

THE 'AMAZZONE CORSARA' BY G.C. CORRADI: A 'GOTHIC' LIBRETTO?

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In 1686 a piece entitled *L'Amazzone corsara* or *Alvilda regina dei Goti* was published in Venice by Giulio Cesare Corradi. It was an attempt to put into music a story made known by Olaus Magnus (*Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* V ch.18 and V ch.27, from Johannes Magnus' *Historia Gothorum* VII ch.8-10), and already treated in Italy by Orazio Ariosti in his epic poem *Alfeo*, written at the end of XVI century.

In Olaus's history the virgin Alvilda is the main example of piracy practised by women. The girl who has always shown an exceptional purity is secluded by her father in a fortress guarded by snakes. He promises her in marriage to the man who can make his way to the girl. The only one who passes the test is Alff, the heir to the Danish Crown. But Alvilda, persuaded by her mother, refuses the marriage and devotes herself to chastity, and becomes a very strong pirate. Unexpectedly one day she fights with Alff himself: she is therefore won and taken prisoner. Marriage and children are the happy end.

In Olaus's work a large space is reserved to the first part of the story, that is to Alff's fight against the snakes, to Alvilda's decision to keep her chastity, and to their exploits by sea. On the contrary, the report about the marriage is extremely concise and, above all, nothing is said about the way Alvilda gives in. Ariosti's unfinished *Alfeo* narrates Alff's love and the beginning of his mission to conquer and to convert Norway. The dominant interest is the religious one: everything in the human life is frail and perishable, so that it is advisable to rely upon God's Providence and not to pride oneself. The case of Corradi's *Alvilda* is quite different. In the XVI century Italian *melodramma* had tried to restore the unity between words and music, which was the property of the ancient Greek tragedy, but the results were very different: librettists aimed at cre-

ate a merely soft atmosphere in which strong contrasts were avoided. In the following century plots often became more complicated and were influenced by the increasing importance of scenography. In the second half of the century librettists began to leave out mythological and symbolical characters and treat historical and 'romantic' subjects: but they often introduced arbitrary events and anachronisms.

The almost unknown Corradi takes only the cue from Olaus's history: he leaves out the previous life of the two main characters (some hints are given at the beginning, in the summary, and in i 2, where Alvilda mentions her ancient dislike for Alfo and Alfo reminds her that he has become a pirate to follow her), and focuses the attention on their meeting after the battle where Alvilda has been defeated. So the play takes place at Alfo's court in Dania, even if there is no allusion to the history or the habits of that country: as a matter of fact the stage setting could be easily changed and the characters could act anywhere else. The court has not the severe look of Olaus's world, but, so to say, the frivolous Arcadian atmosphere: so among the various scenes we find in the first act a *Scola da Scherma, e da ballo contigua à Libreria*, in the second a *Camerino de Specchi*, in the third a *Giardino con fontana nel mezzo* and *Gabinetti* (here and in other quotations I follow always the spelling of the original edition). Alvilda, who should be a dreadful fighter, just like a man, has got with her her private maid, Irena, who acts as an advisor, according to the tragic example where this function, near to the female protagonist, is always the nurse's one. Like Rosmonda, Torrismondo's sister in Tasso's tragedy (ii 4), Alvilda refuses love arguing it also as her fear of suffering (i 3): "Tu m'esorti ad amar, e amar non voglio. / Non voglio amar / Per poter vivere / Senza penar; / [...] Non voglio amor / Per poter vivere / Senza dolor [...]". But in this case the maid is not only a confidant, but lives her own life: Irena and Delio, a favourite of the Court, will fall in love one another (i 16 and 18). Though their love story is the only one without any real obstacle, Delio laments the

pains of love as the literary genre requires (i 19): "Di reciproca fiamma / Ardo anch'io per Irena: / Egual al suo dolor sento la pena. / Amar, / E non penar / Possibile non è". A third couple in the play is the one constituted by Olmiro, Alfo's brother, and Gilde, daughter of Ernando, Olmiro's tutor. It is worth noticing that in describing his love, Olmiro makes use of metaphors taken from fencing language, in the Petrarchian manner. This kind of language had already passed from lyric poetry into romances of chivalry; but the heroines of these poems (like Clorinda in *Gerusalemme Liberata*) were very different from the young girls of the librettos: so Gilde with female cunning drives Olmiro to ask her in marriage (i 10). But apart from this consideration, it should be always remembered that it was music that subsequently provided the specific distinction of each character and of each scenic situation (not to mention the peculiar expressiveness depending upon the voices: the timbre of a particular singing voice is in a way like the fixed mask of a character of the ancient theater).

Moreover the story is complicated by an expedient not connected with this atmosphere: Gilde has been destined for monastic life and shouldn't fall in love (in ii 3, reproaching her daughter for her elegance, Ernando says: "Gilde tù sei già destinata ai chiostrì [...] A Cintia hò voto / Di consacrarti"). Probably Corradi in this case has drawn his inspiration from the character of Rosmonda in Tasso's *Torrismondo* (in iv 3, reporting the words of her mother, Rosmonda says: "a quel Dio t'offersi / che regge il mondo"); but Gilde is completely devoid of scruples, and intends to make a fool of her father and also of her lover, laughing at his sorrow (see also ii 14-17).

Meanwhile Alfo's love story goes on. In ii 8 Alvilda bears her captivity with great courage, like an ancient martyr ("Scherzo, e rido fra le catene / Ne m'affligge alcun dolor [...] Brillo, e godo fra le ritorte / Ne m'attrista alcun pensier"); but in ii 9 when Alfo - following Ernando's advice - pretends he will give her as a maid-servant to his new wife, Alvilda desperately reminds him that

she has been a queen and begs him in the name of love. Alfo's deceit is quickly discovered by Irene (ii 11) who is ready to encourage the project. She is the modern reproduction of the slaves in the ancient Latin comedy, clever and brilliant: her qualities, more than her beauty, are commended by her lover Delio in ii 12. So in a duet she tries to convince her lady to give love free course, like birds, flowers, and trees do. But Alvilda, as obstinate as Silvia in Tasso's *Aminta*, refuses her advice and is apparently ready to remain a virgin. Then a comedy of errors begins: Alfo presents Gilde to Alvilda as his wife (iii 5), Gilde plays her part perfectly (iii 6), Alvilda, determined not to give up, tells Olmiro that Gilde is Alfo's fiancée (iii 7), Olmiro is furious (iii 8), Alfo discloses to Ernando the truth about Gilde's and Olmiro's love (iii 9), Olmiro tries to kill Gilde (iii 10). Only when she sees that Alfo is going to marry Gilde, Alvilda changes her mind (iii 18: "Alv. Quì d'improvviso / Hò cangiato pensiero: / Abborrisco il servir, amo l'Impero. Alfo. E le mie nozze? Alv. Accetto"). In the last scene also the other two stories come to a happy conclusion.

In my opinion what we have here has nothing to do with a northern environment: Tasso's attempt to describe at least a different landscape (but where pleasures, delights, griefs and finally tragedies were the same as in the classical world) is completely ignored. On the other hand in this case the audience needs neither the detailed images described by travellers nor the awful atmosphere of the Renaissance tragedy, because music and scenic effects were then the most important things. Corradi as his contemporary colleagues did (much more than it happened in the XVI and XVII century's tragedies) could place nonchalantly his stories in ancient Rome and in medieval Italy, in Naples and in the East, always giving the impression that the chosen milieu is purely casual.

