

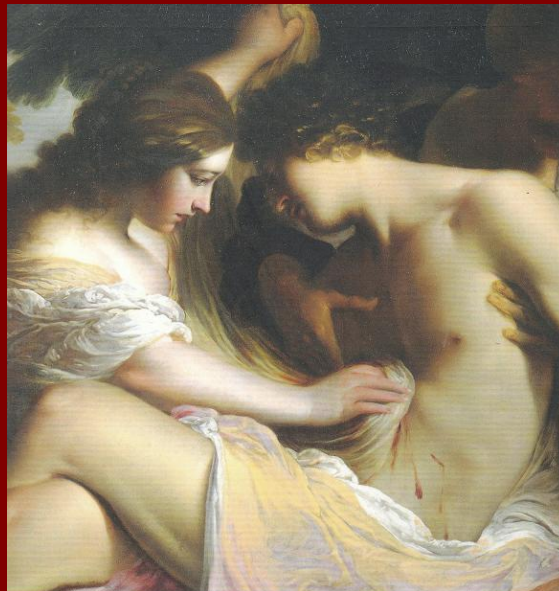
Torquato Tasso

THE LIBERATION OF JERUSALEM

(GERUSALEMME LIBERATA)

translated by

MAX WICKERT



Torquato Tasso
The Liberation of Jerusalem

A new translation by Max Wickert

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

[THREE SELECTIONS]

*I began this translation in 1997 and completed it in 2004.
It was published in 2009 by Oxford University Press in the Oxford World's Classics series and is available in
bookstores and from amazon.com*

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[*from*] CANTO ONE

[*Proem and Invocation. God Sends Gabriel to Godfrey*]

1

I sing of war, of holy war, and him,
Captain who freed the Sepulchre of Christ.
Greatly he wrought by force of mind and limb,
and greatly suffered, nobly sacrificed.
Vainly did Hell oppose him, Asia grim
vainly combined with Libya, hell-enticed.
Heaven favoured him and guided back, to fight
under his sacred flag, each errant knight.

2

O Muse, not you who upon Helicon
garland your brow with long-since-faded bays,
but you who among heavenly choirs don
your golden crown of deathless stars always:
breathe in my breast celestial fire, shed on
my song your light, and pardon if my lays,
embroidering the truth, seem overgrown
at times with pleasures other than your own.

3

You know how, where Parnassus most proffers
its flattering sweets, the world flocks in delight,

yet how, by charming in mellifluous verse,
Truth has disposed the most depraved to right--
as sometimes, to a feverish child, the nurse
holds out a glass with sugared rim. Her sleight
tricks him to drain the bitter draught. So stealth
restores him, and delusion gives him health.

4

And you, magnanimous Alfonso, who
snatch me from fortune's rage, who guide to port
me, errant pilgrim, battered to and fro
by waves and rocks that made my spoil their sport:
Accept these sheaves with gracious eye. Of you
and yours these votive offerings report.
Perhaps one day my prescient pen will try
boldly to write what now mere hints imply.

5

Well it accords with reason, if at peace
Christ's holy folk should find itself someday,
prepared to make the fierce Thracian release,
by force of ships and steeds, his unjust prey,
Earth's sceptre should be yours or, if you please,
yours on the seas the undisputed sway.
Meanwhile, be you as Godfrey was of yore:

Attend my song and gird yourself for war.

6

Five years had passed since on their eastward course
the Christian warriors launched their lofty quest.

Nicea was already theirs, by force;

great Antioch too, by stratagem possessed.

This they defended in protracted wars

with Persia's countless host, even as they pressed

onward and conquered Tartus next. But here

harsh winter made them to bide the coming year.

7

The winter rains were ceasing their control

Of the army's power to resume the war,

when from His lofty throne, beneath which roll

unblemished spheres of holy bliss (as far

as from hell's centre to the utmost pole,

so far is heaven beyond the highest star),

the Eternal Father downward casts His eyes

and in one flash sees all the earth and skies.

8

All things He saw, then cast, in the demesne

of Syria upon Christian leaders that exact,

gaze of His which will pierce the souls of men

to their inmost wills. There He saw Godfrey, racked
with a pure need to oust the Saracen
from Salem's hallowed ground, a man compact
of faith and zeal, to whom the joys of earth--
the fame, the sway, the spoils--were nothing worth.

9

But in Baldwin next He sees a grasping soul,
intent on grandeurs of the human kind;
sees Tancred hold life cheap, in the control
of a hopeless love, the torment of his mind;
and sees how Bohemond makes it his goal
to re-found Antioch, to him assigned,
and in his new reign to establish law,
good customs, arts, and true religion's awe:

10

a task to which so ardently he turns,
he can, it seems, remember nothing else.
Rinaldo's warlike spirit He discerns,
scorning repose; him neither gold impels
nor empire—it is fame alone that burns
in the boundless will with which his bosom swells.
He sees him hang upon the lips of Guelf
and in his forebears' glory seek himself.

11

After the world's King had with piercing view
laid bare the hearts of these and others, He
called from his shining angel retinue
Gabriel, second of the first degree,
who between God and His elected few
is blithe interpreter and herald free,
who brings heaven's tidings earthward, and repairs
skyward, bearing the zeal of mortal prayers.

12

Said God unto His messenger: "Go find
Godfrey, and ask him in My name: What need
for more delay? Why is the fight declined
by which enslaved Jerusalem shall be freed?
Let him call his chiefs to council and remind
the truants of their task. For he shall lead:
I elect him here; on earth, through their election,
they, once his peers, shall fight by his direction."

13

He spoke. And eagerly did Gabriel
speed to perform His bidding, and in air
rendered his viewless spirit palpable
with mortal limbs and shape, of an age somewhere

between boyhood and youth. Such human shell
(but charged with awe and splendour everywhere)
he made his own and fixed upon his maze
of golden curls a nimbus of white rays.

14

White wings he donned, with tips of gold, whose climb
is indefatigably swift and sure,
with which through winds and clouds he soared sublime
above round earth's and ocean's curvature.
So garbed, down from eternity to time,
from purest regions to a world impure,
he swept, and first upon Mount Lebanon
paused, balanced on extended wings; then on

15

toward Tortosa's coast he veered in flight
precipitously down upon his embassy.
Just then the sun was rising into sight,
the face of dawn still half hid in the sea,
while, offering up his customary rite,
Godfrey was praying to the Deity,
when, by a second sun the light increased
and the angel rose before him from the east,

[*from*] CANTO TWELVE

[*The combat of Tancred and Clorinda*]

52

He wants to try her, thinking her a man
worthily matched with him in martial skill

Now by another gate it is her plan
to enter and she winds steeply uphill.

While he is following closely as he can,
his weapons rattle in his haste, until
she turns and cries: "You there, so out of breath,
what do you bring?" He answers, "War and death!"

53

"War, then, and death you'll have. I'll not refuse
your wishes," she replies and stands, cold-eyed.

Tancred, averse (since she is on foot) to use
his horse, dismounts, and drives the steed aside.

They grasp their sharp blades; each the other views,
whetting keen wrath and kindling warlike pride;
and now not otherwise these two engage
than two great bulls who burn with jealous rage.

54

Well worth the clearest sunshine would have been
such marvelous deeds, well worth the highest stage.

O Night, you who would keep that mighty scene
forgotten in your womb's unfathomed cage,
grant that I now draw forth and in serene
daylight display it to a future age.

Let their fame live; remembered in their story
your gloom will shine in their transcendent glory.

55

No feints, no parries, no quick shifts of ground
they deign to use. Here deftness plays no part.
They give no feigned blows as they hack and pound.
Darkness and rage forbid the use of art.

Hear their blades fall with a dread grinding sound
upon the armored plates that guard the heart.
Their feet are fixed, their hands ever employed;
no slash is vain, no thrust stabs in the void.

56

Shame goads on Hatred to Revenge and, Hate
being sated, Vengeance reawakens Shame.
So that their blows and haste, however great,
spur ever greater force and deadlier aim.
At last, thus tangled in their fierce debate,
they draw too close for sword strokes. All the same,
they strike out with their pommels, crazed and rash,

and butt with shields, and make their helmets clash.

57

Three times the warrior has embraced the maid
in his huge arms; and from that clinging grasp
as many times she has burst free, dismayed
to know no lover's, but a fierce foe's clasp.
Then each of them, returning to the blade,
dyes it in wounds, till, wearied and a-gasp,
both she and he, pausing at last, retire
from their relentless struggle to respire.

58

Each looks at the other, leaning, blood-bespread,
heavily on the sword hilts in their clutch.
The last stars fade behind them. Up ahead
the east already glows at dawn's first touch.
Now Tancred sees his enemy has shed
more blood than he, himself not hurt as much.
He exults and glories. (Oh mad mortal mind,
puffed up at every gust of Fortune's wind!

59

Ah, wretched man! what makes you glad? Ah, bleak
will be your triumph, sad your vaunts and jeers!
Your eyes--if you survive--will waste your cheek

for that blood's every drop with seas of tears.)

Thus, wary, these two stand and do not speak

for a long time while the new day appears.

At last, breaking the silence, Tancred thought

to make her name the enemy he fought:

60

“Unhappy is the chance, indeed, that where
silence conceals it such great prowess reigns.

But since our ill luck must make us despair
of praise or witness worthy of our pains,

I pray (if one who fights may pray), declare
your name, degree, your titles and domains,
that (win or lose) it may be known to me
who gives me honor in death or victory.”

61

Replies the fierce maid: “Vainly you demand
what never was my custom to make known.

But whosoever I be, here you see stand
one of that pair who burned the great tower down.”

Hearing this, Tancred flamed with anger and
replied: “You’ll rue those words, that deed you own.

Your silence and your foolish words alike
urge vengeance, you uncivil boor, to strike.”

62

Their rage returns and hurls them, though much bled
and weakened, back to combat. Savage fight!
where Skill is banned , where Strength lies all but dead,
and in their place mad Frenzy rules outright!
Ah what huge gates, wide open and blood-red,
their swords make gape, wherever they alight,
in armor or in flesh! and only Hate arrests
Life that would else flee through them from their breasts.

63

Even as the Aegean Sea, when Aquilo
and Notus cease to blow and churn and pound,
does not fall still, but in the heave and throe
of waves retains the motion and the sound,
so, though that strength which once impelled each blow
ebbs with their loss of blood, they found
in their first impetus sufficient force
to add wound upon wound without remorse.

64

But now (behold!) the fatal hour arrives
that at its end Clorinda's life will owe.
His sword's point he at her white bosom drives;
greedy to drink her blood it plunges. Lo!

the tender, gold-lace coverings it rives
that clasp her lovely breasts and a hot flow
spreads on her shift. She knows she's dying and,
feeling her feet grow weak, can scarcely stand.

65

He follows up his victory, intent
to quite bear down the transfixed maid, and she,
even as she fell, in accents faint and spent,
was forming her last words, her dying plea--
words by a new soul to her spirit lent,
new soul of Faith, of Hope, of Charity,
grace poured by God, Who at her final breath
grants, after a rebel's life, a handmaid's death.

66

"Friend, you have won. I pardon you. Do you
pardon me also--not my body, no--
it fears naught--but my soul, yes. Make it new.
Pray for it and baptize me ere I go."

These tremulous soft accents sink into
his heart and there (he knows not how) make grow
a strange new sense that calms all rage. He hears
and feels his eyes well up with sudden tears.

67

Not far, a little rill was murmuring
from its cool source, hid by the mountain's height.
He ran there, filled his helmet at the spring,
and came back sadly for the solemn rite.
Raising her visor with his hands, trembling,
he bared the unknown brow unto the light.
He saw it, knew it, horror in his eyes.
Ah woe! to see, to know, to recognize!

68

He did not die outright, but set guards so
strong on his heart, his woe was forced beneath.
Numb to his grief, he hastened to make flow
life-giving water where his steel gave death.
He spoke the holy text. She smiled. A glow
of bliss transformed her face, while her last breath
seemed to proclaim, at life's joyful release:
"The heavens open; I depart in peace."

69

A lovely pallor overspreads her face,
like violets mixed with lilies. On the sky
she fixes her fair gaze, and from that place
the sun seems to gaze back with pitying eye.
She does not speak, but, as if to embrace

the knight, she lifts her naked, cold hand high,
giving the pledge of peace. And in this wise,
resting as if in sleep, the fair maid dies.

CANTO SIXTEEN

[Rinaldo abandons Armida]

1

Round is the splendid pile; its inmost womb,
the seeming centre of its circling bound,
a garden close, lusher with lavish bloom
than any else throughout all time renowned,
And, on the way there, room by gloomy room,
its demon wrights ranged corridors all round,
so that it lies, athwart their criss-cross ways,
by winding paths confined in a false maze.

2

Through the main entry (for a hundred gates
gave access to that huge abode) they went.
The portal, all embossed with silver, grates
on golden hinges bright with ornament.
They fix their gaze upon the sculptured plates,
where rich art the rich metal quite outwent.
It lacks but speech, but lacks in life nowise,
nor lacks even speech if you but trust your eyes.

3

See here among Maeonian maidens lie
Alcides with his distaff, glib and trim.

He conquered Hell once, held up stars and sky,
now twirls a spindle while Love laughs at him.
See Iöle with unwarlike hand nearby
make sport to wield his weapons huge and grim,
his lion's skin draped on her back in game--
too rough a robe for such a tender frame.

4

On the other side see the white wavelets spire
in froth-capped crests upon the sea's green field;
see in their midst in double ranks draw nigher
warships and men, gleaming from prow and shield.
The waves flame gold, it seems their martial fire
keeps all Leucadia in one blaze concealed.
Here Caesar's Rome, and Anthony's Orient there --
Egypt, Arabia, India—seaward fare.

5

You would say the Cyclades, uprooted, flee
their shores, that mountains with great shocks collide--
so great the force when galleys on that sea
come to encounter, towering side by side.
Now torches fly, now darts; now tragedy
strews ocean with strange slaughter far and wide.
Yet look! (while neither way the scales yet lean),

look there! she flees, the great barbarian queen!

6

And Anthony, does he flee too? being so near
world dominance, dares he leave that hope behind?
He does not flee, no, feels not fear--not fear,
but the lure of her who flees and draws his mind.
See how he groans to know that he is here
at once by love, by shame, by wrath made blind,
gazing in turn, now at the cruel fight
that hangs in doubt, now at the sails in flight.

7

Then, sheltered in the channels of the Nile
he waits for death, upon her lap prostrate;
delighting in her lovely face, his smile
showing him reconciled to his hard fate.
With such designs the sculptor's burr and file
made rich the metal on the royal gate.
The warrior pair, having withdrawn their gaze
from this fair show, entered the treacherous maze.

8

As the Meander, with digressive flow
now sinks, now climbs with still redoubling tack,
now rolls his waters toward his wellsprings, now

to sea, and, coming, sees himself come back,
so wildly, wilder still, weave to and fro
these windings; yet the scroll plots every track
(the scroll, gift of the sage) and by its art
resolves their doubts and makes all tangles part.

9

And as they leave behind these mazy spells,
a garden opens in a blithe expanse.
Still ponds and crystal fountains, mossy cells,
bright varied blooms and sundry trees, green plants
of all kinds, sunlit hillocks, shady dells,
forests and caves it offers at one glance;
and (what perfects the pleasure in each part)
the art that makes it never seems like art.

10

You would think (so mixed is negligence with care)
mere nature wrought both ground and broideries.
All seems art made by Nature, everywhere
miming what mimes her but herself to please.
The breeze whereby the sorceress moves the air,
the breeze engenders flowers in the trees.
Near deathless fruit undying blossoms ride,
here budding, and there ripening, side by side.

11

On the same tree, where the same branches twine,
the plump fig near the budding fig grows old.

On the same bough bright apples glow and shine,
some new and green, some ripening to gold.

Aloft, laden with fruit, the twisted vine,
luxuriant in the sun, writhes uncontrolled.

Here grapes sprout green amid the flowers, and here
drip nectar, gilt and garnet, sphere on sphere.

12

Among the green fronds charming birds intone
in tuneful counterpoint their wanton lays.

The green leaves whisper and the soft waves moan,
struck by the murmuring wind in varying ways.

When birds are still, the air descants alone,
and when they sing again, more gently plays;
the tuneful breeze, by chance or art, now sighs
in concert, now in antiphon replies.

13

Among the other birds, one floats and glides
with multicoloured plumes and purple beak,
who moves his tongue in fluent wise and guides
its sounds in language like the one we speak.

So artfully he sings, his speech provides
a prodigy, exotic and unique.

Intent to hear, the rest no longer trill,
and, in mid-air, the whispering winds fall still.

14

“Ah, see,” he sang, “the shamefast, virgin rose
first bursting her green bud so timidly,
half hidden and half bare: the less she shows
herself, the lovelier she seems to be.
Now see her bosom, budding still, unclose
and look! she droops, and seems no longer she--
not she who in her morning set afire
a thousand lads and maidens with desire.

15

“So passes in the passing of a day
the leaf and flower from our mortal scene,
nor will, though April come again, display
its bloom again, nor evermore grow green.
Ah, let us pluck the rosebud while we may.
It all too soon fades from its morning sheen.
Let us pluck the rose today, to love and burn
while we can love, and be loved in return.”

16

Then he is still, and the whole choiring band
of birds, as in assent, once more begin.
The doves kiss with redoubled kisses, and
each beast takes thought some loving mate to win.
It seems the hard oak and chaste laurel stand
entranced amid their spreading, leafy kin.
It seems all earth and waves and skies above
breathe the sweet scents and the sweet sighs of love.

17

Amid such tender music, past delights
so false to heed, so flattering to see,
unmoved and constant, wander the two knights
hardened to pleasure's lure and fancy-free.
Lo! between branch and branch meanwhile their sights
pierce through the gloam and see, or seem to see,
then clearly see the lover and his lass,
he lying in her lap, she on the grass.

18

Her veil parts at her bosom, and her hair,
loosed to the warm breeze, lets it ringlets dance.
She swoons in his caress, cheeks flushed and bare,
while silver beads of sweat their charms enhance.
Like sunlight on a wave, a smile plays there

and trembles glistening in her wanton glance.

She hangs over him, and from his resting place

in her soft lap he looks up at her face,

19

and feeds on it with ravenous surmise,

consumed and quite undone by that fair sight.

She leans down, now drinks kisses from his eyes,

now with her lips sucks up their sweet delight,

And at that moment he so deeply sighs

you would think: "Now is his whole soul taking flight,

a pilgrim to her heart." Hidden away,

the champion pair observe this amorous play.

20

There hung (strange armour!), shining in its frame,

a crystal mirror by the lover's knee,

and now he lifts it to his rising dame,

her chosen servant in Love's mystery.

With laughing eyes she, he with eyes aflame,

one object both in diverse objects see.

For her the glass displays herself; for him

her limpid eyes with Love's own image brim.

21

In slavery one, the other in mastery

glories, she in herself, and he in her.

“Turn,” said the knight, “ah! turn,” he said, “on me

those eyes that bliss on other men confer!

For though you know it not, my fires shall be

of all your beauties the true portraiture.

Their form and all their marvels in my breast

better than in your mirror lie expressed.

22

“If you disdain me, ah! at least behold

your own face where all joys and graces reign.

For your gaze, though to other objects cold,

will take delight, turned on itself again.

No mirror can so sweet a sight enfold,

nor a small glass all paradise contain.

The only mirror worth you is the sky,

whose stars reflect your loveliness on high.”

23

Armida smiles to hear, but keeps her gaze

fixed on herself, love’s labours to behold.

Her locks she braided and their wanton ways

in lovely order marshalled and controlled.

She wound the curls of her fine strands with sprays

of flowers, like enamel worked on gold,

and made the stranger rose join with her pale
breast's native lily, and composed her veil.

24

No peacock in his pride so bravely shows
his pomp of plumes in myriad-eyed display.
No rainbow in such purple, gold and rose
with arched and dew-wet bosom greets the day.
But more than all her trim her girdle glows,
that even when nude she never puts away.
Girt in it, she makes shapes where there are none,
and blends what no man else may blend in one.

25

Kind scorns, placid repulses, tranquil change,
glad reconciliations, jest and game,
eloquent smiles, sweet outbreaks, the whole range
of tears, soft kisses, sighs that went and came--
all these she fused in compounds rare and strange,
and tempered them in a slow fire's flame,
and formed of them that magic zone she placed
and ever kept around her lovely waist.

26

At last she breaks her contemplation, asks
leave of him, kisses him, and soon departs.

So every day she leaves for her own tasks
and pores upon her book of magic arts.
He stays, since from the realm where now he basks
he is not free to visit other parts.
He strolls, alone with beasts and trees, all day--
a hermit lover while she stays away.

27

But when the dark with friendly silences
calls wary love to stolen bliss once more,
they spend their glad nocturnal hours in these
gardens beneath one roof, even as before.
But now when, bent on graver offices,
Armida closed her blissful bower's door,
the pair, hid in the brush till then, stepped out,
to face him, armoured proudly, bold and stout.

28

As the fierce courser, who from war's ordeal
has been removed victorious, and is found,
a stud in vile repose and down-at-heel,
ambling ungirt through herds and pasture ground,
when roused by a trumpet blast or glint of steel,
at once veers, loudly neighing, toward the sound,
longs for the lists and a rider on his back,

to meet once more the shock of the attack;

29

even so the youth responded when the gleam
of weapons of a sudden struck his eyes.

His warlike soul, where ardour ruled supreme,
that glimmer all at once now caused to rise,
long though it languished in its drunken dream
of pampered ease in pleasure's paradise.

Hubald meanwhile stands facing him to wield,
raising it toward his face, the adamant shield.

30

He on the bright escutcheon turns his gaze,
that shows what kind of man he has become
and how finely decked out. Sweet perfume plays
the wanton in his hair and cloak. Struck dumb,
he sees his sword, his very sword, ablaze
with womanish gauds, to luxury succumb.

Adornment makes it seem a useless toy,
not the fierce tool a soldier might employ.

31

Like one whom dismal and protracted sleep
from manic ravings to himself returns,
so he returned to see himself so deep

in sin that, mirrored in that glass, he learns
to drop his gaze, feeling repentance creep
through his whole frame while shame within him burns.
He would have hid himself beneath the seas,
or in a fire, or at earth's core found ease.

32

And now Hubald began to speak: "At war
all Asia now and all of Europe stand.
All who seek glory, all who Christ adore
labour in arms now in the Syrian land.
You only, you, great Berthold's son, here snore,
far from the world, chained on a petty strand.
The call that calls the whole world does not call
(staunch champion of a wench!) to you at all.

33

"What slumber or what sloth has so snuffed out
your worth, what vile compunction so unmanned?
Up! up! hear Godfrey's and the army's shout!
Fortune and Victory await your hand.
Come, destined warrior, bring the end about
to a task so well-begun. Make that vile band,
whom you shook once before, fall down, abhorred,
swept from the earth by your relentless sword."

34

He said no more. The noble youth remained
stock-still a moment, stunned, as in defeat.
But then, as shame gave way and anger gained
(Anger, fierce warrior guarding Reason's seat)
till all his face, by that new fire stained,
blushed redder yet and seethed with yet more heat.
He ripped his robes, his vain gauds, and the rest
of slavery's wretched badges from his breast;

35

and, hasty to be gone, he struggled free
of the labyrinth's tortuous passages and fled.
Armida had by this time come to see
the royal gate's fierce guardian beast lie dead.
She now surmised (and soon knew certainly)
that her dear love was fleeing, or had fled,
then saw him, where (ah bitter sight!) he strode,
a fugitive hurrying from their sweet abode.

36

She tried to cry out: "Will you, cruel man,
leave me alone here?" Pain choked off her cry,
and in her heart the plaintive words began
to echo in a yet more bitter sigh.

Ah, wretched girl! A Wisdom greater than
her wisdom robs her now of all her joy.

She sees it, yet endeavours to detain
him by her magic arts, but all in vain.

37

As many spells as ever, bent on ill,
Thessalian witch with unclean mouth might hiss,
potent to make the wheeling heavens fall still
or to unfetter shades from deepest Dis--
she knew them all, but now they baulk her skill,
and silence answers her from Hell's abyss.
She leaves her demon charms, and tries to press
the mightier charms of beauty in distress.

38

She runs, all honour lost, all decency.
Ah! where are all her boasts and triumphs now?
Love's reign, however powerful he might be,
she made or unmade with nods of her brow,
her scorn so equal to her pride that she
loved to be loved, but spurned the lover's vow.
She pleased herself alone; others she knew
only as proofs of what her eyes could do.

39

Cast off now, scorned, neglected, see her go
in chase of him who flees and spurns her sight,
as though intent to make her tears of woe
adorn the gift of beauty he did slight.

She speeds, heedless of mountain crags and snow,
that bruise her tender footsoles, from her height,
and makes her cries like heralds go before,
nor reaches him till he has gained the shore.

40

Distraught, she cried to him: "Oh you, who take
part of me with you, and leave part behind,
take one or give the other back, or make
both die. Hold, hold your steps! at least to mind
the last fond words of her whom you forsake--
I will not say last kisses--may you find
a worthier mouth. Why, faithless, fear to stay?
You had strength to flee; you have strength to say me nay."

41

And Hubald said then: "It would not seem wrong,
my lord, to await her final overtures.
She comes now, armed with beauty and a tongue
of sweet wail for the harsh fate she endures.
What strength but yours could hear the sirens' song

and, listening to it, overcome their lures,
thus crowning Reason the pacific queen
over all your sense, to grow more fine and keen?”

42

The knight makes pause then, and she joins him, weak,
gasping and tearful, with so sad an air
none sadder could be pictured, none more bleak.

With a look as dolorous as she is fair,
she fixes him; she stares and does not speak,
or scorns to speak, or thinks, or does not dare.

He does not look; or looks at her as though
with furtive gazes, or ashamed, or slow.

43

As a fine singer, before lifting high
his voice to vent a powerful melody,
leads up to it and charms the standers-by
with a sweet prelude in a milder key,
so she does not, for all her soul's outcry,
wholly forget her craft and witchery,
but first prepares the ground by tuneful art
for what the voice imprints within the heart.

44

And then she spoke: “Think not, cruel man, that I

will speak as lover speaks to lover, though
such we once were; and if you now deny
that memory or find it full of woe,
at least attend me as your enemy.

A foe at times hears pleas even from a foe;
surely to hear me now will be an act
that leaves your indignation quite intact.

45

“If you, in hating me, feel pleasure, sate
your hatred now--I'll not object--be glad!
You think it just? Then just it is. I hate
all Christians, yes, and hated you, dear lad.
I was born pagan, and laid traps to abate
your power by such devices as I had.

I hounded you and snatched you up to change
your field of war to realms unknown and strange.

46

“Add to this what you deem your greatest shame,
your worst, your most injurious defeat:
I lied, I lured you till love overcame.
Vile flattery, sure! iniquitous deceit!
to let one's virgin flower be plucked, to tame

a man to kneel at beauty's tyrant feet,
to make a prize, withheld with so much thrift
from a thousand others, one new lover's gift!

47

"Let this then be a lie of mine, to assoil
my crimes, that make you feel so wrought-upon
as to depart and quite detest the soil
that gave you such delight in days bygone.
Go then, traverse the ocean, fight and toil,
destroy our faith: myself will urge you on.
What have I said? Our faith? Ah! mine no more!
You are the cruel idol I adore.

48

"But let me follow; do not banish me.
You are the raptor, do not leave your prey--
a small request, even to an enemy.
When victors go, their captives do not stay.
Make whole your triumph, let your army see
one final trophy on your glorious way.
To scorn your scorner, bid me be displayed,
pointing your finger, your despised handmaid.

49

"Despised handmaid, for whom shall I now save

these curls, since they are worthless in your eyes?

I'll crop them and so make the name of slave
with slavish looks conform and sympathize.

Where fires of battle hottest blaze, I crave
to be with you when war or havoc cries.

I have the courage, have sufficient force
to bear your lance for you, or lead your horse.

50

"I shall be what you like: shield-bearer, shield--
to guard you, I'll not spare myself, nor rest.

This bosom, and this soft, bare neck shall yield
to piercing weapons pointed at your breast

Perhaps, to keep me living on the field,
some cruel infidel will deem it best

to spare you, leaving sweet revenge for this
abandoned beauty's sake, such as it is.

51

"Ah, wretch! Still I presume, still flaunt my dreams
of disprized beauty, profitless to me. . ."

He motions her to say no more, while streams
course down her cheek as from a mountain scree.

She seeks to grasp his hand, his cloak, and seems
a suppliant maiden. Pulling backward, he

struggles a while, then conquers every doubt,
his tears locked in his heart, and Love locked out.

52

Love is locked out, nor lights the ancient flame
in him again (for Reason thwarts its lure),
yet gentle Pity enters all the same,
who ever attends on Love, though chaste and pure,
and stirs him so that he can scarcely tame
the sobs that threaten his discomfiture;
but he curbs the tender urge, and by sheer will
controls his bearing and makes his face grow still.

53

Then he replies: "Armida, your distress
grieves me. Ah! that I might assuage your woe
and ease the unwise ardour you confess!
I feel no hatred, do not scorn you, no!
I seek no vengeance, bear no grudge; much less
wish that you were either my slave or foe.
You strayed, yes, overstepped the mark of late,
by revelling now in love, and now in hate.

54

"What of it? Those are common, human flaws:
Your race, your sex, your youth excuse them all.

I partly failed too. As I wish my cause
to meet with grace, let me not judge your fall.
You'll be with me, whenever I shall pause,
in joy or care, at honoured memory's call.
I am your knight and champion, insofar
as honour and faith permit, and Asia's war.

55

“Ah! let our sin end here, so that no tongue
by publishing our shame give you offence;
and let its memory lie entombed among
these wastes, far from the world's experience.
Of all my deeds, let this deed stay unsung
in Europe and its neighbour continents.
Ah! ask not that a blot both base and lewd
should stain your beauty, worth, and royal blood.

56

“Stay here in peace. It is not fit you may
come with me, for my guide forbids it quite.
Stay here, or freely go some other way,
and calm your counsels in your wisdom's light.”
She, while the warrior speaks, can scarcely stay
still but reels, turbid, restless in his sight.
For a good while she scowls at him, aghast,

then, glowering, cursing, she explodes at last:

57

“Sophia did not bear you, you were not
sprung from that ancient bloodline. You the crazed
sea-surge and ice of Caucasus begot,
or some Hyrcanian tigress nursed and raised.
Why then should I dissemble more? No jot
of human warmth shows here. He stands unfazed.
Does he change colour? No. Or at my woe
at least shed tears? or heave one quick sigh? No.

58

“Should I speak then? or silently endure?
He says he is mine, but leaves me in good time.
The generous victor, of his foe quite sure,
forgets offences, pardons grievous crime.
Hear how he speaks! Hear how this chaste, this pure
Xenocrates makes love with reason rhyme!
O Heaven! O gods! why let such brutes assail
your towers with thunder and deem your temples frail?

59

“Well, go then, cruel man, in as much peace
as that you leave me here! Go, wretch! go now!
Soon shall you find my naked spirit seize

upon your track, a vengeful ghost, I vow.
I'll haunt you as I loved, without surcease,
a blazing fury crowned with serpent brow.
And should you chance to escape the sea nor yield
your corpse to wrack, but reach the battlefield,

60

“there, sprawling in your gore among the slain,
you'll pay, false knight, for all the wrongs I bear.
You'll call Armida's name, again and again,
with your last gasps: that's what I hope to hear.”

Breath failed the doleful woman, and in vain
she strove to finish all she would declare,
but swooned away, feeling a cold sweat rise
all over her, and fell, and closed her eyes.

61

You closed your eyes, Armida. Destiny
envied all ease to your tormented soul.
Open your eyes, poor girl! Do you not see
your enemy shed tears without control?
Ah! could you hear them now, how dear would be
the sighs he breathes, how they might make you whole!
He gives you what he can (though you deny),
a pitying gaze, and looks his last goodbye.

62

What will she do now? Should he on these bare
sands leave her between life and death or stay?

His courtesy, his pity hold him there,
but hard necessity bears him away.

He turns, and gentle zephyrs fill the hair
of the escort who awaits him in the bay.

Over the deep her golden sail speeds on.

She gazes shoreward, and the shore is gone.

63

When, coming to, Armida came to know
the desert waste and silence all about,

“Is he gone then,” she said, “and could he go
and thus forsake me with my life in doubt?

no moment’s stay, not one brief aid bestow,
traitor, in my extremity? not hear me out?

And yet, do I still love him? Should I keep
this shore and, unavenged, sit down and weep?

64

“What more have tears to do with me? Have I
no other arts, no other weapons then?

I will pursue him; no place, neither sky
nor the abyss, shall see him safe again.

Ah! now I find him, seize him, rip his heart, hang high
his scattered limbs to caution cruel men.

He excels in cruelty? I too can play
that game. But where am I? What's this I say?

65

“Wretched Armida, you should not have waited
to afflict (as he deserved) that cruel knight.

while he was in your chains; but now belated
hatred inflames your laggard wrath and spite.

Yet unless beauty and craft are unrelated,

I am not weak, if wit and will unite.

The task, O my spurned beauty, calls for you:

yours is the injury; the revenge, your due.

66

“That beauty is the prize I shall bestow

on him who severs the detested head.

Come then, O all my famous lovers! Lo!

hard is the task, but glory lies ahead.

Come, share my throne: a single vengeful blow

will make you partner of my wealth and bed.

If I'm not worth the purchase or the pain,

Nature bestowed my beauty's gift in vain.

67

“Unhappy gift, I spurn you. I detest
my crown, my life, my birth, my very will
to stay alive—all dross. Only the quest
for sweet revenge can keep me living still.”

Her wrath in broken phrases thus expressed,
she leaves the abandoned beach and turns uphill,
a fury crazed, shaking in all her frame,
with hair blown loose, eyes blazing, face aflame.

68

Back in her lodgings, with a horrid spell
she conjured up three hundred gods of Dis.
Black clouds obscure the sky at once and swell.
Day’s great undying star grows pale at this.
Storms smite and smother the high crags, while Hell
begins to mutter at her feet and hiss.
Throughout the palace, you can plainly hear
snarls, howls, groans, bellows raging far and near.

69

Shades blacker than black night, in which no ray
of light is mixed, come surging everywhere,
except where brief and glimmering flashes play
in the profound gloom with a fitful glare.
At last the darkness ends and pallid day

returns; but gone now is the balmy air,
the palace gone, with not a trace to cause
a man to say: "Yes, this is where it was."

70

As in mid-air a huge cloud-shape is shown
at times, but not for very long displayed,
melted by sunlight, or by swift winds blown,
or as dreams by a sick man fashioned fade,
those buildings vanished. There remained alone
the mountains and the frosts that nature made.
Then on her chariot ever standing by
she takes her seat and rises to the sky.

71

She treads the clouds and parts the winds in flight,
while storms and roaring whirlwinds round her shake,
then skirts the distant realms of polar night,
leaving their unknown dwellers in her wake,
passes Alcides' Straits, keeps out of sight
both Spain's and Mauritania's gates, to take
on high above the sea's expanse her course
until she comes at last to Syria's shores.

72

From there she neither seeks Damascus nor

the sight of her once-cherished homeland craves,
but guides her chariot to the barren shore
where her great palace stands amid the waves.
Arrived, she finds a covert, shuts the door,
forbids her presence to her maids and slaves,
and walks in fitful thought from path to path;
but soon her sense of shame gives way to wrath.

73

“I, too, shall go,” says she. “Before the king
of Egypt moves the armies of the East,
I’ll use all arts, transform to anything
uncouth that suits my purpose, man or beast,
wield bow or sword, be the hireling
of kings to make them quarrel. Thus at least
I shall exact what poor revenge I may.
Nor Honour, nor Respect shall bar my way.

74

“As for my guardian uncle, let him blame
himself, whose high will made me acquiesce.
Through him my great soul and my frail sex came
in tawdry roles to posture and transgress.
He spurred my ardour, he drowned out my shame,
and made me act the damsel in distress.

On his account be all that I of late
did out of love, and now do out of hate.”

75

And, pondering thus, she gathers hastily
her knights, maids, pages, sergeants everyone,
and in their robes and gorgeous pageantry
displays her art and royal state. This done,
she sets out on her way precipitately,
and never sleeps or rests by moon or sun
till she arrives where gathering hordes of war
cover the sands of Gaza’s sunlit shore.