TRAUMA AND LITERATURE

As a concept, “Trauma” has attracted a great deal of interest in literary studies. A key term in psychoanalytic approaches to literary study, trauma theory represents a critical approach that enables new modes of reading and of listening. It is a leading concept of our time, applicable to individuals, cultures, and nations. This book traces how trauma theory has come to constitute a discrete but influential approach within literary criticism in recent decades. It offers an overview of the genesis and growth of literary trauma theory, recording the evolution of the concept of trauma in relation to literary studies. In twenty-one essays, covering the origins, development, and applications of trauma in literary studies, *Trauma and Literature* addresses the relevance and impact this concept has in the field.
CAMBRIDGE CRITICAL CONCEPTS SERIES

Cambridge Critical Concepts focuses on the important ideas animating twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary studies. Each concept addressed in this series has had a profound impact on literary studies, as well as on other disciplines, and already has a substantial critical bibliography surrounding it. This new series captures the dynamic critical energies transmitted across twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary landscapes: the concepts critics bring to reading, interpretation, and criticism. By addressing the origins, development, and application of these ideas, the books collate and clarify how these particular concepts have developed, while also featuring fresh insights and establishing new lines of inquiry.

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Preface

The things that go on between Tancred and Clorinda – they meet on a battlefield, they fall in love, they suffer tragically – are part of a larger story invented over 400 years ago by the Italian poet Torquato Tasso in his ambitious romantic epic, La Gerusalemme Liberata. Today’s readers of this lively tale likely come away feeling a mixture of fondness and embarrassment. The story is compelling and fast-paced, and it is hard not to enjoy. Yet it is also melodramatic and at odds with present-day sensibilities, particularly in its assumptions about the interplay of love, honor, and martial glory. Tasso’s thriller about the efforts of Christians to liberate Jerusalem from Muslim control during the First Crusade feels uncomfortable, given the fact that current geopolitical conflicts also pit the Abrahamic faiths against each other. Furthermore, some of it seems hackneyed: The moment when Clorinda pulls off her battle helmet to reveal long blonde tresses that tumble down her back has a certain B-movie flavor. Reading Tasso can be like listening to a dinner-table story recounted by a lovable but long-winded elderly uncle. We are fond of the teller, and we admire his ability to spin a compelling yarn, but we inwardly roll our eyes, privately glad that the worldview he expresses is now out of date.

Sigmund Freud saw something else in the story of Tancred and Clorinda. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, he suggests that it offers a cautionary illustration of how people unwittingly repeat actions that hurt themselves or others. Tasso’s tale contains what Freud calls, in Strachey’s translation, “the most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this.” This fate is what Freud came to label repetition compulsion, and it figures largely in our current understanding of trauma, in a manner reminiscent of how Freud plumbed the literary tradition for the example of Oedipus to illuminate what he considered another aspect of the human condition. As a result, the story of Tancred and Clorinda is now an entrenched part of our conceptual framework as we study and theorize trauma and its meaning. It also serves to remind us that literary language has a role to
play in our engagement with trauma, which is precisely the notion that this volume of essays explores.

Tancred and Clorinda, as recognized literary emblems of trauma, adorn the cover of this book in the photograph of a terra-cotta sculpture created by an anonymous Neapolitan artist in the mid-eighteenth century. The sculpture presents both characters, as well as the remains of the tree that also figures into their story. I am grateful to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for permission to use their image of this work, which is housed in their collection.

In completing this book, I am also grateful for the support and inspiration that I found in a number of settings. The groundbreaking work of the trauma awareness training program (“STAR”) at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding in Harrisonburg, Virginia, helped open my eyes to the complexities of trauma healing. The University of Iowa supported my work as a scholar in residence during a sabbatical leave, and my colleagues at The College at Brockport (State University of New York) both supported that leave and offered opportunities to discuss and deepen my understandings. I also appreciate the further encouragement I have received from my new colleagues at Drexel University. Ray Ryan, editor at Cambridge University Press, first proposed this volume to me; his vision for a Cambridge Critical Concepts series was timely and in tune with current developments in literary studies. The professional work of all the staff at Cambridge University Press was of top quality.

Finally, I want to thank all the contributors to this volume not only for their work on this project but also for their larger engagement with the important topics of trauma and trauma healing. This book is dedicated to all those who wish for the literary and other arts to play a role in creating more just and peaceful conditions in our world.