

HEROIC WOMEN IN TASSO'S *DISCORSO SOPRA LA VIRTÙ FEMINILE E DONNESCA* AND *LA GERUSALEMME LIBERATA*

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*Abstract: Female heroic protagonism had been infrequent in the Western literary tradition for in addition to being expected to fulfill predominantly domestically-oriented roles as a path to moral credit, no intromission into masculine affairs was ever laudatory to women. Where heroic visibility of literary women did happen in pre-modern culture, this was associated with sexual immodesty. An enduring misogynistic trait of much medieval moral and didactic literature had been to claim sexual misconduct especially for socially high-ranking women. During the Renaissance the new pro-feminist discourse seemingly altered this literary moral landscape; it broadened the scope and means of female protagonism in literary texts which meant literary women got to perform more actions in a text without incurring blame, including at the level of subtext. Yet although much perfect equality between men and women has been claimed for this era by subsequent critics, upon closer analysis such generational opening negotiates literary notions of femininity and heroism in much the same way as the previous literature had done in the not so distant medieval past. Tasso's constructions of heroic femininity are cemented on ancient notions of female inferiority and incompatibility with male-specific superiority. This paper shows the notions against which Tasso organizes female heroic protagonism in two of his works, *Discorso sopra la virtù femminile e donnesca* and *La Gerusalemme liberata*, seeking to determine his readiness to grant heroic existence to his female characters.*

Keywords: heroic women, heroic virtues, class-based moral system, early modern literature, literary constructions of femininity

Two of Tasso's works stand iconic for his engagement with female heroism: while the *Gerusalemme liberata* (1575) deploys female heroic protagonism on a grand fictional scale, the more programmatic *Discorso sopra la virtù femminile e donnesca* (1583) articulates age-old, but infrequently-stated-with-clarity class-based moral distinctions between simple, domestically-oriented women (*femmina*) and aristocratic women (*donna*). A key to decoding much of pre-modern / early modern literature, the tract exhibits unexpected antifeminist undertones when it comes to heroic women. But first come royalties. Of royal women, like the heroic ones whom they resemble, we find out they do not belong to the city proper; their virtue is not civic and ought not to be judged according to civic opportunities or the demands of civic offices. To a still lesser extent ought these strong women to be judged according to the demands of household management since this does not pertain to heroic and royal women's tasks. While a housewife's purpose is practical utility and the virtue necessary to her, thriftiness, royal women's *raison d'être* is refined behaviour, and the virtues necessary to them, gracefulness and delicacy. Royal women are very much unlike ordinary ones not in light of their splendor alone, but through splendor coupled to gracefulness and delicacy; this

is especially so as concerns their fabrics weaved of silk and gold, as well as their personal grooming style or that in which they decorate their rooms. Heroic women, even more rare than the royal ones from whose ranks they issue, do not have monarchic leadership roles, transcending at that all other women's condition; their sole pleasure lies in acting prudently and with strength. Their virtue is perfect rather than imperfect.

As he introduces the distinction between ordinary women on the one hand, and royal and heroic women on the other, Tasso diversifies his appreciation of feminine virtues; from this point on he contours categories based on caste. The way in which women are held to be virtuous depends therefore on how low or how high they rank in the social hierarchy. This approach is not new: in the Middle Ages too authors of didactic works and even masters of chivalric literature paid special attention to such distinctions both while developing their characters and in moralizing sentences. With these authors, along with the absolute obligation to display categories of luxury in their apparel as signifier of social status, women of the higher nobility are seen as having different responsibilities, dictated by rank; as such, aside from the moral virtues typical of humble women, the former have to also display prudence, courtesy and generosity. Their morality, however, does not stray from the rigours prescribed for less fortunately ranking women: obedience, chastity, modesty, moderation, administrative know-how, these are all present and are more prominent still. This is one reason why the guide to womanly behaviour contained in the *Treasure of the City of Ladies* (1405) can simultaneously address women of every social standing despite single chapters being dedicated to separate social categories. At the end of twenty-six chapters which detail the practical and moral behaviour of high princesses, as well as thirteen others examining the ideal moral profile of noble females inferior in rank to dynastic women either placed in the entourage of the court or living in religious orders, Christine de Pizan prefaces her contouring of the moral profiles of the rest of the womanly social hierarchy (namely wives of merchants, wives of artisans, servants and women in waiting, prostitutes, wives of peasants, poor women) by claiming that "as we have already mentioned several times before, we intend everything that we laid down for other ladies and young women concerning both virtues and the management of one's life to apply to every woman of whatever class she may be. It is said as much for one woman as for another, so each one can take whatever part that she sees pertains to her."¹ Christine's invitation is real and possible for although dynastic women's practical, ethical and moral practices are more diversified than those of women holding a social standing inferior to theirs, there is nothing really compromising to morality and modesty in her recommendations to princesses.

Appearing to be echoing certain structural aspects specific to the feudal hierarchic system, the classification Tasso draws of women and virtues in his *Discorso* takes at this point another unexpected turn. Just as thriftiness does not pertain to royal and heroic women's role, in the same way womanly modesty and chastity are not virtues suitable to them either; such traits characterize only those women who lack access to other, more noble, that is, aristocratic virtues. In point of chastity and licentiousness, women belonging to this social class are equal in rights to men. Therefore, the virtue according to which heroic women are either praised or censured is heroic virtue: not chastity, but strength and prudence. Between heroic men and

¹ Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 127.

them there is no difference in point of actions and responsibilities save for women's duty to procreate so as to advance the species, a duty, Tasso explains, heroic women at any rate neglect or downright abandon.² Heroic women in Tasso's *Discorso* are, therefore, exempt not only from certain practical virtues, but from the obligation, feminine by definition, to morality and modesty in the way these notions come to be perceived in the author's particular historical period. Despite such an aperture to masculine attributes, Tasso does not liberalize women's behaviour as might however erroneously appear upon first analysis; what he does, instead, is to reinstate in the perception of the Italian cultural and literal élite the medieval misogynistic association between the figure of heroic dynastic women and a propensity toward sexual immodesty. Although several centuries apart, we are standing in front of the same rhetorical stance encountered in Boccaccio's Semiramis or in Dante's sexually incontinent women from Canto V of the *Inferno*: Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra or Helen of Troy. As Virginia Cox³ points out, the merit of this newly recuperated association nearly lost to the last two centuries may not be credited entirely to Tasso, yet his discourse on women's virtues clearly indicates a generational reopening toward scholastic misogyny.

Paradoxically, when it comes to the *Gerusalemme liberata*, Tasso's constructions of heroic femaleness seem sooner to align to the pro-feminist discourse characteristic, in Italy, of the first half of the 16th century rather than to any misogynistic inheritance from the past. Granting heroic virtues to literary women is one aspect of the Western literary tradition consistently posing difficulties to pre-modern and early modern writers who create constructions of femininity. Of all the virtues reserved by this tradition to men, the heroic ones are universally perceived to be the least feminine and unwomanly. As is the case with Dante and Boccaccio's renderings of iconic female figures such as Semiramis, Dido and Cleopatra, in the Western literary tradition heroic women are notoriously sexually immodest. In her *Women's Writing in Italy 1400-1650* Virginia Cox shows⁴ how this hostile projection toward heroic female characters makes a comeback in Muzio Manfredi's tragedy *Semiramis* (1593) and, to a certain extent, even in Tasso's *Discorso sopra la virtù femminile e donnesca* (1583). Yet at a superficial reading the uncensored version of the *Liberata* (1581) appears not to embrace such trends or Tasso, at least, seems to be creating heroic female characters standing in clear contrast to his allegations in the *Discorso*: in his poem, he builds two heroic female characters where, surprisingly, sexuality remains marginal. With Tasso, however, much more interesting than any potential association of heroic femaleness with sexual immodesty is the way in which heroic virtues factor into his descriptions of women. In looking, as follows, at his Clorinda, Erminia and Sophronia, I am trying to determine whether Tasso, as other authors of his age begrudges heroic existence or potentiality to his (heroic) female characters.

The heroic woman Clorinda not only borrows so-called virile moral traits and practical competencies from the masculine, she also defines herself through actually belonging to the

² Torquato Tasso, *Discorso sopra la virtù femminile [sic] e donnesca* in Julie D. Campbell & Maria Galli Stampino, *In Dialogue with the Other Voice in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Literary and Social Contexts for Women's Writing. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series*, 11. Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto, 2011, pp. 135-8.

³ For a more contextualized discussion, see Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy 1400-1650*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008, pp. 166-195.

⁴ Virginia Cox, *Op. cit.*, pp. 166-8.

male gender by way of typically masculine tendencies manifest in her early youth. Tasso presents the change she undergoes in terms that lay feminine and masculine in clear opposition, thereby highlighting the ferociousness of which heroic women are capable. Clorinda, we find out, abandons her feminine habits and virtues at an early age, dedicating herself to activities outside the home; as a young girl, she disdains womanly ways and talents: she does not dirty her hands with “Arachne’s work”, the needle and spinning wheel; she rejects soft clothes (*abiti molli*) and enclosed spaces (the walls of the house discussed by Tasso in the *Discorso*), but instead hungers for honour on the battlefield. She likes to cultivate a proud visage on which she prefers to display toughness, a trait that will, however, not detract from her beauty. In her childhood Clorinda learns how to ride on horseback, she can handle spear and sword, and strengthens her body in training rooms where she grows accustomed to running; she hunts lions and bears in mountains and forests so that to men Clorinda seems a beast while to the beasts she seems a man⁵. It is hard, nevertheless, to see in Clorinda a hybridized gender between the male and the female, despite Tasso’s justification of heroic female exceptionality as juvenile conversion to the masculine. Rather, as a warrior, Clorinda embodies a type of feminine existence exempt from female vices and virtues and consequently fallen under the auspices of the latter’s masculine counterparts.

Although in his *Discorso* Tasso mentions heroic women’s royal origin, those are unlike the royal women Erminia and Armida or the Christian queen of Ethiopia. Perception seems here to favour heroic women, situated, as Tasso will later evince in the *Discorso*, outside civil society, thus above any other female condition. What sets Clorinda and Gildippe apart from the womanly crowd is not the licence to immodesty granted in the *Discorso*, but the freedom to exist physically outside the immediate limitations imposed to other categories of women. Erminia, for instance, confesses she envies Clorinda not her feminine honour of being beautiful, but her freedom not to trip at every step upon the train of her dress as well as the fact that her human potential is not confined within the walls of a jealous room. Clorinda can don arms and, should she wish to get out of the house, neither fear nor modesty holds her way: “Oh how that mightiest of maids is blest! How I envy her lot”⁶, Erminia despondently remarks as she does not know how to get out of the palace in the dead of the night, to reach outside of the fortress’s walls and into Tancred’s camp. Why, the girl asks herself, did heaven and nature not give her also a body and a soul as strong as Clorinda’s, so she too can replace her gown and veil with helmet and armour?⁷ Despite native royalty and perhaps due to her condition as human war booty, Erminia appears momentarily contaminated by the injunction to seclusion given to the women of the city, cited by Tasso from Thucydides in the *Discorso*. As far as heroic virtues are concerned, she falls even lower than Sophronia, the virtuous maid (in neo-Aristotelian terms) of the city. Out of traditional female (misogynistic) modesty Sophronia lives a life of self-isolation within the walls of her house, but gets out alone into the public space in order to appear in front of the king so she can accuse herself of simony and setting fire to the blessed icon. Her gesture is contaminated by the masculine virtue of courage from which laxness of lifestyle prevents Erminia to adhere. Tasso perfectly anticipates here

⁵ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XXXIX-XL.

⁶ *Gerusalemme liberata* 6.LXXXII: I hereby quote from Max Wickert’s translation: Torquato Tasso, *The Liberation of Jerusalem*, Oxford, 2009.

⁷ *Gerusalemme liberata* 6.LXXXIII-LXXXV.

the moral theories embroidered in the *Discorso*: according to these, heroic women, albeit derived from royal women, are rare by way of their exceptionality; the softness of the imperfect female body (to which Tasso makes reference several times in the poem) associated to aristocratic lifestyle are reasons which remove heroic potentiality even from the women most tailored for it, royal ones. Although Clorinda's virtuous heroism spares Tasso from the suspicion of denying women the capacity to excel in the military field, through Erminia, who is perpetually unsuccessful at styling herself into a female warrior, a feeling creeps into the poem that one critic's claim that Renaissance men have the hardest time when they must give women full credit for heroic virtues is true.

Hints as to the mismatch between women's nature and the vocation of arms is also obvious in a moment which, I might say, celebrates sonorously heroic virtues of the kind reserved to modest women, courage. Stripped of the chaste veil in which she had been bracing herself as in a cloak of modesty, tied with ropes that press against her soft arms, Sophronia taken to the stake does not lose heart despite being visibly moved, and the colour in her cheeks is not paleness, we are told, but innocence⁸. Olindo who is in love with the girl tries, however, to save her by adducing an excuse for what he calls 'an action beyond womanly physical and intellectual capabilities'. While in front of King Aladin, he calls upon Aristotelian notions pleasing to scholasticism in the past: according to these, intellectual virtues, courage and physical strength are masculine virtues which contravene to woman's weak nature: *Non pensò, non ardì, né far potea / donna sola e inesperta opra cotanta. / Come ingannò i custodi? e de la Dea / con qual arti involò l'imagin santa?*⁹ ("She did not plan, she did not dare, nor could she do / a feat like that (*opra cotanta*), alone, a woman, and unskilled. / How did she deceive the guards? Of the Goddess / using what talents (*arti*) did she fly the sacred image?"¹⁰). Considering, at any rate, the positive valorization that Sophronia holds in the poem, when it comes to woman's capacity for excellence in the masculine field of heroism, Tasso comes across as ambiguous at best. To exonerate herself from the accusation of characteristic female weakness and lack of skill, Sophronia calls upon the virile mental and moral strength on which she argues her capacity to bear physical pain, alone, without help, and to sustain masculine wrath: *Non son io dunque senza te possente / a sostener ciò che d'un uom può l'ira? / Ho petto anch'io, ch'ad una morte crede / di bastar solo, e compagnia non chiede.*¹¹ ("Am I not without you strong (*possente*) / to bear that which a man's wrath can do? / I too have a chest that to one death believes / to suffice on its own, and company requires naught."¹²).

In the conversation between Sophronia and Olindo while they are waiting on the not-yet-burning stake, the man represents female emotivity while Sophronia demonstrates masculine moral strength. „My friend,” she calls to him, „other thoughts, another crying, / for a different cause, this moment requires”¹³. She reproaches Olindo that at this particular time he is displaying the wrong kind of mindset: instead of despairing on account of unrequited

⁸ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XVI.

⁹ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XXVIII.

¹⁰ My own translation of the above-cited excerpt.

¹¹ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XXX.

¹² My own translation of the above-cited excerpt.

¹³ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XXXVI, my own translation.

love and of untimely death, he ought to be entertaining penitential thoughts and to be envisioning God's long-promised mercy. „Suffer in his name and sweet thy pain be, serenely long for the supreme throne. / Behold the beauty of the sky and watch the sun / up to his seat he seems to bid us and protect”¹⁴. Of all present around the stake Sophronia is the only one to demonstrate moral strength by not shedding a single tear: *Tu sola il duol comun non accompagni, / Sofronia; e pianta da ciascun, non piagni*, Tasso comments rhetorically. (“You alone do not share into the communal grief, / Sophronia; and mourned by all, you alone do not weep.”¹⁵). As she passes by the stake, Clorinda the female warrior notices how of the two prisoners, the maiden is quiet while the youth is wailing: “the weak sex displays more strength”¹⁶, she says, and she is moved to compassion to the point of tears, yet not at the lament, but at the power of silence. This excerpt calls to mind the future *Discorso* where, moralizing upon heroic women, Tasso notes that as far as these are concerned it is no longer fit to be speaking about chastity as in the case of socially lower-ranking women, but about strength and prudence¹⁷. Regardless of the social class in which it may be present, moral strength remains a masculine virtue, and its positive association with female characters makes of Tasso in his depiction of Sophronia a gallant echo of the pro-feminist discourse, in full cultural fashion over the past few decades; and this is even despite continuous denials of the type just mentioned above where Olindo invokes with utter credibility the lack of woman's intellectual, practical, and physical competencies.

Aside from moral strength and courage, Tasso also incorporates cruelty in his figurations of the masculine heroic feminine; this psychological and behavioural trait had been a traditional characteristic of men in chivalric literature. In the *Liberata*, for example, the men making up Aladin's gathering and to whom Armida petitions for the killing of Rinaldo in exchange for her hand and dowry appreciate the maid as being noble, with a generous and manly soul¹⁸. Clorinda too is entirely characterized by a cruel disposition. In order to emphasize the exceptionality of heroic women, Tasso is building for Clorinda a biography wrought with anomalies: born white out of black parents, exchanged with a black baby at birth, raised by a nurse who is in fact a eunuch, breastfed by a tigress, born a Christian yet raised a pagan¹⁹, Clorinda gains heroic status as she exceptionally subdues her gender and nature through prowess and courage²⁰. It is interesting to note how, as an indicator of her disavowal of womanly ways, yet never to the purpose of praising Clorinda for her faithful observance of reigning moral codes, Tasso also uses her relationship to speech and silence, with silence recognized as a highly desired trait in a woman in pre-modern – early modern Western culture, and loquacity ranking high as a vice. While Sophronia is an icon of the pure woman of the city, who based on her low social extraction must be limited in her public gesture by recourse to the virtue of silence so fitting to her status and chastity, Clorinda is a public woman who uses eloquence to diplomatic purposes. Despite this fact, she appears closer to Sophronia's virtuous model; the paucity of her verbal gesture lends her something of

¹⁴ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XXXVI, my own translation.

¹⁵ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XXXVII, my own translation.

¹⁶ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XLII, my own translation.

¹⁷ Torquato Tasso, *Discorso*, p. 138.

¹⁸ *Gerusalemme liberata* 17.LI.

¹⁹ *Gerusalemme liberata* 12.XXI-XXXVIII.

²⁰ *Gerusalemme liberata* 12.XXXVIII.

that silent eloquence requested of all women by medieval and pre-modern moralists (cf. Francesco Barbaro in his *De re uxoria*), yet Tasso's reasons are hereby modified. Clorinda is the warrior woman *par excellence* who measures the organization of her identity exclusively against the masculine. If she speaks less than her noble woman status would allow, this is not because Clorinda may be virtuous in the manner of women who hurry to conform to Christian moral dogma in order to escape the accusation of lack of moderation; her silences aim at escaping the accusation of feminine and womanly; they signify denial of a femininity associated by the scholastic misogynistic tradition with verbosity. Clorinda is, therefore, a construction of masculine femaleness strongly dependent on anti-feminine scholastic perceptions.

As part of her (anomalous) aperture to the realm of masculinity, Clorinda is as savage as the cruelest of knights: when she shows up on the battlefield, she is shown waiting for the enemy to arrive, eager to inflict wounds. Even more relevant to the point is the manner in which Tasso describes the feats of prowess of the heroic women Clorinda and Gildippe. Even more than in his descriptions of male knights, Tasso hereby tends to highlight the enemy's anatomic parts which the women wound in battle. Clorinda pierces her opponent's breast or belly button with her sword, she cuts faces, chops hands and arms, severs heads²¹; when she is asked to shoot arrows from the tower, Tasso emphasizes the way in which her enemies' wounded body parts remain attached to either objects or various other anatomical parts: Clorinda nails a Crusader's steel glove to his hand, then with her arrow she pierces another Crusader from his chest to his back, into yet another Crusader she thrusts an arrow from one thigh to the other, to a noble Crusader she also shot in the arm, the head of an arrow remains stuck inside the flesh when he attempts extracting it from his leg; Ademar shot in his forehead takes his hand to his head to feel the wound but then is being struck by another arrow which this time nails hand to head; she shoots a Palamede in his right eyebrow with an arrow that crosses through his orbit emerging bloody from the optic nerves and exiting through the back of his neck²². Gildippe is just as fierce: during the last battle before the taking of Jerusalem, she holds the sword in her right hand "in a virile way" as she rips Zopiro the Persian at his waist line; she severs one Ismael's right hand from his wrist, to Arimonte she splits the forehead into two between his eyebrows. Gildippe, Tasso concludes, is even braver than the Amazons²³. We can legitimately ask ourselves however at this point what connotative value Tasso attributes to his figurations of the heroic feminine in his *Gerusalemme liberata*. Does he rise to the level of his moral scheme in the *Discorso* where heroic women are exceptional figures, placed above civil society and indulged with an "emancipated" behaviour that, *entre nous*, is typically masculine, or quite the contrary, can Tasso be amalgamated with other authors of his epoch who do not allow without much hostility a heroic existence to female characters?

One possible answer comes from a moral trait Tasso grants Clorinda from the start when he says that to men the girl seems a beast, and to the beasts a man²⁴. Clorinda is characterized by a thirst for combat and physical confrontation at least as much as the most

²¹ *Gerusalemme liberata* 9.LXVIII-LXXI.

²² *Gerusalemme liberata* 11.XLII-XLV.

²³ *Gerusalemme liberata* 20.XXXIII-XXXIV, XXXVII.

²⁴ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.XXXIX-XL.

fearful men in the poem are. When the fire ceases, she still thinks up ways to engage even more viciously into combat; as she cannot easily appease her hunger for honour, the maid seeks confrontation where others stop²⁵. It is relevant that the position she holds in respect to the epicentre of any battle measures her closeness to or her distance from the feminine gender. Thus, at the end of one day spent in the tower where her mission is to wound the enemy with arrows from afar, Clorinda despairs that she cannot participate to the war's true, virile operations. Bow and arrow become infused with feminine connotations by comparison with the knightly sword and lance. Hunt even would be preferable, she says, rather than showing herself as a maiden among knights whose masculine virtue is proved by way of their physical presence on the battlefield. Clorinda needs more than just a bow and arrow to prove herself she no longer identifies with female nature: since she is kept from showing her prowess, why not start donning women's apparel again, and why not staying locked up in a room (*cella* – "cell")?²⁶ This researched masculine pose, however, is not meant to emphasize the heroic woman's toughness and ferocity alone, it also indicates her repeated incapacity to restrain her wrath.

In the Western pre-modern tradition wrath is the masculine trait analogous to female lasciviousness. If women are asked to moderate their lust, men are asked to moderate their anger. Wrath is therefore a deadly sin and a moral vice typical of males. In her capacity as a heroic woman by definition, Clorinda is thus appreciable – exactly as Tasso claims in his *Discorso* – only according to virtues and vices masculine. Blinded by anger, feeling that only the enemy's blood can appease her, Clorinda openly adheres to the vice of wrath; from the ideal heroic woman she only superficially may appear to be, she becomes one of many men incapable of virtuous temperance. What leads to the episode of the warrior maid's death is the unappeased wrath she is left with after the day spent in the tower shooting arrows at the enemy. At the end of that day as the Christian army retreats she suggests to the pagan king an immediate nocturnal mission where she plans to set fire to the Crusaders' tower; setting the tower on fire as a deed of prowess, once she has penetrated into the Christian camp with her companion Argante, poses little difficulty to Clorinda. Nonetheless, she lets herself be blinded against a Christian opponent whom she now wants dead at any cost. Totally absorbed by chasing her enemy, she is oblivious to her companions' backing up and to the fortress closing its gates trapping her inside, alone and surrounded by numberless angry men. Among the Crusaders who hold her as if in a circle there is, alas, Tancred too. Not recognizing her, he challenges Clorinda to single combat; here tough words progressively sparkle both warriors' wrath to novel summits. Tasso explains that when both warriors are already weakened, they launch one last time against each other, angered by a new exchange of biting words: it seems, Tasso confesses, it is not Clorinda and Tancred fighting now, but only naked blinded wrath²⁷.

Tasso's admirers from the Romantic period imposed a nostalgic appreciation to the final combat between Clorinda and Tancred, and above all to the warrior maiden's death at the hand of her lover. Unanimously perceived as such, the death of a Clorinda recognized by Tancred for his beloved only after the fatal blow, arrives to our day in the sweetened form typical of Romanticism. It escapes this valorization Tasso's obsession to conform to the

²⁵ *Gerusalemme liberata* 12.II.

²⁶ *Gerusalemme liberata* 12.II-IV.

²⁷ *Gerusalemme liberata* 12.LXI-LXII.

normative schemes regarding the genre of tragedy found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. When read in the light of the Aristotelian text, Clorinda's death by Tancred turns out to be a *katastrophe*; she reaches this following a *peripeteia* consisting of the nocturnal mission in the Crusaders' camp, which she enterprises at the call of her desire for combat. Understanding the *hamartia* not as "tragic flaw" but as a decision bearing inevitable consequences, made when unaware of circumstances and often while in an incapacity to recognize the truth, Clorinda's *hamartia* lies in her decision to chase the opponent she wants to see dead at all costs. Yet despite the fact that according to the Aristotelian text in complex tragedies *hamartia* is triggered by the inevitability of the consequences of the tragic hero's decision and not by the moral quality of such decisions, it is impossible not noticing how Clorinda's decision bears a strong moral motivation: the virile propensity to wrath and the incapacity to moderate that vice. Tancred himself emphasizes this later on when in front of Clorinda's rigid body laid down in funerary pose. He admits that the maiden's dead face, her right hand with which she grasped him before dying as a token of her friendship and forgiveness, her beautiful legs – all limbs that now lie inert – are the miserable funerary vestiges of his inextinguishable wrath²⁸. This moment of *anagnorisis* borrowed from the tragic hero in reality reflects mimetically as if it were in a mirror the underpinnings of Clorinda's *hamartia*: just as Tancred, Clorinda has sinned of the moral vice of wrath. It is nevertheless interesting how, stained as they both are by the same vice, of the two knights only Clorinda dies, another insinuation, maybe, that women are indeed incapable of managing wisely traditionally male roles. Therefore, far from illustrating in combative Clorinda the image of the perfect heroic woman, Tasso builds the character according to both the normative schemes for the Aristotelian tragedy and the misogynistic, scholastically-derived ideologies reaffirmed in the Italian élite's culture during the second half of the 16th century.

Tasso's first audience would have been able to pick on one other relevant aspect of the poem's subtext, that is the lexicon deployed in linking female heroism to the female body. Tasso's word choices bring forth latent notions of woman's inferiority that the Western tradition had not yet fully relinquished in his age. The *Gerusalemme liberata* presents two seemingly unrelated positions regarding women and war matter: one in which women are honored for how successfully they embody heroic virtues (Gildippe is said to be *guerriera ardita*²⁹ ("brave warrior"); Aladin names Clorinda captain over all his armies: "[...] you shine best among / deeds of high danger, acts of utmost awe. / I say: let our whole garrison your strong / sceptre obey; be your commands their law."³⁰; Queen Matilda's renown, courage and strength, greater even than that of men „over crowns and scepters elevate the gown"³¹), another that emphasizes woman's physical weakness, her lack of skill or simply her civic status inferior to man's. Identifiable as the classic arguments of Aristotelian theories on the inequality of sexes in scholastic culture, Tasso's allusions highlight the misfit between woman's nature and the noble virtues of masculinity of which perhaps the most iconic is the profession of arms. Every time he speaks of weak limbs or the weak female body it is in order to contrast these against virile physical strength so as to underline the distance that separates

²⁸ *Gerusalemme liberata* 12.LXXXII.

²⁹ *Gerusalemme liberata* 1.LVII.

³⁰ *Gerusalemme liberata* 2.48; here I quote from Max Wickert's translation in Op. cit., p. 31.

³¹ *Gerusalemme liberata* 17.LXXVII-LXXVIII; here I quote from Max Wickert's translation in Op. cit., p. 317.

the two genders and the obvious superiority of the masculine. The scene of Erminia's disguise as she dons armour is symptomatic in that sense; Tasso here explicitly links back to age-old polemics over woman's inferiority.

The first clue we are entering the woman debate comes lies in the princess's voluminous gown which trails to her feet: the complexity and softness of feminine apparel is a traditional literary symbol of the easy aristocratic lifestyle which predisposes to idleness, hence to lechery and to the whole gamut of immoral behaviours. When Erminia gets out of her gown remaining in her base layer garments, Tasso points the reader to another suggestive clue: the maiden's body, thin beyond belief. Because with him any reference to physical weakness relates one way or another to virile heroic virtues, Erminia's new image clad in the rough steel that hurts her as it presses against her neck and her golden hair, her too weak hand holding the shield, "too heavy and unbearable a load"³², indeed surprises very little. She shines wrapped as she is in steel in military pose, but Erminia can barely move: "Ah, with what toil she strains beneath that new / burden and moves with laboured pace, and leans / upon her faithful helper's shoulder who / measures her slow steps alongside her queen's"³³. The increased physical effort with which the woman must sustain the armour is directly proportional to the excessive daring – the Aristotelian *hýbris* – she shows as she contemplates a gender mutation which in the first place she does not even have the physical resources to sustain. Erminia will realize the extent of her foolishness once she starts moving and again later on in the enemy's camp when she admits what complete insanity it has been to walk among cruel enemies (Christian), a weak woman dressed in the armour of the fiercest pagan knight. Tasso emphasizes the mismatch between heroic virtues and the majority of women through the failure in which Erminia's expedition ends: chased by soldiers, then lost in a shepherd's camp where she cannot but revert to her initial female condition, her fate is suggestive when coupled to her own inhibitions from before putting armour on. Female heroism is a foolish thought ("I dream things impossible, [...] tangling myself in foolish thoughts in vain"), Erminia says, to the princess being reserved only timidity and woe as typical of the "common female train"³⁴; yet she wonders whether despite being weak and untrained (*debile e molle*³⁵) she could not wear armour at least once, and sustain it if were even for a short while. Tasso's negative answer equates the maiden's gesture to the ancient *hýbris*, to the Christian notion of *vanitas*, and to the still current feeling of the inferiority of woman's nature.

The same association between lack of military skill and physical weakness appears as an allusion in marginal scenes, too: under the Crusaders' attack, voices in the streets of Jerusalem encourage the civil population to fight for defence; Tasso hereby notices how women are as little useful as young boys or the unable elderly are: full of grief and begging for mercy, hoards of terrified women (*vulgo de le donne sbigottite*) retreat toward mosques since they do not know how to deal blows or handle arms³⁶. The reference to woman's

³² *Gerusalemme liberata* 6.XCII.

³³ *Gerusalemme liberata* 6.XCIII; here I quote from Max Wickert's translation in Op. cit., p. 115.

³⁴ *Gerusalemme liberata* 6.LXXXVI; here and in the previous quotation I quote from Max Wickert's translation in Op. cit., p. 114.

³⁵ *Gerusalemme liberata* 6.LXXXVI.

³⁶ *Gerusalemme liberata* 3.XI.

reduced civic value in comparison with man's becomes all the more explicit in Clorinda's words on heroes' participation to high-risk missions. She tries to convince Argante that instead of going for the nocturnal mission of setting fire to the Crusaders' tower he ought to spare his life in his city's best interest: "[...], if I, who am a woman, go / to death, small harm our threatened town endures; / but (Heaven prevent the omen) if you fall, / who will be left who can keep safe the wall?"³⁷. The city thus loses nothing in losing a woman to death, but gets a deep dent in its civic value when a heroic man leaves its bosom. The value difference between woman's life and man's reflect the moral political ideology in the *Discorso* as well as older dogmatic notions on the inferiority of the female gender as second and imperfect.

The ways in which the poem's women relate to armour in its capacity as an identity wrought with masculine inflexions, also suggest the position as second that the feminine holds in comparison to the masculine. When these women desire to hide their status adopting either a new one or simply anonymity, armour, a symbol of martial identity, is a borrowed item. The heroic woman Clorinda visibly marks her estrangement from the female gender by consistently appearing clad in armour. She needs to renounce domestic duties and feminine apparel in order to attain her virile position as a warrior. Just as male knights in much chivalric literature, Clorinda identifies with her armour as the sole modality to participate into the public life of her city. Erminia too temporarily exhibits a desire to renounce a feminine gender which limits freedom of movement seeking to borrow a new identity, more flexible, more generous. Contemplating the armour of the female warrior Clorinda, Erminia is implicitly contemplating a superior identity; such superiority is derived from the eminently masculine diplomatic renown and heroic traits which typically surround this identity. Since her plan is not to fight, but to come up with an ingenious scam – to abusively dress Clorinda's armour in order to obtain free passage into the Christian camp – this expedient that camouflages feminine weakness into a symbol of masculinity becomes further more eloquent. Tasso marks the distance between male and female, with the female in clear inferiority, when Erminia realizes she borrowed an identity she cannot sustain neither physically nor professionally, two of the specifically male areas of competency: her body is too feeble *and* she has no knowledge of the art of war. The distance between the subordinated feminine and the dominating masculine is in fact so huge that instead of giving her freedom, armour becomes a burden, and sets her life in danger (while waiting for an answer in front of Tancred's camp, her armour is being recognized by a group of soldiers who challenge the presumable Clorinda to fight) stressing the gap between the weaker, domestic-oriented, female sex and the public, masculine prestige of the arms. Considered under the various aspects – Clorinda, the female warrior who is almost masculine in manner, cruel, irascible, incapable of tempering her wrath, and Erminia, disguised in an armour that her weak body cannot possibly sustain – in which it factors into Tasso's poem, female heroism is a negation of what might look like pro-feminism at a more superficial reading. The women in the poem who have been touched by heroism or its attributes are in fact incapable of sustaining this exclusively masculine virtue.

³⁷ *Gerusalemme liberata* 12.VIII; here I quote from Max Wickert's translation, p. 218.

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