

Elusive Females: The Coexistence of submissiveness and subversiveness within female characters in *Gerusalemme Liberata*

Hsin-Ju Kuo and Huey-Yann Lu

Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* is hailed as an influential masterpiece in the tradition of Dante and Virgil. The most pervasive discussion emphasizes his intention to revive the epic by infusing new materials – elements of romance – into the tradition. As C. P. Brand mentions in his book, “[s]tructurally the *Liberata* is a fusion of the heroic epic and the chivalrous romance, and represents a conscious attempt at the perfection of a literary form” (79). However, this is “a difficult and dangerous course for poet who may juxtapose but fail to blend the contrasting components. Thus the *Liberata* has been condemned by many critics ... for failing to reconcile the heroic and the romance elements” (81). Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* was strongly criticized by his contemporaries for trying to fuse two different genres and for his attempt to please all his readers – both the learned and the common folk. The academization and institutionalization of literature in the sixteenth century led to a rigid definition of what constituted narrative art, and the generic boundaries between the romance and the epic were the site for the formulation and discussion of the problem (Looney 42). Accordingly, by 1591, Tasso had drastically re-written the poem. In the revised *Gerusalemme Conquista*, Tasso eliminated all the irrelevant digression of love stories and adventure elements, and the revisions have been analyzed broadly in moralistic and religious terms. Tasso's fierce transition makes an interesting footnote to his controversial work, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which was often criticized because it was difficult to categorize this text as either an epic or a

romance. Thus the inherent ambiguity in this work reveals an unstable structure and promises a multiplicity of transgressive interpretations of the text itself. In this essay, I would like to shed light on an alternative interpretation of reading Tasso's three prominent female characters – Clorinda, Erminia, and Armida in *Gerusalemme Liberata*

Tasso challenges the traditional definitions of female figures in the epic and romance: a female warrior, an Amazon, in the epic and a prize in the romance. A female warrior acts and fights like a man and ceases to be a woman, whereas the prize of the romances is voiceless, unidentifiable and submissive to male characters. Interestingly, Tasso's portraits of his female characters in *Gerusalemme Liberata* transgressed the boundaries of this predominant feature of both the genres. The nature of these three female characters is subversive, undefined and elusive, which cannot be manipulated or pinned down by any traditional definitions of gender.

Clorinda, Erminia, and Armida, are, in a sense, "Tasso's 'orphan daughters' in competition with those of traditionally more dominant characters" (Migiel 3) in epic and romance traditions. Their ambiguous genealogies are relatively difficult to be traced, so that their true identities are unfixed. Therefore, these female characters are potentially endowed by nature with a subversive power to transgress the boundaries set by previous epic and romance writers. Marilyn Migiel notes that "more important, these female characters permitted Tasso to explore what it might mean, at least for his poetry, to ask an alternate series of questions about the relation to the father" (8). Here, I would like to broaden the scope of "father" to the canonical structure which shapes the fixed definitions of women in the epic/romance tradition. Though Migiel also argues that "Tasso's poem suppresses the stories of orphan daughters or highlights

their suspect truth value while downplaying comparable uncertainties about male narrative” and it grants “the Christians control of ambiguous signs and genealogies” (167), paradoxically, it is exactly these non-Christian women’s ambiguous genealogy and unfixed identity that allow an in-between space of transgression. In the service of epic moral values, eventually they are expected to be “re-incorporated; they [will] die or [will be] reconciled to the men they love, or at least to the Christian forces; their stories become part of the apparently seamless fabric of the dominant narrative” (Miguel 174). This convention notwithstanding, Tasso has made their process of conversion diversified and undermined by portraying them as distinct from other female characters in epics and romances. Clorinda, Erminia and Armida should be perceived as complicated heroines whose submissiveness and subversiveness coexist within them. This ambivalent coexistence contributes to an alternative way of reading Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*.

I. Clorinda

What makes Clorinda prominent underlies her obscure and elusive attributes. Tasso depicts her as an elusive and enigmatic woman who can hardly be pinned down by any definitions of gender. First, though she can fight as good as any male soldier, her physical appearance is incredibly beautiful and attractive. The boundaries of masculinity and femininity have been blurred by Clorinda’s performance. Her androgynous characteristics leave her undefined.

She also has an ambiguous genealogy—she is a cultural hybrid of paganism and Christianity (12.18-40). At the moment when Clorinda reveals her natural Christian blood – she was born a Christian but raised a Saracen, she doesn’t change her stance or convert to Christianity. Some critics have suggested that being born into a certain

race, culture, or religion does not solidify one's belonging in that group (Michael Rex). Other critics treat Clorinda's death as a symbol of loss of both her pagan and Christian identities. Migiel notes that "[h]er attack on a Christian soldier has given her an identity from which she cannot easily retreat" and when she is "[p]ierced by Tancred's sword, Clorinda loses both the identity she attempted to claim outside the walls, and that of the faithful Muslim subject she was committed to be within the walls of Jerusalem" (29). However, her initial motive to be involved in the war between Turkish and Christian camps should be included in the discussion of her identity.

At the beginning of *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Clorinda participates in the war not for any religious or cultural reasons. She makes a deal with Aladine to fight for him simply because she wants to save Sophronia and Olindo's lives (2.39-43). In other words, Clorinda gets involved because of her compassion for these two innocent lovers, not because of religious or cultural identity. Different from other Amazons in the epic tradition, Clorinda's personal reason makes her choose the wrong side – not the moral and virtuous one. But readers have to be reminded that her decision is made of her own free will – driven by her sympathy towards Sophronia and Olindo. To a certain degree, her knowledge of her Christian roots does not necessarily change her dedication to the Turkish camp. She commits her loyalty neither to the King of Jerusalem nor to paganism, but to her words, namely her contract with King Aladine. It would then be understandable that when she is killed by Tancred she allows the baptism because she has already kept her promise to the last minute of her life. Her obligation to the contract, or to the Turkish camp, has been accomplished so that she and the Christian camp are not rivals any more. Again, out of her free will, she chooses to be baptized. To draw a general delineation of Clorinda, her true identity is

always in a process of floating and transgressing; she is an obscure signifier who refuses to be defined by any biological, religious or cultural boundary.

In addition, Clorinda is supposed to be a typical female warrior, an Amazon in epic terms. Davies defines that “[t]he epic tradition already incorporated a figure of the androgynously arms-bearing maiden, from Virgil’s Camilla to Tasso’s Clorinda. . . . Yet they are warriors and take part in the bloodshed. Before their unhelmeting, they are generally taken to be male” (49). As an Amazon, her gender is undefined: a woman dressed like a man who fights her enemy as skillfully as a brilliant male military strategist. Her masculine appearance and strength appear to at odds with the accepted image of women: silent, obedient and chaste. Yet her rebellious features which are different from a submissive female are not the most subversive part of her identity. Besides being a warrior, Clorinda is also described as the lady Tancred admires. Tancred projects his adoration to Clorinda yet Clorinda is ignorant of the existence of the man and his love. This is a traditional epic/romance convention – a knight adores a lady without her knowledge. Ironically, the moment of Tancred revealing his love is also the moment he kills Clorinda. Clorinda is aware of his love but it’s too late. Tasso’s deployment of this tragic scene undermines the typical formula of the romance: a lady always manages to accept the knight’s adoration no matter if she is willing or not. Clorinda’s death in a way stands against this convention. In death she will not be transformed into Tancred’s object of desire. Therefore she maintains her position as an independent subject. She has become an alternative type of female figure who cannot be co-opted in the categories of the typical Amazon in the epic tradition or the prize in the romance.

II. Erminia

Erminia is a character filled with inner struggles which makes her a rare female character in either tradition of epic or romance. Erminia, the princess of Antioch, falls in love with her enemy, Tancred. At the moment when Tancred conquers her father's kingdom, his courteous treatment of the captive princess conquers her heart (6.56-58). Yet Erminia's love for Tancred is both undeclared and unreciprocated. Her desire for Tancred "is set within a genealogical frame, a frame of Oedipal conflict. It threatens to become a story of betrayal of father and fatherland" (Migiel 11). Under the enormous conflict between the duty to her people and her own passionate desire, Erminia's encouragement to pursue love is noticeable and appreciated.

It seems that ladies in chivalric romance seldom have strong or vivid personal traits. For instance, the character Emily in *The Knight's Tale* of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is rather flat and voiceless. There is no colorful depiction about the female figures' inner feelings, thoughts, or even conflicts. By contrast, Erminia impresses readers with her dynamic characteristics.

Erminia has her opportunity with Tancred when she finds him near death on the battlefield and takes care of him (19.112-3). Melinda J. Gough suggests that Erminia uses "her knowledge of charms both 'powerful and magical' in order to initiate her own transformation from pagan slave to beloved Christian wife" (542). Another set of critiques puts more emphasis more on Erminia's superiority than her "dutiful submission to patriarchal Christian authority" (544). For example, Migiel identifies Erminia as an "anti-Delilah":

Although Erminia exhorts Tancred to health and to consciousness, her exhortation is double-edged. Erminia's nurturing stance may suggest that she assumes the submissive [...] by shearing her own hair in order to give

Tancred strength, she becomes an anti-Delilah. But Erminia remains in control both physically and perceptually. (72)

Erminia becomes an anti-temptress who cuts her own hair in order to heal Tancred and to strengthen, not to weaken, his power. Her love and passion bring Tancred back to consciousness. In other words, she gives her hair to rescue Tancred and to make him stronger. This move makes Erminia a more superior and powerful figure. Thus the motif of the knight who comes to rescue the damsel in distress, inherent in romance tradition, has been undermined. The hierarchy of rescuer and rescued, superior and inferior, is subverted in the case of Tancred and Erminia. Though the maiden Erminia knows nothing about war or self-defense and is physically vulnerable, she possesses enormous power of “transgressive passion and agency” (Gough 544). Her love towards Tancred conquers the fear gives her encouragement. Disregarding her safety, Erminia goes to Tancred’s rescue. For some critics, C. P. Brand for instance, the action of cutting her hair is interpreted as Tasso’s “intention of making her become a nun” (Brand 104), which symbolizes devotion and selflessness. However, her movement can also represent a parallel of a knight raising his sword to rescue the maiden. The only difference is that the roles of knight and maiden are reversed.

Erminia’s transgressive power lies not only in her relationship to Tancred, but also in identifying those Christian knights for the King of Jerusalem, Aladine. Erminia is first introduced to readers in Canto III when she and the king are looking over the battlefield. She identifies most of the Christian knights and offers reliable descriptions of these heroes. It is both significant and unusual that Tasso gives Erminia this privileged position. At this point, Erminia has adopted the persona of the omniscient narrator:

Erminia is from the beginning possessed of a perceptiveness no other

character in the poem has. Her ability to recognize the Christian soldiers and to recount their virtues and defects in a potentially ambiguous way make of her a character with attributes and functions remarkably similar to those of the narrator. (Miguel 58)

It is very subversive that Erminia occupies the superior position of “utterance”, a quasi-omniscient narrator. Though she is supposed to be a vulnerable pagan woman who is expected to be silent and subordinate to male characters, ironically she has the predominant authority to identify each Christian knight and faithfully reveal information about them. It is astonishing that these male characters’ personal traits are in this way defined by Erminia. A woman who by the conventions of the tradition is supposed to be a passive prize unexpectedly has the power to define the male characters.

In addition to the verbal power of utterance and naming, Erminia also exercises her non-verbal superiority, her dominion of “looking.” Maggie Gunsberg brings in a wide discussion on the ideology of the look in *Gerusalemme Liberata*. She notes that “[i]n a genre such as the epic poem, characterized by overt conflictual bodily activity, analysis of [,,] the nature of the relationship between subject and object of the look [...] whether the subject of the act of looking differs in terms of power position from the object being looked at” (177). In the analysis of the faculty of sight in the power hierarchy, Gunsberg further makes distinctions between the act of looking and the act of seeing. The act of seeing does not necessarily constitute an intentional act. On the contrary, the act of looking involves “a deliberate act of looking and is consequently more meaningful in the context of the politics of the look in which the look is used to establish or maintain a position of superiority over the person looked at” (182). In Canto III when readers first meet Erminia, she stands on a tower and looks at the

knights on the battlefield from a vantage point which gives her a superior perspective (III.12-40, 58-63). Consequently, she becomes the active subject looking at passive objects – the conventional male heroes.

In her action of looking, she has an important agenda: to identify the Christian knights for the King of Jerusalem. The purpose of this task accordingly makes Erminia's gaze an intentional act involving hierarchical power relations. There is no doubt that the hierarchy is determined by Erminia. The act of looking, or the faculty of sight, functions as Erminia's subversive weapon to reverse the conventional hierarchy of males and females, the superior and inferior in the conventions of the epic and romance.

III. Armida

The character of Armida is most widely discussed in analyses of *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Similar to the other two females, Armida represents a floating signifier who transgresses the defined boundaries in the conventions of the epic and romance. At the beginning, she is given a task to undermine the unity of the Christian camp. The first time when Armida appears in Godfrey's camp, she "acts" as a vulnerable lady who needs the white knights' assistance. She elicits those knights' feelings of pity by telling them a potentially false story about her royal genealogy and how she strives against her unacceptable marriage (4.28-77). In Tasso's depiction of her performance, Armida is silent and bashful until Godfrey has been reassured, and then she elaborates her story of exile. Paradoxically, though she acts as a vulnerable lady who needs help, she simultaneously possesses

the unthreatened superiority of her gaze and from her linguistic and narrative control, in particular from the irrefutability of the (possibly false)

story she narrates about her family. Therefore, [...] she is a master of perception as well as deception” (Migiel 13).

Armida is perceived both superior and vulnerable. Armida’s disguise of a vulnerable lady perfectly conforms to the archetypal image of chivalric romance: an unprotected damsel awaits a knight to come to her rescue. What makes this scene of a romance subversive is that readers completely recognize the motivation underling her appearance: to sow discord among the Crusaders. Her deceitful performance is an excellent “discourse of feminine fakery” (Zatti 124). Tasso’s elaboration of this scene subverts the convention of chivalric romance and achieves an effect of “dramatic irony.” On the one hand, the interactions between Armida and the Christian knights completely conform to the tradition of chivalric romance. However, on the other hand, this romantic depiction is elaborately designed and performed. Readers would have an alternative interpretation of the duality of Armida, who is both the pretend damsel and a temptress at the same time.

Some critics note that Rinaldo’s love for Armida is entirely sensual. Rinaldo is simply attracted by Armida’s physical beauty and sensual pleasure. C. P. Brand even claims that “[t]heir passion is selfish: Armida wants to be worshipped and served, and Rinaldo forgets his duty in his attempt to satisfy his senses – but Rinaldo’s love is spiritualized by his return to duty and Armida is redeemed by his love and forgiveness” (106). Rinaldo’s indulgence in Armida as an enchantress and his breaking away with Godfrey corresponds to the role of the “prodigal son.” As C. P. Brand points out, Rinaldo’s character is similar to Achilles’s: young, impetuous and resentful of authority, and his break with Godfrey and departure from the Christian camp is in the Homeric and romance tradition (105). The prodigal son might be distracted from his adherent duty, and in the case of Rinaldo he is allured and tempted

by Armida's physical beauty. However, the culmination of being a prodigal son is at the moment when the protagonist is suddenly aware of his obligation towards his people or certain beliefs. It would become understandable that some critiques interpret Rinaldo's leaving Armida and returning to the Christian camp as the symbol of true repentance. If Rinaldo is to represent the ideal of Christian virtue, he has to break off with the pagan enchantress. Therefore, Armida simply serves as a foil to Rinaldo's self-awareness as a Christian knight, since the enchantress would be an "obstacle" to the holy mission of the Crusaders.

Rinaldo's departure from the enchanted garden represents the permanent victory of reason over the sensual, of Christianity over paganism, and of good over evil. The eventual cleansing of evil from Armida's enchanted forest may represent "the Crusaders' ultimate triumph over paganism and [Tasso's] attempted reconciliation of the heroic romance with Christian allegory" (Neff 202).

Yet the departure and reunion of Rinaldo and Armida at the end of *Gerusalemme Liberata* is far more complicated than the absolute dichotomy of good versus evil. As Cavallo suggests, Tasso's use of the enchanted woman can be traced back to the epic tradition: Odysseus leaving Circe and then Calypso in Homer's *The Odyssey*, Aeneas's leaving Dido in Virgil's *The Aeneid* (77-78). However, Tasso's elaboration of the ending in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in effect, distinguishes him from his predecessors.

Parallel to the subversion of the archetypal female character in romance conventions, in the later development of Armida's relationship with Rinaldo Tasso undermines the typical female traits of the epic tradition as well. First, Rinaldo has

eventually fallen in love with Armida in Canto IV without Armida's practice of witchcraft. Armida practices magic only when Rinaldo is not around. They have become true lovers to each other, and for Rinaldo Armida is a woman he loves rather than a witch. So Cavallo implies that Rinaldo's departure from Armida has nothing to do with the choice of either good or evil:

By shifting from love to compassion, Tasso can represent an inner conflict in his hero that is not one of the appetites against reason, but rather of Courtesy ("cortesia") and Pity ("pieta") against harsh Necessity ("dura necessita"). Both choices, in this case, are laudable, but one must take precedence. (90-1)

The story does not end at Rinaldo's separation from Armida. When Rinaldo returns to the Crusader army, he reasserts his role as a Christian knight. After the liberation of Jerusalem, Rinaldo is elected as the new leader. At the same time, he recalls his promise of being Armida's knight when he leaves. Therefore, he returns to Armida. The following development of the plot, the reunion of Rinaldo and Armida, makes Tasso radically different from his epic predecessors. Armida is about to commit suicide when he sees Rinaldo. She turns away from his beloved face then she faints. It is Rinaldo's tears that bring her back to consciousness (20.120-36). This touching romantic scene again reveals their true love for each other. To make a comparison between Homer's Circe and Calypso, Virgil's Dido, Tasso's Armida has a very dissimilar perspective in contrast to the other three enchantresses. To a certain degree, Circe, Calypso and Dido, in effect, function as handmaids or helpers to the heroes' ultimate duty or obligations. Once the heroes leave them to accomplish their duties, the women's stories end. However, Armida is not so disposable after Rinaldo accomplishes his duty. Further, Rinaldo claims himself the champion and servant of Armida, and the two lovers submit to each other: "[b]oth lovers, using different code

words, are making the same pledge of themselves to their beloved” (Cavallo 98). Therefore, the treatment of Armida’s religious conversion as the victory of Christianity may not be the dominant interpretation. Armida’s conversion is for love rather than religion. Whatever Rinaldo’s religion is, she would accept it. As Cavallo argues, “it is not a religious conversion from paganism to Christianity, but a secular conversion from seductress to *inamorata*” (99). Mutually, Rinaldo, in a way, also converts to Armida: from love’s master to love’s servant (20.134).

Tasso refuses to polarize Armida as either evil temptress or chaste virgin. On the one hand, her role is not just to be seductive and present enchanting obstacles, as with Circe and Calypso. On the other hand, when Jerusalem is liberated and Rinaldo has accomplished his duty, Armida’s role also changes. She becomes the end point, the ultimate destination for Rinaldo, and she becomes a virtuous woman awaiting the hero’s return.

Tasso counters his predecessors by creating transgressive female characters – Clorinda, Erminia and Armida – who challenge the fixed definitions of women in the literary epic and romance. Not defined by the two archetypes of female figures – the female warrior and woman as prize – these three women are endowed with profound perspectives and elusive natures which invite more colorful interpretations of the text.

Works Cited

- Brand, C. P. *Torquato Tasso: A Study of the Poet and of His Contribution to English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965.
- Cavallo, Jo Ann. "Tasso's Armida and the Victory of Romance." *Renaissance Transactions: Ariosto and Tasso*, ed. Valeria Finucci. London: Duke UP, 1999.
- Davies, Stevie. *The Idea of Woman in Renaissance Literature: the feminine Reclaimed*. Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1986.
- Gough, Melinda J. "Tasso's enchantress, Tasso's captive woman." *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001): 523-52.
- Gunsberg, Maggie. *The Epic Rhetoric of Tasso Theory and Practice*. Oxford: The European Humanities Research Centre of the U of Oxford, 1998.
- Looney, Dennis. *Compromising the Classics: Romance Epic Narrative in the Italian Renaissance*. Detroit: Wayne State Up, 1996.
- Migiel, Marilyn. *Gender and Genealogy in Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata*. Lewiston, Pa.: Edwin Mellen, 1993.
- Neff, D. S. "Between Clinamen and Tessera: Female Homophilia in Gerusalemme Liberata and Christabel." *Literature Interpretation theory* 10.3 (1999): 193-217.
- Zatti, Sergio. "Epic in the Age of Dissimulation: Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata." *Renaissance Transactions: Ariosto and Tasso*, ed. Valeria Finucci. London: Duke UP, 1999.