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INTRODUCTION

"Tirant lo Blanc is the best European novel of the fifteenth century," says Damaso Alonso in his excellent study.(1) Miguel de Cervantes, writing from the 17th century, affirms: "as far as style is concerned, this is the best book in the world."(2) If this is so, why has the novel all but disappeared from view?

Some place the blame on the language of the original: Catalan, whose literature is not widely read in the original tongue. Others say it is the fault

of the erotic scenes ~~ too shameful for the polite society of earlier times. To my mind, a heavily contributing factor is its rhetoric. As Joseph Vaeth says: "Within this work may be found religious and philosophical discourses, speeches and disputations…; formal debates…; documents and papers…; formal challenges and replies…; dramatic lamentations; long and fervent prayers; and allusions to classical Latin authors, to biblical characters and to figures prominent in medieval literature." He goes on to say that if the novelist had omitted many of these elements, "his book would in that case have been reduced to approximately one-fourth of its present size, but quite probably it would now be considered a masterpiece of narration and dialogue."(3)

Such has been the aim of this translation: The story line has been slightly abridged, but the most dramatic change is that most of the rhetoric has been eliminated. If the reader's literary palate is tickled by this version, and if he would like to read the entire manuscript in English, he is referred to the version by David Rosenthal or to the even more complete translation by Ray La Fontaine.(4)

Who was the author of this spicy, brutally realistic novel of kings and knights of the fifteenth century? We know that Joanot Martorell, son of the king's chamberlain, Francesc Martorell, was born in Valencia in about 1413. He lived in England during the years 1438 and 1439, and also traveled to Naples. Death came to him in 1468. During his life he wrote several letters of combat, and he began to write his novel Tirant lo Blanc in about 1460. Whether or not he actually finished the book is still a matter of debate, for it was not published during his lifetime. Another writer, Marti Joan de Galba, adds his name as a second author, and says that he wrote the last one-fourth of the book. But he died six months before it was published, and his contribution, if any, is questionable.

And what was the success of this novel? Only 715 copies were printed on its initial run in 1490, and apparently all were sold. A second edition did not appear until 1497. An abridged translation into Spanish was finally produced in 1511, and no further Spanish editions appeared until the 20th century.(5) It was translated into Italian in the 16th century, into French in the 17th century, and finally into English late in the 20th century.

Of interest is the fact that soon after the appearance of Tirant lo Blanc, and throughout the 16th century, Spain was flooded with novels of chivalry. But these were of quite a different nature. Although the major characters are also knights highly instilled with the code of chivalry, they become involved in fantastic adventures filled with dragons, enchanters, and the like, following the lead of the French romances that were translated into Spanish beginning in the 13th century. These Spanish novels of chivalry were produced in such great numbers and read so widely that no less than Spain's great mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila, was for a time a voracious reader of them.

While Tirant lo Blanc had no literary followers until Cervantes more than one hundred years later, it does have the honor of being "the earliest existing romance of chivalry printed in the Peninsula."(6) This being so, from where did Joanot Martorell receive his inspiration? Although Professor Henry Thomas notes that "the tracing of sources…(may be only) one degree higher than the hunting of cats,"(7) we feel impelled to relate some of the more important discoveries of literary scholarship. The first section of the book is in imitation of an English romance, "Guy of Warwick", in which England fights off a Danish invasion. When Tirant lo Blanc appears for the first time, asleep on his horse, and stumbles upon the hermit who explains at great length the order of chivalry, the entire section (which this present translation omits) is taken from Ramon Lull's Libre del Orde d'Cauayleria.(8) Tirant himself may be an amalgamation of several historical figures: Roger de Flor, Richard Beauchamp, Louis IX, Peter II of Aragon, Joan Hunyadi lo Blanch of Hungary, etc. Tirant's adventures in

Africa closely parallel many people, events and place names from Ramon Muntaner's Chronica.(9)

More important than any of these "sources", however, is this question: What did Martorell do with the material that came to him from books, from life, and from his imagination?

Cervantes, writing more than one hundred years after Tirant lo Blanc was published, was sufficiently impressed to talk about it in his Don Quixote not once, but on two separate occasions, in fairly glowing terms.(10) Furthermore, some readers have pointed out scenes that appear to be similar in both books: both Philippe and Don Quixote find holes in their stockings, which leads one into great searching for a lost needle, and the other into even deeper depression; there is a cat-howling episode in both books, etc. And there is one other way that Tirant lo Blanc points the way toward the Quixote: in the framework. Cervantes uses a device often found in the novels of chivalry that preceded his work, stating that his book is no more than a "translation" from another language. (While, in fact, the authors of those books are simply advertising the next novels they intend to write in the series, much as the "Hardy Boys" or "Nancy Drew" series advertise in the final pages of each novel.) But in the Quixote the device has a far deeper purpose: Cervantes informs us that Don Quixote is a flesh and blood figure whose real-life adventures appear in several Arabic histories, and one in particular, by a certain Cide Hamete Benengeli. With the aid of a translator, Cervantes says, he is now bringing the story of Don Quixote's life back into the Spanish tongue. What we have here is, of course, a ploy to make the characters seem more real, and Cervantes makes this assertion with a broad wink, for while we are "suspending our disbelief," we also know that it is nothing more than his artistry.

And what of Tirant lo Blanc? According to Martorell's dedication, his book is also a translation: from the English original, he is translating into Portuguese, and from the Portuguese into Catalan. But where is the English original from which this book is simply a translation? There is no character in English literature or history named Tirant lo Blanc, and discounting the beginning pages, taken from the "Guy of Warwick" romance, there is no book in English from which this one has been translated. As for the translation into Portuguese, there is no book about Tirant in that language. So why does Martorell tell us all this? (Although, as we have noted, other novels of chivalry speak of themselves as "translations", all were printed after the publication of Tirant lo Blanc.) Is this novel then, which Cervantes so admired, also presenting us with a "true history" which has been "translated" in a way similar to the Quixote? Within Tirant lo Blanc we also find allusions to historians who have "originally" set these words down. For example: "Here the book returns to the emperor…" "Hippolytus… performed singular acts of chivalry which this book does not relate, but defers to the books that were written about him." Is there any difference between this and the statements of Cervantes about his characters? ("Here Cide Hamete Benengeli leaves him for an instant and returns to Don Quixote…" "The history goes on to tell that when Sancho saw…") But we are given no broad wink from Martorell. It is all true, he tells us, and there is nothing more to be said. That Martorell died before the work was published, and that Marti Joan de Galba may have made some additions before it was finally published, does not clarify the matter. For De Galba also affirms that the book is no more than a translation from the English to the Portuguese, and from that language into the Valencian tongue, and that he is merely finishing what Martorell was unable to complete.

There are no broad winks. But the characters belie the "history": They come to life as no straight-forward, factual history can bring its subjects to life. As Damaso Alonso so accurately puts it: this fifteenth century work "is precisely that whip that could excite Cervantes' imagination. Tirant was not yet the modern novel, but in it were many elements, and furthermore, essential elements of what would become the modern novel."(11)

Having read this novel, who could forget the characters that Martorell has brought to life? Who would not feel grief at the death of Tirant and the princess, no less united in soul than Calisto and Melibea in Spain (making their appearance a few short years later in Fernando de Rojas' masterpiece, La Celestina), than Romeo and Juliet in England, and no less tragic. And in remembering Tirant, who would not smile at the thought of him serving as a go-between for Prince Philippe and the infanta, Ricomana. Could anyone be more delightful than the forthright Plaerdemavida (whose name translates literally as "Pleasure-of-My-Life") — surely one of the best delineated characters in any literature. Or anyone more villainous than the odious Widow Repose — a figure stamped indelibly on our minds, wearing her ridiculous red stockings and hat in the bath.

As Cervantes says: "In (Tirant lo Blanc) knights eat and drink, sleep and die in their own beds, and make their wills before they die…" And his praise for Tirant is also borne out by the characters in the Quixote. For in many of that book's most memorable episodes, they too eat and drink (and regurgitate), they sleep (when someone or something does not awaken them to a new adventure), Don Quixote makes out his will (to the contentment of some of the beneficiaries), and finally he dies in his bed (and Cervantes warns us that no one should try to revive him: "For me alone Don Quixote was born, and I for him… We two alone are as one." This identification of the author with his work was felt no less keenly by Martorell. As he says in his dedication: "And so that no one else may be blamed if errors are found in this work, I, Johanot Martorell, knight, alone wish to bear the responsibility, and no one else with me, for this work has been set down by myself alone…"

If Don Quixote's Dulcinea did not exist until she took form in his (or in Cervantes') mind, or the windmill that was a giant, or the Cave of Montesinos, they have now come into existence in the mind of every reader of that novel. So may Tirant and his men, the princess, the emperor, Plaerdemavida, also come to life alongside the gentle and not so gentle folk of Cervantes, in every reader's imagination. Let me leave the reader with these words about Tirant lo Blanc by Cervantes: "Take him home and read him, and you will see that what I have said of him is true." (12)

Finally, a word about this English translation which brings Martorell's work full circle, back into the English language from which he says he has translated it. My work was begun in 1976, and completed in 1982. Shortly afterward, the English translation by David Rosenthal appeared, which includes most of the "philosophical discourses, speeches", etc. that I have purposefully omitted. So my translation lay unmolested in a box during these past several years while the computer has been developing at breakneck speed, now allowing this great 15th century novel to be read, electronically, throughout the world. (What would Joanot Martorell say…?) And more "finally", thanks to the many people who have supported me on this project and on others in the past: To Walter Pattison who awakened me to the excitement and beauty of Spanish literature; to my late friend, Arturo Serrano Plaja, who made a valiant attempt to refine my taste, and who guided me throughout the years; to my many colleagues and friends at the University of Minnesota; and also to good memories of several of my colleagues at UCLA: my dear friend, the late Richard Reeve, John Crow, the late Donald Fogelquist, Julio Rodgriguez Puertolas, Enrique Rodriguez Cepeda, Carlos Otero, Paul Smith, and of course the incredibly fine man to whom I dedicate this translation, and who helped me in my darkest hours: Jose Rubia Barcia. There being so many, if I have neglected anyone in particular, I pray and know that they will be more than understanding. Vale Robert S. Rudder Claremont, California Nov. 1995