

The Mind is its Own Place: Torquato Tasso and Romantic Heroism

In the following I will contend that the Romantic use of Torquato Tasso, in Goethe's eponymous dramatic work, Byron's *Lament of Tasso*, and Shelley's *Julian and Maddalo*, is an essential—often overlooked—archetype of the Romantic hero, and that such a model reveals to us a common theme of the Romantic ideal: the (at times) semi-autobiographical characterization of the despondent, yet triumphant, heroic artist conquering his own suffering. Tasso's image conforms, in all three works (though with notable distinctions) to the portrait of the artist as a duality; ever at war are these contrasts, between spirit and flesh, duty and passion, and in an undeniably Rousseauvian vein, *amour propre* and *amour de soi*. By further exploring these specific thematic elements, the image of Tasso the Romantic hero will be ever more apparent. Doing so requires that we first define this heroic archetype *per se*, in order that we may identify such characteristics in the three appropriations of Tasso the poet, his adaptation into the Romantic epoch.

The Romantic hero is in its essence a dichotomy; he is, on the one hand a semi-autobiographical—verging at times on solipsistic—representation of the artist's complex relationship with his surroundings. So too is this character sufficiently distant from his creator—an unattainable ideal. Whether Childe Harold, Shelley's maniac from *Julian and Maddalo*, or indeed Tasso himself, we observe in the hero of the verse such characteristics not totally alien to his creator, though only a vague projection: a retreat into the idyllic. Indeed, this point has not been lost on biographers of the Romantics, who often see, for example, in verse a blurred reflection of the poet's essence. Hippolyte Taine takes this view with respect to Byron, explaining that the hero is visceral, yet sublime; Byron idealizes the poet, yet still preserves in his hero a sort of tragic blemish, which reminds us that he is all-too human. In Taine's words, "Byron's hero is always a man striving with the worst anguish, face to face with shipwreck, torture, death—his own painful and prolonged death, the bitter death of his well-beloved, remorse for his companion, amidst the gloomy prospects of a threatening eternity, with no support but native energy and hardened pride."¹ Taine's observation rings true, certainly, of Byron and Shelley, of the imprisoned maniac, and of course Torquato Tasso.

Torquato Tasso, written in the late 1780s during Goethe's time in Italy, possesses qualities emblematic both of pre-*Sturm und Drang* German drama, and an early Romanticism influenced greatly by the arrival of Shakespeare in Weimar. The work, externally, conforms *in toto* to the Neoclassical, Aristotelian dramatic constructs—a French import—which Storm and Stress would eventually challenge, and phase out. The work's primary dramatic mechanism, meanwhile, is the conflict that arises between Tasso's desires—namely for love and his creative agency as an artist—and his duty as a subject of the Court. Tasso's mania results ultimately in his confinement, though it is at this point that Goethe's drama breaks off. Should we read this allegorically, the ending suggests that the vision alluded to—the pseudo-Romantic—has not yet found fertile ground with which to fully blossom. No less,

¹ Hippolyte Taine, N. Van Laun (trans.), *History of English Literature, Vol. II (2 Vols.)*, (New York: William L. Allison Company, 1895), p. 363.

Goethe's treatment of Tasso is an essential precursor to the later Romantic works of Byron and Shelley. One senses that Tasso is in Goethe's work a Romantic poet, yearning to be free, yet still constrained by the etiquette of the Court. To read this as an allegorical representation of German national theatre on the eve of *Sturm und Drang*, gives the work agency within the early, or proto-Romantic canon. And further, like German theatre would soon after be liberated in no small part by the influence of England's greatest dramatist, so too would Tasso, by the likes of Byron and Shelley. It is therefore important that we begin by exploring in greater depth Torquato Tasso as *becoming* a Romantic hero.

The Romantic elements of Goethe's *Tasso*, as previously explained, are those parts of the drama that most clearly elucidate the suffering in which the great poet feels himself engrossed. Tasso's development as a (proto) Romantic hero becomes clear, principally, as a function of his ostracism. Before Tasso's entry onto the stage, we are informed, however vaguely, of his disdain for the Court, as Don Alfonso observes 'It's an old fault in him that he seeks out Solitude rather than society.'² It is clear that Alfonso thinks Tasso's character enigmatic (though he seems indifferent, even disinterested in this fact). At the very least, Alfonso simply cannot understand the artist before him. Features of the play's formal dramatic structure—namely those events unrelated to Tasso's thought or mental state—are relics of the Neoclassical. Don Alfonso's evident lack of understanding of Tasso's unconventional behavior results from his internalization of courtly mores. In other words, Alfonso views Tasso's behavior through the lens of court society, which prevents any greater comprehension of Tasso's misery. Soon thereafter Goethe introduces the poet, and the Romantic sense of the drama supersedes the neoclassical. In the opening scene of Act II, Tasso engages in a futile attempt to explain to princess Leonora his feelings:

And thoughts that lack all reason and proportion
In my poor head are jostling one another.
It seems that solitude beckons, lispings at me
Alluringly, as though to tell me: Come,
I will dissolve those newly stirred up doubts.³

Leonora's response, unsurprisingly, is a mix of genuine compassion and, as with the other members of the Court, utter confusion. But how could one expect an entrenched member of the nobility—which Goethe appears to favor over the artist—to grasp the artist's melancholy? Tasso is in conflict with the very social order of which the princess is a member, making any resolution to the play's conflict almost inconceivable. In this respect, as one scholar has noted, "Goethe's sympathetic portrayal of the Court lets the reader see how Tasso's indulgence in his private feelings create havoc when they impose upon the feelings and needs of

² Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Michael Hamburger (translator), 'Torquato Tasso', in *The Essential Goethe*, ed. by Matthew Bell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 170 (I; II, 244-5).

³ *Ibid.* p. 182 (II; I, 751-5).

others. This Tasso is not a heroic individualist; he is childish, petulant, and egoistic.”⁴ This, in other words, is precisely why Goethe’s Tasso is not the Romantic hero of Byron and Shelley, but far closer to Werther, albeit more intense and subjective.⁵ By juxtaposing poet with Court in precisely this fashion, so redolent of *ancien régime* values, it is difficult to judge the former in a favorable light. Tasso appears irrational, even malicious when, for example, he challenges Antonio to a duel for what is at most a slight indiscretion. Despite the shortcomings of setting, Tasso is perhaps closer to a Romantic hero *avant la lettre* than to a Neoclassical malcontent. Were he a knight or prince, we might find his likeness in one of Corneille’s tragedies, but it is his status as an artist that sets him in a new paradigm. The play ends on a semi-conciliatory tone. Tasso makes amends with Antonio, yet his inner conflict is left unresolved:

The boards beneath me split
Wide open, leave me with no foothold, none,
With both my arms I clutch at you, Antonio.
So in the end will a poor boatman cling
To the same rock on which he was to founder.⁶

Ultimately, Goethe leaves Tasso on the fringe of the Romantic, trapped still in the dramaturgically *passé*, pre-Shakespearean Germany. The poet’s individualism must be fully realized in order to unfetter his *dæmon*, even if the consequence of creative liberation, in this case, is his relegation to iron chains and the stone-walled oubliette. It is with Goethe’s Romantic successors—Shelley and Byron—that we will see Tasso elevated to a Romantic ideal, becoming the heroic model latent within Goethe’s dramatic formalism.

In an April, 1817 letter to his friend Thomas Moore, Byron expressed his desire to visit Tasso’s cell in Ferrara, “to see the place where he [Tasso] went mad.”⁷ Madness would be central to Byron’s *Lament of Tasso*, completed around a week after his letter to Moore. The work is akin to a dramatic soliloquy—profoundly reflective—and to an extent surpassing even the most introspective of Goethe’s verses, explores the poet’s psychological condition. From the outset, Byron’s Tasso, that ‘eagle-spirit of a child of song’, bemoans his

⁴ Regina Hewitt, ‘Torquato Tasso—A Byronic Hero?’, *Neophilologus*, 71 (1987), p. 433.

⁵ Nicholas Saul, ‘Aesthetic humanism’, in *The Cambridge History of German Literature*, ed. by Helen Watanabe O’Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 214.

⁶ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Michael Hamburger (translator), ‘Torquato Tasso’, in *The Essential Goethe*, ed. by Matthew Bell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 248 (V; V, 3441-5).

⁷ Lord Byron, ‘Letter to Thomas Moore’, 11 April, 1817, in Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron IV*, ed. by Rowland E Prothero (London: John Murray, 1900), p. 103.

Long years of outrage, calumny, and wrong;
Imputed madness, prison'd solitude,⁸

The first Canto is entirely an expression of Tasso's psycho-emotional state; he suffers alone, yet stoops 'not in despair.'⁹ Whereas Goethe's drama evokes a sense of pity for Tasso, here we observe his resilience amid the torment. However little he reveals in the first Canto of the source of Tasso's suffering, Byron's intention is to illuminate the darkest recesses of Tasso's mind, to present a sense of his suffering, without explaining all of its causes. The poet's resilience in face of the pressures of society is certainly characteristic of the Byronic hero; this manifestation is what Peter Thorslev calls the 'agonized hero of sensibility'. One such historical model for this sort of hero is Rousseau, who at once bemoans his ostracism from society—*Me voici donc seule*, so begins the opening plaint of *Les Rêveries d'un Promeneur Solitaire*—while simultaneously maintaining his proud defiance: *ils ne m'empêcheront pas de jouir de mon innocence et d'achever mes jours en paix malgré eux*.¹⁰ In a similar manner, Tasso in the *Lament* declares,

I loved all solitude, but little thought
To spend I know not what of life, remote
From all communion with existence, save
The maniac and his tyrant¹¹

We find use of a number of Rousseau's motifs and ideas throughout Byron's *œuvre*, and while there are certainly echoes of Rousseau in the *Lament*, they reach their pinnacle in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*, published subsequently. Thematically, there are some similarities between Tasso and Harold, which Byron establishes by his use of the poet's prison cell: 'A palace and a prison on each hand'. As it was for his friend Shelley, Byron's visit to the prison hospital was profoundly moving, cathartic even. By this point in the development of Romanticism, Tasso's transformation is complete. He is, within this artistic milieu, a model to hearten and console these melancholic poets.

Although Byron's *Lament* is not a panegyric, and entirely distinct in genre from, for example, Shelley's *Adonais*, the two works share a tragic tone as they muse on the loss of something dear. Though where Shelley sings the memory of his deceased friend, Byron's focus is the poet's loss of his creative agency, as in Canto IV:

Who have debased me in the minds of men,
Debarring me the usage of my own,

⁸ Lord Byron, 'The Lament of Tasso', in Lord Byron, *Poetical Works*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 367 (I, 2-4).

⁹ *Ibid*, (I, 20).

¹⁰ See: Peter Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 35-50.

¹¹ Lord Byron *The Lament of Tasso*, p. 369 (VII, 173-7).

Blighting my life in the best of its career,
Branding my thoughts as things to shun and fear?¹²

As is true of Byron's earlier *Childe Harold*, the author projects his own anxieties upon the hero, though it is only in overcoming the source of torment that we can identify the character as heroic. The Byronic hero is at least semi-autobiographical; according to Thorslev, Byron not only projects upon his works a self-reflective component, but even becomes in some ways like his characters. Tasso in this case, might conform to such an idea; by overcoming his circumstances, he is a surrogate for both the poet in the abstract, and Byron in particular.¹³

Like Byron, Shelley's time in Italy inspired in him the desire to compose a work dealing with Tasso's confinement at St. Anna. Shelley's visit to the prison seems to have had a profound, even spiritual impact on the poet. This we see in a November 1818 letter to his friend Thomas Love Peacock. Shelley describes the dungeon in which Tasso was for seven years confined:

The dungeon is low and dark... But it is a horrible abode for the coarsest and meanest thing that ever wore the shape of man, much more for one of delicate susceptibilities and elevated fancies. It is low, and has a grated window, and being sunk some feet below the level of the earth, is full of unwholesome damps. In the darkest corner is a mark in the wall where the chains were riveted, which bound him hand and foot.¹⁴

Shelley spent a great deal of time in the months prior to this letter preparing a dramatic work inspired by Tasso's imprisonment. In April 1818, Shelley informed Thomas Jefferson Hogg of his preparations therefore, claiming 'such a subject would suit English poetry.'¹⁵ The drama seems to have been abandoned soon thereafter, and is extant in fragments only. However, Shelley did not discard the subject; Tasso was to become a Romantic ideal—a maniac.

As the poem's subtitle implies, *Julian and Maddalo* is a conversation, written in heroic couplets, inspired by conversations between Shelley and Byron. The introduction of the maniac shifts the focus from Julian and Maddalo's philosophical discourse to the maniac's lament, his explication of his condition. Though we are never told so explicitly in the poem, the maniac is a legendary, almost mythical representation of Tasso. Indeed, Tasso was the ideal model for such a representation because, according to C.P. Brand, he endured an elusive, unrequited

¹² Lord Byron *The Lament of Tasso*, p. 368 (IV; 96-9).

¹³ Peter Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 11. See also: Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially p. 42-3).

¹⁴ 'Percy Shelley Letter to Thomas Love Peacock, 9 November, 1818', in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley Vol. II*, ed. by Roger Ingpen (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1909), p. 635-6.

¹⁵ 'Percy Shelley Letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, 30 April, 1818', *Ibid.*, p. 600.

love, suffered through political oppression, “maintaining his dignity and essential nobility of heart... the hypersensitive creative artist at odds with society, wandering restlessly from court to court or chained in a lunatic’s cell.”¹⁶ So too is the maniac—like Tasso—a heroic ideal of Shelley himself. Consider the following, from the maniac’s ‘soliloquy:

It were
A cruel punishment for one most cruel,
If such can love, to make that love the fuel
Of the mind’s hell; hate, scorn, remorse, despair:
But *me*—whose heart a stranger’s tear might wear
As water-drops the sandy fountain-stone,
Who loved and pitied all things, and could moan
For woes which others hear not, and could see
The absent with the glance of phantasy,
And with the poor and trampled sit and weep,
Following the captive to his dungeon deep¹⁷

We are at once struck by the theme of love; it appears to be a great source of suffering—‘the fuel of the mind’s hell’—and it is all very personal, ‘woes which others hear not’. Perhaps, should we accept Alan Weinberg’s explanation, because the maniac’s lines “had some basis in human experience, Shelley’s own, or Byron’s, or that of Tasso.”¹⁸

As the 19th century progressed, Tasso’s status diminished—though not completely—as a model of the Romantic hero, and a reflection of those artists for whom this model was once appealing. Though the Byronic hero would prove to be perhaps the most important literary type of the century, it was from Childe Harold and other works, not from Tasso, that this influence derived. Perhaps two generations of Romantic poets sufficed to thoroughly develop the Tasso archetype, and it had reached its logical literary conclusion. As we have observed in this progression, Tasso begins as a proto-Romantic, quasi-hero in Goethe’s drama, and evolves to become, in effect, a quintessentially Romantic ideal of the poet, as in Shelley’s *Julian and Maddalo* or Byron’s *Lament*. Though his renown has greatly waned, Tasso must nevertheless be recognized as seminal in the development of European Romanticism. Modern readers, who may never have read a single verse of Tasso, are nevertheless exposed to his fate of circumstance, and his heroic triumph.

¹⁶ C.P. Brand, *Torquato Tasso: A Study of the Poet and His Contribution to English Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 205.

¹⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Julian and Maddalo’, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 131 (439-48).

¹⁸ Alan M. Weinberg, *Shelley’s Italian Experience*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 47.

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