence in how one opens a narrative poem, for at the outset in Ariosto incidents multiply and diverge in such a hurry that they defy us to keep track of them. Tasso, on the other hand, defines himself and his methods by complete contrast at what we may call the highest level, for his poem has only just begun when he has already “taken it to the top” in an overview of total unity from the divine perspective:

gli occhi in giù volse, e in un sol punto e in una
God intends, as we soon learn, to bring order among the faithful through the election of Goffredo, the Duke of Bouillon in Lower Lorraine, as the sole leader of the Christian forces in their attack on the Holy City.

Naturally, we search William of Tyre in vain for any account of this sort of drama in the heavens, though we find abundant citations of scripture that surely indicate his sense of divine guidance behind the First Crusade. We learn as well of no such earthly election at this stage in its advance. Rather, an uneasy balance of power obtains among three rival nobles with the influence of other prominent leaders making itself significantly felt on occasion. But literary and religious principles govern Tasso’s imagination and determine his response to the history he inherits. He means to exploit the credit that received legends rate in the popular mind while altering and adjusting the facts in keeping with the other agendas that order his ultimate priorities.

For example, almost the earliest specific, immediate detail in the Liberata falsifies the record while following both classical precept and classical precedent. For Tasso opens his account of the Christians’ progress toward Jerusalem in what he calls the sixth year of their mission (GL I, 6, 1) whereas it was indeed the third, as he well knew and later acknowledged in his Giudizio sopra la sua Gerusalemme da lui stesso medesimo riformato. But an additional three years readily increases our sense of the ordeal undergone by the soldiers of the cross, and that adds to our awe at their heroic suffering and thus gets at what Tasso certainly deemed the truth of a deeper dimension of their actual experience. A modern Christian interpreter might arguably discern in Tasso’s meaning at this juncture what Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly termed the cost of discipleship, however much he may question the Crusaders’ motives for paying that price. But Tasso’s own motives equally spring from secular sources like those he relied upon in discussing the appropriate size of an epic in his early Discorsi. Horace’s praise of Homer’s opening to the Iliad and the way it thrusts the reader in medias res underlies Tasso’s theoretical advisory for the composition of an epic just as he echoes the exemplary ancient text in his actual telling of the tale.

Comparable scruples and precedents guide and sponsor Tasso’s invocation of the Muse and her mother in his poem’s initial canto. Tasso’s variations on the conventional summoning of heavenly aid in the exordium (GL I, 2 + 3) have inevitably, and rightly, attracted much critical commentary. His acknowledged qualms about tricking out the truth in borrowed plumage certainly evince his post-Tridentine edginess about anything less than rigorous fidelity to the accepted facts of his story and faith of his times. But the source of his self-justification contains an obvious irony that can obscure an interesting stage in the transmission of the classical rationale that Tasso cites to sanction his poetic
practice. In his own self-defense, the conscientious Christian poet does indeed turn to the foremost pagan proponent of the Epicurean philosophy of pleasure. However, in doing so, Torquato also relies on the more intimate example of his father Bernardo's recourse to Lucretius in Bernardo's efforts to resolve a similar conflict at the mid-point of his massive L'Amadigi:

Come talor un medico che vuole
Gabbar l'infermo, per dargli salute,
Celar l'amaro sotto il dolce suole;
Acciò ch'egli di ber non lo rifiute:
Così sotto fìgmenti di parole,
Di chimere da noi non conosciute
Danno i Poeti molti documenti
Al volgo ignaro, e a l'inferme menti.

(II, 1)

Of course, Bernardo Tasso was a forerunner of Torquato's in the mid-Cinquecento efforts to discipline what many deemed the moral and aesthetic vagaries of Ariostean romance into more acceptable doctrinal and formal terms. Tasso's second invocation in Canto I warrants association with that process in the light of his concern for historical authority. When the poet appeals to what he calls "Mente" (GI I, 36, 1), editors usually gloss that word with "memoria," the faculty which the ancients personified as the mother of the Muses, Mnemosyne. Tasso's vocative, however, intends to summon no such mythical figure but rather dramatically to affirm his earnest bid for accurate recall of the past events that he aims to recount and, thereby, to gain the credence of his readers. Such seriousness, however, was no more than a joke to the romantatori like Ariosto, Boiardo, Pulci and, ultimately, the cantastorie from whose burlesque performances they derive something of their tone. That joke wore the mask of Turpin, the supposed biographer of Charlemagne, whom these poets routinely invoke to defend their most preposterous claims.

Furthermore, another of Tasso's dominant ambitions makes itself eminently clear at this moment, which could easily serve as a paragon of this poet's dedicated classicism as it shows forth in such works as the Discorsi dell'arte poetica. For a comprehensive muster of the soldiers of the cross has prompted Tasso's second invocation, which, in its turn, leads him to catalogue the Christian forces in direct imitation of Homer's presentation of the Greek forces en masse before their first intended attack on Troy in the second book of the Iliad. However, any pretense of historicity quickly founders on this definitively epic occasion if we summon William of Tyre as witness merely at the opening of Tasso's impressive catalogue. For example, Ugone of Vermandois, brother of the French King Phillip I, leads off the list (GI I, 37, 1) whereas William of Tyre informs us of his ignoble desertion of the Crusaders well before they had
reached this stage in their march (298–99). Almost directly thereafter, appears Ademaro, the Bishop of Puy and Urban II’s chosen ecclesiastical mentor of the Christians (Gl 1, 38, 8). Unfortunately, we learn in the same passage from William of Tyre that the French cleric had succumbed to the plague that ravaged the soldiers of the cross immediately after their successful siege of Antioch. Other instances of this sort abound.

However, consideration of Tasso’s epic as a text for students of the historiography of the Crusades would mistake his intentions as wildly as the failure to consider William of Tyre’s history as a part of the imaginative story of that event would thoroughly miss the Archbishop’s motives and, in good part, his point. The first of Tasso’s early Discorsi shows him construing one of Aristotle’s precepts somewhat more strictly than Aristotle himself as Tasso makes clear his own desire to employ the authority of history as it resounds through the fame of well-known legends and records. But he does allow himself the freedom to invent. That he should exercise such license in defiance of established facts need not trouble him so long as he does not tamper with sacred history nor expect that authority in regard to debatable points of the recent past. The sort of “errors” that we have observed can claim in their defense the artistic ambitions that Tasso sought to justify in his early theories of epic composition.

II

Any thoughtful consideration of the first of Tasso’s early Discorsi and the light that it sheds on his epic masterpiece must take into account this poet’s acute sensitivity to questions of religion. The subsequent agonies that he experienced in this regard much later in his career signify both his own profound consciousness of the consequences that such matters entail and the keen awareness of such issues that characterized his age. His avoidance of what he deemed subjects too sacred for an epic poem indicates the strictness of his religious conscience and demonstrates his shrewd management of his options as an heir to the traditions of romance and as an imitator of exemplary classical texts. In fact, the early Discorsi tellingly reveal Tasso’s often deft adjustments to a challenging variety of pressures and exactions that his poetic ambitions forced him to accommodate.

One of Tasso’s most agile mergers of his potentially conflicting interests allows him to reconcile apparently rival claims of classicism and Christianity. Moreover, he achieves this feat in a manner that roundly satisfies all parties concerned because he manages to confirm the poetic value of contemporary religion on the basis of ancient philosophy. He makes Aristotelian aesthetics the justification of a Christian theme. For the Greek philosopher asserts that the poet intends to imitate an action, and, according to Tasso, such imitation aims to achieve verisimilitude. No modern reader, however, believes in the bygone gods of Greek and Roman mythology, so a Christian cosmology and
and the agents of its effects, like devils and angels, must supply the divine machinery that epic requires if the poem means to tell a credible tale (6–7).

Besides the obvious moments, like Tasso’s first call upon the muse, his conscience in these matters makes itself felt on some surprising occasions once he puts such principles into practice in the composition of the Gerusalemme liberata. For example, in Canto II when Clorinda rides into town at the eleventh hour, the stakes are high indeed, for two lives rest in the balance as well as the future of a newly disclosed passion. In fact, the pitch of melodrama at this juncture has earned Tasso radically divergent praise and blame.² But in the midst of this tension-fraught encounter we hear nothing less than a brief lesson from the catechism, and the Islamic catechism at that! Clorinda lectures Aladino on the Moslem prohibition of what the Judeo-Christian tradition terms “graven images” in the Mosaic commandment against them.

‘Fu de le nostre leggi irreverenza
quell’opra far che persuase il mago:
che non convien ne’ nostri tempi a nui
gl’idoli avere, e men gl’ idoli altrui.’

GI II, 5–8

Among other things, Moslem strictures against idol-worship account for our lack of a trustworthy likeness of the Prophet Mohammed, who achieved hegemony for the new revelation he preached by supplanting a variety of local cults on the Arabian peninsula and replacing their idolatry with the unifying spirit of monotheism (Runciman 13–15). So, in the above passage from Tasso’s poem, Clorinda appeals to one of the primary laws of her faith. But we also witness the Christian poet’s acknowledged respect for Catholic dogma ironically emerging in principle, here, in the words of his heathen heroine. This momentary scrupulosity about the tenets of Islam mirrors the far more extensive and agonizing questions of faith that Tasso’s reliance on classical models forced upon him.

 Likewise, Tasso’s recourse to Homer and Virgil as exemplars of his chosen art confronted him with the need for an historical subject and with the problems that arise in the imaginative adaptation of records of the past. He responded by making shrewd choices that placed his poem in an era and setting that satisfied not merely his religious requirements but also his predilection for chivalric romance, reflecting in the process the main currents of his literary heritage as well as the tastes of his age. He also rationalized these choices convincingly in the first of his early Discorsi, well in advance of most of his efforts to carry them out.³ Of course, Ariosto hardly succeeded so famously with his audience by scrupling over the sort of issues and standards that seriously preoccupied Tasso throughout his career. Rather, an irresistible playfulness permeates the Furioso and regularly inspires an irreverent disregard for both fact
and dogma. Ariosto's ideal reader may lack curiosity, and he certainly must lack piety, but he needs an almost infinite desire to be entertained.

Ariosto's customary indifference to the truth he sometimes claims for the facts of his stories makes itself known in his routine citations of Turpin. As bawdy and unlikely a tale as that of Astolfo and Giocondo in Canto XXVIII receives the stamp of the Archbishop of Rheims' authority while the poet himself disclaims responsibility and proceeds with his naughty fun. And just as Clorinda's aforementioned speech also betokens Tasso's rigorous concern for accurate detail with his foreign and heathen characters and settings, we can note a casual imprecision in Ariosto's presentation of similar aspects of his tale. For example, in an odd conjunction of supposed fact and real feeling, Ariosto suits out the Syrian knights at Damascus in the armor of the Crusaders and then proceeds to make an impassioned plea for a reconquest of the Holy Land as a means of uniting the strife-torn western Christendom of his time (Of XVII, 73-79). Perhaps an imaginative critic could find here a figurative call for the Gerusalemme liberata, for he certainly would be well justified in hearing in this outburst an invocation of the crusading spirit abroad in the European land that attained explicit expression in Tasso's epic. Ariosto felt its power enough to give word to it elsewhere in his poem and to admit its potential for unifying a divided western Christendom (Of XV, 99). But what could be further from Tasso's artistic conscience, as he elaborated its standards in the early Discorsi, than Ariosto's mistaken outfitting of Syrian knights in Christian arms?

Soriani in quel tempo aveano usanza
d'armarsi a questa guisa di Ponente.

(Of XVII, 73, 1-2)

Obviously Ariosto experienced the same impulse to take chivalry to its limits, geographical as well as spiritual, that Tasso felt and followed. However, he knew few of the latter-day restraints that inhibited his successor.

Ariosto also uses the superstructure and underpinnings of a conventional Christian cosmology to satirize religious institutions and Christian art. When God in His heaven commissions the archangel Michael to protect the auxiliary forces that Ruggiero has assembled on their march from Picardy to Paris (Of XIV, 75 and ff.), the divine intermediary's subsequent search for Silence meets with immediate frustration since the monasteries, which seem the likely abode of such a quality, no longer house it. Michael does, however, encounter Discord there in the company of Christ's devotees, and she serves him well in a later part of his assignment (Of XIV, 75 and ff.). In this case, Ariosto obviously targets the Church as the object of his satire. Elsewhere (Of XXXIII, 127-8 and XXXIV) he takes aim at Dante, the "divino poeta," to subvert whatever sacredness his text and the mythical otherworld depicted therein may have attained in the minds of its readers. Astolfo, the droll cavalier, follows
Ariosto's version of the pilgrim's itinerary from Hell on up, and his journey broadly parodies the Dantean pilgrimage. In the underworld long-winded Lydia, who could outtalk the most forthcoming shade in the Commedia, confesses her "sin" to the English knight: she was cruelly cold to her lover — hardly the sort of offense that the medieval poet dwells upon in the Inferno! And after his ascent to the moon, Astolfo hears from Saint John an allegorical explanation of the refuse accumulated in the "lunar junkyard," as a recent critic calls it (Quint 85), that makes the central method of Dante's art seem arbitrary to the point of whimsicality. The Evangelist matches up such an odd assortment of lost items from the valley of the moon with what he claims to be their corresponding earthly significance that only caprice could justify the meanings St. John assigns to various components of his curious collection. Taking them seriously means misreading the Furioso, while getting the joke puts Dante's poem, or at least one of its critical qualities, in what Ariosto evidently deems its less than holy place.

Tasso's early theories about what part history and religion should play in an epic poem certainly reveal that he meant to stake out a claim for himself in the realm of romance and to share some of Ariosto's prerogatives. However, the spirit of his Ferrarese predecessor's poem diverges so widely and consistently from the terms of his own aspirations that Tasso needed to look elsewhere among Cinquecento efforts in narrative poetry to find examples he might follow or improve upon. In his aim to compose an historical epic based upon classical precedents he found in Trissino a forerunner in his own century, though the popular failure of that poet's account of Belisarius' campaign against the Gothic usurpers in Italy constituted a grave caveat on the poetic hazards of pedantic classicism. Tasso, indeed, was prompt to acknowledge the magnetic attraction Ariosto's romance exerted upon the public while volumes of Trissino gathered dust on library shelves (Discorsi 22-23). However, he could also discriminate between viable options and certain dead-ends even in works that had enjoyed no happy fortunes, and he managed with comparable discernment to pick and choose his main chances among both the winners and the losers of the laurels of his immediate past.

For one obvious example, Tasso's ottava rima can readily appropriate some of the livelier rhythms of romance whereas Trissino's unrhymed hendecasyllables proceed at a notably duller pace than either the taut and polished Homeric hexameters or their compact Virgilian counterparts, both of which he aimed to evoke. Also, the stanzaic music of romance is lost to Trissino by default whereas Tasso makes it his own in his quite particular fashion while he still advances a serious historical theme from a Christian era in a poem that undeniably imitates the supreme paragons of ancient epic.

Reading the two texts in tandem reveals a further medley of congruences and divergences. In the word "liberata" Tasso's title echoes Trissino's Italia liberata da' goti and thus certainly manifests a consciousness of the earlier
epic. Yet prior to its publication, Tasso referred to his poem by a different name, that of its hero Goffredo; since it was originally published without the poet’s consent or consultation, its title at that time was similarly unauthorized. Still, Tasso did not seek to eliminate the nominal connection between the two texts in subsequent editions of his poem over which he exercised greater control until the radical recasting of his original appeared in 1593 as the *Gerusalemme conquistata*. But it is the first word in each of these kindred titles that signals a key divergence of emphasis between these two works, for “*Gerusalemme*” readily indicates a spiritual place beyond history and geography yet very much a part of both. “*Italia,*” of course, summons the “patria,” and the strength of feelings associated with that word should not be underestimated. “*Gerusalemme,*” however, can invoke both the personal immediacy and the ultimate transcendence of the profoundest religious sentiments while at the same time giving them a local habitation and a name.

Trissino opens his poem in patent imitation of the way Homer begins the *Odyssey*, with both Providenza and Onerio, a Christian concept and a Greek term, transformed into angels and sharing the role that Athena plays at the start of the ancient epic. The former appeals to God’s mercy on behalf of “la misera Italia,” and the latter then executes the divine command with which God responds to that appeal, setting in motion the series of events that subsequently frees Italy from barbarian dominion. Onerio, who takes Visione along on his mission, appears to the Holy Roman Emperor in a dream at dawn in the form of the Pope and promises him precisely what Tasso initially claims for the Crusade, a “glorioso acquisto” (*GI*, I, 1, 4; *II*, I, p. 3). The Emperor Justinian reacts to this heavenly messenger by arranging a meeting of his top advisers and followers where, after an exchange of various opinions, he designates Belisarius as the head of his campaign against the Goths in Italy. At the outset of his poem Tasso parallels this process in the election of Goffredo as the sole supreme leader of the Christian army after that intention has been advanced by God in heaven, Peter the Hermit on earth, and the archangel Gabriel in between.

In his second invocation (*II*, II, p. 20) Trissino specifies Homer’s muse, or rather muses, as apt assistants for the task at hand, which is in itself described as a novel one and amounts to the same assignment Tasso undertakes after his second invocation, i.e. the enumeration of the Christian forces. Trissino explicitly acknowledges his admiration and his imitation of the ancient singer; and, in significant contrast to Tasso, he sees no noteworthy disjunction between the sources of inspiration both he and his pagan predecessor solicit, although he does suggest some limit to his artistic skill in comparison with the classical exemplar whom he follows. Unfortunately, convincing proof of his modest admission is not far to seek, for at just this point Trissino chooses to introduce a preliminary survey of the Empire, a substantial aside on its administrative structure and geographical extent, before he catalogues the troops.
Such discursive footnotes in the midst of his poetic text bespeak the cross-purposes that hobble his efforts repeatedly. Virtual sloughs of factuality retard the progress of his overall imaginative design, and they better address antiquarian interests than those of a poem’s likely audience.

In his early poetics Tasso indicted Trissino for this very tendency, which soon enough recurs in a more flagrant form at another point in the Italia liberata. In fact, Trissino presents a series of catalogues that enumerate the imperial forces with needless redundance and a bureaucratic insistence on secondary, if not irrelevant, detail. First of all, a list of chosen leaders is read before the Emperor prior to his appointment of Belisarius as their supreme commander in his stead. Directly thereafter Belisarius reviews his mustered troops and, in the process, repeats the same sort of information contained in the foregoing list in much the same style as before. Trissino certainly could have compressed this two-stage procedure into one, and he would have demonstrated thereby a needed economy in exposition while still following the Homeric example of the catalogue and gaining its sense of the far-reaching consequences of the action he meant to describe. Tasso’s election of Goffredo and the subsequent parade of the Christian forces manifest considerably more efficiency in carrying out his comparable purposes. But historicity further hampers Trissino at this juncture in ways that Tasso faulted in his early Discorsi (9-10). For, as Belisarius appoints his officers, he attends to details of equipment that unfortunately entail obsolete items and antique terminology which contemporary readers would generally find obscure and thus annoying. 4

Ironically, Trissino’s fastidious concern for what he calls “romana usanza” (II II, p. 30) distracts him from the rich poetic potential in what amounts to merely an isolated observation at this stage in his narrative. For Belisarius intentionally makes these initial appointments in the name of the Emperor as though he were only relaying the news of his superior’s choices. He thus aims to avoid envy and resentment, and he clarifies this motive to Justinian before he acts upon it (II II, p. 27). In human terms or those of character, this amounts to the most interesting information we hear for several pages which are mainly devoted to the minutiae of military protocol and outfitting. Tasso, of course, perceived in such conflicts over authority and precedence among his Christian leaders the opportunity to introduce into his epic the vagaries and amours of knight-errantry that constitute the well-spring of romance within the classical confines of his tale. He also saw in the challenge of unifying such divergent tendencies, the major theological dimensions of the universe his poem inhabits. Trissino’s poem certainly contains episodic interludes, erotic interests, and the machinations of supernatural agents. However, an ill-assimilated and clumsy classicism frequently mars his efforts in these areas and stands in noteworthy contrast to the outcome of Tasso’s struggles with similar material.

For example, in Book III of the Italia liberata Trissino patterns much of the sequence of incidents that makes up its plot on stories taken from Homer
and Virgil, and he introduces a pagan god and a demi-god as motivating forces behind the action. However, few of Tasso's sort of qualms over acceptable use of such material manifest themselves in Trissino's borrowings and adaptations; likewise, few of Tasso's decisive resolutions to these conflicts deepen and clarify the terms of the narrative. Book III mainly tells the tale of Sofia, the Empress's niece, and her passion for Justin, the heir-apparent. As the story unfolds, Sofia confides her anguish as an unacknowledged lover to her sister, Asteria, as Dido does to Anna in *Aeneid* IV. The Empress Teodora intercedes with Justinian on her behalf by seducing the Emperor as Hera similarly beguiles Zeus on Mount Ida in *Iliad* XIV. And Justin, returning home in haste from Brindisi to marry Sofia, nearly drowns at sea like Odysseus when he first sights Phaiakia in *Odyssey* V.

Among the divinities invoked or actively engaged in these events, "il Re de l'universo," whom Belisarius calls upon to speed the imperial troops across the sea and help them prosper in their Italian mission (*II* III, p. 40), certainly must reign supreme. However, Amor melts the heart of Sofia and thereby sets the love story in motion, and Neptune assists the Christian fleet at sea and helps save the drowning Justin in his rush to reunite with his beloved. Yet none of the machinations of these pagan powers bears any relation to the apparent supremacy of the God invoked by Belisarius. They keep their own schedules and, evidently, come and go as they please or as Trissino arbitrarily summons them.

For instance, "l'angelo Nettunio," trident in hand, expedites the voyage of the imperial armada from his post in the crow's nest of Belisarius's vessel, though hardly more than a dozen lines thereafter the same proper name applies simply to the sea upon whose back the boats are riding (*II* III, p. 40). Later, when Justin is caught in the storm and echoes Odysseus's bitter claim of the bliss of those who died heroically in battle at Troy rather than obscurely at sea, Neptune fills Leukothea's role in the *Odyssey* and takes pity on him, appearing in the form of a coot to reassure him (*II* III, p. 45). Of course, in the source none other than Poseidon stirs up the storm in his resentment against Odysseus, who seems about to escape the ordeal of the curse Polyphemus had called down upon him in his father's name. While such a disjunction between an original and its imitation makes no perceptible difference to Trissino, an alert reader may reasonably wonder about the author's attunement to some of the ramifications of the very art he practices.

The possibilities in imitating Hera's beguilement of Zeus upon Mount Ida (*Iliad* XIV) achieve fuller realization as the sly delight of both Homer and the goddess resonate nicely in some of Trissino's lines. In fact, as the Empress sets her tender trap and snares the Emperor, we may fairly sense a further range of Trissino's irony and wit, for casting Teodora in Hera's role allows him to suggest mixed feelings about the former. Procopius, his historical source, reserved such insinuations for his unofficial *Secret History*, which contains his less than reverential account of the regime he served and which attacks the Empress in
particular. Trissino may have followed his lead here in a fashion allowed by his chosen form, bringing Homeric myth tellingly to bear upon historical records and personal animosity.

Subtlety of this sort unfortunately does not last long, for Book III culminates in a crescendo of would-be suicides and erotic agons that could make a pagan blush. By turns, Sofia tries to take her own life, and Justin contemplates doing the same, as each hears of the other's ebbing heartbeat; they keep the palace doctor making rounds. With the extremes of these hysterics in mind, perhaps we can better appreciate the dimensions Tasso adds to similarly passionate melodramas in his poem and the ways he heightens and ennobles such emotions. Of course, we approach in the process some of the most questionable passages in his poem where the fullest effect of his abstract idealism makes itself felt, but this comparative context corresponds to that of the early Discorsi and places Tasso's efforts in relation to issues and authors very much on his mind during their composition.

Returning to Sofronia and Olinda's ordeal at the stake, which occasioned Clorinda's lecture on idolatry, we can see how Tasso employs martyrdom to sanctify erotic feeling. Though he risks thereby the strain of a stilted high-mindedness, he does make a place for the tensions and disclosures of secret passion while eschewing the morbid egotism that Trissino's momentarily star-crossed lovers descend to. As Judith Kates (101) has astutely claimed for the far more fully elaborated amours of Rinaldo and Armida, Tasso can actually enlist his Christian conscience as a cover and defense for indulging in the sensual sort of poetry that inspired his imagination. Rinaldo's coming confession and the subsequent reconstitution of his spiritual life literally buy him some time in Armida's garden, and they release the poet from the restrictions his scruples impose by means of a triumph in their very own terms. Obviously, Tasso's struggles with the various authorities that vied for interior dominion over his genius frequently cramped his style to crippling effect. However, he won some major victories far within what may sometimes seem enemy terrain.

NOTES

1. Baldassari provides the most recent and thorough discussion of the uncertain date of the early Discorsi.
2. Lanfranco Caretti, for example, sees this whole episode as an authentic and lofty expression of inspired idealism (Gerusalemme liberata, p. 41), whereas it has drawn adverse criticism from Galileo through B. T. Sozzi.
3. In his later revised and expanded Discorsi del poema eroico, Tasso asserts that he wrote the first version during a break from composing the opening books of the Liberata. See p. 62 in the Poma edition.
4. Note, for example, such terms as the following: triari, catafrati, decurie, schiniere (II II, pp. 28-29).
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