The Allegory, and the Deviations from It: Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*

WEI-MIN SUN*
Department of Applied Foreign Language, Far East University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

In *Jerusalem Delivered*, Tasso describes the siege and liberation of Jerusalem by the first crusaders in 1099. By 1575 the epic is almost finished and in 1581 a version of it appears, yet during his life Tasso never acknowledged the finality of any publication of this poem. The main reason is that, contrary to Tasso's desire for moral or religious coherence, there are the strains of eroticism and the celebration of the pagan mind in *Jerusalem Delivered*. Tasso seems much disturbed by such a fact. He adds to his poem an allegorical explanation; he even rewrites his epic. In this study, I try to read *Jerusalem Delivered* in both ways, regarding it first as a work of allegorical coherence and moral intention and, secondly, as a work of divergence from and transgression of such coherence and intention.

Key words: epic, romance, Christian, pagan, Renaissance.

Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* is a mixture of war and love, or of piety and eroticism, and sometimes the parts of love and eroticism seem even more appealing than those of war and piety. The reader of *Jerusalem Delivered* may often recall clearly the amorous episodes of Olindo and Sophronia, Tancred and Clorinda, Rinaldo and Armida, Tancred and Erminia, and Edward and Gildippe, though how the besieged city is eventually recovered by the Christian army may be remembered only vaguely. Tasso himself seems to be aware of such a divergence from the high seriousness and decorum of the epic subject, asking pardon even in the opening invocation: "and if I have sewn/ embroideries of the truth in any place, / I ask forgiveness for their lesser grace" (Tasso, 2000a, p. 17). In 1587, after being released from the hospital of Saint Anna, Tasso begins to rewrite his epic, laboring to strengthen its Christian orthodoxy. In 1593, he publishes the rewritten poem under the title *Jerusalem Conquered*, which, nevertheless, proves to be a discreet failure.

Tasso's consciousness of his swerve or deviation in *Jerusalem Delivered* is also evident when he adds an allegorical explanation to the epic. According to this "Allegory of the Poem" of Tasso's, the entire design of *Jerusalem Delivered* is quite Neoplatonic, based largely on Plato's concept of the three parts of the human soul. In such an allegorical scheme, most of the important characters, actions and setting in the epic are endowed with symbolic meanings.

However, we should not consider Tasso's allegorical interpretation the only approach to *Jerusalem Delivered*, though it can shed some light. In *Jerusalem Delivered*, there seems to be a constant tension or struggle between the sensuous element and religious piety, or, in Lewis's words, "the conflict between sensuality and valor" (Lewis, 1966, p. 117). Whitfield even suggests that the former outdoes the latter:

* E-mail: phaeacia@gmail.com

> Love and glory are to be the twin staples of the *Gerusalemme*; but in spite of the earnestness with which Tasso pursues the second it is the first which commands his natural allegiance, and to which his poem gravitates. (Whitfield, 1960, p.140)

In his "Allegory of the Poem," Tasso first makes it clear that "the soul in turn is not simple, but in itself contains many distinct faculties and powers" (Tasso, 2000b, p. 416). In Tasso's understanding, there are basically three different faculties or powers related to the human soul. Godfrey "stands in the place of the intellect, in particular that intellect that judges not the necessary but the mutable" (Tasso, 2000b, p. 416), and "the intellect is from God" (Tasso, 2000b, p. 416). Later, in his article, Tasso identifies the "intellect" with the "rational faculty" (Tasso, 2000b, p. 416). Rinaldo, on the other hand, stands for the second faculty of the soul, that is, the "irascible faculty," the power that departs the least from the intellect:

> [J]ust as it is the soldier's duty to obey his captain…, so it is the duty of the irascible part of the soul, warlike and robust, to arm itself with reason against the desires, with the vehemence and ferocity it needs to beat back and put to flight whatever might hinder the attainment of happiness. But when it does not obey reason, allowing itself to be carried away by its own force, it can happen that it does not fight the desires at all but joins their side….This impetuous, vehement, indomitable virtue, though it could never be figured forth in a single knight, is nonetheless principally signified by Rinaldo…. (Tasso, 2000b, p. 418)

Besides the rational faculty and the irascible faculty, Tasso also mentions the third faculty, that is, the "concupiscible faculty" (Tasso, 2000b, p. 416). Though less explicitly, Tasso seems to assign this last faculty to Tancred and the other warriors who "behave like fools" (Tasso, 2000b, p. 416) in the arena of love.

Obviously, Tasso's idea of the human soul originates from Plato's philosophy. In Book 4 of the *Republic*, for instance, Plato maintains that the individual soul is composed of three parts, namely, reason, will (spirit), and sensation (appetite, desire). The soul which is harmonious and healthy means the one ruled by reason, the highest principle. When reason fails to be the ruler, the soul is then in a disordered condition. Such a concept is more fully discussed later in the *Phaedrus*, in which the three parts of the human soul are portrayed as a charioteer and a pair or winged horses. The horse on the right side is a "lover of honor with modesty and self-control" as well as a "companion to true glory," while the other horse is not only ugly in appearance but subject to "wild boasts and indecency:"

> [T]he one who is obedient to the charioteer is still controlled, then as always, by its sense of shame, and so prevents itself from jumping on the boy. The other one, however, no longer responds to the whip or the goad of the charioteer; it leaps violently forward

> and does everything to aggravate its yokemate and its charioteer, trying to make them go up to the boy and suggest to him the pleasures of sex.[1] (Plato, 1997, p. 531)

In Plato's allegory, the charioteer is undoubtedly reason personified and the two horses represent, respectively, the spirited part and the appetitive part of the individual soul. The horse "on the right side" reminds us of Rinaldo in Tasso's epic, the "right arm" (Tasso, 2000b, p. 419) of Godfrey. In other words, when placed in the Platonic allegory, Godfrey serves as the charioteer and Rinaldo, the nobler horse. The horse subject to the "pleasures of sex," by contrast, is reminiscent of the Christian warriors led astray by the female charm of Armida.

Such parallels are made explicit in the article of Tasso though he mentions nothing specific of Plato's allegory of the chariot. For a closer comparison, part of Tasso's explanation of the interaction between Godfrey and Rinaldo is quoted here:

> In his duel with Gernando, trespassing beyond the bounds of civilly sanctioned vengeance, and in his servitude to Armida, Rinaldo may denote anger ungoverned by Reason; but when he disenchants the woods and storms the city, breaking the enemy host, he may denote Anger directed by Reason. Thus Rinaldo's return and his reconciliation with Godfrey signify but the obedience that the irascible must render to the rational. In these reconciliations two things are to be noted. First, Godfrey, with a civil moderation, shows himself to be Rinaldo's superior… Second, just as the rational must not exclude the irascible from action, so should it never usurp the duties of the irascible, as such usurpation would violate natural justice. Instead it should make the rascible its companion and minister. (Tasso, 2000b, pp.418-419)

Thus, Rinaldo's early desertion from the Christian camp and his final return from the Fortunate Isles of Armida find their allegorical grounds. We also realize why Godfrey, though the official hero of the poem, is comparatively uninteresting and unrecognizable, suffering from a "reputation of pious tedium" (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p. 176). Godfrey is the charioteer of reason, and the virtues such a character should be equipped with are wisdom, piety and valor rather than passion, anger or pride, which Rinaldo and other warriors are often famous for.

In Canto 1 of *Jerusalem Delivered*, Tasso describes the character of Godfrey briefly, immediately followed by his descriptions of some other warriors in the Christian host. The distinction between Godfrey and his warriors here is somewhat authoritative in that Tasso depicts these figures as they are seen in the eyes of God:

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[1] The detailed delineation of the two horses in the Phaedrus is as follows: The horse that is on the right, or nobler, side is upright in frame and well jointed, with a high neck and a regal nose; his coat is white, his eyes are black, and he is a lover of honor with modesty and self-control; companion to true glory, he needs no whip, and is guided by verbal commands alone. The other horse is a crooked great jumble of limbs with a short bull-neck, a pug nose, black skin, and bloodshot white eyes; companion to wild boasts and indecency, he is shaggy around the ears—deaf as a post—and just barely yields to horsewhip and goad combined. (Plato, 1997, p. 531)

He viewed all creatures…,
saw Godfrey ardent for one aim, to rout
the heathen from the land of the Most High;
faithful, zealous, he holds all earthly gain
of power and glory and riches in disdain.
(Tasso, 2000a, p. 18)

Godfrey is obviously the spiritual head of the Christian army. Other Christian warriors, on the other hand, are less valued. Baldwin, for instance, is ‘‘restless and intent/ on all the grandeur to which men aspire,’’ and Tancred is ‘‘careless of his life or death,/ crushed in the grip of amorous desire’’ (Tasso, 2000a, p. 18). Even Bohemond, the conqueror of Antioch, is given little credit in Tasso’s poem.

That in *Jerusalem Delivered* Godfrey is spiritually superior to his warriors is further demonstrated later when Armida arrives at the Christian camp to ‘‘ply every art of feminine allure’’ (Tasso, 2000a, p. 77). Most of the Christian warriors are ensnared by her ‘‘peerless form, / …the charm of her youth and womanhood’’ (Tasso, 2000a, p. 77), and many of them follow her to her castle just to be imprisoned in a cave ‘‘where there shone no trace of light’’ (Tasso, 2000a, p. 210). It seems that Godfrey and Tancred are the only two not lured and captured by Armida’s beauty and deceiving art, and yet, in the case of Tancred, Armida is in fact not a true failure. Pursuing Erminia, who is in Clorinda’s armor, Tancred chances to come to Armida’s fortress after losing his way. He is also held prisoner in her castle, just as Rinaldo is to be abducted soon in her Fortunate Isles. Strictly speaking, therefore, only Godfrey, the ‘‘intellect’’ (Tasso, 2000a, p. 217) of the Christian host, has never been conquered by Armida:

No obstacle could turn his holy thoughts
from the sure path which God had marked out for him;
She tried a thousand shapes, a thousand arts,
appearing like a Proteus before him,
and his cold sleeping love would have been roused
by the sweet acts and the sweet looks she bore him,
but heavenly grace made all her ventures vain,
nor would it profit her to try again.
(Tasso, 2000a, p. 104)

Godfrey is the Christian leader against not only the pagan army but also the disruption, caused by Armida particularly, inside his own camp. In Quint’s words, ‘‘Godfrey finds himself fighting on two fronts. Before he can conquer the Muslim defenders of Jerusalem, he must restore unity in his own ranks….The epic thus depicts a double crusade: against the infidel outside the Church, against disunity and potential heresy within’’ (Quint, 1993, p. 215). Godfrey is the center that draws the Christians together, reflecting ‘‘Tasso’s own profound desire for moral coherence and moral action’’ (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p. 176), just as the besieged city is the narrative center, to which ‘‘as to their goal all the actions of the political man are directed’’ (Tasso, 2000b, p. 416).

Nevertheless, Godfrey and his Christian enterprise of recovering the holy city do not seem enough for Tasso to write his epic. Owing to some possible reasons which I will discuss later, Tasso requires something else besides mere piety and war, and hence the various romances and the strains of sensuousness in his poem. The result, as Wilkins points out, is a work "concerned equally with knightly prowess and with love; feminine valor is afield; episodes flourish; enchantments abound; beauty pervades; and classical elements, in action, in phrase, in simile, are plentiful….Its dominant dignity is relieved by certain gentler qualities… " (Wilkins, 1974, pp. 276-277). That is, Tasso's proclamation that the besieged city is his epic center remains a mere proclamation. His patent ideological desire to show one aim, one moral or one religion is actually at odds with his treatment of the subject.

Often, the "gentler qualities" in *Jerusalem Delivered* seem more like the deviations or swerves from the allegorical unity and the moral intention originally planned. When Armida appears for the first time, for instance, Tasso employs quite a few lines in depicting her charms. He even dedicates more than one stanza to the description, as well as the imagination, of Armida's breasts:

> Her shapely breasts showed the uncovered snow
> that stirs and nourishes the fire of love.
> They looked, in part, like fruit not fully ripe,
> part sheltered by her gown that lay above,
> envious—yet if it shuts the pass for sight,
> imagination, you have room to rove,
> for not content with outward beauty, deep
> among the hidden secrets would you keep.
>
> As when through water or a crystal stone
> the rays of sunshine do not separate,
> so now, through the drawn mantle, into lands
> forbidden, the mind dares to penetrate,
> and there it walks at ease, and one by one
> scouts out those wondrous sights to contemplate,
> then relays their description to Desire,
> fanning the flames within him all the higher.
> (Tasso, 2000a, p. 78)

Lines such as these may seem quite unappealing to us, yet we should not forget that *Jerusalem Delivered* is completed in 1575 and is intended for the Renaissance reader, whose response must be different from ours. Two facts concerning the publication of *Jerusalem Delivered* may illustrate the differences between the literary atmosphere in the Renaissance and that in our time.

The first is that, when published in 1581, *Jerusalem Delivered* is at once accepted and enjoyed by the general reader. "Thereafter editions multiplied swiftly" (Wilkins, 1974, p. 279), and many of them are pirated editions. The epic is quickly known, too, in countries outside Italy. In England, for instance, a complete translation by Edward Fairfax appears in 1600.

The second fact may appear even more significant. *Jerusalem Delivered* is

completed in 1575 but is not published until 1581. The postponement of its publication results mainly from Tasso's awareness of the ''indecorous'' elements in the poem and, accordingly, from his fear of the censure of the Inquisition. He gives the poem to some of his friends first for private criticism, but the comments he receives are mostly discouraging. According to Wilkins, his friends ''condemned the abundance of episodes and enchantments, and what they regarded as an excessive interest in love affairs'' (Wilkins, 1974, pp. 277-278). Here we find an obvious discrepancy between the taste of the general public and that of certain readers who are chiefly the supporters of Ariosto. Also, Tasso's poem offends some powerful men such as Leonardo Salviati, who insists upon the purity of the Tuscan tongue. Finally, Tasso submits himself to such hostile criticism and decides to rewrite his epic. Such a distress, with others, troubles his mind. From 1579 to 1586, he has been confined for mental illness in the hospital of Saint Anna.

These facts show that the sensuous elements or the erotic undertones in *Jerusalem Delivered* are actually felt by Tasso's audience, and that they are more clearly and strongly felt in the Renaissance than they are today. We should be often be reminded of such distinction as we try to define the eroticism or sensuousness in Tasso's work.

The stanzas describing the ''amorous delights'' (Tasso, 2000a, p. 303) or the ''morbid pleasures'' (Tasso, 2000a, p. 305) in Armida's garden should be read in this same manner, too. In the lines quoted below, however, readers of all times may agree that there are the unmistakable implications of the sex act:

> Loose at the breast she wore her slender veil
> and left her hair a-scatter in the heat.
> She lay in languor, as her usual play,
> her blush enlivening clear pearls of sweat;
> on her moist eyes played laughter like a ray
> of light on the trembling sea. Over the knight
> she hung; in her soft lap he lay his head,
> raising his hungry eyes to hers, to feed
>
> greedily on her charms, and as he fed
> his sight, he was himself consumed, undone.
> She leant, and sipped sweet kisses from his eye
> and sucked them from his lips….
> (Tasso, 2000a, p. 303)

Tasso's being drawn away from the religious theme and the military action is also evident in the comparatively larger space he allows for the amorous motifs. In the last canto of the poem, for instance, the scene of the reconciliation between Armida and Rinaldo occupies much more space than the scene of Godfrey and his men adoring the Holy Sepulcher. A brief comparison of the two scenes makes it clear that, as Whitfield announces, ''the steep and craggy hill of virtue is less prominent than it ought to be, and Tasso expatiates where he is launched on to this softer side of Love…'' (Whitfield, 1960, p. 142):

and Armida turned and looked on him in surprise
she had not heard him coming. Suddenly
she raised a cry and turned her scornful eyes
from the face she so loved…and fainted. She
fell, like a half-cut flower, whose soft neck bows—
but he was her support. With one arm he
made a pillar for her lovely side to rest,
and gently pulled her gown over her breast.

And bathed the poor girl's lovely breast and face
with a few pitying tears, a gentle rain;
as when the morning fall of silver dew
brings beauty to the fading rose again,
so she came to herself and raised her head
dewed with another's tears. She tried in vain
to turn away—three times she looked above,
three times she dropped her glance from her dear love.
(Tasso, 2000a, p. 410)

The final canto seems to leave Tasso's audience with the possibility of the future union between Rinaldo and the reconstructed Armida. By contrast, the epic ends rather hastily with the victorious Christian chiefs compressed into one concluding stanza:

So Godfrey has attained the victory;
and leads, in the last light glowing in the west,
the victors into the city now set free
and to the place where Christ was laid to rest.
To the temple with the other chiefs goes he,
nor does he set aside his blood-stained vest.
He hangs his arms here; with devoted brow
adores the great tomb, and fulfills his vow.
(Tasso, 2000a, p. 413)

Simply put, at the end of Tasso's poem, there is more of a romance interest than of an epic one.

In *Jerusalem Delivered*, Tasso strays not only into the softer side of Love but also into, with compassion, the pagan world. As Kirkpatrick suggests, *Jerusalem Delivered* "displays a great interest in the ritual and magical ceremonies practiced by the pagan forces" (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p. 176). More importantly, Tasso seems to discover virtue and dignity in the pagans and is therefore sympathetic with the pagan mind. The valor of Argante, for instance, is exhibited more than once. In Canto 12, Argante insists upon accompanying Clorinda to burn down the Christian tower at night, saying, "No, no, we've fought as comrades, you and I!/ Let me win glory with you then, or die" (Tasso, 2000a, p. 232). Learning that Clorinda is killed by Tancred, Argante shows his deep sadness and vows to avenge the warrioress:

"Here, Jerusalem, hear Argante's vow!
Hear me, you heavens—let this be satisfied
or strike my head with lightning—I swear now
vengeance upon the Christian homicide,
and let him look for death from me, for hers,
nor will I drop my weapon from my side
until it pierces Tancred's filthy heart
and leaves his corpse for crows to peck apart."
(Tasso, 2000a, p. 251)

Later, in Canto 19, we find that Argante has not forgotten his vow, though he fails to kill Tancred in the end. Argante remains a valorous warrior when most of the pagan soldiers have abandoned the holy city. Tasso's sympathy with Argante is more clearly shown after Tancred slays this pagan warrior and requests a "decent burial, and praises too" (Tasso, 2000a, p. 381), for him. To Tancred, Argante is a worthy opponent "brave to the last" and "we should grant him honor" (Tasso, 2000a, p. 381).

The prowess and dignity of Argante are explicitly demonstrated, and we seem able to find in this character a heart of tenderness and passion too. Argante's lament for Clorinda's death may be a revelation of his love for the warrioress, which is implicitly confirmed by Tasso's deliberate arrangement that he is to be killed by Tancred, who is also in love with Clorinda. The battle between Argante and Tancred is in a sense the struggle between two men pursuing the same woman. In other words, like his Christian enemy, Argante is capable of loving. Moreover, after Clorinda is dead, some of Argante's words of lamentation are so reminiscent of those of Tancred:

"If I had gone I might have brought her home
from danger…or I might have shut my eyes
in a memorable death, to meet my end
on the same earth she reddens as she dies…."
(Tasso, 2000a, p. 251)

"and if some beast has gorged his fierce desire
on those sweet members, may I too be slain,
swallowed by the same mouth, shut in the same body,
shut in with you!…"
(Tasso, 2000a, p. 246)

Tasso's sympathy for the pagan side is also shown when he portrays the situations in the two opposite camps. Sometimes, Tasso's description of the predicament in one camp is immediately followed by his delineation of what happens in the other camp. The two sides are represented almost in juxtaposition, and the similarities, rather than the differences, between them are emphasized. In such representation there seems to be an effort to consider the Christians and the pagans justly. Tasso seems to claim that both should be treated with an unbiased mind. In the opening stanza of Canto 12, for instance, we find that the pagans are as

alert, busy and vulnerable as the Christians:

> Night—but no restoring ease of sleep
> gave the hosts rest from all their laboring,
> for here the French maintain strict guard and keep
> watch, with the tower's repairs continuing,
> and there the pagans shore their crumbling wall
> around the town, restoring, bolstering
> the cracks and gaps the battle had opened wide.
> And the wounded were a care for either side.
> (Tasso, 2000a, p. 231)

So far we have seen some of Tasso's divergences or swerves from the serious allegory he writes and adds to his poem. There may be some reasons for such divergences or swerves. Firstly, the main origin of *Jerusalem Delivered* is *Rinaldo*, a romance of cavalier adventures, composed when Tasso is in his teens (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p. 161). Viewed from this perspective, the Christian motif of recovering the holy city is perhaps not the first or ruling cause of *Jerusalem Delivered*. The second possible reason may be much related to the first one: the temperament of the young Tasso may not have changed too much even when he reaches manhood. As Lewis observes, the temperament of the mature Tasso seems one of naivety and simplicity when compared with those of other poets. "I mean that quite unforced and quite sincere elevation of sentiment which makes us feel that Tasso is, in a very serious and even reverent sense of the word, the most boyish of the poets" (Lewis, 1966, p. 120). Thirdly, Tasso's treatment of the fabulous or romance qualities in his epic may correspond with his literary theory that poetry achieves its purpose of moral instruction through pleasure.[2] Such a theory, though nothing new, is discussed in his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*:

> I say that the heroic poem is an imitation of an action noble, great, and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the aim of giving profit through delight, so that the delight may get us to read more willingly and thus not lose the profit." (Tasso, 1973, p. 14)

Lastly, Tasso's seeming deviations from the Christian enterprise into eroticism and the pagan world in *Jerusalem Delivered* may be a faithful reflection of the Renaissance attitude in general. Though born with the same religious instincts as the Europeans in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance Italian is aware of what is going on in natural philosophy and science. The discovery of the inner and outer universe renders him the man-centered viewpoint. Life is no longer a journey through sheer hardship to a better world after death, but rather an exciting end-in-itself. Such worldliness prevents the Renaissance Italian from paying too much attention to salvation. As Burckhardt asserts, "the ambitions and the

[2] Whether the fabulous or romance quality in Jerusalem Delivered is too much is debatable. Tasso himself seems uncertain of it, and hence the rewriting of the epic. Montgomery also maintains that, "Though he [Tasso] is certain that the aim of poetry is moral betterment, he is undecided how central pleasure is" (Montgomery, 1979, p. 148).

intellectual activity of the present either shut out altogether every thought of a world to come, or else caused it to assume a poetic instead of a dogmatic form" (Burckhardt, 1960, p. 304). In addition, during the Renaissance, there are the frequent relations of Italy with Byzantium and the Mohammedan peoples, which must have acquainted the Italians with cultures initially strange to them. As the relationship between two different peoples is concerned, close contact is perhaps the best way to produce understanding and sympathy, which, among others, explains Tasso's humanistic attitude toward the pagan world in his poem.

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Sun Wei-min was born in Chiayi in 1959. He received a B.A. in Western languages and literature from National Chengchi University and an M.A. in English from Fu Jen Catholic University. Currently he is a doctoral candidate in foreign languages and literature at National Cheng-kung University and a lecturer at Far East University of Technology.