What is tragic about Torrismondo?

Tasso’s only tragedy, begun originally in 1573–4 as Galealto, re di Norvegia and completed in 1586 with the title Il Re Torrismondo, was awaited with great anticipation by the author’s sympathizers in the court of the Este, as well as in Mantova and Rome. The drama was, however, nowhere near the artistic and public success that Tasso’s previous works such as Aminta and Gerusalemme liberata had been, and is generally considered by critics to mark, if not exactly the death knell of his literary genius, the beginning of the declining years of his creativity. In attempting to explain the failure of Torrismondo, critical analysis was, until recently, primarily preoccupied with the role of the incest which takes place between the major characters (presumably since this is the element most obviously linking the work to the classics), and with the nature of the incest itself—whether it should best be classified as the Sophoclean ‘Oedipus’ variety or as inspired by the Phedran myth. From a careful reading, however, it becomes clear that the factor of incest is textually not the tragic determinant, first because it is committed in the total ignorance of both protagonists and secondly because there is no atonement for it in the case of either of them, as would be required by Aristotelian esthetics. In fact, more recently scholars have distanced themselves from the obligatory fascination with the incestuous relationship between Torrismondo and Alvida and have begun to look elsewhere for the drama’s tragic nature, or lack thereof, and for the link between tragedy and catharsis. Whether the importance of incest may have been overexaggerated by critics, or, conversely, if Ramat is correct in assuming that Tasso’s own fear of delving into
the subject is what really causes the failure of the tragedy artistically,\(^5\) the most disconcerting characteristic for the serious reader of *Torrismondo* is that incest and friendship exist essentially as two separate themes (actions), neither of which is sufficiently developed to our satisfaction.\(^6\) The result is that Tasso’s work patently violates the Aristotelian rule of unity of action (as yet far from being discarded as inapplicable by the majority of sixteenth-century Italian playwrights), while at the same time violating most modern criteria for an artistically successful work.

Unlike *Aminta*, an exquisitely balanced experiment with the pastoral form, Tasso’s *Torrismondo*,\(^7\) born of the moral ambiguities of the incipient baroque, contains structural anomalies and dark nuances in style generally attributed to the author’s own troubled psyche at the moment of its genesis, and to the insecurities inherent in the atmosphere of the Counter Reformation affecting all Italian literature of the period. A comparison of the variants between what exists of the first version and the final rendition of this work actually reveals several stylistic usages clearly symptomatic of a gradual slip of Tasso’s artistic criteria into the post-Tridentine sanctum of literary ambivalence.\(^8\) But this alone does not explain the structural ambiguities in the tragedy. Although Aristotle and his faithful sixteenth-century followers had already formulated regulative rules for the tragic genre, *Torrismondo* contains curious departures from the Aristotelian norms, a result of Tasso’s inclusion of epic, or heroic elements, in the plot and structure. The possibility that, inspired by his success with *Aminta*, Tasso was deliberately combining epic and tragic elements in an attempt to create another hybrid with this drama, can most likely be discarded on the grounds that the author would have almost certainly mentioned his intentions in the second *Discorso*, written subsequently to *Torrismondo* and in which he specifically mentions the work as a tragedy (Book Three).

The clues to the non-traditional artistic divergences in this drama can be discerned in Tasso’s treatises. Chronologically, the composition of *Torrismondo* conveniently falls between the author’s earlier *Discorsi dell’arte poetica* (1564–5), in which he had outlined the basic tenets of the epic poem, and the more complete and mature version, *Discorsi sul poema eroico* (1587), in which he developed these tenets in greater detail. He not only discusses them in comparison to tragedy (especially in the second *Discorso*), but also accepts the pedagogical esthetics paving the way to the “vero meraviglioso” (“true marvel”),\(^9\) substituting his youthful insistence on “dilettosa verisimiglianza” (“delightful verisimilitude”), and the poetics of “magnificenza” (“magnificence”), later emphasized at the expense of the lyrical impulses more typical of his youthful writings. That Tasso, in the *Discorsi del poema eroico* declares himself essentially irresolute as to his preference between the epic poem and tragedy (Book Six), need in no way change our conviction that they afford the best documented explanation for the structural failures of *Torrismondo*; a careful study of them in fact reveals that he clearly prefers the heroic poem
over tragedy, for all his reticence in saying so outright.

Tasso discusses the importance of both love and pure friendship in his *Discorsi del poema eroico*, but only as regards their presence in the epic poem ("Insomma, l’amore e l’amicizia sono convenevolissimo soggetto del poema eroico," 107 ["In short, love and friendship are subjects entirely suitable for the heroic poem," 48]). He discusses only love, however, within the context of the tragedy:

E se gravissima è la tragedia, niun’altra poesia avrebbe maggior bisogno che la sua soverchia severità fosse temperata con la piacevolezza d’amore. (2.105)

[And if tragedy is extremely serious, no other kind [of poetry] has more need to temper its supreme severity with the delightfulness of love. 46–7]

Tasso fails to mention friendship within the scope of tragedy. Since he does not, we are led to suspect that the decisive role it plays in *Torrismondo* does, in fact, reflect a preference on the part of the author for the epic poem over tragedy.

At the same time, Tasso’s fragile emotional state at this moment in his life must also be given due consideration when evaluating the drama. The clearly autobiographical verses cited from the work at the beginning of this study provide more than merely an echo of the plight of every court poet of the times; Tasso composed the work a year after his release following a seven-year detention in the Ospedale di Sant’Anna in Ferrara, where he had been committed for a progressively depressed mental state which had led to rather outrageous action on his part towards his protectors, the Duke and Duchess of Este. Whatever happened to the author during this painful period covering the moment of composition of his tragedy most likely affected the nature of the work itself, and in this case it appears likely that a personal experience may very well have subconsciously enhanced the author’s latent preferences for certain aspects of the epic poem over tragedy. It is my contention, however, that, while Tasso’s psychological state when he composed the work appears to have influenced the structural weakness that determine its failure as a tragic work, the unfortunate decisions which the author made in composing it can be traced to his preference for the epic poem and to his creation, subconscious though it may have been, of characters which would be more suitable to an epic poem than they are to a tragedy. My analysis will attempt to put the divergent artistic threads of the *Torrismondo* fabric in perspective through a discussion of the text of the tragedy and the related tenets which Tasso lays out in his two treatises.

Tasso finished *Torrismondo* during the first year of freedom after Sant’Anna. But his freedom, far from untethered, was conditioned on his transfer to Mantua under the supervision of the Duke of Mantua and menaced by the constant threat (at least as perceived by Tasso) of the possibility of a forced
return to Ferrara and prison. His only real personal relationship during this time was with the secretary to the Florentine ambassador in Ferrara, Antonio Costantini.\textsuperscript{11} The friendship with Costantini, who, beginning with the last months of the author’s confinement, attended to Tasso’s every personal and professional need, seems to have been the only constant in his life during the year in which he composed \textit{Torrismondo}. The almost exclusive nature of this relationship for Tasso, as evidenced by a continuous and copious correspondence, has to be seen as setting the stage for a thorough understanding of the strange priority which the author gives to the friendship between the two male protagonists in the tragedy; he never elaborates either relationship, although the former was the most important one in his life while he was writing \textit{Torrismondo}, and the latter, the most important component of the tragedy itself. The parallel between the two indicates a strong link between Tasso’s personal and artistic lives which clearly must temper our ability to successfully fathom the conception of this work (though I hasten to assure the reader that any considerations of a Freudian nature will not be entertained in the context of this study). Nonetheless, just as it may be assumed that Tasso’s psychological state makes itself felt throughout the drama, another inner struggle between traditional norms and his own preference for the epic poem are evident at several points of the development of the \textit{pièce}, and any attempt to explain the artistic failure of \textit{Torrismondo} by psychological factors must at any rate look for the structural results of those factors in the work itself.

At the onset of the drama, the reader is confronted with the inner torment of Alvida,\textsuperscript{12} confused by Torrismondo’s coldness towards her and by his friendship with Germondo, king of Sweden. The reasons underlying the friendship between Torrismondo and Germondo are never clarified, although they have led the former to travel to Norway for the latter, in order to woo and, in so doing, to betray Alvida and her father prior to the beginning of the action of the drama. The use of this type of ambiguous situation is not atypical with Tasso; in his epic poem \textit{Gerusalemme liberata},\textsuperscript{13} completed in 1575, he skillfully constructs several of them in order to establish romantic links between enemy camps (Armida and Rinaldo, Erminia and Tancredì). The delineation of these figures and the relationships in which they become involved underline the author’s unwillingness to take sides in his epic, and in the more general sense, to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong. Though this strategy is appropriate to the epic poem, in which we are not called upon to judge the hero morally, it is out of place within the parameters of a tragedy, where such fence-straddling thwarts the purpose of the genre; the ambiguities which would have made all three characters suitable for \textit{Gerusalemme liberata} make them unsatisfactory for a vehicle such as \textit{Torrismondo}, where the lack of the example they alone could have furnished for the distinction between right and wrong in the end muddles our ability to understand the work’s process of catharsis.
Given Tasso's success with his pastoral play *Aminta*, an intentional attempt at something experimental with this tragedy would not in principle have been surprising. By the time he wrote it, dramatists of his age were no longer entirely satisfied with the spontaneity and linearity of the ancient models. Literally all Italian tragedians unanimously concurred, as their works reveal, with what Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio had said in his *Discorsi intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie* (1543), namely that the tragedy should develop plots at once "grandi e terribili," which would in turn invoke horror through their atrocity, in keeping with Seneca's teachings and in order to provide the necessary Aristotelian catharsis. Two years earlier, Giraldi Cinzio had produced a tragedy, *Orbecche* (1541)\(^4\) in order to apply his own criteria. The first Italian tragedy composed for presentation and actually presented in public, *Orbecche*, though no critical success over the long run, enjoyed considerable immediate acclaim, at least as a novelty, in the Este court of Ferrara. This precedent may well have whetted Tasso's desire to match such an acclaimed predecessor's success. It may, as well, have contributed to the general disappointment when *Torrismondo* failed to match critical expectations.

Giraldi had himself created the source for his tragedy in an earlier novella. The lack of any tangible referent in *Torrismondo*, however, is but the first in a series of problems which present themselves to the reader of Tasso's drama. While there was an (obscure) historical precedent for the story, hardly within the scope of classical tradition or folklore,\(^5\) it included neither of Tasso's major topics—friendship or incest—and we are therefore beset by a sequence of questions pertaining to both of them, none of which is answered by text or tradition. The most obvious of these is how the reader is supposed to react to the opening premise of Torrismondo's journey to Norway to ask King Araldo for his daughter's hand in marriage. The immediate result of this deceitful courtship is the simultaneous betrayal of Araldo, and double betrayal of Alvida, first by Torrismondo's feigning to be her suitor and, second, by his swearing to her to obtain vengeance for her brother's death, one of the first details of the courtship which we discover in Act I, scene 1, from Alvida herself:

Perch'io promesso aveva al vecchio padre  
di non voler, di non gradir pregata  
nobile amante, o cavaliero, o sposo,  
che di far non giurasse aspra vendetta  
del suo morto figliuolo e mio fratello.  

(1.1.70–4)

[Because I had promised my aged father  
to have, though prayed to do so, no lover, cavalier or husband  
who would not swear to avenge  
his dead son, my brother.]
Torrismondo, asked by his state counselor in his first appearance (1.3) to explain his depressed mood, makes no mention of this betrayal. He reveals, in a long (375 verses) monologue, a heart obviously ridden with guilt by the sexual encounter which has occurred between him and Alvida during their return trip to Gotia. Although he does briefly touch on the suffering caused Alvida by the ensuing situation (his resultant, and inexplicable coldness towards her; his hints that she should marry Germondo), the primary issue is not Alvida but his responsibility towards Germondo. The guilt he feels regards the betrayal of Germondo by his own seduction of the woman he has deceitfully courted on his friend’s behalf, rather than for the suffering to which Alvida is subjected as a result of Torrismondo’s subsequent vagueness in her regard:

And if ever justice should be violated,
then alone for the friend should that be so,
for justice must be observed in all other cases.
And I postponed another’s (Alvida’s) and my own peace,
such was my will to remain faithful to my friend.]

Torrismondo in fact comes close to blaming Alvida for their indiscretion:

[... Il tempo largo,
e l’ozio lungo e lento, e ’l loco angusto,
e gli inviti d’amor, lusinghe e sguardi,
rossor, pallore, e parlar tronco e breve
solo inteso da noi, con mille assalti
vinsero al fin la combattuta fede.

[... generous the time,
long and slow the leisure and narrow the space,
and the invitations to love, compliments and glances,
blushing, pallor, the curt and brief conversation,
which only we understood, with a thousand assaults
overcame at last my beleaguered loyalty.]
(who is in contrast mentioned seven times). The counselor, with a clever turn of Torrismondo’s own words, further minimizes what has happened between his king and Alvida as some sort of peccadillo (more a consequence of Alvida’s will and the situation than of Torrismondo’s weakness), concluding that, while passion may have temporarily overcome him, such temptation has had its results on similar gentlemen of epic renown, and the suicide which Torrismondo sees as his way out of the situation must surely be an exaggerated and unnecessary solution:

Vedeste bella e giovinetta donna,  
e fu nel poter vostro, e non vi mosse  
la bellezza ad amar: costretto e tardi  
voi rispondeste agli amorosi inviti,  
dando ad amore e tre repulse e quattro:  
raffrenaste il desio, gli sguardi e i detti.  
Al fin amor, fortuna, il luoco e ’l tempo  
vvinser tanta costanza e tanta fede.  

[1.3.670–77 emphasis mine]

[You saw a young and beautiful woman,  
and it was within your power and yet that beauty  
did not move you to love: later, obliged,  
you responded to the amorous invitations,  
refusing more than once Alvida’s love:  
you put off the desire, the glances, the remarks.  
At last love, fortune, the place and time  
overcame such steadfastness and loyalty.]

Thus ends Act I, with Torrismondo, though not convinced of his counselor’s reasoning, and still sensing his own impending death, nevertheless almost totally preoccupied with the results his actions will have on a friendship as yet unclarified. The reader, who awaits the protagonist’s further reaction as to what this must all mean for Alvida, will not see it forthcoming until the last act, when he discovers her body after her suicide; even then there is no mention of the causal effect of his friendship with Germondo on this tragic gesture. Thus, his grief (just before his own suicide), as described by the messenger witness (“Poi disse: — Alvida, tu sei morta, io vivo / senza l’anima? — E tacque.” (5.4.3061–2) [Then he said— Alvida, you are dead, I should / live without my soul?— And was silent.]) finds the reader unprepared, since it is based on insufficient textual development of the relationship which has barely existed between the two and has been caused by Torrismondo’s friendship with Germondo to which he has given priority. In this light, the scene, which in more logically prepared circumstances should have constituted one of those dramatic silences when the author is able successfully to shift the action to the psychological and moral state of the protagonist, seems simply cryptic in tone.
From all this it is clear that the friendship which is so important in the work for Tasso, yet so unexpected for the reader of the traditional genre (even the Giraldian version thereof), is in fact totally misplaced in the tragedy. Here, it has become an obstacle to the work’s tragic impact which the author is either unable, or unwilling, to overcome, precisely because the friendship is here presented by the author as the type of ‘amore’ (i.e. friendship) he outlines in the *Discorsi* as being best suited to the ‘cavaliere’ and to the heroic poem:

... ma se l’amore è non solo una passione e un movimento dell’appetito sensitivo, ma uno abito nobilissimo della volontà, come volle san Tomaso, l’amore sarà più lodevole ne gli eroi, e per conseguente nel poema eroico. (2.106)

[... but if love is not merely a passion and a movement of the sensitive appetite, but a highly noble habit of the will, as St. Thomas held, love will be more praiseworthy [than wrath] in heroes and consequently in the heroic poem. (48)]

Clearly a Platonic emotion, one ruled by reason, it is compared positively by Tasso to physical love:

... ma il concupiscibile appetito somiglia più tosto al rubbello popolare, il quale, sollevandosi e facendo tumulto nell’animo, nega di prestare obbedienza alla ragione, lì dove l’irascibile è quasi guerriero ministro della ragione in raffrenare l’altro che le fa contrasto. (2.106)

[... while concupiscence rather resembles a popular uprising, which, swelling and raising havoc in the mind, refuses to grant obedience to reason, whereas the irascible faculty is the soldier and minister of reason in curbing its opponent. (48)]

This same type of “love,” more importantly, because it is “a highly noble habit of the will,” is a given in the epic genre which does not have to be explained, as it is not (but clearly needs to be) explained in a would-be tragedy such as *Torrismondo*.

Tasso’s failure to clarify this friendship between the two men in his tragedy, coupled with the lack of any explanation of their betrayal of Alvida, leaves us with little alternative but to assume that Tasso prefers the heroic poem to tragedy. Moreover, given his unstable emotional state, we may justifiably suspect that he also confuses friendship with love, and thus, ultimately, one genre with the other.

It should not surprise us that the work does not constitute “the tragedy” expected by Tasso’s contemporaries, for it even fails, under scrutiny, to hold up to his own criteria for the genre on other levels; indeed, further consultation of the *Discorsi* reveals additional indications of ‘genre fusion’ (or perhaps confusion) in the author’s creative thinking.

The unity of action which Tasso, in Book Three, clearly states is necessary in tragedy (“nella commedia e nella tragedia è da tutti giudicata necessaria,”
127 ["... in tragedy and comedy everyone thinks it necessary," 66]) seems, at first glance, to be equally important for the heroic poem, ("... debba esser dall'epico fuggita e disprezzata," 127 ["in the heroic poem too it must be necessary, there being no apparent reason why this unity... should be shunned and scorned by the epic poet," 66-7]). For the epic, a multitude of actions causes indeterminacy:

l'Àriosto ... non dee esser seguito nella moltitudine dell'azioni, la quale può bene essere scusabile nell'epopeia rivolgendo la colpa a comandamento de' signori o ad altra ragione si fatta; ma la scusa sarà più tosto della fortuna che dell'arte, e fia scompagnata d'ogni lode. (3.126-7)

[Ariosto ... is not to be followed in multiplicity of actions, which may be excused in his epic by putting the responsibility on the lords who demanded it or by some other such argument; but let that excuse, implying fortune rather than art, not be accompanied by praise. (66)]

However, the nomenclature with which Tasso argues in favor of unity of action in this case changes, as he proceeds in his argument, from azione (action), to favola (fable), and he ultimately comes down on the side of a single fable, rather than of unity of action, per se. Since he considers Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, with its many plots (favole), a single poem (128), he seems to leave the door open to a multiplicity of 'actions' in the epic poem as these were understood by Aristotle and his followers. Tasso's ambivalence on this point in the Discorsi may very well explain why he introduced two themes into Torrismondo which, though at first glance seem entwined thematically, must, by virtue of the author's failure to develop either of them, remain ultimately unrelated to one another structurally. He thus violates the Aristotelian norms he purports to embrace on this score as well.

Further comparing the epic and tragic genres in Book Two (102), Tasso concludes that the same historical (or mythical) figure could be considered by both the playwright and the epic poet, but for different reasons. The epic hero is chosen for heroic potential—greatness in daring, excellence in arms; any other vices he may have—and they may be considerable—are irrelevant. The tragic protagonist, on the other hand, tends to be a highly regarded citizen and often a moral individual, but with the necessary major character flaw which leads to the tragedy, according to the Aristotelian tradition:

Richiede la tragedia persone né buone né cattive, ma d'una condizione di mezzo: tale è Oreste, Elettra, Giocasta, Eteocle, Edippo la cui persona fu da Aristotele giudicata attissima alla favola tragica. (2.102-3)

[Tragedy demands persons neither good nor bad but in between, such as Orestes, Electra, Jocasta, Eteocles, and Oedipus, whom Aristotle judged highly suited to the tragic fable. (43-4)]
It is clear that, for the purposes of the tragedy, the deep friendship between Torrismondo and Germondo, the prime mover of the action, is also meant to symbolize their goodness; Torrismondo’s relationship with Alvida causes the betrayal of that friendship and shows his character flaw. However, the duplicity with which these king/warriors deceive Alvida and her father by their plan to obtain her for Germondo, quite aside from the admirable bond that exists between them, indicates that both would have been better suited for epic—in which their other very obvious moral shortcomings would have been acceptable—than they are for tragedy.

The author also outlines the differences in subject matter suitable for the two genres: the epic poem is not required to provide an instructive catharsis in the way tragedy should (“né questa condizione in loro si richiede come necessaria,” 102 [“nor is he [the writer of tragedies] required to [satisfy this condition] as a necessity,” 43]). But he clearly specifies that the basic subject matter of tragedy, horror and compassion, must be furnished at a fairly steady rate throughout the work if the ultimate cathartic purpose is to be achieved:

Muovono l’azioni tragiche l’orrore e la compassione, e dove manchi il miserabile e lo spaventoso, non sono più tragiche... e se talora ne’ poemi eroici si vede qualche caso orribile o compassionevole, non si cerca però l’orrore e la compassione in tutto il contesto della favola... (2.102, emphasis mine)

[Tragic actions move horror and pity; when the pitiful and the terrifying are missing they are no longer tragic... And if heroic poems sometimes use something horrible or pitiful, still horror and pity are not expected throughout the fable... (43)]

But horror and compassion are not furnished at a steady rate in Torrismondo, unless the apprehension and insecurity which haunt Alvida in Act I were judged by the author to be cause for sufficient pity. If so, then this is another artistic misjudgement on Tasso’s part, since Alvida and her plight take a back seat in the action from Act I onward (with her character development suffering notably in consequence). As for horror, the author uses the narrated ipotiposi for the protagonists’ deaths, thereby buffering the one real horrific sequence, so that not even in this sense, especially given the gory standards of the period,18 does Torrismondo pass muster as a tragedy.

Finally, Tasso makes it clear that the dramatic action of the two genres should differ in both nature and form: for tragedy it consists both in the unexpected and sudden changes of fortune and in the greatness of its events, while for epic it is based on

... l’eccelsa virtù militare e sopra il magnanimo proponimento di morire, sovra la religione e sovra l’azioni nelle quali risplendono queste virtù, che sono proprie dell’epopeia e non convengono tanto nella tragedia. (2.102, emphasis mine)

[... lofty military valour and the magnanimous resolve to die, on piety, religion, and deeds alight with these virtues, proper to epic but less fitting to tragedy. (43)]
There is nothing surprising in the deaths of Torrismondo and Alvida. She, the confused victim, senses some dark and forboding destiny in her first appearance (Act I, scene 1) which clearly heralds her imminent demise; he expresses a sense of guilt which renders him suicidal just two scenes later. Torrismondo’s suicidal guilt, moreover, is in itself much more in keeping with the “magnanimous resolve to die” for one of the virtues (i.e. friendship) “proper to epic but less fitting to tragedy” of the epic poem, than any sudden or unexpected misfortune, blinding passion or impending danger which would have been the appropriate element of a traditional tragedy. Conversely, incest, the most obvious subject in the plot suited for tragic development, seems instead relegated to a careless afterthought (most likely, I suspect, added by the author in a last-minute attempt to increase the ‘horror’ of the plot). By failing to exploit it beyond this point, Tasso fails as well, and by natural extension, to exploit the character of Alvida. One cannot help but wonder how effective further use of this neglected female protagonist could have been had Tasso chosen to examine more closely either her relationship with Torrismondo (and the matter of incest) or, equally intriguingly, Torrismondo’s friendship with Germondo (how and why, it, rather than the obviously trumped up excuse of her father’s death, leads to Alvida’s suicide). But further development of Alvida’s character would have changed the emphasis of the text completely for Tasso, and, at any rate, we have seen from the Discorsi that, however disrupting the highlighting of the male friendship may seem to the reader of this drama, it needed no explanation in the author’s mind.

Notwithstanding Tasso’s uncertainty between love and friendship, tragedy and heroic poem, it is hard not to wonder what might still have been accomplished with this work. Hybrids are after all common in Italian baroque theater and there is no reason why such an accomplished artist as Tasso, who had earlier shown himself to be so admirably adept at it, could not have been successful once more in the endeavor, had he done so intentionally and been willing to accept the thematic consequences. But the text all too quickly becomes mired in incredible complications. The subtle ambiguities discernible in Alvida’s character at the outset are soon totally overwhelmed by both the political aspects and the unanswered problems of the prevailing friendship between Torrismondo and Germondo, which, already in Act II, seems clearly, and uncomfortably, out of place in a tragedy; by early in the third act, even the most avid of readers no longer really cares.

In the end it thus seems apparent that Torrismondo’s major structural and generic problems are the combined result of personal problems the author was no longer emotionally able to deal with, and literary preferences he could no longer sort out, all of which unfortunately led him to make the unsound artistic decisions we have discussed. The desperation of his mental and emotional state at the time he wrote Torrismondo is widely credited with the verses of the final chorus, surely representing the tragedy’s most lyrical
moment:

Ahi lacrime, ahi dolore:
passa la vita e si dilegua e fugge,
come giel che si strugge.

... 
Che più si spera o che s'attende omai?
Dopo trionfo e palma,
sol qui restano a l' alma
lutto e lamento e lagrimosi lai.
Che più giova amicizia, o giova amore?
Ahi lagrime, ahi dolore!

(5.3320–40)

[Ah tears, ah pain:
life passes, disperses, flees,
as ice melting ... What left is there now to hope for, to await?
After triumph and glory,
only mourning, complaints and tearful woes
are left to the soul.
What else is friendship or love good for?
Ah tears, ah pain!]

The sense of total pessimism which permeates these verses joins with a sense of personal defeat, the result of all the problems which had plagued Tasso up to that point, rendering him unable to control his artistry anymore than he controlled his own destiny. The human eyes, which elsewhere in Tasso’s opus occupy a predominant place, are here able only to produce tears; they no longer see or provide the artist with the possibility of understanding and creating, or, ironically for this work, with the ability to see the profound difference between friendship and love in Torrismondo. They thus become the symbol of an ingenious artistry tragically at its end—eyes which no longer possess the sense of vision, of critical and decisive direction, which would have been necessary to make this attempt succeed in satisfying us. The presence of the friendship between the two male protagonists in the end diminishes the work’s tragic effect, both because it disorients the reader and because it weakens the impact of what, according to the traditional norms, really should be important in the drama—the relationship between Alvida and Torrismondo. The total lack of any explanation for the predominance of the friendship between the two men confuses Alvida as it confuses the reader, ultimately pushing her to suicide and (perhaps by extrapolation), the reader to a loss of interest. Since the friendship is the cause of the ‘tragedy’ in the text, it obviously cannot, as would be the case if this were an epic poem, not be explained, much less taken for granted. That it is not explained, for whatever reason—either because Tasso was too consumed emotionally by his problems or by his friendship with Costantini, or too confused to be clear in his own intentions in conceiving the work—is what ultimately causes its
artistic failure, and that, given the genius of its author, is certainly its most tragic aspect.

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NOTES

1 All translations, except for those from the Discorsi, are my own.
2 For the reader's convenience, I have included the following brief summary of the work: Torrismondo, king of Gotia, for an abiding (but entirely unexplained) friendship which he has for Germondo, king of Sweden, journeys to Norway to ask the king of that country for his daughter Alvida's hand in marriage, secretly doing so on behalf of Germondo, who is unable to speak for himself, having killed Alvida's brother, and being therefore her avowed enemy. On the way back to Gotia, Torrismondo and Alvida become lovers and he is thereafter tormented by his betrayal of Germondo. He then tries to convince his sister, Rosmonda, to marry his friend in Alvida's stead, and through her refusal, discovers that Alvida, and not she, is his real sister, having been secretly taken away as an infant due to obscure predictions of her fate. Alvida, fearing the loss of Torrismondo's love, and discovering that he has hidden the news of her father's death from her, kills herself, and he, in discovering her body, also commits suicide. The tragedy ends with Germondo taking charge of Torrismondo's kingdom, promising to care for his friend's aging mother.
3 Getto has given the most complete analysis of the problem of incest, describing it as a cultural fact for Tasso, a 'given' in the two forms of Oedipus and Phedra, the first as an involuntarily committed crime, a horrible tragedy that happens unintentionally and irreparably, the second as a reality which exists knowingly within the soul. According to this description, Torrismondo's incest with Alvida is clearly of the Oedipean variety, at least in structure. Getto, however, senses the presence of the sinful Phedran incest in the work, a result, he seems to feel, of Tasso's somewhat sick and decadent mind. Ramat agrees with this analysis, emphasizing the innocence of the two protagonists as a protest against fate, reflecting in turn Tasso's own innocence and purity, even within his sick and unraveling state of mind. Donadoni dismisses the incest element, describing that aspect of the tragedy as "volgare dramma di intrighi e d'amore" (416). Verdino finds the description of the storm to be a metaphor for what ends up to be a tragic sexual act, i.e. incest as punishment for an act which, though not fateful, is consciously committed.
4 Alvida does not kill herself because she discovers she is the sister of Torrismondo, but because he has hidden the news of her father's death from her and because he has tried to convince her to marry Germondo. Likewise, Torrismondo kills himself, not after the discovery of the incestuous act, but after he has become aware of Alvida's suicide.
5 Ariani gives a structural analysis of the work based on the relationships of scene-text-public and emphasizes the necessity of considering it as a whole, as opposed to studying its separate elements, even pointing out, correctly, that Tasso never lets us know where he really stands on the issue of incest. Guglielminetti declares the conflict between love and friendship to be the cause of the final catastrophe, for all practical purposes eliminating incest as a causal factor (Tasso, Teatro xxxiv–xxxv).
6 Ramat claims that the scarce poetic value of the work is a result of Tasso's own lack of courage to delve into the theme of incest. The result, he claims, is an ambiguity which defeats the effect of the tragedy (259). This would imply that Tasso may have opted for emphasizing the friendship of Torrismondo and Germondo as a means of avoiding the more difficult topic.
7 If one were taking a tally of the actions of the pièce, a critical argument could also be made that Rosmonda's refusal to marry Germondo, thus thwarting Torrismondo's last-ditch plan to
extricate himself from the dilemma in which he has become mired and to firmly ally Sweden and Gozia, constitutes an additional action, especially since it shifts the mood of the work unexpectedly, albeit briefly, into the realm of ragion di stato.

8 A few examples of this change in style between Galealto and Torrismondo: a. Alvida, in the first scene of the earlier version, makes love with Torrismondo, in more Renaissance tradition, as soon as she has seen his “bel corpo . . . e giovinetta etade” (Galealto 1.1), while in the final version Tasso adds a political prologue to their coupling in which Alvida makes Galealto promise her revenge for her murdered brother, thus making concessions to the baroque ragion di stato; b. The syntax of the seduction scene during the journey by sea is more moderate in tone in the final version. The original verses which begin the scene: “Noi solcavamo il mare e la credente / mia sposa al fianco mi sedeva affissa / sempre, e pendea da la mia bocca intenta / e dai suoi dolci sguardi e dai sospiri / ben comprendeaa ch’ella nel molle core / ricevuto m’aveva sattamente, / che si struggea d’amore e di desio” [We cleaved the sea and she who believed to be / my wife sat close to me / always, hanging to my every word / and from her sweet glances and sighs / I understood well that, in her tender heart / she had already accepted me in such a way / that she was torn by love and desire], and continue, further on “Allor amor, furor, impeto e forza / di fatal cupidigia al cieco furto / sforzér le membra temerarie, ingorde; / ma la mente non gia, che si ritarasse / tutta in se stessa schiva e disdegnosa, / e dal contagio de’ diletti immondi / pura si conservò quanto poteva.” [Whereupon love, fury, impetuosity and the power / of fatal lust to blind larceny / forced the fearful, swollen members / but not yet the mind, she retracted / shy and disdainful in herself, / and from contagion of the terrible delights / she kept herself pure as she was able] (Galealto 1.2.457–522) become, in Torrismondo, the somewhat more timid “Noi lieti solcavamo il mar sonante, / con cento acuti rostri il mar rompendo, / e la creduta sposa al fianco affissa / m’invitava ad amar pensosa amando.” [We happily cleaved the sounding sea / breaking the water with a hundred acute faces, / and the one believed to be my wife close to my side / invited me to love, while pensively loving] and the noticeably edited “Allor amor, furore, impeto e forza / di piacer amoroso, al cieco furto / sforzar le membra oltra l’usanza ingorde” [Whereupon love, fury, impetuosity and the force / of loving pleasure to blind larceny / forced the overly swollen members] (Torrismondo 1.3.482–567); c. The nurse’s monologue (Torrismondo 1.2.203–34) in which she forsees a hidden motive for Alvida’s inexplicable fear (the first hint of incest) is lacking in Galealto. Her words in Torrismondo, moreover, which describe the threat of the unknown and insecurity as being the norm in every peaceful state, definitely strike a more baroque tone.

9 There is evidence of this development already in the earlier treatise Discorsi dell’arte poetica (1564–5), however: “una ragione sola . . . : questa è la varietà, la quale essendo in sua natura deleterevolissima, assai maggiore diranno che si trovi nella moltitudine che nella unità della favola . . . Non era per avventura così necessaria questa varietà a’ tempi di Virgilio e d’Omero, essendo gli uomini di quel secolo di gusto non così isviogliato” (35): “[one reason alone . . . : that is variety, which, being of its nature very pleasurable, most will say is to be found in the multitude of things than in the unity of the story . . . This variety was not such a necessary thing in adventure during the times of Virgil and Homer, since the men of their period were not so moderate” (translation is my own)].

10 Tasso, who had always lacked self-confidence, after 1575 seems to have become progressively paranoid, imagining himself surrounded by enemies and spies. In 1577, apparently close to insanity, he was placed in mild confinement, but soon escaped and went to his sister in Sorrento, returning to Ferrara in 1579, during the celebration of the marriage of the Duke of Este. His paranoia, exacerbated by a general lack of concern for his problems in the court, led to a violent scene in which he publicly insulted the Duke, as well as the Duchess. This event caused the Duke to have him imprisoned, at first in chains, but with progressive freedom. The story developed by Goethe in his Torquato Tasso, according to which Tasso’s confinement had been the result of an affair with the Duke’s sister Leonora, has no historical
11 At the beginning of 1586, Alfonso d’Este made his cousin, Cesare, heir to the family line. Cesare had married Virginia de’ Medici, and she showed personal interest in Tasso’s creativity, encouraging him to produce a dramatic piece. It is thus that he began to rewrite Galeatto with the new name of Il Re Torrismondo. Virginia’s personal interest, coupled with the necessity of Cesare’s visit to Rome, where Tasso’s friend father Grillo could intercede on this behalf, made Tasso optimistic about the possibility of being released from his imprisonment. At the same time Antonio Costantini, secretary to the Florentine ambassador in Ferrara, began to visit him and a close friendship was born between the two. By the end of June Tasso was allowed to leave Sant’Anna with Costantini for afternoon outings and the relationship between the two reached an intimacy reflected in their correspondence (see, e.g., the beginning of this letter quoted by Pittoru 306): “La cortesia di Vostra Signoria m’ha di maniera avvezzo a le sue spesse e care visite, ch’io sono stato quasi tutti’oggi a la finestra, aspettando che ella venisse a vedermi e a consolarmi, come suole; ma non essendo venuta, per non rimaner affatto senza consolatione, vengo io a visitar lei con questa mia” (“Your generosity has so accustomed me to your frequent and kind visits, that I have spent almost the whole of this day at the window, waiting for you to come to see me and console me, as you usually do; but since you have not come, I, to avoid being bereft, come to visit you with this letter”). At least one biographer (Pittoru 312) suggests the relationship was homosexual in nature. It seems certain that the separation which was soon to be forced on them made what should have been a completely happy situation for Tasso an emotionally very strenuous one. In July, the author was finally freed on the pretext of returning with the visiting Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua to spend a few days of vacation in that city. A few days materialized into a full year, but with no guarantee that Tasso, now a demoralized and prematurely aged man of 42, could not at any moment be returned to Ferrara and prison. Well treated in the beginning by Vincenzo and Eleonora in Mantua, he managed, even in the absence of good health and under the cloud of his ambiguous status, to work prolifically: he composed two small treatises, finished a poem, Floridante, which his father had begun, as well as Il Re Torrismondo, which Costantini was able to transcribe for him in beautiful calligraphy with accompanying art work. Tasso gave this first copy, not to Virginia d’Este, Cesare’s wife, but to Eleonora, Vincenzo’s wife. The year in Mantua, however, was far from a happy one for Tasso personally. Vincenzo was not as financially generous nor as personally friendly with him as the author felt he should be, and Tasso began to consider seriously going to Rome with Costantini, who had in the meantime lost his position with the Roman ambassador in Ferrara and was now living with friends in Bologna, where he occupied himself with the publishing of Floridante, while awaiting new employment in the Papal city. Torrismondo dedicated to Vincenzo, was published in August, 1586. The failure of the work to gain critical success dashed Tasso’s hopes, probably his last, of recuperating any financial stability on his own.

12 Alvina’s character, as sketched in Galeatto, is not altered in Torrismondo, although its pointed delineation in the former, as a woman in conflict between desires and fears, aware of the weaknesses of her own body, tormented by carnal desire and by an unexplained fear to which it is linked in an unspecified way: “Temo e desio, / no ’l nego; ma so ben quel ch’io desio, / quel ch’io tema non so. Tem’ombre e sogni, / e un non so che d’orrendo e d’infelice, / ch’un dolente pensiero a me figura / confusamente” [I fear and desire / I’ll not deny it; but I know what is that I desire, / that which I fear I know not. I fear shadows and dreams, / and an undetermined horror and unhappiness, / and a painful thought comes to me / confusedly (Galeatto 1.1)] is somewhat obfuscated by the tip of the description of her inner feelings infavor of the fears which she harbors, although their nature is at first not clarified: “Bramo e pavento, / no ’l nego, ma so ben quel ch’i’ desio; / quel che tema, io non so. Temo ombre e sogni, / ed antichi prodigi, e novi mostri, / promesse antiche e nove, anzi minacce / di fortuna, del ciel, del fato avverso, / di stelle congiurate; e temo, ahi lassa /
un non so che d'infausto o pur d'orrendo, / ch' a me confonde un mio pensier dolente, / lo qual mi sveglia e mi perturba e m'ange, / la notte e 'l giorno" [I desire and I fear / I'll not deny it, but I know what it is that I desire; / that which I fear I know not. I fear shadows and dreams, / and ancient prodigies and new monsters, / old and new promises, threats, actually / of fortune, from heaven, of adverse fate, / of conjuring stars; and I fear, alas / an undetermined misfortune, even horror, / which confuses my painful thought, / which awakens me, perturbs me and anguishes me, / day and night] (Torrismondo 1.1).

13 These relationships are, as Chiappelli has pointed out, "gettati come ponti ideali tra i campi nemici . . . mostrano quanto sia difficile discernere il male e il bene anche in due sistemi così seccamente opposti come il chiaro e l' oscuro; e quanto essi comunichino per misteriose correnti d'amore che vorrebbero unirli, benché siano umiliati e condannati da una disputa superiore di principi trascendenti" (12).

14 Though schooled in Greek tradition, Giraldi follows Senecan practice in this play, as well as in the other eight tragedies he wrote, which attempt to recreate the tone of the ancient models and seem heavy handed to the modern reader. Interpreting Aristotle's 'pity' as additional horror, Giraldi makes Orbecche seem exceedingly violent. Four murders take place off stage and are narrated, and Orbecche kills herself on stage. Consisting of five acts, the tragedy was conceived, not from mythology, as was the practice, but from one of the novelle from Giraldi's own Ecatommiti. Sulmone, king of Persia, has a political marriage in mind for his daughter, Orbecche. When he finds she is already secretly married with two children, he has her husband and children murdered and the bodies of the latter, the head and hands of the former, delivered to her. She then kills him and herself. In addition, a previous occurrence (which occupies the first act), tells how Orbecche's mother Selina, involved in an incestuous relationship with her son, was murdered by Sulmone, having first cursed her innocent child Orbecche.

15 Tasso found a precedent in Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus (Rome, 1554) by the bishop of Upsala Olao Magno and in Gothorum Suecomunique historia (Rome, 1554), by Olao's brother Giovanni, which resembles the story line of Torrismondo, in that one Nordic leader asks for the hand in marriage of a princess for his cousin for political reasons. There is no friendship involved, however, nor any mention of incest (Tasso, Teatro xxx).

16 One of the three examples given, Achille, is also proposed by Tasso in the Discorsi as the perfect hero of the epic poem, along with Aeneas, Hercules, Theseus, Agamemnon, and Pyrrus. Poma 103; Cavalchini e Samuel, 44.

17 Tasso had said literally the same thing concerning the tragedy in his Discorsi dell'arte poetica, written when the author was much younger, but published along with Discorsi del poema eroico in 1587: "Le azioni tragiche movono l'orrore e la compassione, e ove l'or manchi questo orribile e questo compassionevole, tragiche non sono" (Discorso Primo, Poma 12).

18 Giraldi gave us at least one death onstage in Orbecche. The fact that we learn of the incest in Torrismondo by means of the narration of a trick of fate, much as it is explained by Giraldi Cinzio in Orbecche, would at least suggest that Tasso uses it, as did Giraldi, to enhance the 'horror' mood of his drama, with no real intention of ever developing it in the text as the main determinant of tragedy.

19 The introduction of Rosmonda in the third act seems to indicate, through her pining for the 'età d'oro', when women could be huntresses and soldiers, that Tasso almost wants to include elements of the pastoral as well; the baroque topic of ragion di stato, apparent in the preoccupation to forge a tri-nation alliance among Gotia, Norway and Sweden, introduces so many considerations of a political nature that we become overwhelmed with details, in spite of the realistic insights these factors may have provided the contemporary reader into the state of affairs of Ferrara.
What is tragic about Torrismondo?

WORKS CITED


