



NELL'ELEZIONE DI SUA ALTEZZA EMINENTISSIMA

## FRÀ MATTEO FESTING

PRINCIPE E GRAN MAESTRO

DEL

SOVRANO MILITARE ORDINE OSPEDALIERO  
DI SAN GIOVANNI DI GERUSALEMME DI RODI E DI MALTA

### COMMENTARY

**Metre.** Sonnet, composed of two quatrains and two tercets of hendecasyllables. The rhyme system (ABBA-ABBA-CDE-EDC), an archaic form not so frequently found in Italian poetry, was used among others by Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), in two of the three sonnets he composed to celebrate the Italian historian and man of letters, Giacomo Bosio (1544-1627), who wrote a famous *History of the Knights of St. John* (*Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.ma Militia di San Giovanni Gierosolimitano*, Rome 1594-1602): cf TORQUATO TASSO, *Opere*, a cura di Bruno Maier, II, Milan 1964 (no. 1569, *Bosio, che già i trascorsi oscuri tempi*, p. 318; no. 1570, *Al greco stil già largo campo offerse*, p. 319). The more typical rhyme system (ABBA-ABBA-CDC-DCD) is used in the English translation. Both the original Italian text and the English translation display a number of archaisms – lexical, orthographical, morphological and syntactical – along with a large resort to rhetorical effects.

**1. lo scettro santo:** literally, «the sacred sceptre», as *sceptre* is a symbol of supreme power, whereas *sacred* refers to the fact that the Order of St. John is a religious order. Here the Grand Master's office is metaphorically alluded to (cf *Post* in the English translation). – **2. vice:** «change», i.e. «turn», «succession», a Latinism in Italian, where *vece*, the phonetic result, is normally represented. – **4. P'invitto stuolo:** «the undefeated host», viz. of the Knights of St. John, with a Latinism.



**5. s'estolle:** the boast «soars», «rises», a Latinism (*se extollit*). – **6. di cui gran fama dice:** due to rhyme, the English text has a different reading, *not last in Martyrs' Row*. This echoes the Ambrosian hymn (*Te Deum*), *Te martyrum candidatus laudat exercitus*, «the noble army of martyrs praise thee». – **7. la pia cervice:** literally, «the pious neck», with a genuine Latinism (*cervix*); but the adjective logically refers to the person itself. – **8. al rege offerse, e imporporò l'ammanto:** «He piously offered his neck to the king to be cut off, and thus he dyed the royal robe purple with blood», a chiasmus. The image of purple is a favourite one for Christian poets to sing about the blood of martyrs. In a popular hymn by Venantius Fortunatus, the Holy Cross is rhetorically addressed to as *Arbor decora et fulgida, / ornata regis purpura*, «O glorious and splendid Tree, adorned with the King's purple», viz. with Christ's Precious Blood (cf *Liturgia Horarum iuxta ritum Romanum*, editio typica altera, II, Vatican City 2000<sup>2</sup>, *Proprium de Tempore, Tempus Quadragesimae, Hebdomada Sancta, Ad Vesperas*, p. 329). Besides, *imporporò* is a reminiscence from Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), *La Pentecoste*, ll. 15-16: *imporporò le zolle / del suo sublime altar*, (Christ) «empurpled (with blood) the turves of his sublime altar», Calvary. Thus, the martyr is assimilated to the first martyr, Christ himself. However, a vague memory of a “lay” martyrdom is traceable too, as the whole line recalls a passage from a sonnet by Jacopo Vittorelli (1749-1835), the last of mannered “Arcadian” poets, on the death of Louis XVI: cf ID., *Per la morte di Luigi XVI*, in *Lirici del Settecento*, a cura di Bruno Maier, con la collaborazione di Mario Fubini, Dante Isella, Giorgio Piccitto; *Introduzione* di Mario Fubini, Riccardo Ricciardi editore, Milan-Naples 1959 (= *La letteratura italiana. Storia e testi*, 49), p. 899, ll. 10-11: *e il fiume dell'aperta gola / spruzzò Fortezza, ed inquinolle il grembo*, «and the flood bursting out from the ripped throat spattered Fortitude with blood, and thus did it pollute her lap». In the light of this example, our line might also have sounded like: *al rege offerse, e imporporogli (imporporonne) il manto*, «and empurpled his robe». However, it is to be noted that *ammanto* is often found in old as well as literary Italian to refer to the robe that is worn by some dignified person, and especially to the Papal robe, as in Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia, Inferno*, canto II, ll. 25-27: *Per questa andata onde li dai tu vanto / intese cose che furon cagione / di sua vittoria e del papale ammanto*, «He from his journey, in thy song renown'd, / Learn'd things, that to his victory gave rise / And to the papal robe» (classic translation by Henry Cary, 1805), where rhyme *vanto/ammanto*, the same as in our sonnet, is to remark. A subtle, violent contrast is suggested between present and past behaviour of Henry VIII: once, he had been acclaimed by the Pope as *Defensor Fidei*, «the Champion of Faith»; now, as a schismatic king, he has ordered the execution of Fortescue, a noble subject who refused to swear to be faithful to him and deny the



Roman Catholic religion. By this way, the *ammanto*, a symbol of regal dignity, with the Papal robe alluded to, displays all its sarcastic power. Moreover, the martyr's purple-coloured blood may well allude to the king's purple robe, thus emphasizing the latter's impiety through a clashing opposition.

**9. P'alma instrutto:** «with your soul having imbibed» so noble examples, a Greek accusative. – **10. i guerrier:** literally, «warriors»; the word, referring to the Knights of St. John, is used by Tasso in his third sonnet to Giacomo Bosio: cf *op. cit.*, no. 1571 *A quel ch'è qui raccolto in brevi carte*, p. 320, l. 10: *il pio guerrier*. – **11. di qual sangue:** the rhythmic pause between *qual* and *sangue* is intended to stress both words («Recall *the blood* you descend from», with reference both to Fortescue's martyrdom and to the distinction of many other ancestors).

**12. P'alto dover:** «the high duty». – **13-14. onde si vuol dal Prence a' tribolati / levar l'affanno, e trionfar de gli empj:** «whereby a Prince is supposed to relieve the suffering of the troubled and triumph over the impious», a particular reference to the charismata which the Order of St. John is based on, *Obsequium Pauperum* (serving the poor and the sick, *a' tribolati levar l'affanno*) and *Tuitio Fidei* (defending Faith, here to be expressed in a negative way as *trionfar de gli empj*). Note run-on line and chiasmus. The exhortation is reminiscent of a famous passage from Vergil's *Aeneid*, book VI, ll. 851-853: *Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento / (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem, / parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, «But, Rome, 't is thine alone, with awful sway, / To rule mankind, and make the world obey, / Disposing peace and war by thy own majestic way; / To tame the proud, the fetter'd slave to free: / These are imperial arts, and worthy thee» (classic translation by John Dryden, 1697). In fact, the opposition *a' tribolati / levar l'affanno, e trionfar de gli empj* echoes the model, *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, although Aeneas' *pietas* becomes here a genuine, Christian piety. Moreover, Vergil's words, *memento / (hae tibi erunt artes)* are paralleled here by *l'alto dover apprendi, / onde si vuol dal Prence*, «Do learn from thy Ancestors, what is bound / a Christian Prince to do». – **14. e trionfar de gli empj:** a Latinism (*triumphare de aliquo*). The English translation has, *and th' Impious confound*, a vague reminiscence from *Proverbs* 13,5 *Impius autem confundit et confundetur*, «But the impious confound and will be confounded».

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