

[www.historyfictionfantasy.wordpress.com](http://www.historyfictionfantasy.wordpress.com)

a blog about historical fantasy epic  
inspired by Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*  
in the Hunterian Collections  
by Ioulia Kolovou, PhD student and Hunterian Associate

Wednesday 5 November 2014, The Hunterian Art Gallery



© The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2014.

Torquato Tasso (born Sorrento March 11, 1544 - died outside Rome April 25, 1595) was one of Italy's greatest poets. His heroic epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata* [*The Liberation of Jerusalem, or Jerusalem Delivered*, first English translation 1600] was immensely popular in his time. Tasso suffered much in his life due to mental illness, but his work continued to inspire writers, artists, and musicians long after his death.



© The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2014.

*The Liberation of Jerusalem* is based on historical events, and narrates the conquest of Jerusalem by the Franks during the First Crusade (1096-1099). In that event, various armies from Western Europe set out on a military campaign, at the instigation of Pope Urban II, to recapture Jerusalem, then a part of the Muslim Fatimid Caliphate. The Christian armies under the leadership of Godfrey of Bouillon besieged and overtook Jerusalem in June 1099.



Sp Coll Hunterian Cd.2.1., Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library.

Torquato Tasso uses historical facts as a poet, not as a historian. He transforms historical facts in ways that would serve his poetic purpose: he changes the personalities and sometimes the names of the historical people, he creates new, fictional characters, and he invents enigmatic castles and mysterious islands, merging myth, fantasy, and the classical tradition of Homer and Virgil with the medieval world of the Crusaders and with his own world of the Renaissance. The result is enchanting, like the magical forests and enchanted islands of his imagination.

A heroic epic is all about war. In *The Liberation of Jerusalem* there are battles between Saracens and Christians, as well as single combats between important military characters, including the warrior-maiden Clorinda. Even supernatural powers participate in the struggle, in which Tasso has angels on the side of Christians and devils / mythical monsters on the opposing side, whom he calls ‘the pagans’. Interestingly, all women who fight, and indeed all female characters in the epic are ‘pagans’...



© The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2014



© The Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow 2014

Among the fictional characters of this heroic epic are Rinaldo and Armida, whose doomed love affair is an important diversion in the heroic narrative. Armida is an incredibly beautiful witch, and Rinaldo is the bravest and handsomest hero of all. But, following Achilles, his classical prototype, his wrath and inordinate love of honour will lead him into the clutches of Armida. Ironically the witch will become herself bewitched and fall desperately in love with Rinaldo, only to be abandoned in the end.

Whatever Tasso’s contemporaries made of this story, it proved to have a lasting appeal in the creative imaginations of artists, writers, and composers. The illustrations from the Hunterian Collections are two good examples of this fascination. Many operas, too, were inspired by Tasso’s masterpiece, even in our days (eg. Judith Weir’s *Armida*, as late as 2005!) One of the most beautiful is George Frideric Handel’s *Rinaldo* (1711). At the end of the programme, we will hear a song from this opera, sung by Brianna Robertson-Kirkland, Hunterian Associate from a previous group. This song captures the melancholic beauty of unrequited love and evokes tones of unbearable loss and yearning.



source:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rinaldo\\_\(Handel\)\\_score\\_title\\_page.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rinaldo_(Handel)_score_title_page.jpg)

**To find more about this fascinating story, see the illustrations from the Hunterian Collections, and discuss how historical fiction imaginatively transforms facts and even takes them to the realm of fantasy, follow my blog at [www.historyfictionfantasy.wordpress.com](http://www.historyfictionfantasy.wordpress.com)**