Tasso’s Critique and Incorporation of Chivalric Romance: His Transformation of Achilles in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*

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The conflicted attitude that Torquato Tasso shows toward chivalric romance in his epic theory also marks his epic practice, as this article illustrates by comparing Rinaldo in *Gerusalemme liberata* to Homer’s Achilles. While there are broad parallels between the two heroes—in particular their angry withdrawal from the fighting, which so hampers their side that no progress to victory can be achieved without their return—the circumstances that follow their defection and that, eventually, prompt their return are quite different. In Tasso’s poem these differences are mostly ascribable to the poet’s incorporation of conventional romance ingredients: the hero’s solitary quest for chivalric adventures, his amorous dalliance and truancy in the realm of an enchantress who falls in love with him, his liberation from her spell thanks to the intervention of a magus, his eventual overcoming of hostile magical forces that impede the progress of his fellow warriors. It also becomes apparent that a salient difference between Rinaldo and Achilles is that the conflict faced by Tasso’s hero is much more internal. Once again it is the matter of romance that allows Tasso to dramatize the personal susceptibility and the regeneration of his protagonist. Despite the negative valence he assigns to the motifs and themes of romance, Tasso depends on romance ingredients to depict the inner transformation that Rinaldo must undergo to make him into a fitter Christian warrior, and thereby a hero ethically superior to both his Homeric and chivalric precursors.

My presentation seeks to fit the theme of the conference by considering how Torquato Tasso modified the figure of Homer’s Achilles when he created Rinaldo in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*. But I would like to start by pointing out that some of my current work has dealt more with Tasso’s epic theory rather than his epic practice, and what has interested me particularly about his theory is its complicated attitude toward chivalric romance. Not surprisingly, this conflicted attitude manifests itself in Tasso’s use and function of romance matter in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, and the poet’s incorporation of romance bears directly, as I will argue, on his departures from the Homeric paradigm in his treatment of Rinaldo. So it is worth considering, however briefly, how Tasso views the romanzo in his *Discorsi* on the heroic poem.

Chivalric romances, the more common and appealing form of narrative poetry that had prevailed in Italy up to the middle of the sixteenth century (culminating in Ariosto's best-selling *Orlando Furioso*), were regularly criticized in the codifications of epic poetry which emerged in Italy in the second half of the century. Since the "romanzi" were part of a relatively recent medieval poetic tradition they served as convenient targets for the promoters of epic poetry, intent as these promoters were to reinstitutionalize a classical genre based on Homer's and Virgil's models which would displace aberrant modern practice. As part of their efforts to discredit and displace the chivalric romance, they regularly presented it as epic's defective opposite.

Tasso is no exception. In his two sets of discourses on the heroic poem, he often sets forth requisites that have to be met in an epic poem by contrasting them, implicitly or explicitly, to the deficiencies of chivalric romance, including Ariosto's. For example, by insisting from the start of his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* on the epic poet's need to observe verisimilitude in his representation of the epic action, Tasso was indirectly discrediting the incredible fantasies and exaggerations, the inverisimilitude that typified the knightly exploits of romance. However, Tasso's more direct and sustained critique of the *romanzo* in his *Discorsi* is made on structural more than on thematic grounds. This critique takes the form of refuting G. B. Giraldi's earlier legitimation of the chivalric romance on the grounds that it is different in kind from traditional epic poetry. According to Tasso, the confusing multiplicity, the excessive length, the absence of beginnings and ends, the discontinuity of both Boiardo's and Ariosto's romances are not, pace Giraldi, formal features of the *romanzo* as an independent genre. They are structural flaws inherent in episodic narratives that refuse to observe classical, that is permanently valid artistic norms of unity, continuity and completeness. Though more polemical, Tasso's view that the *romanzo* does not constitute a separate poetic genre is shared by contemporary codifiers of epic. They all consider the romance as an inferior, deficient and deviant sort of writing, of which a properly constructed and ordered epic is the legitimate, more perfect form.

Tasso's attitude toward the romanzi turns out to be more complicated. While his *Discorsi* contain recurring disparagements of the structural and even the ethical aspects of earlier chivalric romances, one can also discern in these treatises, albeit less explicitly, Tasso's accommodation of certain romance features, and this, as we shall see, also characterizes his epic practice. It needs to be pointed out that, in practical terms, the repudiation of the ethos and structure of the *romanzo* was a risky strategy to follow if a poet like Tasso wanted to enjoy more than a very limited readership. We know that, in the latter half of the sixteenth century, Italian poets who sought to compose a modern heroic poem could not ignore altogether the broad appeal of the chivalric *romanzo*, especially Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. They recognized the need to import features of the *romanzo* into their heroic compositions, however much orthodox *literati* were calling on them to conform more to Aristotelian-Horatian guidelines and to Homero-Virgilian precedents. There were, to be sure, some poets who did resurrect the Homeric paradigm, and, by doing so, they defied the multiple, discontinuous, and inconclusive plot structure of romance. The most notable such effort was Trissino's *Italia liberata dai Goti* (1547-48). Trissino's epic not only challenged the romance tradition by its single unified action, but it also confronted the romance ethically by its critique of the individualistic honor-seeking heroes of romance. The *Italia liberata* turned out, however, to be an artistic and commercial calamity. Its failure to attract readers made all too apparent the liability of faithfully reproducing the Homeric paradigm. For example, Torquato Tasso's father, Bernardo, fully aware of the failure of Trissino's orthodox epic, chose to write the *Amadigi* (1560), a narrative poem