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"Clorinde: les obscurités d'une guerrière"

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Clorinda: The Darkness of a Warrior

TEXTE

1 The characters in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) reveal, at their most accomplished moments, an interiority that is tormented and profoundly divided – so much so that their gestures and actions can never conceal, disguise, or contain a mysterious (unconscious) and disquieting inner sphere. The will to be heroes – heroes of faith, heroes of war – that distinguishes the Christian soldiers inevitably collides with this dark zone. Heroism itself is an attempt to bury this darkness once and for all, a darkness that, for long stretches of the poem, takes the form of love.

2 Tasso demands that human beings give meaning to their existence in the world through the union of religion and heroism, yet love shatters this bond – above all because it stands opposed to war. With the poet of Sorrento, the worldly and pagan age of the Italian Renaissance comes definitively to a close. His work unfolds in a time that is redefining its own points of reference, attempting above all to restore coherence to Catholic culture, threatened by the Reformation.

3 As the studies of Adriano Prosperi have shown, Counter-Reformation culture sought to integrate every aspect of human life – writing included, and above all desire – within a comprehensive Christian perspective, and to justify itself before that horizon.

4 Indeed, when Tasso revives the chivalric tradition, he does so precisely in order to strip it of its secular and even irreligious aspects (as in Ariosto) and to restore to it an educational, religious, and moral function. This responsibility entails the choice of a subject of profound cultural significance: the First Crusade becomes, on the one hand, a means of reflecting upon the Christian world's need for truth, threatened today by the Turks (or by Protestants), and on the other, a way of representing the clash between positive, divine forces and negative, diabolical ones.

5 The negative and diabolical forces are subterranean; they include a series of tormented and shadowy dimensions, the foremost among them being love. It is for this reason that love, in Tasso, is a fault – a

contaminated territory, necessarily godless. Not by chance, as has been widely noted, love enters the poem together with the world of the infidels, the world against which Goffredo and the Christians wage war. It is the pagan life that seethes with ungoverned desires: it is against this magma that Tasso struggles.

6 If in Ariosto one finds an explosion of pleasures and desires in every canto – and the eponymous knight, once unblemished, ultimately falls victim to the fascination of love, to the point of madness – in Tasso, by contrast, love is condemned and concealed; it would be unthinkable for the Christian hero, Goffredo, to fall in love or even to entertain thoughts of pleasure. And yet, within Tasso, despite Tasso, beyond Tasso, the power of love acts with a secret and magnificent force throughout *Gerusalemme liberata*.

7 In this sense, the story of Clorinda is paradigmatic. Precisely as a Muslim warrior, Clorinda introduces desire into the poem: a desire almost impossible, perhaps even unknown. Tasso can do nothing to resist this power; indeed, one of his Christian heroes, one of the noblest, Tancredi, falls in love with the girl when he sees her bare-headed, refreshing herself at a spring:

> Egli mirolla, ed ammirò la bella
> Sembianza, e d'essa si compiacque, e n'arse.
> Oh maraviglia! Amor ch'appena è nato,
> Già grande vola, e già trionfa armato.
> (*Gerusalemme liberata*, I, 47)

8 Here is love now armed – war itself is suspended. Tancredi's fault is twofold: not only does he fall in love, forgetting the war, but he does so with a pagan. Clorinda, in turn, is not portrayed as a passive figure, a condition that often characterized Ariosto's women. Clorinda is a maiden, but above all, a warrior – entirely a warrior:

> Costei gl'ingegni femminili, e gli usi
> Tutti sprezzò sin dall'età più acerba:
> Ai lavori d'Aracne, all'ago, ai fusi
> Inchinar non degnò la man superba:
> Fuggì gli abiti molli, e i lochi chiusi;
> Ché ne' campi onestate anco si serba:
> Armò d'orgoglio il volto, e si compiacque

> Rigido farlo, e pur rigido piacque.
> (*Gerusalemme liberata*, II, 39)

9 Tasso paints not merely a woman. At times, Clorinda scarcely *seems* a woman at all; for this reason, she cannot even comprehend Tancredi's words of love. Clorinda, in truth, seems to stand apart – even from the diabolical world of pleasure embodied by the pagans – precisely because she is, first and foremost, a warrior.

10 Clorinda thus becomes the name of resistance against colonial invasion, as both warrior and *infidel*. But Clorinda is at once a woman and, at her origin, a Christian. This multiplicity of hers stirs desire and provides, for Tancredi, the moral justification of that desire. In the end Tasso fails to resolve the contradictions embodied in the female warrior, and allows her to be killed (and, moreover, the Christian conquest can begin after her death). If love is a fault, if love must remain hidden – could there be any resolution other than a duel, other than death itself?

11 Her death marks the triumph of power, and more broadly, the capture (*dead or alive*) of whoever cannot be fixed within a specific territory. This, indeed, represents the true *crux* of every disciplinary power, from the Counter-Reformation to the present day.

12 To study the figure of Clorinda, therefore, is to interrogate essential dimensions of human experience – desire, sexuality, gender, religious belonging – and also of history: war, resistance. Traversing events, concepts, established oppositions – sex and gender – Clorinda probably embodies, at once, both a radical refusal of any fixed identity and the courage of one who resists becoming an instrument of death.