

THE MADNESS OF TASSO

BY BURGER R. HEADSTROM

IT was in his early manhood that Tasso first began to exhibit signs of that strange mental infirmity which later was to give definition to the remaining years of his life. A ceaseless pursuit for pleasure, the distractions of a gay court life and the exacting duties of a courtier, a passion for knowledge that demanded gratification, and an ambition for fame which he had not as yet attained, were bound to have a serious effect on a brain already overtaxed by excessive study, and weakened by that Italian fever so prevalent among the marshes where he lived, and to which he had succumbed. Furthermore, his brain was on fire with the *Gerusalemme*. And Tasso, imaginative and emotional, was vain and self-centered; believing that he was the center of everyone's attention, it was not long before he began to believe that everyone was plotting against him. Becoming discontented with Alfonso, with the court, with Ferrara, he became restless and irresolute, and began to find the last three cantos of the *Gerusalemme* difficult to finish. And as the power and activity of the Inquisition increased, a new worry entered Tasso's soul; he became fearful of what the religious censors might say of his poem:—he even feared lest it should be suppressed.

This occupation with ecclesiastical authority did little to soothe Tasso's troubled mind. Always attentive to religious observance, he began to fear for the safety of his own soul; and though he had never questioned the beliefs of the Church, there had been moments when he had wondered at them. On the advice of the Duke, he departed for the delightful villa of Belriguardo for change and quiet. But his condition did not improve there; instead, he was visited by "horrible soundings of the last trump, and saw God sitting in the clouds, and heard Him say, 'Depart, ye accursed, into everlasting fire! And,'" he writes, "this terror pressed on me so heavily that I

could not but confide in some friend or acquaintance, and, if I failed to confess any sin, however, trivial, from forgetfulness or shame, I used to repeat the confession to a priest over and over, as well as the general confession."

Tormented by such religious doubts, continually worried by the criticisms addressed to his still unpublished poem, beset on every side by jealousies, surrounded by false friends, and always having to dance attendance on the princes and ladies, Tasso's position was not a happy one. He lived in a world of fictitious allurements; beneath a thin veil of polite affectation there lay bitter disappointments, dark secrets, grim tragedies; the polite behaviour was but a hollow mask for angry and violent passions, so vividly portrayed by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

A mind already unstable could ill afford to contend with the vexing problems such a life offered. And Tasso's critics were often unjustly severe. As much as he would alter the poem, he always failed to please them, until finally his own conscience became troubled. He began to suspect that certain passages would never pass the Inquisition, and to remove them would be to impair the beauty of the poem. He consulted doctors of theology; he sought professors of the darker arts, and the result was a rather fortunate one. For he followed the example of Dante and gave to his poem an allegorical interpretation,—“to secure luck to lovers and incantations, everything that will not stand the hammer shall go overboard.”

As the allegory appealed to the Renaissant mind, Tasso was able by this device to escape the persecutions of his literary enemies, and to silence, as well, all fear of suppression by the Church. But he was not able to escape from the religious doubts which had been produced on his mind by his bitter struggle with his critics. He was more troubled than ever and wished to consult the Inquisition at Rome. But as Ferrara had long been a hot-bed of heresy, and was continually kept under the close surveillance of the Holy See, it was deemed dangerous to allow Tasso, who was fully acquainted with the heretical tendencies of the court, to proceed to Rome; and to make it difficult for him to do so, he was closely watched. To Tasso's mind, already on the verge of insanity, this surveillance was full of foreboding. He began to think he had mortally offended

Alfonso, and that, at any moment, he might be poisoned, or otherwise done away with; he began to suspect he had even offended an implacable Heaven,—that he was guilty of heresy: in fact, his mind became full of wild imaginings. And one evening, while pouring out his delusions to Lucrezia, he suddenly seized a weapon and violently attacked a servitor, the storm, at last, having broken.

It is a rather pitiful spectacle of this courtier, this scholar, "the observed of all observers, quite, quite down," placed in a room whose windows were grilled with iron bars. And for Tasso, there now followed a period of bitter suffering. At the Monastery of San Francesco, to which he was removed, he was wont to "empty himself in confession and break out into a mountain of frenzies. So that he is far worse than ever." But even here he became too much of a responsibility. Always writing to the dreaded Supreme Tribunal of the Inquisition, lest he should make his way thither, he was transferred back to the Castello. But he proved too cunning for his guards for one morning they found his room empty. Over the flat lands of Romagna and the Marches, he wandered, catching the glitter of the Adriatic at times, while on his right stretched range after range of the Apennines. Avoiding the coast towns and seeking shelter in the hamlets that crouched in the valleys, he passed beyond the Gran Sasso, finally reaching the high valley of Aquila, and its ancient capital, Sulmona, the birthplace of Ovid. But still further, he pursued his lonely, melancholy way, following tracks that only the goat-herds traversed, through the wild solitudes of the Abruzzi! And at last, after many weary days of travel, he arrived at Sorrento, where a quiet home, the renewal of family intercourse, and the general tranquillity of life, were favorable to the recovery of mental balance.

Although many of the old illusions faded from him, his mind, unfortunately, became absorbed with new anxieties. He began to worry and fret about the fate of his poem and other manuscripts which he had left at Ferrara, and of the Duke's attitude towards him. And as he was as eager before to escape from Ferrara, he was now as anxious to return. Court life was a necessity to Tasso; he was by birth and training a courtier, and longed for its pomp and glitter, and for the position it gave to a recognized man of letters. He became restless at Sorrento and departed for Naples.

where once again his disordered mind manifested itself, and guided by an impulse went to Rome where he sought the co-operation of some of his friends in restoring him in the good graces of Alfonso.

Tasso's letters at this time reveal a strangely perverted mind; they are full of the subtle, specious sophistry of the insane. Gibbon speaks of the sad malady which affected Tasso's mind without seemingly clouding his genius. In fact, the retention of a great amount of literary power, the flashing of vivid imaginations, combined with a serious mental disorder, astonished his contemporaries and has even puzzled succeeding generations. Tasso's malady never entirely left him, although at times his mental darkness was broken into by gleams of light, when his imagination took flight as of yore and traversed an unembodied world. But his fancy gradually lost its richness, became sadder, more tinged with melancholy tenderness; while his creations became less vivid, until they finally sunk to the banality of *Le Sette Giorni*.

Tasso, as he himself has told us, was not content unless he was *primus inter pares*. And at the time of Alfonso's third marriage, when all Ferrara was agog with the bustle and excitement incidental to the great event taking place, the poet's mind had reached the straining point. Slighted by the little notice paid to him by the princes and nobles, whose attention was directed elsewhere, and further excited by the noisy revels, he suddenly burst forth in a state of maniacal fury. He rushes to the palace of the Bentivogli, where he finds only the lady of the house and some other noble dames. He indulges them with a volley of abuse directed against the Duke, the new Duchess, the whole House of Este, and the gentlemen of the court. Then he runs wildly to the Castello. He insists on seeing the Duchess, he demands the return of his manuscripts, he must save his honour from calumny, his enemies conspire to make him out as an heretic—they design his death. The ladies are frightened, they try to soothe him, but he continues to make dreadful accusations, nobody escape his reckless tongue, and certainly not the bride. The Duke is informed, and poor Tasso is carried off to the Hospital of St. Anna, where, in one of the chambers destined for maniacs, he is clapped and chained down, "a ruined piece of nature," his wits quite gone, "a sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch."

Tasso spent seven weary years at Sant'Anna, employing much

of his time in trying to secure his freedom, but in spite of his pitiful appeals "the gate remained shut in his face," and who knows but what he was right when he said it was "enough to make the sanest mad." At times he was very ill; he has terrors by night and hears strange sounds; he sees "the Glorious Virgin and her Son surrounded by a halo of colour, who appeared to me that I might not despair." In his letters, he bitterly complains of his wretchedness, much of which is undoubtedly exaggerated, for, as Grillo tells us, the poet's confinement was due not so much to the harshness as to the affection of the Duke. But in any event, to Tasso, who was extremely religious, the denial of the confession or the sacrament, which were refused to the insane, could not have failed but to have added to his misery.

During the later years of his stay at Sant'Anna, Tasso became less disposed to maniacal attacks; he had found solace in literary activity, in complying with every request for verse and prose, he found an escape from the trial and tedium of incarceration. But his mind gradually grew weaker, and his religious doubts and scruples returned from time to time. Tasso appears to have accepted his fate with that resignation so typical of those men who are the playthings of Destiny.

But the dastardly attack of the pedants on his *Gerusalemme* suddenly made Tasso more anxious than ever to get free; and to this end he appealed to the Pope, the Emperor, the Grand Duke, the Dukes, the Princes, the Cardinals, to every one of quality and reputation whom he could approach, succeeding finally in inducing Vincenzo Gonzaga to plead his case with Alfonso. The Duke was reluctant to give the poet any further freedom than in walking about the streets of Ferrara with an attendant, but finally gave an unwilling sanction with the warning to the Prince to "keep a strict watch, or urged by insane delusion, he will contrive to escape."

But freedom had little to offer Tasso. And at Mantua, where he had gone, he was always more or less ill, for the flat lands reeked with ague, and the slightest disturbance brought on a return of his old mental trouble. He became irresolute and discontented. "I spend my sleep night after night in dreams," he writes, "and the watches of the night are those of a sick man." And as his mental state became worse, he grew restless; he wandered to Bergamo, to

Modena, to Bologna, to Loreto, and finally set out for Rome, to seek the help of Pope Sixtus V, the man least likely of any to aid him.

Tasso's failure to even secure an audience with the Pope, from whom he had hoped for great things, had its effect on the poet's mind; and he became not only an inconvenient visitor but rather an intolerable one, causing his friends, against whom his suspicions became directed, no ends of trouble. They were "busy inventing traps for him," he said, and it was true, for fearing an outbreak of madness they wanted him returned to the Duke, who had only loaned him to Vincenzo, but Alfonso had "no desire to keep that poor man in confinement any longer."

Although his friends did what they could for him, Tasso was at this time very needy. And as his mind and body had been weakened by continual disease, his character likewise had undergone even a worse deterioration. He desired to live like a gentleman, but at the expense of others; he began to write begging letters, in which he asked for much more than he required; he wrote uninspired verses in honour of anyone whom he thought might be of use to him; he even was advised by one of his friends to consult an alchemist to get base metals transmuted into gold. "He is ready," says Cherbuliez, "to sell his wares at fixed prices—he wants so much for glowing laudation, so much to liken you to Hercules, so much for allowing you to figure among the courtly chivalric circle of the twentieth canto of the *Conquistata* that are worthy to be compared with the Titans themselves." He even went so far as to hold it disgraceful for a poet to praise without payment in advance. "nor will I laud a prince under 100 scudi."

This want of means drove Tasso to Naples in an effort to recover the maternal inheritance of which his relatives had defrauded Bernardo. Still proscribed from the Neapolitan kingdom, Tasso managed, with the aid of powerful friends, to find a retreat with the good brethren of the Olivetan body. The monastery, situated high on a cliff, was almost hidden by screw-pines and cypresses; the gardens were full of roses; while the ascent was crowded with olives and vines; and behind lay a narrow little glen at the bottom of which danced the bubbling rivulet that had carved it out. In this beautiful and peaceful retreat, Tasso began to improve both in mind and body; and of the panorama, spread before him, he says

it was as medicine to his soul. The chimes of the vesper bells, mingling with the distant hum of a great population; cowed forms, flitting beneath the fir trees; muttered sounds of prayer, breaking the silence of a starry heaven, or perchance, the light strains of a lute, borne by some passing breeze from the thoughtless world below; the lights of the fisher craft, that glided through the distant darkness, bound some of them for Salerno and Sorrento, and recalling many memories: all served to soothe his weary, perturbed spirit. And in a letter to a friend, he says, "I have returned to a city which, being my native place, ought to be the goal of my wanderings and the resting place for my labours. To my happiness in Naples nothing is wanting, saving your presence and that of Father Angelo Grillo." Yet there was a tinge of sadness to his happiness, for Cornelia was dead, and here reposed the bones of his mother; and in a letter he tells us of a visit to the tomb of Porzia, "of whom the recollection is ever dear, yet full of grief and begetter of fresh sadness."

But soon the old restless discontent seized him; and added to his imaginary trouble was the real one of a law suit. "To make a man perfect," he once said, "three things are needed. They will sharpen his wits quite enough. They are an enterprise of love, an enemy, and a lawsuit. Comacchio gave me the first, Ferrara the second, Naples the third." Tasso returned to Rome, but there he quarrelled with everyone; he went to Florence, but there the summer heats made him ill; he went on a visit to Matteo of Capua, but the Prince, eager that the poet should employ his time writing verses for his lady, did not let Tasso out of his sight; and Tasso complained to Manso, who came and took him away to his own palace. But Tasso was soon again at Rome where decay, both mental and moral, became very apparent. And the old restlessness continued to vex him; he wanted to return to Ferrara, where he wished to lay his bones, but the Duke refused to receive him. Instead, he returned to Naples, where he grew feebler in strength, and on the suggestion of Cinzio once more returned to Rome, where he arrived "in safety" as he says, "but very infirm."

Tasso was lodged at the Vatican, where much was made of him. He was praised by the learned, and everywhere in Italy, voices began to demand that the poet be invested with the laurel wreath.

even as Petrarch had been crowned at Rome some twelve generations before. And Pope Clement, who was favourably disposed towards Tasso, not only gave him an audience, but assigned him a pension and was very gracious to him; and, moreover, consented to the coronation which was confirmed by public acclamation. Tasso, at last, had the world at his feet. But it was too late, for all had come to the man when he was already conscious of the chill approach of death.