Jerusalem Delivered (Gerusalemme Liberata)

Torquato Tasso · *1581 · Edward Fairfax translation (1600)*

Godfrey of Bouillon leads the Christian armies of the First Crusade to the siege of Jerusalem. The campaign is delayed by quarrels, magic, and love: the sorceress Armida lures knights away, Tancred loves the pagan warrior Clorinda, and the hero Rinaldo is lost in an enchanted garden. Tasso's epic, in twenty cantos, joins history with romance, and Fairfax's verse translation is a classic of its own.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a holy war be won by discipline and faith alone, or must the passions that threaten it be taken into the story?

Godfrey stands for single purpose, and the poem first praises him. Yet the poem's most memorable figures are those who are torn: Tancred, who kills the woman he loves in a night duel, and Armida, a villain who comes to love Rinaldo. Tasso grants the cause its moral weight but gives the human cost an equal share. The final victory is clear, and so is the sense of what was spent on it.

KEY CHARACTERS

Godfrey of Bouillon
The chosen leader of the crusaders, steady and devout.

Rinaldo
The most brilliant knight, rash and bound by passion.

Tancred
A noble knight who loves Clorinda.

Clorinda
A pagan warrior woman, born to Christian parents without knowing it.

Armida
A sorceress sent to divide the Christians, who falls in love.

Erminia
A pagan princess who loves Tancred.

Argante
A fierce Saracen champion.

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Army and the Council

CANTOS I–V

Godfrey is chosen leader. The army marches on Jerusalem. In Hell the devils plan to scatter the Christians, and Armida arrives at the camp with a false plea for help and takes away many knights.

- Godfrey's authority is established before anything is attempted.
- The story of Olindo and Sophronia is an early tale of willing sacrifice.
- Armida's beauty is a weapon used with great skill.

02

Duels and Wounds

CANTOS VI–X

Tancred fights Argante, Erminia tries to cure him, and the pagans make night sorties. Rinaldo, banished for killing a rival, leaves the camp.

- Erminia's secret love for Tancred makes her a sympathetic figure on the wrong side.
- The loss of Rinaldo weakens the Crusaders.
- Visions and an angelic message guide the Christian leaders.

03

Clorinda and the Forest

CANTOS XI–XIII

A procession on the Mount of Olives is followed by an assault. In a night duel Tancred kills Clorinda not knowing who she is. The wood that supplies siege timber is enchanted.

- Clorinda's death scene, with her baptism, is the emotional peak.
- The enchanted forest turns every trained soldier's nerve to fear.
- Tancred's grief is not eased by victory.

04

Rinaldo and Armida

CANTOS XIV–XVI

Two knights are sent to bring Rinaldo back. They find him in Armida's garden, charmed and idle, and they shame him into leaving.

- The garden is a description of pleasure meant to tempt as it charms.
- Rinaldo's awakening is one of the poem's great scenes.
- Armida's grief at his leaving is shown with sympathy.

05

The Last Assaults

CANTOS XVII–XX

Rinaldo breaks the spell on the forest. The Egyptian army arrives, and the final battle is fought. The city falls and Godfrey gives thanks at the Holy Sepulchre.

- The siege tower and the spell's breaking resolve the long delay.
- Armida, defeated, is moved by Rinaldo's mercy.
- The poem ends at the Sepulchre, with the army kneeling.

Holy War | Love and Duty | Enchantment | Leadership | Sacrifice

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The poem tells a historical story with magical machinery. Notice when each is used.
2. Compare Godfrey with Tancred as models of a hero. Which does the poem love more?
3. Pay attention to the pagan characters' speeches. Tasso lets them speak well.
4. Fairfax's translation is in eight-line stanzas. Read a few aloud to hear the rhythm.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Edward Fairfax translation (1600) (Project Gutenberg #392 (Torquato Tasso, Jerusalem Delivered, translated by Edward Fairfax, London, 1600; Project Gutenberg edition with modernised spelling; compared with the Internet Archive scan of Godfrey of Bulloigne, ed. R. A. Willmott, London: Routledge, 1858, godfreyofbulloig00tass)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/tasso-jerusalem-delivered/.