

# Torquato Tasso, *La Gierusalemme liberata*, 1590

Special Collections featured item for January 2005 by Tim Eggington, former Rare Books Librarian

**Tasso, Torquato, 1544-1595. *La Gierusalemme liberata di Torquato Tasso / con le figure di Bernado Castello ; e le annotationi di Scipio Gentili, e di Giulio Gustavini.* In Genova : [appresso Girolamo Bartoli], 1590.**

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First published in 1581, *Gierusalemme liberata* is one of the most celebrated literary works of the late Renaissance. Following the epic ancient tradition, it recounts the capture of Jerusalem by the crusaders in 1099. *Gierusalemme liberata* strongly influenced the writings of later authors such as Spenser and Milton, among many others. It also provided the subject for operas by composers such as Monteverdi (*Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, 1624), Handel (*Rinaldo*, 1711) and Rossini (*Armida*, 1817).

Published during Tasso's lifetime, this rare edition is particularly admired for its 20 full-page illustrations. These were engraved by Giacomo Franco and Agostini Carracci after designs by Bernardo Castelli. Bound in contemporary vellum, Reading's copy also includes various indications of its provenance. One of them reveals the book to have resided in 'Napoli Ottobre 1726'.



Born in Sorrento, Tasso is remembered principally for his two masterpieces, *Aminta* (1573) and *Gierusalemme liberata* (1581). For much of his career Tasso resided at the court of the Duke of Ferrara, seven years of which were spent in confinement for apparent insanity. Tasso was particularly troubled about the reception of his works and the fate of his manuscripts, over which he lost control while confined. Most of all he feared being charged with heresy by the Inquisition. In later years Tasso regained his composure, residing variously in Mantua, Naples, Florence and Rome where he died in 1595.

In conceiving *Gierusalemme liberata*, Tasso's objective was to create an epic poem equal to those of ancients such as Homer and Virgil. In the military clash between Christian and pagan forces, Tasso found a story reminiscent of such epics, albeit with a Christian subject as required by the prevailing Counter-Reformation ethos. Thus, whereas in Homer and Virgil the action is controlled by the squabbling gods, in *Gierusalemme liberata* it is controlled by God and the angels, opposed by Satan and his devils.



In addition to his historical theme, Tasso's opening lines proclaim his intention that this epic should also include a contrived theme of love so as to soften the 'bitter truth' of history with 'sweet drafts' of his own invention. Thus in *Gierusalemme liberata*, the Christian knight Rinaldo falls victim to the charms of the pagan Armida in her enchanted garden while the pagan warrior Clorinda inspires a fatal passion in the Christian hero Tancredi. The prime focus of the poem is however the military action and the conquest of Jerusalem although, as the sorcerer Ismen predicts, this achievement would prove temporary.

### Canto 3

The Christians' first glimpse of Jerusalem as they arrive before the walls of the holy city. The pagan king Aladine is accompanied at the walls by Princess Erminia the fair. Erminia is torn between a concealed passion for the Christian hero Tancredi and her loyalty to the Islamic cause. In the thick of the battle the female pagan warrior Clorinda may be seen approaching to do battle with Tancredi. Owing however to his infatuation with Clorinda, Tancredi proposes single combat with her so that she may slay him. But she is wounded by another man and flees.



### Canto 4

Satan gathers his devils from the Abyss in order to thwart the Crusade. A witch Armida is sent to the Christian camp to seduce the crusaders through her devious and magical ways. 'Proud of her beauty, and of the gifts of her sex and her youth,' she asks Godfrey the leader of the crusaders for aid. The whole camp of crusaders fall in love with her.

### Canto 9

The spirit Alecto urges the pagan leader Solyman to make a surprise night attack on the Christian camp in violation of the chivalric code. The archangel Michael is sent by God to inform the many devils present that they are forbidden to intervene any further.



### Canto 16

Two crusaders are despatched to retrieve their comrade, the hero Rinaldo, who has temporarily fallen victim to the charms of the witch Armida in her enchanted garden. Finally, the two lovers are discovered together at the centre of Armida's maze. Rinaldo's warlike spirit is reawakened after seeing himself in a mirror and realising what he has become. He returns to the Christian cause leaving the abandoned Armida vowing to torment him.

## Canto 19

Crusaders pour into Jerusalem for the final assault. The pagan princess Erminia finds Tancredi lying unconscious near the body of the pagan hero Argante whom he has vanquished. Erminia revives Tancredi, and tends his wounds, drying them with her hair.



Although *Gierusalemme liberata* was quickly acknowledged to be an epic masterpiece, Tasso was not happy with the work. In his later years he substantially rewrote it, publishing his revision under the title *Gierusalemme conquistata*. Constrained by stylistic and moral considerations, this was widely perceived to be a disappointment and was quickly discarded in favour of *Gierusalemme liberata*. The latter achieved more widespread acclaim due to its successful translation into a number of other languages during the final years of the 16th century. The English translation by Edward Fairfax, published in 1600, is still widely admired and read today.

## References

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