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Literary news about *Tirant lo Blanc* de Joanot Martorell at Lletra, the UOC's virtual space devoted to Catalan literature

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Tirant lo Blanc

[...] La storia dell'interpretazione del *Tirant lo Blanch* ha visto come centrale la stessa questione: definito di volta in volta, tra l'altro, come "novela moderna" (Dámaso Alonso), come "novela cabaleresca" contrapposta alla "novela de caballería" (Riquer), o in ultimo come "novela total" (Vargas Llosa), il romanzo si caratterizza forse proprio per la caoticità e la magmaticità degli elementi che lo compongono, all'interno dei quali solo sulla base di un partito preso è possibile privilegiare alcuni e subordinare altri. Uno studio sistematico, o quanto meno approfondito, di queste componenti dovrebbe evidenziare la loro provenienza, le modalità delle loro combinazioni, i gradi della deformazione parodica e mirare a cogliere appunto in tale caoticità e magmaticità uno degli aspetti dominanti dell'opera, se non proprio il suo aspetto dominante. Ciò non significa affatto che il *Tirant* sia un bizzarro e sterminato zibaldone di modalità letterarie capricciosamente accostate e mescolate: chiunque abbia avuto il fiato di percorrere con attenzione le sue 927 pagine di piccola stampa (nel formato della sua più recente edizione) può testimoniare che l'autore non perde mai il controllo della sua variata materia, e che lavora con pari abilità su ampie architetture narrative come su piccole cesellature e incastri, a differenza di molti romanzieri del tardo Medioevo, spesso ispirati a criteri di pura accumulazione di materiale narrativo grezzo. [...]

Donatella Siviero, *"Tirant lo Blanch" e la tradizione medievale. Echi testuali e modelli generici* (Messina, Rubbettino Editore, 1997)

"This is the best book in the world", wrote Cervantes about *Tirant lo Blanc*, and the statement may sound like a joke - today. Yet it is true that this is one of the most ambitious and, from the point of view of its construction, perhaps the most modern, of all classical novels. Of course, no one knows about this now, as the novel was read by very few, and no one is reading it today any more, except for some university lecturers, whose work on historical analysis, and whose stylistic vivisection and sounding of sources tend to contribute, albeit unintentionally, to highlight the funeral condition of this book devoid of readers, as postmortems and embalmments are to do with the dead. These scholarly essays, often remarkable in their rigour and information, as de Riquer's foreword to his 1947 edition of the *Tirant*, never show the essential thing: the vitality of this dead body. [...]

Mario Vargas Llosa, *Lletra de batalla per Tirant lo Blanc* (Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1969)

Tirant lo Blanc

Martí de Riquer

Tirant lo Blanc, described by Cervantes as "the best book in the world", is the most outstanding Catalan novel of all time, and represents an important step forward in Western narrative. It was begun in 1460 by Joanot Martorell, who left the book well advanced when he died in 1468; then it passed into Martí Joan de Galba's hands, who wrote the final chapters and had it published in Valencia in 1490.

Joanot Martorell, the main author of *Tirant lo Blanc*, was born in Gandia in 1414 to parents belonging to the middle nobility: by 1433 he had already become a knight ("mossèn"), and would soon become involved in the private armed quarrelling to which his family was very prone. In 1437 he kept up a

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witty and mordant chivalresque correspondence with his cousin Joan de Monpalau, whom he accused of having given word of marriage and subsequently dishonoured his sister, Damiata Martorell. This was a scandalous affair in which a number of Valencian knights became embroiled, along with the King's son Enric, and which led Joanot Martorell to London, where he convinced King Henry VI to be the judge of the single combat between himself and his cousin that was supposed to be held in England. Martorell spent 1438 and 1439 at the English court, waiting for the arrival of his adversary, who failed to make his rendez-vous to the challenge, and who, years later, would be obliged to pay an indemnity to Damiata. After returning to Valencia, Joanot Martorell participated in a number of other knightly conflicts: he was challenged by Felip Boyl, an authentic knight-errant who had fought in a number of places in Europe, and entered into a serious quarrel with don Gonçalbo d'Híxar, the commander of Muntalbà, due to a disagreement over the payment for certain possessions, that led to an acerbic interchange of chivalresque letters and a challenge to a combat to the death. It is possible that at about that time (1450) he also made another journey to England. It is known that he was in Portugal and at the Neapolitan court of Alfons the Magnanimous, and that he died in 1468. He was a proud and quarrelsome man, whose cartels of defiance to his numerous enemies show us a sharp and sarcastically ill-intentioned individual, an enthusiast of a chivalry that had entered into decadence, and an enemy of merchants and jurists and a proponent of direct action. But those same letters also reveal that he was a great writer.

In one of his stays in England, Joanot Martorell came to know a version - almost certainly in French prose - of the ancient romance *Guy de Warwick* that was held in the library of King Henry VI. Our author took an episode from this chivalresque narrative and, adding to it part of the doctrine exposed by Ramon Llull in the *Llibre de l'ordre de cavalleria*, he wrote a narrative entitled *Guillem de Varoic*, which has come down to us unfinished and which Martorell would subsequently incorporate into the first chapters of *Tirant lo Blanc*.

The *Tirant* is preceded by a very unoriginal dedication (most of it is a literal copy of the one that don Enrique de Villena placed at the beginning of *Los dotze treballs d'Hèrcules*) addressed to the son of King Duarte and Eleanor of Aragon, the Prince don Ferrando de Portugal, who lived in Barcelona in 1464 and 1465. Martorell states that he first translated his book from English to Portuguese and afterwards from Portuguese to the "vulgar Valencian" tongue, what has obviously a mere shadow of truth and only could be applied to the first 97 chapters of the book (that consists of 487), where he fuses the previous *Guillem de Varoic* and recounts events of his life in England. He tells of how the young Breton Tirant lo Blanc de Roca Salada, accompanied by a number of gentlemen, goes to England to attend certain solemn festivities associated with a royal wedding. In London, he is dubbed knight and becomes famous for his constant victories over various adversaries, among whom is Tomàs de Muntalbà, the brother of the boastful Kirieleison de Muntalbà (in this there is perhaps a certain mockery of the commander of Muntalbà, Martorell's enemy); he is proclaimed the best of the knights who have appeared in the festivities. In these chapters, the atmosphere that the author found in England reproduced faithfully and in detail, even in the names of people and places, and for the first time there appears the well-known story of the foundation of the Order of the Garter, or Jarretièra. It is worth noting that, in marked contrast to the usual depiction of the hero in run-of-the-mill chivalresque novels, the protagonist of *Tirant* obeys strictly human proportions: he is strong and valiant, but he never fights against more than one adversary at a time, and, if he always wins, this is due, as Martorell seeks to stress, to the fact that he possesses the virtue of holding his breath for longer than do others, this being a physiological explanation whose aim is to shun outlandishness and exaggeration.

On his way back from London, Tirant hears that the island of Rhodes is closely besieged by the Turks

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and about to fall into their hands; he equips a rescue-vessel, in which he is accompanied by Prince Philip, the son of the King of France. After a stay in Sicily (where the author recounts the amusing love-affair between the Sicilian princess Ricomana and Philip of France, an undistinguished, listless and stingy man whose defects Tirant conceals), the expedition proceeds to Rhodes, and thanks to bold and intelligent military stratagems, the hero of the novel saves the besieged Knights of St John and drives out the besieging Turks. Tirant has gone from being a knight-errant, a victor in sumptuous court jousts, to being an authentic strategist of the sea and the land in command of large armed contingents, and in this, the narrative corresponds to the reality of the time, since there exist accounts of fifteenth-century generals who began their military careers in tournaments, jousts and mock sieges, and who ended up commanding expeditionary armies. The episodes of warfare in Rhodes are a reflection of the historical siege of the island in 1444, of which we possess the account in verse by Francesc Ferrer. The events in the Sicilian court in Palermo are now narrated with the irony and naturalness characteristic of Martorell, in marked contrast to the rather dull seriousness and courtly ritualism of the previous episodes in England.

Tirant is now famous as a captain and, when he responds to the pleas for help of the Emperor of Constantinople - whose city is about to fall to the Turks -, his figure brings to mind the Italian *condottieri* and the numerous Valencian corsair-knights of the time. It is at this point that the central and most extensive part of the novel begins - the part in which Tirant will fight in the Balkans and save the Byzantine Empire, an enterprise that undoubtedly recalls the historic Catalan expedition to the East and the figure of Roger de Flor, about all of which Martorell must have known through the *Crònica* by Muntaner. Tirant and his army are received in Constantinople as saviours, and as soon as he and Carmesina, the daughter of the Emperor, lay eyes on each other, an impassioned love arises between them that will last until their deaths. From now on, the novel follows two perfectly interconnected plots that are set out in parallel fashion: military campaigns and amorous vicissitudes. The military action, with its unforeseen turns, victories, defeats, treasons, and cunning stratagems, is narrated with admirable technical precision, vivid descriptions and a conscious sense that war is an intelligent game in which ingenuity is of greater value than force. The amorous story of Tirant and Carmesina, with its unforgettable scenes of free and joyous wooing and of young, untrammelled passion, becomes marred by the intrigues of the Viuda Reposada, who is also in love with Tirant. There is a simultaneous development of the youthful love of Estefania de Macedonia and Diafebus and of the elderly love of the Empress for Tirant's page, Hipòlit. The court of Constantinople, in which sumptuous celebrations, both palatial and chivalric, are held amidst rich and elegant symbolism and solemn poise, is also shown as a very human and sensual setting, brimming with intrigues of impatient lovers, womanish scheming, basse passions and notes that are highly discordant with our concept of the severity and hieratic nature of the imperial court of Byzantium. When Tirant and Carmesina are married by the then-normal expedient of the secret wedding, the Viuda Reposada induces the knight to believe that the princess is cheating on him with a black gardener; when this calumny is about to be exposed, a tempest seizes upon the galley in which Tirant and Plaerdemavida, the princess's lovely and spirited lady-in-waiting, are voyaging, and drives it to the coast of Tunisia.

Here begins the long African episode of *Tirant* that brings to the novel a new slant and a different set of surroundings. Tirant, at first a captive, soon manages to be held at his worth thanks to his gallantry, his ingeniousness and his command of the military arts, and in this way he comes to be used by the African kings in their own wars. He ends up as the arbiter of the destinies of these North-African kingdoms after creating a kind of private army and carrying out, simultaneously, an indefatigable missionary activity that leads to the baptism of thousands of infidels. At the same time, Plaerdemavida becomes Queen of Fez and Bejaia through marriage.

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Nonetheless, Constantinople remains under threat from the Turks, and Tirant longs to return to Carmesina, who has spent these years of the knight's absence shut up in a nunnery. With his allies the African kings, and with a fleet supplied by Philip of France, who is now King of Sicily, he comes to the rescue of the Greek capital, utterly vanquishes the Turks, and undertakes a great campaign to re-conquer the lands of the Empire. In a quick journey to Constantinople, he consummates his marriage to Carmesina, and the Emperor accepts him as son-in-law and names him his heir by bestowing on him the title of Caesar of the Empire. He returns to the task of re-conquest, but one night at Andrinopolis, while strolling near the river, he catch a cold: this quickly becomes pneumonia and leads in due course to his death, before which he makes his will and writes a letter of farewell to Carmesina. Shortly afterwards, the news reaches Constantinople, where the Emperor makes a long and dolorous lament over the body of Tirant; then, the distraught Carmesina raises another sorrowful plaint, in the course of which her father the Emperor dies. The princess makes a public confession of her sins, dictates her will, causes herself to be laid in a stretcher between the corpses of Tirant and the Emperor and soon afterwards draws her last breath. The Empress, who has given herself to the young Hipòlit even as these painful events are taking place, is now the heiress of the Empire and at once marries her lover. The Emperor Hipòlit orders the bodies of Tirant and Carmesina to be taken to Brittany, where they are buried in rich tombs with epitaphs written in verse. Years later, after the death of the Empress, the Emperor Hipòlit marries the daughter of the King of England. Both die on the same day, and their son, whose name is also Hipòlit, inherits the Empire. When Martí Joan de Galba, the continuator of Martorell in *Tirant*, wrote these last scenes, which depict a pacific, prosperous Eastern Empire ruled over by Christian Emperors, all Europe was lamenting the fall of Constantinople to the Turks; the attempts to gather a Crusade with the aim of liberating the Empire have failed; and a number of Catalan poets have written pieces of heartfelt verse on this sad subject.

Let us recall the essence of Cervantes's judgement of *Tirant lo Blanc*: "This is the best book in the world: here, knights eat, and sleep, and die in their beds, and write wills before their deaths, along with other things in which all the other books of this kind are lacking". Cervantes has realised that Joanot Martorell humanises the chivalric literature which, from its very beginnings, had converted its protagonists into paradigms of moral virtue and physical vigour and had shown them as living in constant tension and dying a glorious death. Tirant is, simply, a strong and courageous man, but one who on many occasions receives grievous wounds, needs the help of doctors, and has to go through long periods of convalescence - one who, finally, when he has attained his military and amorous triumph and nothing can prevent him from inheriting the Empire of Constantinople, dies "in his bed" from a pneumonia that he has contracted like any other common mortal, and who, but only after he has written his last will and testament. But beyond this normality there is something else that Cervantes senses and admires: the irony and sense of humour. Martorell writes in deadly earnest, with a complete awareness of what he is doing, and, as himself a knight, has a strong belief in the dignity of chivalry and in the chivalric principles that in his own time were beginning to melt away; but this does not prevent him noting from time to time grotesque or amusing details, from ridiculing a person or a situation with a few quick touches or from constructing dialogues with free-flowing ingenuity. Tirant is a loyal and faithful lover and Carmesina an impassioned and constant beloved, and very often both express their sentiments in an affected and rhetorical language that uses wise quotations and intellectual metaphors - something that perhaps is not so far from the reality of the fifteenth century as we might imagine. But beneath this flood of words one remains in contact with an irrepressible youthful passion - we should notice that, when the love affair begins, Carmesina is only fourteen - and the struggle between Tirant, who, assisted by Plaerdemavida, seeks the consummation of his desire, and the princess, who fears public dishonour, all leads to a highly-nuanced sensuality that Martorell, as a knight, expresses sometimes in the form of military metaphors, in the manner in which at the time one might have spoken of love in military camps.

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Another of the many peculiarities of *Tirant lo Blanc* - one that is also common in *Curial e Güelfa* - is the avoidance of the unlikely and outlandish elements that are so frequent in books of chivalric adventures, and for which we need to look no further than *Amadís de Gaula* and other Castilian novels about knightly deeds. Coincidence does not determine the plot of *Tirant*, in which actually there is no exaggerated intrigue or suspense and only two episodes that apparently break with the real: the visit of King Arthur and the fairy Morgana to the court of Constantinople, which seems a fiction of a dramatic kind; and the adventure involving the knight Espèrcius and the dragon, an episode undoubtedly imputable to Galba. The exaggeration of reality, especially in the tragic scenes, responds to the theatrical sensibility of the period. Although they are doubtless attributable to Galba, the lamentations of Carmesina over the dead body of Tirant constitute an episode of an extraordinary, awe-inspiring and poignant dramatism; and amid so many rhetorical speeches, some of which are even in rhymed prose, the reader is struck by how the princess flings herself onto the embalmed body of Tirant to kiss him with such impetus that she brokes her nose and stains her eyes and face with blood; by how she kisses the cold lips of the corpse and opens his eyes to kiss them, so that blood and tears flow down together. Even though in this scene Galba may very closely follow the tale of Hero and Leander by Rois de Corella, what his account gives us is the sorrowful and bloodily tragic end of the once youthful and playful love of Tirant and Carmesina.

As is also the case in *Curial*, many of the characters who appear in *Tirant* have names similar or identical to those of real people of the time, a fact in which there is sometimes even a political intention (the "bad" Christians in the East have the names and titles of the Neapolitan and Sicilian nobles who between 1459 and 1462 were supporters of the Anjou dynasty; the "good" ones bear the names and titles of those who where faithful to Ferran, the son of Alfons the Magnanimous). In the character and behaviour of Tirant there are traits and characteristics that belong to certain historical persons: in some respects, he is a modern version of Roger de Flor, and has a few touches that seem to derive from the personality of Joan Hunyadi, "le chevalier Blanc", the father of Matias Corbí; from the Burgundian Geoffroy de Thoisy; and from the Castilian Pedro Vázquez de Saavedra. So it is not a question of a single "live model", nor of the literary transfiguration of an historical knight, but rather of the veracity of the hero created by Joanot Martorell.

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A selection of texts

Text

 **WEB: "The White Knight: Tirant lo Blanc"**

English translation by Robert Rudder for the Gutenberg Project.
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=378>

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