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Utopia incognita
Tasso's Atlantic and the Decolonial Imagination

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Abstract

Set against the backdrop of the First Crusade's conquest of Jerusalem, Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) channels both the aspirations and the failures of city-building and destruction. The poem explores probing questions about territorial ownership, religious right, and the materiality of space, extending from the Middle East to its symbolic New World shores. Central to the article's analysis is Canto XV, whose prophecy of Columbus and his distant voyage engages pre-, anti-, and decolonial modes of thought. This prophecy unfolds as two Crusaders approach the Atlantic island of the enchantress Armida, a space charged with imperial tensions. Although resembling an earthly paradise, Armida's island functions as a paradise-prison, a heterotopia generating what the present study terms decolonizing doubts – critiques and counternarratives that arise when one colonial context is forced to assess another. These doubts unsettle the poem's portrayals of conquest, liberation, captivity, and the epistemologies of discovery. Tasso's emphasis on the verbal and visual proof of lands beyond known bounds exposes the anxieties surrounding both colonial and authorial power. By examining the interplay between utopian and decolonial perspectives, the present article brings into relief Tasso's geographical critique of center and periphery, and foregrounds the pivotal role female artistry plays within epic history and its (im)possible future.

Keywords: Decolonial History, Epic Poetry, Prophecy, Torquato Tasso, Utopia

1. *Introduction*

The painting *Carlo e Ubaldo resistono agli incantesimi di Armida* (Figure 1), completed by Venetian artists Gian Antonio Guardi and his brother Francesco around 1750, depicts a verdant setting bustling in luminous florals. Gathered by a fount is a pair of playing nymphs. Their facial expressions are notably different: one nymph directs her gaze downward and driftingly to the right, revealing a partially curved smile, while her seated counterpart locks eyes with two intruding men, her mouth agape, her limbs twisted, bearing testimony to her startled state. The

Guardi brothers here represent the prelude to the most famous scene from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581). Carlo and Ubaldo, the crusading duo mid-way through their journey to retrieve their comrade Rinaldo from Armida's island, have arrived in this bucolic setting dressed for war. Bedecked in armor, helmets, and a shield, each part of the Crusaders' appearance accentuates their status as securely protected. Their bodies, though partially shrouded by nature, stand in contrast to the nymphs' exposed skin, allowing this visual transmediation to pose a question less explicitly articulated in Tasso's poetry: are these bathing nymphs and fortified warriors meeting in a *locus amoenus* or a *locus terribilis*?; if it is the latter, who risks being harmed? Which pair is truly the more vulnerable one?

Figure 1 – Gian Antonio Guardi and Francesco Guardi, *Carlo e Ubaldo resistono agli incantesimi di Armida*, ca. 1750/1755. Oil on canvas. 250.2 x 459.8 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund. Accession number 1964.21.1. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington[1]

The depiction of armed men encountering near-naked women in alluring sites of natural enchantment calls to mind another early modern scene that stokes these same questions. This visual grammar recurs, for instance, in the *Allegory of America* (Figure 2) originally by Jan van der Straet (better known as Stradanus), included in the print series *Nova reperta* (ca. 1600). Stradanus depicts navigator Amerigo Vespucci as he arrives on the shores of the allegorized continent America. The stripped, supine female figure is jolted from her hammock, alarmed by his unexpected intrusion. America's mouth gapes – parted on the cusp of issuing speech – mirroring the terrified nymph from the Guardi brothers' painting. Each female figure conveys the taut vulnerability that brews within a scene of political (en route to the possibility of sexual) conquest.

[1] Creative Commons Zero (CC0), <https://www.nga.gov/artworks/50255-carlo-and-ubaldo-resisting-enchantments-armidas-nymphs>, accessed 1 December 2025.

Figure 2 – Theodor Galle, after Jan van der Straet, *Allegory of America*. From *Nova reperta*. Antwerp: Philips Galle, ca. 1600. Engraving. 27 x 20 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund. Accession Number 34.30(2). Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art[2]

Reasons for connecting Carlo and Ubaldo's voyage with depictions of New World discovery emerge from the *Liberata*'s Canto XV. There, as the Crusaders approach Armida's pleasure island, Fortune – an angelic extension of the poem's 'divine partisanship' (Gregory 2009, 153) – issues a prophecy. She speaks in the second person directly to Christopher Columbus, foretelling him (as if he were one of Tasso's readers) of all he will bring about on distant shores, and how poetry will remember him:

Tu spiegherai, Colombo, a un novo polo
lontane sì le fortunate antenne,
ch'a pena seguirà con gli occhi il volo
la fama c'ha mille occhi e mille penne.
Canti ella Alcide e Bacco, e di te solo
basti a i posteri tuoi ch'alquanto accenne,
ché quel poco darà lunga memoria
di poema dignissima e d'istoria. (*GL* XV.32)[3]

[2] Creative Commons Zero (CC0), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/659655>, accessed 1 December 2025.

[3] (You, Columbus, will unfurl your fortunate sails toward a new pole / so distant that even Fame, / with her thousand eyes and thousand wings, / will scarcely follow your flight. / Let her sing of Hercules and Bacchus; for you alone / let it suffice that she offers even a brief nod to your posterity. / That little will grant you enduring memory, / worthy of both poetry and history). All citations of *Gerusalemme liberata*, abbreviated to *GL* and listed by canto and stanza number, are from Tasso 2009. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

Fortune does not simply say what Columbus will do in the New World; she utters it in the very form he would have been most eager to receive. Prophecy for *Cristo Ferens* ('bearer of Christ', as Columbus felt he was) meant playing the long and patient game: launching expeditions against natural odds – the 'dubbio clima' (doubtful climate, *GL* XV.31) that Tasso imagines – christening those who survive disease and warfare, draining lands of their local resources, and funneling the spoils of imperial journeying to fund a crusade to take back Jerusalem: in short, to give epic poets something to write about.[4]

Tasso approaches conquest critically in the *Liberata*'s final cantos, enough to label the Christians 'predatori' (predators, *GL* XIX.30) upon their crossing over Jerusalem's walls. Tasso was sensitive, as this identifier suggests, to what cities look like when they are being destroyed – a sensitivity that renders episodes like the refuge the Muslim princess Erminia finds among humble shepherds especially sheltering within an otherwise theater of war. Beyond Columbus' own visions of expansionist prophecy capable of retaking Jerusalem, what makes Fortune's prophecy curious and complex is its multidirectional temporality. Writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, Tasso designs a poem set at the end of the eleventh century, featuring a prophecy of fifteenth-century discovery. This blend of temporal layers grows in intricacy when considering the other prophecies uttered in the poem. The prediction in Canto X, for instance, is *post eventum*: it anticipates the results of the Third Crusade (1189-1192), a devastating defeat for Goffredo's twelfth-century successors, one that restores Muslim rule in Jerusalem.[5] Halfway through a triumphal account of the First Crusade (1096-1099), the looming specter of subsequent history jeopardizes the promise of a true Christian victory. History might be written by the victors, but nothing (not even poetry) can fix their crowns beyond challenge. In this light, Tasso's poem reveals not the grandeur of ideologically motivated conquest but its susceptibility to the erosions of time. Through its construction of temporal continuities and reliance upon their ruptures, the *Liberata* unsettles its own historical framework midway through its very own making.

Blurring the edges between past and present, Tasso theorizes the effects of American colonization before they begin to materialize. He stages his epic in a precolonial moment in the history of the Americas, in keeping with a principle articulated in his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* (1564): the historical setting of an epic should not be too distant from the experience of contemporary readers. The 'right' kind of epic, according to Tasso's neo-Aristotelian logic, must stem from historical events and retain a level of believability adequate to its moral and narrative aims. Such preferences write out of the genre's genealogy works like *Orlando furioso* (1516, 1532) by Ludovico Ariosto. The *Furioso* may be entertaining, Tasso is willing to admit, but it lacks the unity and verisimilitude proper to epic. While Tasso's poetic treatises insist on historical credibility, his poem lingers at the threshold of imaginable alternatives – speculative geographies, prophetic visions, and temporal crosscurrents that draw the *Liberata* into dialogue with futures that had not yet arrived. In this tension between prescription and invention, Tasso adheres to and destabilizes the very epic norms he helped to define.

Tasso was, to echo David Quint, curious about the 'potential *shapelessness* of history as a subject for poetry' (2015, 2021). The wonderment essential to the *Liberata*'s fiction – the marvelous that baits Crusaders at nearly every turn – is the same wonderment that renders historical accuracy optional for the narrator. That honeyed disruption, which sweetens and muddies sour truths, slows the Christians' march to Jerusalem announced in the poem's opening octave. So

[4] On Columbus' ambitions to embark on a crusade to recapture Jerusalem, see Hamdani 1979 and Watt 2017, 130-146.

[5] See *GL* X.22-23 and the extended analysis of this episode below.

does the marvelous loosen the *Liberata* from the tangled knots of history, whose events and imprints it nonetheless aspires to recount. My analysis herewith considers these dynamics more generative than obstructing. Guided by Craig Kallendorf's reading of 'The Other Virgil', that classical poet who 'presented both what is lost as well as what is gained in conquest', my arguments shine a new light on Tasso's progress towards a New World (2007, 15). For Tasso, to herald the achievements of Christian empire is also to mourn their costs.[6] What Gian Biagio Conte has argued about the *Aeneid* resonates profoundly with the *Liberata*:

> a meditation (modulated in various tones) on the reasons why one person or one people has emerged victorious [in] its painful struggle against another … Victory necessarily involves destroying the rights of others; it may even require the victor to look through enemies' eyes. The epos becomes rich in contradictory registers when right is divided – and so language along with it – as a whole age is torn apart. (1986, 183-184)

The poem's double gaze – one that elicits sympathy from the narrator – has long been a privileged line of discourse in Tasso scholarship.[7] What I prioritize here are the affective and ideological forces that generate sympathy for events that have not yet happened and, according to some within the poem, perhaps ought not to. Of primary relevance here is the imaginative work the *Liberata* undertakes in asking what an encounter with the Atlantic isles might look like in a world before (and without) New World colonization. What hope is there, Tasso's poem wonders, for a counter-narrative of peace instead of bloodshed, of tolerance rather than obliteration, of coexistence westwards before there is no one left with whom to coexist?

My aim is to move past the traditional view of Tasso as simply a Counter-Reformation loyalist committed to promoting the Catholic Church's need for imperialist speed. I argue instead that the *Liberata* unfolds within a precolonial horizon, and that this horizon unlocks a decolonial imagination – one that operates through the rhetorical logic of the historically impossible yet poetically thinkable. Despite the abundance of primary materials on travel, navigation, and ethnographic encounter, scholarship on decolonial thinking in early modern Italy lags behind advances in adjacent disciplines, our field's immersion in what Steve Mentz has termed the 'blue humanities' still awaiting a fuller tide of critical attention.[8] Walter Mignolo's call for 'pluriversal' approaches to the premodern world provides a critical lens through which to reassess these materials, opening pathways that Tasso scholarship has largely not yet traced but that prove essential for considering the global dimensions of his epic.[9] The *Liberata* does not, to be sure, always conform neatly (or willingly) to a Catholic imperialist paradigm; its countervailing visions and voices speak forcefully to that resistance. Such countercurrents come into focus in the poem's Atlantic episode (Cantos XIV to XVI), which rehearses a poetics of coexistence consonant with the epic's broader complexities around conversion and survival, including the ambiguous conversions of Erminia and Armida, as well as the survival of the Muslim Altamoro, whose life the captain Goffredo spares moments before entering Christ's tomb. Considering these dynamics, Tasso's epic proves unexpectedly hospitable to questions now central to decolonial critique.

I employ the term 'decolonial' prudently, cognizant of the multiple connotations it bears in contemporary contexts. My historical thinking gravitates to Raymond F. Betts' capacious understanding of decolonization as 'a global-scale political change', an approach that offers the

[6] See Cavallo 1999; Fuchs 2001, 24-34; Moudarres 2019, 105-142.
[7] For this perspective's origins and developments, see Zatti 1983.
[8] See Mentz 2023.
[9] See Mignolo 2011.

conceptual elasticity needed to read premodern epic within broader transformations of territory, authority, and cultural contact (2012, 25). Discourses of pre-, anti-, and decolonial imaginations arise naturally from a genre so steeped in politics, history, and geography. Sneharika Roy has formulated a question that places these criteria at the forefront of her reconsideration of the genre: 'If the epic celebrates the *presence* of territory, ancestral history and a collectively shared culture, what relevance does the genre have in societies shaped by the violent *loss* of territory, history and culture?' (2018, 2). Tasso's poem navigates both impulses, a dynamic captured by Lanfranco Caretti's classic model of 'bifrontismo spirituale' (spiritual double-mindedness) – the productively cloudy space in which the ambiguities of the *Liberata* breathe most freely (1961, 90). As has long been observed, Tasso's poem affirms the epic imperative to commemorate territorial and spiritual victory, even as it registers the displacements and vulnerabilities borne by those on the vanquished side. It is precisely this negotiation that Tasso's earliest readers and imitators perceived and further pursued. To take only one example, Ascanio Grandi seized the opportunity to extend these questions in *Tancredi* (1632) – his epic poem centered on one of Tasso's leading heroes – in which encounters with an Amazonian polity and an allegorical America lay bare the racial, gendered, and territorial logics embedded in premodern epic.[10]

This essay shows that Tasso himself anticipates such interrogations: his decolonial imagination counter-prophesizes the history of westbound imperialism, working to defer and destabilize its projected effects.[11] This imaginative possibility, of course, operates in full view of the brutalities of sixteenth-century colonization – realities Tasso knew and that haunt the very language of his poetic speculation. Even so, he harnessed this knowledge to craft deliberate parallels between the conquest of the New World and the capture of Jerusalem. The *Liberata* may invoke Columbus and his legacy, but it does so, perhaps, to suggest that the world might have fared better without them. In the episodes that matter most here, Tasso's loosening of an ideological grip on the ideals of Catholic imperialism entailed real risks. It is no surprise, then, that he later doubled down in his revised poem, *Gerusalemme conquistata* (1593), which erases Columbus' New World altogether. In his *Giudicio sovra la* Gerusalemme *riformata* (a treatise Tasso began writing in 1593 and which was posthumously printed in 1666), he underscores Jerusalem's thematic and geographical centrality, thereby validating his decision to excise 'le navigazioni e le meraviglie dell'oceano, lasciandomi intiero il soggetto per un altro poema' (Tasso 2000, 154).[12] Though he claims to have set this material aside for a future project, no such return to Columbian travels materializes again in Tasso's writings. Others, however, took up the very ambitions he had only imagined. At the start of the seventeenth century, Tommaso Campanella championed modern men as worthy subjects for epic poetry, calling for new works about Columbus – the 'heroum maximum' (greatest of heroes) – and Ferdinand Magellan, mariner-heroes he regarded as more deserving of immortalizing verse than the legendary warriors of ancient Troy (1954, 1099).[13] If Campanella imagined Columbus as the natural headliner of a modern epic of exploration, Tasso treats him far more obliquely, entwining his figure with that of the poem's counter-navigator, the enchantress Armida.

[10] See Foltran 2005, 129-185.

[11] Though my conclusions differ, they are informed by readings of Tasso's poem that foreground its imperialist agenda. For representative contributions to this line of criticism, see Quint 1993, 214-247; Zatti 1998; Cardini 2006, 186-194.

[12] (The navigations and the wonders of the ocean, leaving me the subject intact for another poem).

[13] Many Baroque poets fulfilled Campanella's request (see Hester 2017).

2. *Weaving Tasso's New World Knowledge*

The prophecy about Columbus, as noted above, occurs *en passage* to Armida's Atlantic isle, whose location merits closer attention. Through a network of literary allusions to the earthly paradise, the enchantress' home-away-from-Syria takes shape as a utopic return to unspoiled perfection. Its placement among the Canaries (or Fortunate Isles) – where the ancients placed the realm of eternal bliss – reinforces this association, as does the archipelago's service as a 'concetto limite' (boundary concept) between old and new worlds (Cachey 1995, 124).[14] The French theologian and cosmographer Pierre d'Ailly had likewise situated the earthly paradise atop a mountain in the Canaries in his *Imago Mundi* (1410), a treatise that Columbus heavily annotated on his voyages and one that may also have proved suggestive for Tasso. As her ambiguous conversion at the poem's end negotiates the future she envisions as ideal, Armida's personal voyage leads her from hell to a figural paradise, echoing the path of Dante's pilgrim in the *Divina Commedia*. Symbolically and morally, Armida's western island occupies the antipode of Jerusalem, aligned with Dante's geography of Mount Purgatory and imagined as the farthest possible terrain from the poem's sacred battlegrounds.[15]

Tasso emphasizes the island's western orientation in language that, for a sixteenth-century reader, would have evoked the expanding cartographies and speculative geographies of a desirable New World. Fortune, with Carlo and Ubaldo in tow, steers her boat beyond the Pillars of Hercules and into the boundless sea ('e s'ingolfa in pelago infinito', *GL* XV.23). In a poem fundamentally concerned with the Christian claiming of land, their mission cannot help but resonate with the early modern imaginary that linked distant, ungoverned islands with the prospects of possession. Although the *Liberata* never names a western colonial project outright, the island's remoteness, abundance, and perceived accessibility echo the descriptive language of travel literature produced during the age of discovery: lushness ripe for cultivation, solitude awaiting settlement, and an absence of Christian sovereignty – features that render the island legible as a symbolically conquerable space.

The proximity between Armida's enchanted isle and the earthly paradise casts it as a liminal zone – a charmed Purgatory that must be purged, a paradise-turned-hell before it might be remade as utopia. It is not incidental that Tasso would think in utopian terms in his epic: Thomas More's *Utopia* (first available in Italian in Venice in 1548) offered a conceptual template for imagining islands suited to idealized structuring.[16] Yet More's principle of holding goods in common does not map cleanly onto Tasso's island, whose function for others is markedly different from its purpose for Armida. For visitors like Rinaldo, the island is a dazzling detour – a gilded cage that suspends his participation in the conquest of Jerusalem. For Armida, by contrast, her homeland becomes a transformative crossroads, a bridge between her sinful and redeemed states. Tasso underscores that on Armida's island *arte vince natura*: art outdoes nature by imitating it for sheer delight, producing a space where invention rivals the real ('Di natura arte par, che per diletto / l'imitatrice sua scherzando imiti', *GL* XVI.10). Yet however fully Armida saturates the landscape with her artistry, the episode's function as it concerns her ultimately exceeds her own intentions. The very space Armida fashions as a site of pleasure becomes the unlikely threshold of her transformation: the ground on which Rinaldo's departure exposes the fragility of her

[14] See *GL* XV.35-36. In the final section of his *Works and Days* (lines 166-173), Hesiod elaborates on the location of the Elysian fields and the Isles of the Blessed. For Italian literary appraisals of the Fortunate Isles, see Cachey 1995.

[15] For comparisons between Armida's artistry and the ekphrases of *Purgatorio*, see Treherne 2007, 7-10.

[16] On the Italian reception of More's work, see Spinozzi 2016.

illusions, and from which her trajectory toward repentance and salvation begins. That the same space enables both erotic entrapment and spiritual awakening signals the island's wider symbolic work as a heterotopic enclave of enchantment and constraint, where the deception of others shades imperceptibly into the deception of the self.

Because of these divergent functions, the episodes on and around Armida's island generate what can be termed decolonizing doubts: unsettling fears, critiques, and counternarratives that arise within one symbolically colonizable space (the enchantress' island) as it is set against another contested site (Jerusalem). These doubts register anxieties about a world poised to slip into cycles of conflict, chaos, war, and hostility – the very conditions that necessitate more than one crusade. They do not articulate a clear colonial program; rather, they emerge through the implicit, associative logics of geography and desire: the pull of Western abundance against the imperative to claim Eastern land; the lure of remaking a paradisiacal island versus the duty to conquer a sacred city. In generating these tensions, the *Liberata* tests its own representations of conquest, liberation, and the epistemologies of discovery pervasive in Tasso's own time.

Before Tasso developed his interest in the islands off Africa's Atlantic coast – the springboard for Europe's westward colonial projects – Petrarch and Boccaccio had already expressed curiosity about their inhabitants and customs.[17] Like his predecessors, Tasso drew on a wide range of sources, encountering diplomatic reports from Spain preserved in Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Delle navigationi et viaggi* (1550-1559), including accounts by Amerigo Vespucci, Andrea Corsali, and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. Peter Martyr d'Anghiera's collection of eight travelogues, *De orbo novo decades* (1530), written by Columbus' friend and early chronicler, likewise enriched Tasso's geographical knowledge base. Similarly influential was Girolamo Fracastoro's *Syphilidis sive Morbi Gallici libri tres* (1530), which had already set a poetic precedent for commemorating circumnavigation.[18] Tasso's own engagement with this tradition is evident, for the imprint of Fracastoro's Latin text surfaces in an intermediary stage of the *Liberata*'s development.

Around 1575, Tasso drafted an original version of his Columbus-inspired Canto XV, preserved in the Ambrosiana manuscript R. 99 sup, *La navigazione del mondo nuovo del poema di T. Tasso*. Bound for deeper waters than the published epic permits, Fortune's 'mirabil nave' (marvelous ship, *GL* XV.9) in this manuscript sails along the South American coasts mapped by Antonio Pigafetta in his account of Magellan's circumnavigation. Carlo and Ubaldo see the splendors of Peru and Ecuador, glimpsing Patagonian giants and cannibals. Curiously, Tasso drops the latter term's topographical link to the Caribes and uses instead 'Anthropophagi' (from the Greek *ἀνθρωποφάγοι*), the name Herodotus gives to the Scythian 'man-eaters'.[19] Next, the intrepid crew narrowly traverses the Estrecho de Todos los Santos winding between Chile and the Tierra del Fuego archipelago. From here, they brave onward to Armida's islet home, which has now drifted to Pacific waters, making her a visionary forerunner to Magellan and an author herself of exploration in the New World. The Ambrosiana manuscript thus dates Tasso's early interest in casting his epic as a poem of global navigation – a scope that, as we have seen, he would ultimately relinquish. As Roman reviewers demanded a more doctrinally and formally orthodox Christian poem, and as Tasso pursued stricter adherence to Aristotelian unity, these transoceanic ambitions were progressively pared back.

The New World's fleeting presence in the published *Liberata* indicates that, in the later stages of revision, Tasso was balancing other geographical points of reference, turning toward more

[17] See Cachey 1991.
[18] See Cachey 1992, 328-330.
[19] See Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 4, Ch. 18.

immediate – indeed, geographically proximate – threats: the eastern Ottomans, the southern Moors, and the northern Protestants. Although, as Karla Mallette has shown, 'the territories known today as "Italy" had diverse experiences of colonization' between antiquity and the sixteenth century, European powers were on especially high alert following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Turkish advance to the gates of Vienna in 1529, and the costly victory at Lepanto in 1571 (2025, 521). These pressures intensified among Catholics a longing for the Christian unity thought to have existed during the First Crusade – long before Columbus and his companions dreamt of gold and glory. Within this climate, Tasso's Columbian prophecy and its jostling of temporalities register further anxieties about colonial and authorial agency. The poem's shifting horizons – between Jerusalem and the gateway to the Americas, between past Crusaders and future conquerors – expose how the very question of what may be narrated becomes a source of instability. Across these central juxtaposed cantos, the problem of possible narration unsettles the poem's ability to signify coherently what one knows, occupies, claims, and may – through the very act of claiming – destroy.

3. *Dreaming up Empire*

The voyage to the Canaries has often been considered a blunt shift away from the poem's focus on Jerusalem – the city whose etymology, as recalled by Isidore of Seville, means 'vision of peace'.[20] The reading that develops here, which seeks out peace within a poem preoccupied with war, aligns with Andrea Moudarres' view that the *Liberata* expresses a 'fundamental longing for co-existence' (2019, 130). In a world marred by conflict, poetry becomes the medium through which tolerance can be imagined anew, precisely by revealing how consistently humanity has failed to choose co-existence when given the chance. In keeping with Mignolo's framework recalled above, the poem's pre-, anti-, and decolonial discourses emerge from the moment that sets Rinaldo's quest in motion: Goffredo's dream in Canto XIV. Drawn upward by the spirit of Ugone – a fallen Crusader sent by God – Goffredo ascends to the heavens, where meditations on empire crystallize into visions of islands and their exalted vantage points. From these heights, the poem exposes the tension between the pursuit of ephemeral glory and the more heavily charged discourses surrounding land – its possession, loss, and imagined futures. Guiding Goffredo toward the source of 'mente eterna' (eternal intellect, *GL* XIV.9), Ugone speaks with *contemptus mundi*, relativizing and diminishing worldly ambitions:

Quanto è vil la cagion ch'a la virtude
umana è colà giù premio e contrasto!
in che picciolo cerchio e fra che nude
solitudini è stretto il vostro fasto!
Lei come isola il mare intorno chiude,
e lui, ch'or ocean chiamat'è or vasto,
nulla eguale a tai nomi ha in sé di magno,
ma è bassa palude e breve stagno. (*GL* XIV.10)[21]

[20] See Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* Book VIII, i, 6.

[21] (How vile is the motive that down there is / contest and reward for human valor! / Within what narrow circle and among what bare / solitudes is your splendor confined! / Your earth, like an island, the sea encloses round; / and that – which sometimes you call Ocean, sometimes the Deep – / bears no magnitude equal to such names, / but is a lowly marsh and a shallow pond).

Goffredo's privileged, somnolent gaze transforms the globe into an island – an outlook otherwise impossible to attain because of the captain's 'own refusal to stray from the center of the old, Ptolemaic universe', that is, Jerusalem (Tylus 1993, 110). From this elevated perspective, Goffredo glimpses a world unmoored from its usual boundaries. The philosophical weight the canto later ascribes to the ocean's depth dissolves here into a kind of swampy superficiality, as though vast geographies were flattened into the thin, abstract lines of a map.

For a poem centered on a Middle Eastern city, islands play a deliberately pivotal role in prescribing its cartographic ethics – a system of values and consequences articulated through the geographical dialogue among coordinates traced on a map. In doing so, the *Liberata* adopts a poetics of miniaturization, exchanging the fractured image of dividing waters for the unifying sweep of the world itself: 'vide un punto sol, mar, terre e fiumi, / che qui paion distinti in tante guise' (*GL* XIV.11).[22] The shrinking effect of Goffredo's gaze accords with Tasso's conception of poetry as a 'picciolo mondo' (little world) in the *Discorsi*, yet it stands in tension with the vision of an ever-expanding globe made possible by Columbus' docking in the Caribbean. Because the divisions in human geography bolster 'servo imperio … e muta fama' (slavish empire and mute fame, *ibid*.), history and poetry rest at odds here with the prospects of a unified world. Goffredo's dream vision explains that, for 'la nostra folle umanità' (our foolish humanity, *ibid*.), empires thrive on partitions, on multiplying divisions within a world already conditioned by them. Seen through this lens, empire proves more the handmaiden of romance than of epic. Imperialism – the ideological rudder of empire – guides a course of boundless variety that only masquerades as unity, a power that expands without always cohering. (Just ask the Roman Empire). It is little surprise, then, that in his final years Tasso turned to a new kind of epic, *Il mondo creato* (1608), a work devoted to the origins of the created world: a singular, undivided entity teeming with life, not yet splintered into the fractures and partialities of human history.

If *Il mondo creato* looks back to a world before division, the *Liberata* stages the psychic and political costs of living amid its aftermath. Goffredo's dream, accordingly, serves a practical purpose: it delivers precise instructions for how to win the war. It also intimates the possibility of a peace accompanied by something marvelous in its wake. The marble column with which Armida draws Rinaldo to her island is itself an instrument of marvel – what Stephen Greenblatt termed a 'marvelous possession', a persuasive wonder that binds its beholder even before conquest occurs.[23] Perched on the shore of the Orontes river in Syria and addressed to 'chiunque tu sia' (whoever you might be) – read: any Columbus hopeful – the column's golden inscription speaks to those searching for elsewhere: 'O chiunque tu sia, che voglia o caso / peregrinando adduce a queste sponde, / meraviglie maggior l'orto o l'occaso / non ha di ciò che l'isoletta asconde. / Passa, se vuoi vederla' (*GL* XIV.58).[24] Ego-bruised Rinaldo, who has withdrawn from political company in a self-imposed exile, is swayed by the column's two-part promise of wonderment and displacement. The inscription's appeal next pairs coherently with the siren song's critique of ephemeral glory: life is fleeting, fame fizzles fast, and humans are too obtusely ambitious even to notice.[25] The siren rehearses some of the sentiments voiced in Ugone's critique of human endeavors. This is notably the second time in this short series of episodes when humanity's chase for shallow glory comes under scrutiny. The siren's encouragement to indulge in carnal bliss rubs friction against

[22] (He saw oceans, lands, and rivers as a unified whole, / though they appear here divided in so many ways).

[23] See Greenblatt 1991.

[24] (O whoever you might be, whether by choice or by chance, / wandering has brought you to these shores: / neither sunrise nor sunset holds greater marvels / than what this small island conceals. / Pass over, if you wish to see it).

[25] See *GL* XIV.62-64.

Ugone's divine reveal and divine authority itself; she urges mortals to ignore threats from the heavens, to trust in their own capabilities and instincts. Yet both figures strike a common chord in their warnings about fame: the songstress deems it ephemeral, while the fallen Crusader sees it as an hourglass, bound to fade into inevitable silence. Petrarch's allegorical *Triumphi* had teased out this logic early on: fame yields to time, renown to the passing of generations. It is telling that this shared lesson in human folly emerges from mutually dependent sites: Goffredo's education comes from viewing the world from above, as if it were an island, while Rinaldo's stems from experiencing an island itself, its admonitory voice channeled by one of Armida's proxies.

4. *Fixing Eyes on the Historical Prize*

Reflections on fame and its futility join course with Carlo and Ubaldo's maritime journey. Aboard Fortune's skiff, these Crusaders swap their martial credentials for the title of 'naviganti' (explorers, *GL* XV.11), a label more apt for their overseas voyage. Their trip takes flight through the Bakhtinian chronotope of providential expedition, whereby the convergence of time and space occurs as part of a divinely guided plan.[26] Representing Tasso's 'self-conscious incorporation of romance adventure into the [poem's] providential plot', to quote David Quint (2015, 208), Fortune resembles a 'colomba' (dove, *GL* XV.5), bringing into relief her likeness to Columbus. While on board her vessel, Carlo and Ubaldo zoom past lands from the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, while the narrator muses about empire and its fragilities: 'Muoiono le città, muoiono i regni, / copre i fasti e le pompe arena ed erba, / e l'uom d'esser mortal par che si sdegni: / oh nostra mente cupida e superba!' (*GL* XV.20).[27] The voice of the poem utters here a prophecy that toys with the expectation for lasting political dominance: civilization's partial demise interprets its own success. Cities, kingdoms, and their vitality expire as bodies subject to time. This meditation on temporal erosion finds a powerful analogue in the *Divina Commedia*, where Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida likewise reflects on the corrosive force of time and its effects on successive generations: 'Udir come le schiatte si disfanno', he tells the pilgrim, 'non ti parrà nova cosa né forte, / poscia che le cittadi termine hanno' (*Paradiso* XVI.76-78).[28] The *Liberata* inherited a similar lesson from Petrarch's *Triumphus Temporis*: 'Passan vostre grandezze e vostre pompe, / passan le signorie, passano i regni: / ogni cosa mortal Tempo interrompe' (ll. 112-114).[29] Yet here is where Tasso's poem stops short: the allegorical dream through which Petrarch observes eternity – a sequence that follows Dante's climb to the Empyrean – is inaccessible to the *Liberata*'s terrestrial march toward death. Goffredo reaches only as far as Ariosto's Astolfo had in the *Furioso*'s moon mission: a vision from above that points downward, a perspective onto Earth to glimpse what it is not. Interpreting the junction between the city and the sepulcher, Albert R. Ascoli has keenly noted how Goffredo's entry into Christ's empty tomb constitutes the *Liberata*'s 'culminating confrontation with the paradigmatic otherness and difference of death' (2011, 310). 'Like Dante's poem', Ascoli affirms, 'Tasso's tomb is the sign that true meaning and true life dwell beyond history' (319).

[26] See *GL* XV.6 for an example of what Barbara Fuchs calls the 'allegory of Christian teleology' (2001, 29).

[27] (Cities die, kingdoms perish; / the sands and grass cover their splendor and displays. / Man even seems to scorn being mortal. / Oh, our greedy and prideful mind!).

[28] (Hearing how lineages fall apart / will not seem a strange thing or difficult to you, / since even cities have their end).

[29] (Your greatness and your splendor pass away, / your lordships expire, your kingdoms fade: / Time puts an end to all mortal things).

If history ultimately proves transient, what, then, becomes of poetry that roots its prophecies in a historical record it suggests cannot endure?

Notably, it is Tasso's narrator, not Fortune, who laments 'nostra mente cupida e superba!' (our greedy and prideful mind, *GL* XV.20). The voice of the poem criticizes humanity's discontent with the limits of a mortal life, defying them through the birth and burning of civilizations. This cyclical-civic machine, much in the style of the regenerating phoenix, gains new life through death, vivacity through demolition. Only rather than mirror the autonomy of the phoenix – the bird that rises anew from its own ashes – Tasso's vision of imperial power and poverty evolves alongside a prophecy that disadvantages the Christians. Canto X reveals that Muslim triumph in Jerusalem is imminent; all it requires is a bit of patience on the part of the Crusaders' enemies. By exposing the fullness of time, Tasso turns Fortune's wheel toward a sharper truth: triumph promises glory, but never permanence.

Canto X is intricate because of its intertextuality. A cloud-encased chariot carries the sorcerer Ismeno (disguised as an aged man) and Solimano, the deposed king of Nicaea who leads an army of Arabs and Turks. A figural stand-in for the eleventh-century ruler of Nicaea, Kilij Arslan ibn Suleiman, Solimano is, as Moudarres notes, 'imbued with a sense of history' (2019, 114), yet he also gains visibility as the poem's 'classic epic hero' (Wondrich 1998, 111). Unaware of his guide's identity, Solimano speaks to Ismeno in the style of Armida's column: 'O chiunque tu sia' (*GL* X.18), approximating the marvels of the *Liberata*'s sorceress through the body of its subversive sorcerer. In this moment of uncanny symmetry, Solimano appears a doppelgänger of Goffredo in his eagerness to learn the war's outcome and its greater meaning. The promise of hope takes the place of guarantees, as Ismeno confesses his inability to predict the future. He encourages Solimano with 'osa, soffri, confida; io bene spero' (Dare, suffer, trust: I have good hope, *GL* X.21). Ismeno's lesson turns to the example of Salah al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb – Saladin – the Sultan of Egypt who reconquered Jerusalem in 1187. Saladin had long commanded literary respect in Italian works predating the *Liberata*, as well as in William of Tyre's twelfth-century *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, one of Tasso's principal sources.[30] The sharing of Ismeno's knowledge offers Muslims a sympathetic model drawn from their own history. And because no Christians overhear his projection, the hope he voices remains theirs alone. The poem thus insists that not all confidence is lost: Muslims, like phoenixes, may yet rise and attempt Jerusalem again.

If Fortune introduces Columbus through his ties to a single Italian region ('un uom de la Liguria', a man from Liguria, *GL* XV.31), Ismeno pins Saladin to an entire continent. In doing so, he reprises Satan's anti-expansionist lament, envisioning a world in which imperial designs falter and alternative powers rise:

uom che l'Asia ornerà co' fatti illustri,
e del fecondo Egitto avrà il governo.
Taccio i pregi de l'ozio e l'arti industri,
mille virtù che non ben tutte io scerno;
basti sol questo a te, che da lui scosse
non pur saranno le cristiane posse,
ma insin dal fondo suo l'imperio ingiusto
svelto sarà ne l'ultime contese,

[30] See the representations of Saladin in Dante's Limbo (*Inferno* IV.129); Petrarch's *Triumphus Famae* (II.148-150), where he trails Goffredo; and stories 1.3 and 10.9 of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

e le afflitte reliquie entro uno angusto
giro sospinte e sol dal mar difese.
Questi fia del tuo sangue. (*GL* X.22-23)[31]

Emilio Russo has referred to canto X as a 'canto di profezie' (canto of prophecies); it may likewise be described as a canto of counter-history (2005, 272). Solimano shares a lineage with the historical figure Saladin that stresses the temporal constraints on Christian victory in the Holy Land. This genealogical link bridging history and poetry contrasts with the dynastic prediction issued at this canto's end. Peter the Hermit undergoes a rapturous, divine vision, and foretells of Rinaldo's Este descendants, a purely poetic fabrication.[32] Though Solimano will die in battle against Rinaldo in Canto XX (107-108), he is gifted the vision of a collective future, one which his descendants will determine.[33]

En route to gaining this knowledge, Solimano and Ismeno behold Jerusalem in ruins – a city reduced to blood-soaked rubble in the aftermath of the nocturnal battle of the preceding canto. The narrator's lament, 'che spettacolo fu crudele e duro!' (what a cruel and harsh spectacle it was!, *GL* X.25), is an aerial indictment of the very behaviors the Christian camp permits and perpetuates. This condemnation will resurface in the final two cantos, where the Crusaders are reimagined as spiteful predators and the Muslims as desperate fugitives.[34] The mournful vision of Christians abusing their 'fasto superbo' (proud splendor, *GL* X.26) and 'lunga pompa' (lengthy parade, *ibid.*) also foreshadows the criteria the narrator will later use to censure fallen cities in Canto XV. The sight of Christians gathering not only to strip the Muslim dead of their arms but also to reclaim their own fallen troops visually resonates with the prophecy of eventual Muslim triumph. Yet such symmetry will have to wait to crystallize until after the First Crusade ends.

Ismeno, a magic-wielding convert operating within a Christian epic, fixes his gaze on the historical prize. The events that Tasso's contemporary readers would recognize as historical fact ultimately fulfill Ismeno's hope for the future. What he thinks he sees ('Veggio o parmi vedere', *GL* X.22) in his shadowy anticipation of Saladin's reconquest is, in effect, a prognosis of an anti-crusading history. Yet however historically accurate his hopes prove to be, Ismeno's vision is categorically *not* a prophecy. When Solimano asks him to reveal the future, Ismeno warns 'troppo è audace desio' (such a desire is too bold, *GL* X.20). Mortals, he explains, are not endowed with foresight; any impulse to seek it must therefore be quenched. Yet the very term 'audace' stands out in Ismeno's teaching for its resonance with Fortune's Columbian prophecy. Dante had already offered the *Liberata* a cautionary tale through his portrayal of Ulysses' 'folle volo' (mad flight, *Inferno* XXVI.125), signaling that the drive to pursue 'virtute e canoscenza' (virtue and knowledge, *Inferno* XXVI.120) beyond mortal limits is a quick ticket to eternal ruin.

Mapping the same geography traced in Dante's canto, Tasso's Fortune recasts Ulysses' mad flight as a 'volo audace' (intrepid flight, *GL* XV.26), doubling down on her affirmative char-

[31] (A man who will adorn Asia with illustrious deeds / and will hold dominion over fertile Egypt. / I will pass over the merits of his peaceful governance and industrious arts, / a thousand virtues which I cannot fully discern. / Let this alone suffice for you: by his hand, / not only will the Christian forces be shaken, / but their unjust empire will be torn / from its very foundation in the final battles, / its battered remnants pushed / into a narrow enclave, defended only by the sea. / This man will share your blood). See *GL* IV.12-14 for Satan's anti-imperial complaint.

[32] See *GL* X.73-77.

[33] Corrado Confalonieri highlights theologian Paolo Beni's critique of Tasso for using a Muslim sorcerer to reveal this history (9-11). I thank Corrado Confalonieri for kindly sharing the manuscript of his forthcoming study.

[34] See *GL* XIX.30 and XX.143.

acterization of the Greek's 'ardimento' (daring, *GL* XV.31).[35] Audacity shapes Tasso's paean to Columbus as a pointed revision that restores a measure of intellectual heroism to his figure. But *audacia* also converses with the poem's many hesitations about boldness itself. Stepping outside the boundaries of one's allotted time is a danger flagged by both Ismeno and Fortune – a caution that sits uneasily beside the poem's larger effort to refashion fragments of history into the palatable order of poetry. It is precisely this tension that renders prudence the core of Fortune's pedagogy. In her capacity to interpret divine order, the providential pilot answers Ubaldo's flurry of questions – curiosities driven by the impulse to emulate Ulysses' transgressive model yet emerge with richer rewards.

5. *Adjusting to Island Time*

Brimming with the eagerness of *Morgante*'s Rinaldo and Dante's pilgrim in *Paradiso* XIX, Ubaldo asks whether he and Carlo are the first to cross over the Pillars of Hercules. Fortune's redeeming version of Ulysses' voyage confirms they are indeed not, only fueling Ubaldo's desires. When he asks about the populations inhabiting distant lands, Fortune instructs him in their diverse customs, dress, and speech. Occupying her providential role within the epic, she foresees the spread of 'la fé di Piero' (the faith of Peter, *GL* XV.29) and predicts the baptismal campaigns that would accompany European arrivals in the Americas. This forecast channels Pope Paul III's papal bull *Sublimis Deus*, dated 29 May 1537, declaring: 'Attendentes Indos ipsos, ut pote veros homines, non solum Christianae Fidei capaces existere, sed ut nobis innotuit, ad fidem ipsam promptissime currere'.[36] In her vision of Catholicism's global reach, the mouthpiece of Christian providentialism rejects the 'spirito di tolleranza' (spirit of tolerance) cultivated in earlier Italian epics (Zatti 1995, 503), a spirit that would carry over into Giambattista Marino's *Adone* (1623), regarded critically as an epic of peace.[37]

And yet, tellingly, Fortune's Columbus appears more sailor than missionary, despite his own self-fashioning as the 'bearer of Christ' (*Cristo Ferens*), a title drawn from the Greek origins of his name (*Χριστόφορος*). True to his position as *Almirante del Mar Océano* (Admiral of the Ocean Sea), Tasso's Columbus stands among the ranks of the 'naviganti industri' (expert mariners, *GL* XV.30) that followed in his wake. The poem awards him privileged recognition for reaching the New World first, even through choppy waters:

né 'l minaccievol fremito del vento,
né l'inospito mar, né 'l dubbio clima,
né s'altro di periglio o di spavento
più grave e formidabile or si stima,
faran che 'l generoso entro a i divieti
d'Abila angusti l'alta mente accheti. (*GL* XV.31)[38]

[35] See Boitani 1992, 60-86; Residori 1992; Tylus 1993; Stephens 2000.

[36] (Considering the said Indians themselves, as true human beings, they are not only capable of receiving the Christian Faith, but, as has come to our attention, hasten most eagerly toward it). For the reproduction of the Latin text, see Gutierrez 1878, 427.

[37] See Bolzoni 2010.

[38] (Neither the threatening roar of the wind, / nor the inhospitable sea, nor the doubtful climate, / nor any other peril or fear / considered more dire or terrifying, / will make the generous one restrain his lofty mind / within the narrow straits of Mount Abyla).

What were for Dante's Ulisse impediments to travel in the form of familial obligations (*Inferno* XXVI.94-99) become for Tasso's Columbus nature's 'divieti' – not merely limits, but prohibitions that delineate the very conditions of heroic audacity. Columbus' ship is hailed as the boldest, yet its generosity is more geographical than evangelical, more pedagogical in its mastery of navigation than active in spreading the faith.[39]

Prophecies elsewhere share similar vocabularies of underwhelming grandiosity. In Canto I, the narrator addresses his patron Duke Alfonso II d'Este with cautioned expectations about his future writing plans. Stranded as a 'peregrino errante' (wandering pilgrim) wading in the waters of inattentive patronage, Tasso wagers that *perhaps* one day his pen *might* dare to write of Alfonso that which his poem can only hint at: 'Forse un dí fia che la presaga penna / osi scriver di te quel ch'or n'accenna' (*GL* I.4). The parallel attitudes towards Alfonso and Columbus sharpen in perspectives voiced in the revised version of the poem. *Gerusalemme conquistata* elects a new patron altogether, Cardinal Cinzio Passeri Aldobrandini, Tasso's late patron at the papal court in Rome.[40] The *Conquistata* bypasses mention of Columbus' voyage and fame, and shrinks Carlo and Ubaldo's sightseeing tour to a curt four lines.[41] Armida, for her part, transforms almost entirely as a result of Tasso's lengthy edits. Already weary in letters to his Roman readers that Armida appears too much as a leading lady, Tasso relocates her enchanted palace to Mount Lebanon's peak.[42] With the help of Filagliteo – the Christian wizard substituting now for Fortune – the rescue team of Crusaders (now named Araldo and Ruperto) swiftly find Riccardo (formerly Rinaldo, now divested of his ties to the Este). Araldo and Ruperto convince Riccardo to leave but ensure that Armida cannot before they take flight. While, in the *Liberata*, the Magus of Ascalon equips Ubaldo and Carlo with tools for non-violence, Filagliteo gives Araldo and Ruperto chains with which to bind Armida: 'e con quel laccio sì tenace e saldo / legò le braccia e i piè fugaci e snelli / co' nodi d'amante e di topazio' (*GC* 13.70).[43] The Armida of the *Conquistata* lands directly inside the desire she had expressed in Tasso's earlier poem: to be bound up in chains as conquered spoils, a spectacular symbol of the Christians' haughty pride.[44] Yet she is denied her wish for transport with her trappers: rather than return to Jerusalem as booty for display in the final canto's imitation of a Roman triumph, Armida is abandoned for good. She joins the ranks of other rejected epic women in what is now the poem's mathematical center. Armida in the *Liberata* occupies central themes from the periphery; the *Conquistata* banishes her in reverse order. Departing alongside her is the option for a redeemed ending, or, rather, the project to convert on behalf of Christians. In marked contrast, the *Liberata* holds space for Armida to serve as a protectress (and not a victim) of a symbolic New World order. Sustaining her island's life by letting it fall constitutes the revised focus of Armida's art.[45]

[39] Compare the prediction of Rinaldo's descendants (among them Tasso's patron, Duke Alfonso II d'Este) converting populations in Africa in *GL* XVII.94.

[40] For Tasso's reliance on Aldobrandini's patronage, see Driscoll 2024.

[41] See *GC* 12.84.

[42] On Tasso's hesitations about Armida's role in the poem, see Gough 2001 and Wainwright 2021.

[43] (And with that bond, so firm and unyielding, / he tied her swift and nimble arms and feet / with knots of adamant and topaz).

[44] See *GL* XVI.48. Note that here Armida anticipates the narrator's label 'predator' to describe her Christian conquerors.

[45] For more elaborate discussion of Armida's transformations in the *Conquistata*, see Cavallo 1999; Residori 2004; Wainwright 2021.

6. *Keeping the Gilded Age Golden*

Abetting Armida's defense of her island in the *Liberata* is the Magus of Ascalon's prescription of non-violence. Banned from using arms as a shortcut to fighting temptation, Carlo and Ubaldo are unlicensed to kill. In order to tame the island's natural beasts (e.g., pythons, boars, lions, and bears), the Magus equips them with a magic wand ('verga'), a simple waving of which releases a sharp whistle that calms beasts into submission – its orphic proximity to the aims of Catholic missionary work impossible to overlook.[46] Carlo, quickly forgetful, fails as a student during his first challenge. Upon encountering a serpent on the sands, he thinks as a military man would and brandishes his sword. Nicolas Poussin's *The Companions of Rinaldo* (Figure 3) (ca. 1633) captures the contrast in the Crusaders' defense strategies. Carlo appears on the right in his state of total oblivion. He wields a sword against the serpent, sinuous with fiery eyes and coiled around itself. Tasso describes this animal as without a known origin: a 'fèra serpendo orribile e diversa' (slithering beast, terrible and strange, *GL* XV.47). His creature partially resembles Cerberus, inferno's watchdog prone to docility at the sound of music.[47] The wand's whistle is not, however, an instrument of sweet suppression but one intended to sow fear: per the Magus' instructions, 'temeranno appressarsi ove ella suoni' (beasts will be afraid to draw nigh wherever it may sound, *GL* XIV.73). Dread, not dominance, is here the Christians' sonic soft power.

Figure 3 – Nicolas Poussin, *The Companions of Rinaldo*, ca. 1633. Oil on canvas. 118.1 x 102.2 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1977. Object number. 1977.1.2.
Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art[48]

[46] See *GL* XIV.73. For the symbolic intertextuality between Tasso's wand and Homeric poems, see Quint 2015, 204.

[47] In Vergil's *Georgics*, IV. 483, the singer Orpheus gains safe passage to the Underworld by enchanting Cerberus with pacifying music. Dante's description of Cerberus as a 'fiera crudele e diversa' (cruel and strange beast, *Inferno* VI.13) resonates further with Tasso's serpent.

[48] Creative Commons Zero (CC0), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437327>, accessed 1 December 2025.

Reading in the serpent a metaphor for symbolic New World gold – rotted, neglected, and corrupt – it is no small irony that the beast's color appears faded:

Inalza d'oro squallido squamose
le creste e 'l capo, e gonfia il collo d'ira,
arde ne gli occhi, e le vie tutte ascose
tien sotto il ventre, e tòsco e fumo spira;
or rientra in se stessa, or le nodose
ruote distende, e sé dopo sé tira.
Tal s'appresenta a la solita guarda,
né però de' guerrieri i passi tarda. (*GL* XV.48)[49]

This spectral, decaying serpent mirrors the dulling of gold, the very luxury conquistadors after Columbus sought in plenty, as analyzed by Elvira Vilches (2010).[50] As Tasso clearly states, the serpent's are putrid riches, not stones of splendor. Even by Ubaldo's own admission, this creature acts on the defensive ('il difensor serpente', *GL* XV.49); a violent offender it seems not. Still, Carlo first attempts to kill the serpent as an heir to Ariosto's Ruggiero, who likewise raised his sword against the giantess Erifilla upon landing on Alcina's island – the closest precedent for Armida's – before yielding to her plea for mercy.[51]

As with the Cumaean Sibyl restraining Aeneas from attacking the monstrous phantoms of *Aeneid* VI (285-294), Ubaldo and the wizard of Ascalon insist on the necessity of avoiding violence.[52] The wizard's guidance resonates with the aims of Bartolomé de las Casas, who argued for the peaceful incorporation of the cross-Atlantic populations into the Catholic faith. While it is tough to prove whether Tasso had read firsthand Las Casas' writings, similar sentiments likely circulated in northeast Italy, where translations of his works flourished in the early decades of the seventeenth century in Venice.[53] All the same, Tasso's Magus and Las Casas harmonize on a fundamental point: carnage has no place in European encounters with figures of difference.

7. *Settling Scores with Armida, the Cartographic Penelope*

Tracing the interplay between the *Liberata*'s utopian and decolonial perspectives clarifies how and why female artistry intersects with epic history – a lesson Armida inherits from Penelope. In the *Odyssey* the queen of Ithaca is responsible for sustaining poetry. Because Penelope weaves and unweaves the shroud for Laertes, successfully keeping impatient suitors at bay, she guarantees the survival of suspense. If Penelope allows for narrative to reach its end, Armida permits narrative to change its course. When readers first meet her, she is instructed to directly imitate Penelope's art: 'Tessi la tela', her uncle Idraote tells her, 'ch'io ti mostro ordita' (weave the web that I show

[49] (It rears its head and scaly crest of pallid gold, / swelling its neck with rage. / Its eyes blaze with fire, / its belly keeps all paths concealed, / and it exhales venom and smoke. Now it coils back upon itself; / now it unwinds its knotted folds, and drags itself after itself. / Thus it appears at the usual watch, / yet it does not slow the warriors' steps).

[50] Given both creatures' resonance with the poets' contemporary history, Tasso's gilded serpent invites comparison with Ariosto's hellish beast Avarice from *Orlando furioso* XXVI.30-36, depicted on Merlin's fountain as slain by political leaders.

[51] See *Orlando furioso* VII.7. For comparative readings of Ariosto's and Tasso's respective island paradises, see Driscoll 2021.

[52] See *GL* XV.49.

[53] Three editions of Giacomo Castellani's translation, *Istoria, o brevissima relatione della distruttione dell'Indie Occidentali*, appeared in Venice in 1626, 1630, and 1643.

you all laid out, *GL* IV.24).[54] Cloth immaterializes as discourse in Armida's ruse of distraction. Though her words carry sway, her actions are far more telling. Crucially, her role in the matrix of discovery has little to do with her scandalous reputation and everything to do with her cartographic gifts – her ability to chart, reshape, and even erase land. What is especially pertinent is the language of accumulation and recuperation, of building and recovery, that characterizes Armida as geographically savvy. The elsewhere that Penelope cannot access through the making and unmaking of her art is the very elsewhere that Armida guards through the construction and destruction of her own.

Armida unsettles the logic of settlement primarily to others' disadvantage. Her cartographic defenses thwart Carlo's desire to return to Europe bearing news of her exotic island shores. As becomes clear, his appetite is not for the diversity of distant lands but for the envy he hopes to stir in others by claiming to have witnessed it firsthand:

Carlo incomincia allor: "Se ciò concede,
donna, quell'alta impresa ove ci guidi,
lasciami omai por ne la terra il piede
e veder questi inconosciuti lidi,
veder le genti e 'l culto di lor fede
e tutto quello ond'uom saggio m'invìdi,
quando mi gioverà narrar altrui
le novità vedute e dir: 'Io fui' ". (*GL* XV.38)[55]

Carlo's zealous ambitions rehearse what Mignolo names 'the rhetoric of modernity' and read like the quest for double colonization (2011, 14). The ability to say 'Io fui' (I was there) is to foresee the occupation of land in time and space. Fortune, now a killjoy to her would-be colonizing shipmate, reigns in Carlo's hungry zest: it is not yet time, she teaches him, for Europe to set sail on its colonizing projects. In other words, she intends, 'Carlo, you can't be Columbus.'

Yet there is still time, Armida proves, to stall the European colonizing gaze Carlo brings with him. After failing to convince Rinaldo to stay with her on the island, she colors the sky black, conjuring tempests and cursing the destinies of both Rinaldo and the Christian faith. The premodern model of conquest through semiotics, as Tzvetan Todorov has discussed, becomes under Armida's agency a conquest *over* semiotics.[56] Before flying off to Egypt to recruit a hitman for her now enemy ex-lover, Armida all but snaps her fingers to make her island disappear. She summons three hundred deities from hell, including, it seems, the 'demon fabri' (demon craftsmen, *GL* XVI.1) who built her palace. Together, they raze her home from the earth. In the blink of an eye, what was her utopic paradise becomes an infernal *οὐ-τόπος*, an unmappable 'no place' effaced from sight:

Ombra più che di notte, in cui di luce
raggio misto non è, tutto il circonda,
se non se in quanto un lampeggiar riluce

[54] For Penelope and Armida connected in other ways, see Cavallo 2004, 213; Van der Laan 2024, 105-137.

[55] (Carlo then began: "If that lofty mission / to which you guide us permits it, my lady, / let me now set foot on this land / and see these unknown shores, / see the people and the worship of their faith, / and all those things for which a wise man would envy me, / when it will benefit me to tell others / of the novelties I have seen and to say, 'I was there' ").

[56] See Todorov 1982.

per entro la caligine profonda.
Cessa al fin l'ombra, e i raggi il sol riduce
pallidi; né ben l'aura anco è gioconda,
né più il palagio appar, né pur le sue
vestigia, né dir puossi: "Egli qui fue." (*GL* XVI.69)[57]

A counter-figure to Hercules and Ulysses, Armida eliminates the discursive prospects of westbound colonization, the lexis of enviable experience that Carlo so voraciously craves. Virgil's Dido self-destructs when Aeneas opts for destiny over their love tryst; Armida flattens the metaphorical grounds upon which others might follow in Aeneas' or Columbus' footsteps. Her fractured world evades spatialized chronicle – the compulsion among Crusaders and future colonists to say 'I was there'.

Armida draws new boundaries when she destroys old lands, redefining what epic boldness can look like on a map. Her topographical excision challenges the claims others might stake on still farther foreign shores – a commanding gesture within a poem centered on the reclamation of territory held by opposing forces. Through an emphatic five-fold negation of place, trace, speech, and the senses, Tasso's maker of westernmost creation marks the new bounds of western expansion. 'Né dir puossi: "Egli qui fue" ' evokes the anti-imperial motto *Non plus ultra* traditionally inscribed on the Pillars of Hercules. From a sixteenth-century perspective, this becomes a decolonial refusal of Emperor Charles V's emblem and counter-motto *Plus Ultra.*[58] Armida's erasure thus reasserts a limit that imperial ideology insists on transgressing, turning the *Liberata*'s western horizon into a site where expansion encounters its own undoing. Reduced and preserved as a *utopia incognita* – an unknowable no-place off-limits and out of sight – Armida's island is able to survive, transformed just as she is.

While Rinaldo may emerge, as Jane Tylus has suggested, as the poem's 'would-be Columbus', Armida thrives as the anti-discoverer (1993, 104). Opposed to providential designs, she stands as much as an anti-Columbus as an anti-Magellan, an anti-Cortez, and an anti-Charles V – the imperial heroes and 'nuovi Argonauti' (new Argonauts) championed in the third and final edition of Ariosto's *Furioso*.[59] Because in the *Conquistata* Armida's island disappears into namelessness, its plotting in the *Liberata* casts these negative associations into sharper relief. The Canaries would become, as Tasso knew well, 'il porto del mondo' (the world's port, *GL* XV.63) in the history of European conquest. Yet the *Liberata*'s fusion of hybrid temporalities render this space also available for a decolonial alternative: a utopia transformed into a no-man's land, a world not new but deliberately nullified. Armida's history lesson is clear: if humanity lost Eden through the fault of female sin, then Europe forfeits its progress toward the New World through the reckless ambitions of men.[60]

[57] (A shade darker than night's, in which no ray / of light mingles, surrounds everything, / except when a flash briefly gleams / through the deep murk. / At last the shadow gives way, and the sun weakens its rays; / nor is the air yet pleasant, / nor does the palace appear anymore, nor even its traces, / nor can anyone say: "It was here").

[58] See Moudarres 2012, 298. Tasso was familiar with the ambitions associated with Charles' emblem, as evidenced in his dialogue *Il conte overo de l'imprese* (1594). See Tasso 1998, vol. 2, 1196.

[59] See *Orlando furioso* XV.21-36. Mention of the 'nuovi Argonauti' occurs in *Orlando furioso* XV.21 and hints at the exploits of Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, and Columbus. Ariosto had presented a copy of this edition to Charles V when they met in Mantua in November 1532, prompting the emperor to reciprocate reportedly with the title of poet laureate. See Moudarres 2012, 294-299.

[60] On ties between Eden and Armida's isle, see Venturi 1999.

8. *Purgatory Found or Atlantis Sunk?*

When Armida levels her island home, might she gesture proleptically to her post-conversion aims? After enjoining herself to the troops assembled in Gaza, she arrives on the poem's final battlefield with archery in hand, ready to kill Rinaldo and then turn violent against herself. A tender reunion between the former lovers in a secluded setting softens Armida's resolve, further swayed by Rinaldo's pledge to be her 'campione e servo' (champion and servant, *GL* XX.134). The Christian hero vows sincerely to serve Armida and to restore her political dominance, displaying his heart thusly:

Mira ne gli occhi miei, s'al dir non vuoi
fede prestar, de la mia fede il zelo.
Nel soglio, ove regnàr gli avoli tuoi,
riporti giuro; ed oh piacesse al Cielo
ch'a la tua mente alcun de' raggi suoi
del paganesmo dissolvesse il velo,
com'io farei che 'n Oriente alcuna
non t'agguagliasse di regal fortuna. (*GL* XX.135)[61]

Attracted by these political prospects, Armida dissolves her wrath and dedicates herself to Rinaldo in return. She is perceptive to the contract he has proposed: *if* she converts, he will be her henchman. Yet it is not necessarily Armida's faith that she alters, but the weight of the words she utters in reply. She repurposes the promise the Virgin Mary makes in her response to the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation: 'ecce ancilla Domini' (behold the handmaid of the Lord, Luke 1:38). Armida might assert 'ecco l'ancilla tua' (behold your handmaid, *GL* XX.136), but her acceptance of Christianity is nowhere explicitly stated.[62] What she submits to is collaboration in Rinaldo's geopolitics. Command and law – the stakes in Armida's promise – converge in her pledge of obedience but only because Rinaldo holds her up a new Alexander, destined to become indominable among all women in the East. Providential Fortune, who stood at the helm as guide to Armida's Atlantic island, is reconfigured as the 'regal fortuna' the enchantress now chases at the poem's conclusion. Looking toward the east while the Christians prepare to return home in the west, Armida prospers (temporarily) as a New World protectress. By withdrawing her island from Europe's expectant gaze, she stages a preemptive defense of what will become of the Americas, vulnerable and vigilant, as in Stradanus' allegory.

Armida's erasure of space to thwart human greed invites comparison with the sinking of fabled Atlantis, as recounted in Plato's dialogues. Both islands – each a vanished utopia – warn against unchecked hubris and embody an ideal that recedes the moment one tries to grasp it. These islands catalyze the enchantment of exploration even as they expose the ethical failures of those who would explore. Yet in Armida's case, what becomes colonizable is not her island but divine power. Through the act of destruction, she appropriates a divine prerogative, guarding the allure of what remains unsettled. In doing so, Armida revives and preserves the marvelous,

[61] (Look into my eyes, if you do not wish to trust my words, / and witness the zeal of my faith. / I swear to restore you / to the throne where your ancestors once ruled. / Oh, would it please Heaven that some of its light / might dissolve the veil of paganism that clouds your mind, / I would ensure that no woman in the East / could rival you in royal fortune).

[62] On Armida's questionable conversion, see Migiel 1987; Stephens 1989; Cavallo 1999; Gough 2001; Ramachandran 2007; Van der Laan 2024.

vividly captured in the painting that opened this essay. Like the Guardi brothers' circumspect nymph, Armida's island is both palatable and vulnerable to the European gaze. But as a utopia outside of time and space, it ultimately resists that gaze's compulsion to seize and transform – holding fast at the threshold where would-be conquerors must decide whether their ideal worlds will sink or swim, or whether they were never meant to be claimed at all. With this decolonial option, Tasso and Armida offer readers an elsewhere protected from the violence of possession, a *utopia incognita* shimmering beyond the reach of desire adrift.

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