

OLAUS MAGNUS' HISTORY AND TORQUATO TASSO'S TORRISMONDO

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In the years between 1573 and 1574, during the composition of Aminta or shortly after, Tasso began to write a tragedy, Galealto, which was interrupted at II, iii, resumed after a long time, and finally published in 1587 with the new title Torrismondo. Its structure was essentially classic and Tasso himself explained its relationship with Sophocles' Oedipus (Discorsi del Poema Eroico, II). But its setting was northern, primarily taken from Olaus Magnus' Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus, a real European best-seller of the XVI century (it was translated into Italian in 1565, and an abridged edition was also made). Jacques Goudet also found a likeness between the plot of Torrismondo and a story related by Johannes Magnus, Olaus' brother (Gothorum Suenonumque Historia IV, ch. 24): in both cases a Norwegian princess, whose name is Alvida, is sought in marriage by a mediator (Ericus in Johannes Magnus, Torrismondo in Tasso), on her lover's behalf (Froto in Johannes, Germondo in Tasso). Tasso, however, complicates the story by including an incest between Alvida and Torrismondo, and the friendship between Torrismondo and Germondo betrayed by the former because of his sudden falling in love with the princess.

It is difficult to establish when Tasso read Olaus Magnus the first time: perhaps already in 1562, surely before drawing up Galealto. But the first evidence we have consists in two letters addressed to Ascanio Mori in 1586: Tasso would have liked to borrow Olaus' History from his friend in order to complete his tragedy, and to plan other works. As a matter of fact, we may find traces of typical northern culture in Tasso's proses: in his dialogue Il Messaggero, and in Discorsi del Poema Eroico, II (in the latter northern countries are considered the ideal background for epic poems).

Recent studies have shown that Mansons' two histories must have circulated in Ferrara in the XVI century. In 1982 Giuseppe Venturini published Alfeo, a poem by Orazio Ariosto (great grandnephew of the more famous Ludovico Ariosto), one of Tasso's friends. It was an adaptation of Olaus Magnus V, ch. 18 and V, ch. 27 (from Johannes Magnus VII, ch. 8-10), that is of Alff and Alvilda story.

Italian critics generally consider Torrismondo of a poor quality if compared with other Tassian works, and don't appreciate the northern background because it appears to be quite artificial. Anyway in the last few years some scholars have tried to find out the meaning of this tragedy without passing aesthetic judgements. So they showed for instance that incest is a theme of secondary importance, and that the real aim of the plot is to show some aspects of the conflict between honour and love.

Some Italian editors drew up a list of passages derived from Olaus Magnus' History. They stressed above all the

local colour, but perhaps they didn't inquire sufficiently into the tragic cues Tasso could find in Olaus. I'll leave out well known passages and try to demonstrate that Tasso's characters seem to draw towards the catastrophe because they violate the rules of their own country.

The Historia Gentium Septentrionalium was proof that Northern Europe, still unknown at that time, had a different climate, but not so different a culture. It is not difficult to realize that Olaus' auctores apart from his brother and Saxo are above all Greek and Latin authors.

So we are not surprised to see that both Olaus (XIII, ch. 28) and Tasso (Ger. Lib. I,3) appeal to Lucretius' authority (I,936 ff.: Sed veluti pueris absynthia taetra medentes ...), Olaus speaking about De bono modo educandi pueros, Tasso explaining the didactic function of poetry.

It is interesting to notice here that also in Alvida's story (already mentioned with regard to Orazio Ariosto) Tasso could find familiar details: the warrior who uncovers Alvida's hair throwing off her helmet with his sword and so making her known (Olaus V, ch.27) is a topos in poems of chivalry, and looks like Tancredi who uncovers Glorinda's wonderful blond hair (Ger. Lib. III,21 and XII,67).

Olaus tried to demonstrate the relationship between northern and classical culture on one hand, and the priority (or sometimes the superiority) of his country on the other hand. Tasso comes into contact with a pure world assailed by raising corruption.

Torrismondo's plot is not based on the unwitting incest, but on the faults that characters consciously commit. Alvida and Torrismondo make love before getting married: they are guilty above all because they haven't respected the principles of pudency, important in their native culture even more than in Christian religion. But the woman is perhaps more guilty than the man (Olaus Magnus XIV, ch.10): "Nec ante completam hanc celebritatem mutua carnali copula, pacto parentum interveniente, se commiscere solent coniungendi: quia immane cunctis gentibus crimen apparere dignoscitur, si ante sponsalia sacra stupri illecebris virgo temeratur: immo summo opere cavent puellae, ne copulam anticipent, quia perpetuam cum prole sic suscepta infamiam luant". While Olaus' exemplary married couple abstain from sexual intercourse also in the nights following the wedding (XIV, ch.10), and put even a sword in the middle to avoid temptations (XIV, ch.4), Alvida suffers because Torrismondo seems not to be longing for her any more (Torr. I,i, 154-162).

If Alvida's unappeased wish is just the opposite of the honest behaviour of northern virgins, the background of the protagonists' sexual intercourse must also be different from the ideal scenery of weddings described by Olaus (XIV, ch.10): "haecque nuptialia festa ut plurimum circa aestivale solstitium in aedibus frondosis, floribusque dispersis, insigni alacritate, & tripudiis frequentius fieri consueverunt. Nuptias exornant circumstantiae celebriores, tempus scilicet anni iucundius, nativa soli coelique temperies, paene ad contrahendas nuptias nata. Hacque ratione plures in amoenis insulis accessu navicularum fiunt nuptiales festivitates".

The tempest described by Torrismondo (I, iii, 498 ff.) derives notoriously from Vergilius (Aen. I 81 ff.), besides from some Olaus' passages (especially II, ch.10) and Seneca, Agamemnon 474 ff. The idea of setting this love (to be preliminarily judged illicit because prematrimonial) in a stormy weather is vergilian too: in fact the union between Aeneas and Dido notoriously takes place in a cave during a sudden storm caused by Juno with the purpose of facilitating that illegal 'marriage' (Aen. IV 165 ff.). Anyway Olaus may help us to understand better the gravity of Torrismondo and Alvida's transgression: the island where they are shipwrecked and where then they make love is antiphrastic to the idyllic islets of Olaus history. Alvida's behaviour however had not been moral even before (Torr. I, iii, 482-485):

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.

As a matter of fact this is how virtuous girls are supposed to behave (Olaus XIV, ch.2): "quo habitu vel pallio, omnia corporis membra, tanquam freni moderamine incedendo, vel conversando, cum admirabili modestia & verecundia (visu, vel colloquio virorum nusquam, nisi parentum licentia permissio, utentes) dirigebant. Tantaque inerat eis pudicitia, ut vix rogatae virum publico in coetu, donec coniugali vinculo stringerentur, raroque tunc, inspicere vellent. Adeo casta celebritate oculos ubique, etiam a licitis, refrenabant". By this way Alvida seems already to be barred from a serene wedding's day, when a garland on her head should be a proof of her virginity (Olaus XIV, ch.10).

On the other hand Torrismondo is guilty above all because he agrees to do an unworthy action in the name of friendship (I, iii, 454-463), deceiving both Alvida and her father. His second guilt is to be unfaithful to Germondo. He does the opposite of 'Girone il Cortese' (Discorsi del Poema Eroico, II) who represses his desire for Danaino's wife. Torrismondo is incapable of controlling his impulses, and so becomes a victim of incontinence as it is clearly shown by the quotations from Dante, Inf. V (Paolo and Francesca episode) at Torr. I, iii, 496-497 and I, iii, 564. So Torrismondo is not the ideal husband Northern fathers wish for their daughters (Olaus XIV, ch.3): "Item [patres considerant] an vir patiens sit in adversis, moderatus in prosperis, & quod difficilimum potestatis genus est, olim rector sui".

Besides Torrismondo's incontinence can easily change into fraud. The first solution Torrismondo thinks of is to kill himself so that Alvida can marry Germondo as a widow (I, iii, 731-742). The Jesuitic way out would entail Germondo's deception, and moreover wouldn't solve the problem of an eventual illegitimate child. Anyway we don't find traces of the complex question concerning adulterine births (Olaus Magnus XIV, ch.12-13: "error matris transit ad filios"). This tragic subject is set aside to leave space for an arrangement. The counsellor easily persuades Torrismondo to

accept the idea of a double marriage Torrismondo-Alvida and Germondo-Rosmonda (I, iii, 795-805). Torrismondo doesn't seem to realize that he is going to betray his friend again. The same theme of friendship was treated in a different, more honourable way in Olaus story. Olaus told the case of two friends so faithful to one other to sacrifice their life (XIII, ch.33): "Quod circa adducendus est hic casus duorum Regum Aquilonarium, Suetiae scilicet, & Daniae: quorum pactis adeo inviolabilis quondam pax firmata erat, ut in ultimum usque finem mutua amicitia pactum confirmarent: nec aures, aut animum illis accomodaturi essent, qui inter ipsos foedera rumpere, odia serere, concordiam labefactare molirentur: sed alter alterius commoda, honorem, quietem, dignitatem, auctoritatem defendere, & ampliare curaret".

Hundingus, King of Danes, hears that his friend Hadingus, king of Swedes, has been killed. So he drowns himself in hydromel. Hadingus, who is still alive, hangs himself in public to return his friend's faithfulness. Olaus judges the episode with great admiration: "Affirmat Albertus Crantzius hanc duorum Regum mortem perquam ridiculam fuisse: at ego eam parem puto praecipue virtuti magnorum Graeciae, & Latii principum, qui voluntariam in mortem, ne fidem promissam violarent, se tradiderunt". Torrismondo, like his sister and lover Alvida, violates his native land laws. He knows very well the terrible punishments for adultery (Olaus XIV, ch. 15-16), and he knows that friends cannot forgive any offense to their honour (Olaus XV, ch.14): "Habet tamen natura populi huius hanc iustam severitatem, ut si hospites tanta benignitate suscepti, inhonesta cupidine ducti (quod raro tamen accidit) consortem patroni domus, aut filiam, vel ancillam lascivo ludibrio violare praesumpserint, aut vim intulerint, tunc illico talem omni saevitia adhibita, usque ad mortem infaticabili conatu, & implacabili iracundia persequuntur".

Germondo's good reaction to the proposal of getting married to Rosmonda is quite surprising: we can't understand why this man who fell in love with Alvida at first sight (Torr . I, iii, 377-380) and seeks her in marriage by fraud gives up so easily without inquiring into what had happened (Torr . IV, 1, 2135 ff.). Perhaps he is a better friend than Torrismondo, perhaps he agrees with the counsellor's proposal to join three reigns together (Torrismondo IV, i, 2071-2072). Olaus too explained that marriages can be helpful to avoid hatred and wars, and remembered the union between a Norwegian king and a Gothic king's daughter (XIV, ch.4).

Anyway Torrismondo and Alvida would have got married, had Rosmonda not confessed not to be Torrismondo's sister. Consequently she was not allowed to marry a king (IV, iii, 2205 ff.). Rosmonda was consecrated to God by her real mother (IV, iii, 2275 ff.), but her aspirations seem to coincide with Gothic Amazon's life (II, iiii, 1297 ff.; cf. Olaus V, ch. 28-32). As a matter of fact Torrismondo's story is suspended between paganism and Christianity. In my opinion this is another ingredient Tasso derives from Olaus. Olaus' world is not historically definite: the encyclopaedic purpose causes the levelling of different periods and different habits. Anyway Rosmonda, who is supposed to be

caste because of her consecration, on the contrary is in love with Torrismondo (II, iii). So, when she defends virginity and speaks against marriage in front of the queen-mother who tries to convince her to marry Germondo, we suspect that she refuses above all the idea of getting married to a man she doesn't love and that she wants to be faithful to the man she should consider her brother. Apparently Rosmonda's words are right (II, iiii, 1111-1115: "Io più tosto credea che doti nostre / fossero la modestia e la vergogna, / la pudicizia, la pietà, la fede; cf. Olaus XIV, ch.3: "Vera autem ornamenta matronarum, non vestes, sed pudicitia [...] aestimantur"); as a matter of fact they are ambiguous. In the same way also the reasons why Rosmonda reveals to Torrismondo she isn't really his sister (IV, iii, 2206 ff.) may be interpreted in different ways.

Rosmonda's revelation that causes the catastrophe informs us why Rosmonda took Alvida's place: a vaticination had foretold that Alvida would have caused destruction of the reign. We know from Olaus the importance that prophecies had in Northern countries (III, ch.13): "fatendum erit, nullam unquam gentem tam humanam, tamque doctam, immo nec tam immanem, aut barbaram fuisse, quae non significare futura, & a quibusdam intelligere, ac praedicere consueverit: maxime tamen Aquilonares homines, quos studio futura praesciendi occupatos fuisse comperio". It is obvious that in this world like in the classic one, prophecies end by proving true. It is again Olaus who gives a tragic example of fate unavoidableness (I, ch.31): "Sunt & duorum fratrum bini lapides fatales in Gothia Meridionali hac antiquitate usque in praesens celebrati, quod illis adolescentiae aetatem vix egressis, a divinatoribus prognosticatum erat, ut mutua caede morerentur. Quod fatum abhorrentes, ac declinare volentes, ad remotas orbis partes perpetuo peregrinaturi separatim se contulerunt. Surgente vero aetate decrepita, in patriam regrediuntur, quisque pro se putans, tanto temporis progressu fratrem, fatumque fuisse finitum. At aliter evenit, ut fata viam invenirent. Nam cum aliquot stadiis ab oppido Ionacopensi senes, & ignoti mutua salutatione convenissent, & paulisper circa viam publicam in nemore pinoso quievisissent, mox rixantibus eorum canibus, pariter & ipsi ad mutuas rixas, & vulnera proruperunt, animamque trahentes, & fratres se agnoscentes, expirarunt".

These two brothers are convinced that that prophecy has vanished after such a long time, Torrismondo's father tries to avoid destiny by hiding his daughter, Torrismondo believes that the prediction is vane, and Alvida, even when all is clear (V, i), refuses to accept the reality of the facts: but fate is always incumbent. Olaus seems not to believe the two brothers' story ("Sed haec antiquorum relatione potius, quam approbatione sint adducta"): perhaps his profession of faith and his responsibility as a bishop prevents him from the common wish to know future. Tasso's characters are simply lost in their guilts. Like in Sophocles' Oedipus, also in these northern countries the tragedy arises from transgression of codified values.

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