



**Readings in  
Catalan Fiction**

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### Knights in Love: Don Quixote and Tirant lo Blanc

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The discussion of two classics of European literature such as *Don Quixote* and *Tirant lo Blanc* in the presence of an American public perhaps entails some sort of introduction to the stories of medieval and renaissance knights, their transformation into a novel with a historical feel to it in the hands of the Valencian Joanot Martorell, and the radical critique expounded by the Castilian Miguel de Cervantes. Moreover, in the case of the particular theme we are about to discuss, a reconsideration of the concept of honor, both masculine and feminine, within the European culture of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries is necessary. Between the times of the adventures of *Tirant lo Blanc* and *Don Quixote*, more than a century went by, in which great political and social upheavals occurred, literary and aesthetic innovations. Nevertheless, certain fundamental values were perhaps transformed to a lesser degree, such as those which determined the cultural models of knight and lady, the feminine and masculine ideals, and the associated judgments and prejudices. But instead of continuing with this historical and theoretical introduction, I'd rather deal directly with the theme I've proposed to discuss, and which I consider especially revealing as regards certain social and literary values which belong just as much to the present day as to those past times.

To begin with, I'd like to make clear that my knowledge of literary theory or the history of literature is on the scarce side, and is mainly derived from a certain amount of reading and my own personal reflections on the subject. I do have some well-founded ideas on the theory of culture, on values, symbols, imagery and, first of all, on the discipline known as cultural anthropology which I've devoted many years of my life to. So if I'm going to discuss one of the emblematic classics of Catalan literature, *Tirant lo Blanc*, and compare it with another great classic, *Don Quixote*, I can only do so from a standpoint where I feel at ease and more or less sure of myself. I'll speak, then, from this anthropological perspective, rather than taking a purely literary approach. And I'll discuss certain points or ingredients which may be used, if not to draw direct comparisons between *Tirant lo Blanc* and *Don Quixote*, or between Cervantes and Martorell, at least to illustrate certain curious similarities found precisely in the field of ideals and values:

the female stereotype, the figure of the enamored knight, the values inherent to these models, and the attitudes and behavior derived from them.

There is no knight without a lady. Real or unreal, queen or maiden, in love or not requiting, the female figure is, for want of a better word, the complement, the other side or the other half of the image of the knight whether he be real or imaginary. It's a long-standing central relationship, which may have its origins in Hellenistic or Byzantine novels, or later, in the idealized love stories of the troubadours, but which in any case constitutes an indissoluble unit. In short, the knight is the idealized image of masculinity, the lady or maiden, that of femininity, and the relationship between the two has to be equally ideal and perfect. Or maybe not. It is in many novels, but not in the case of *Tirant lo Blanc* or *Don Quixote*. In *Tirant lo Blanc* because the ideal figure rapidly becomes carnal, in *Don Quixote* because this ideal is turned upside down by its incarnation in a brutally "realistic" peasant girl. As regards the relationship between the two figures, the knight and the maiden, oddly enough *Tirant lo Blanc* is the more realistic, even if he is a medieval hero, engrossed in an unreal but fabulously possible adventure, while the idealism corresponds to *Don Quixote*, perhaps a hero even now, and who may stand outside time and history.

Let's begin, then, with Dulcinea and the ironic turnabout of the idealized female figure. When Sancho pretends, as commanded by his master, that he has given Dulcinea Don Quixote's letter (First Part, Chap. XXXI), the knight declares: "Go on; you reached her; and what was that queen of beauty doing? Surely you found her stringing pearls, or embroidering some device in gold thread for this her enslaved knight." "I did not," said Sancho, "but I found her winnowing two bushels of wheat in the yard of her house." "Then depend upon it," said Don Quixote, "the grains of that wheat were pearls when touched by her hands."

The peasant girl "has to be" a princess, the grains of wheat have to be pearls, and the ineffable perfume of her body has to measure up: "But one thing you will not deny, Sancho; when you came close to her did you not perceive a Sabaean odor, an aromatic fragrance, a, I know not what, delicious, that I cannot find a name

for..." "All I can say is," said Sancho, "that I did perceive a little odor, something goaty; it must have been that she was all in a sweat with hard work." With a couple of masterly pen strokes, Cervantes puts things in their place: the ideal fantasy is fantasy, and the real picture is real. How these two facets are combined is another matter.

The use of magic and incantations (scarce and almost irrelevant in the exploits of Tirant lo Blanc, even in his amorous adventures) is constant during the quiixotesque saga, as constant as it is essential to the imagined transformation of reality. Even when, on leaving el Toboso, Sancho points out three peasant girls riding on asses, and makes Don Quixote believe that it is Dulcinea and her two maids-in-waiting, Don Quixote, who sees them just as they are (we should remember that he has never set eyes on Dulcinea: the lady is a necessary product of his own fantasies), is disconcerted, but finally forced to believe in the magical transformation (Second Part, Chap. X): "Don Quixote had by this time placed himself on his knees beside Sancho, and, with eyes starting out of his head and a puzzled gaze, was regarding her whom Sancho called queen and lady; and as he could see nothing in her except a village lass, and not a very well-favored one, for she was platter-faced and snub-nosed, he was perplexed and bewildered, and did not venture to open his lips..." Finally, he declares full of compunction: "...though the malign enchanter that persecutes me has brought clouds and cataracts on my eyes, and to them, and them only, transformed your unparagoned beauty and changed your features into those of a poor peasant girl... refuse not to look upon me with tenderness and love; seeing in this submission that I make on my knees to your transformed beauty the humility with which my soul adores you."

We could leave it at that: this is *Don Quixote*, this is Cervantes, and this is great literature. But, whether the lady's idealized beauty is real or imaginary, pearls and perfume included, it has to be consistent with the corresponding moral perfection. And this itself has to measure up to that perfect state which the knight aspires to, and which is also fundamental to the conditions for finding absolute and perfect love. In one of the ingenious scenes of the famous Inn (First Part, Chap XLIII), while Don Quixote sighs to the night, on a sort of

ritual guard outside, Maritornes and the innkeeper's daughter prepare to play a trick on him. He exclaims: "*Oh my lady Dulcinea del Toboso, perfection of all beauty, summit and crown of discretion, treasure house of grace, depository of virtue, and finally, ideal of all that is good, honorable, and delectable in this world...*" Then Maritornes calls to him from a little window, on behalf of the "daughter of the lord of the castle". But idealized love does not allow for any parallel relationship with another woman, not even the chance to flirt: "*I pity you, beautiful lady, that you should have directed your thoughts of love to a quarter from whence it is impossible that such a return can be made to you as is due to your great merit and gentle birth, for which you must not blame this unhappy knight-errant whom love renders incapable of submission to any other than her whom, the first moment his eyes beheld her, he made absolute mistress of his soul...*" In this respect, what happened to Don Quixote, in fantasy, is the same as what happened to Tirant lo Blanc in a truly physical, real sense: absolute love at first sight! But Tirant lo Blanc is not Don Quixote. Tirant lo Blanc, as well as being enraptured by his beloved, contemplated, as we will see later, some kind of more carnal reality. And he certainly wouldn't have replied to Maritornes in the same way as Don Quixote did when the girl asks him to take her hand: "*Lady, take this hand, or rather this scourge of the evildoers of the earth; take, I say, this hand which no other hand of woman has ever touched, not even hers who has complete possession of my entire body...*". The hand of the perfect knight may touch anything, the sword, flesh and blood, and it may even be the hand of the executioner (of evildoers, naturally): but that hand, that same hand—and it goes without saying any other part of the body—cannot be touched by any woman, not even by his beloved, the knight's lady and captor. There is little irony here and a lot of moral orthodoxy, or at least the orthodoxy completely hides the irony. The scale of values of the perfect knight (this is what poor Don Quixote aspires to: to be impossibly perfect), in tandem with the scale of moral values of the perfect lady excludes any erotic contact whatsoever, not even the slightest touch of a hand.

Not even in Barcelona, that most liberal of cities, does Don Quixote give in to any kind of frivolity, temptation or female

insinuations. At Don Antonio's house in Barcelona, the knight from La Mancha is invited to supper and a dance, during which the poor nobleman is verbally and physically besieged (Second Part, Chap LXII): *Among the ladies were two of a mischievous and frolicsome turn, and, though perfectly modest (always the case: no ladies or maidens appear who aren't unconditionally "modest"!)* somewhat free in playing tricks for harmless diversion's sake. These two were so indefatigable in taking Don Quixote out to dance that they tired him down, not only in body but in spirit. It was a sight to see the figure Don Quixote made, long, lank, lean, and yellow, his garments clinging tight to him, ungainly, and above all anything but agile. The merry ladies made secret love to him, and he on his part secretly repelled them, but finding himself hard pressed by their blandishments he lifted up his voice and exclaimed, "*Fugite, partes adversae! Leave me in peace, unwelcome overtures; avaunt, with your desires, ladies, for she who is queen of mine, the peerless Dulcinea del Toboso, suffers none but hers to lead me captive and subdue me;*"

The ladies who pester him represent the most classic and conventional version of temptation: despite the general innocence of the scene and the intentions of the *merry ladies*, Don Quixote sees them as almost diabolical adversaries, who must be put to flight and, to cap it all, with a Latin formula. He wants nothing to do with them, not even in his thoughts: the rejection is total, unconditional, and "desire", as contemplative as it may well be, is exclusive to Dulcinea, and therefore unacceptable coming from any other woman. Everything, absolutely everything, about their behavior, has to meet the demands of an idealistic code which is here embodied by the sad figure of the knight, ("*long, lank, lean, and yellow, his garments clinging tight to him, ungainly...*"), in the same way that his reactions have to measure up to the most rigorous code of social conventions.

Later, on the way back to the palace of the dukes, the knight is victim of another much more serious prank: Altisidora's pretended love for him (Second Part, Chap. LXX), which Don Quixote, evidently, interprets as true love. His reaction and his response are again as predictable as they are implacable in their conventionality: "*I have several times told you, senora, that it grieves me you should have set your affections upon me,*

as from mine they can only receive gratitude, but no return. I was born to belong to Dulcinea del Toboso, and the fates, if there are any, dedicated me to her (predestined devotion, from birth!) and to suppose that any other beauty can take the place she occupies in my heart is to suppose an impossibility. This frank declaration should suffice to make you retire within the bounds of your modesty, for no one can bind himself to do impossibilities.” Now it’s the knight who presents himself as a direct example not only of faithfulness but also of modesty—a clearly female virtue, whose limits have been exceeded by the maid by simply declaring him her love.

When he wants to express the nature of his knightly love, which is part of the image he has built up of himself, Don Quixote sums it up perfectly in the speech he addresses to the ecclesiastic he has met on the road (Second Part, Chap. XXXII): “I have redressed injuries, righted wrongs, punished insolences, vanquished giants, and crushed monsters; I am in love, for no other reason than that it is incumbent on knights-errant to be so; but though I am, I am no carnal-minded lover, but one of the chaste, platonic sort.” This synthesis couldn’t be clearer: among the obligations and actions—acts of amending justice, fabulous feats—which make up the condition of knighthood, the obligation to fall in love is also included. Which, in the case of *Don Quixote*, is defined in terms as far-removed as possible from carnal pleasures: far from vice, within the parameters of Catholic self-restraint and contemplative “Platonism”. This ritual and ideological commitment—idealized love for the idealized lady—is also applied to the female archetype in her role as intercessor and protector, worthy of veneration, shelter and source of strength and courage, as expressed by Don Quixote when he is about to enter the cave of Montesinos (Second Part, Chap. XXII): “O mistress of my actions and movements, illustrious and peerless Dulcinea del Toboso, if so it be that the prayers and supplications of this fortunate lover can reach your ears, by your incomparable beauty I entreat you to listen to them, for they but ask you not to refuse me your favor and protection now that I stand in such need of them. I am about to precipitate, to sink, to plunge myself into the abyss that is here before me, only to let the world know that while you do favor me there is no impossibility I will not attempt and accomplish.” It doesn’t take much effort to imagine this entreaty to Dulcinea as a prayer which

could be very easily and correctly addressed to the Virgin Mary, whose worship was so strongly encouraged by the Council of Trent.

This is not the right moment to enquire into whether, a century before the Council of Trent and the Counter-Reformation, the liberty of the literary imagination corresponded to a real and valid liberty, at least as regards the subject and material now under discussion. In any case, the fact is that in the scene where the canon and the curate comment on tales of knightly deeds (First Part, Chap. XLVII), the canon considers them contemptible, among other reasons, because they are completely unreal and describe impossible situations and deeds. And he states, both indignant and incredulous: “*And then, what shall we say of the facility with which a born queen or empress will give herself over into the arms of some unknown wandering knight?*” For the good canon as portrayed by Cervantes, the ladies’ attitude in Martorell’s *Tirant lo Blanc* is just as impossible, as unreal, as such fantastic feats as magical transportation, giant-killing or the slaughter of a million enemies. The pending question is whether this is only what the character thought, the canon in the story, or also the opinion of his creator, don Miguel de Cervantes.

My own impression—and experts on Cervantes please forgive me if I’m wrong, because it’s just an impression—is that Cervantes, at least Cervantes the writer, shares the ideas, the values and, above all, the ideology, which is expressed, classically and conventionally, in the themes of honor and *dishonor*, femininity, *modesty*, and in the formal and ritual demands placed on the relationship between men and women, or more precisely between women and men. In accordance with the dictates of this ideology and these concepts and values, in some of the tales and stories “implanted” in the novel, the theme of deceit in marriage crops up repeatedly, and also its possible resolution and consequences, including violence: vengeance to recover the maiden’s lost honor. For instance, on the way to Barcelona, when Don Quixote finds himself in the company of the famous bandit Roque Guinart, and a woman dressed as a man appears on the scene, a victim of *dishonor* because she believed the promises of a deceitful lover. She explains: “*He saw*

me, he paid court to me, I listened to him, and, unknown to my father, I loved him; for there is no woman, however secluded she may live or close she may be kept, who will not have opportunities and to spare for following her headlong impulses. (Women's' desire is always to blame, which is another important point). In a word, he pledged himself to be mine, and I promised to be his, without carrying matters any further. (In other cases, or in other stories, the protagonists do "go further", with disastrous results). Yesterday I learned that, forgetful of his pledge to me, he was about to marry another, and that he was to go this morning to plight his troth, intelligence which overwhelmed and exasperated me; my father not being at home I was able to adopt this costume you see, and urging my horse to speed I overtook Don Vicente (the traitor) about a league from this, and without waiting to utter reproaches or hear excuses I fired this musket at him, and these two pistols besides, and to the best of my belief I must have lodged more than two bullets in his body, opening doors to let my honor go free, enveloped in his blood." (First Part, Chap LX). The woman, in a circumstantial but significant role reversal, has, dressed as a man, done what a man should have done (in this case, her father). And the idea explicit in the conclusion is as forceful as the description which expresses it: the woman has stirred up the man's desire, only that, and without any "effort", and brings on dishonor (because she has not taken the corresponding marriage vows), and then her lost *honor* can only be redeemed by bloodshed. This code of behavior has total validity; it's implacable. It is part of an ideology which neither Don Quixote the knight nor any of the other male or female characters in the novel would question. And my impression is that this also occurs in the case of the author, Miguel de Cervantes: brilliant writer and critic of his society and times: critical with many of its moral and ideological standpoints, but it seems to me, not in this respect.

And now we'll discuss the subversion of this whole framework of basic references, a radical subversion which appeared a century earlier: *Tirant lo Blanc*. A book—I'm not sure whether it's right to say that it's exactly about chivalry—where the knight's honor lies not so much in the ethereal nature of the lady and her maidenhood, but rather in the triumph in the battle to convince and conquer her. Without this victory and

conquest the knight is seen as worthless, dishonorable and insignificant. It's true that transgression and subversion appear throughout cultural history as a constant, in parallel with orthodox or central lines of thought and values; and it's true that there is no shortage, in this respect, of marginal literary testimonies. However, it's no less certain that it's unusual to find this subversion, not as such, but tied in with those very same predominant lines of thought and values, and to find them exalted in a literary text of the category of *Tirant lo Blanc*, which is hardly marginal. Rather, it is central and mainstream. It is as much a classic and central to Catalan literature as *Don Quixote* is to Spanish, the *Divine Comedy* to Italian or Shakespeare's plays to English.

In the case of *Tirant lo Blanc* this is a work focused at the very heart, not the margins, of the society of its time. Like *Don Quixote*, but taking matters from a different angle, or perhaps more so than *Don Quixote*, it is a product and a reflection of the urban aristocracy in the second half of the XV century, and it is addressed fundamentally to a public consisting of minor nobility, merchants and professionals, the circles in which its author, the Valencian knight Joanot Martorell, moved and lived. Martorell expresses, through the knight Tirant lo Blanc, a strict order of knightly ideas, values and role models taken to the furthest extremes: the hero, is not only the foremost knight of his time—as Don Quixote de la Mancha wished to be, in his fantasies—, but also the most upright and noble, and the one who reaps triumphs of incomparable historical proportions, such as the final defeat of the Turks and other unbelievers, the restoration of the Byzantine Empire and the conquest and conversion of the whole of Moslem Africa. His final triumph and glory is imperial power itself, the highest achievement imaginable. And his love for the emperor's daughter... bravely consummated in bed. Here, where the bed is the battlefield, where the eroticism of the main heroes is explicit, *Tirant lo Blanc* distinguishes itself from its literary forerunners and later novels from the following centuries, because a long time passed before something similar could be described as great European literature.

The future lovers and adversaries meet for the first time

in a most unusual scene. Tirant lo Blanc has just arrived at the highly Christian court of Constantinople. The Turks have just defeated the Christians, the Emperor's son has died in battle, and the whole court is in a state of mourning and despondency. But it's hot, and when the emperor takes Tirant lo Blanc to the ladies' quarters to introduce him to his daughter, they find her lying on the bed, with the windows closed and her blouse half-unbuttoned, we find the following description: "He could see her breasts, which were like two heavenly crystalline apples. They allowed Tirant's gaze to enter but not to depart, and he remained in her power to the end of his days" (p. 335). This is the start of a striking and undying infatuation, out-and-out love at first sight (from a real and carnal viewpoint, not something imaginary), something usual in this kind of stories, just as it was in Hellenistic writing. What's not usual, though, is that the "first sight" is of the maiden's bare breasts, nor that it's her father himself who leads the newly arrived knight to the ladies' chambers and right to his daughter's bed when she looks so seductive. From here on, anything goes: from Tirant lo Blanc and Carmesina's inflamed love affair to the explicitly shameless behavior and language of the noble ladies and maidens of the court to the carefree and not in the least bit censured—what the critical canon in *Don Quixote* found so hard to believe—adultery committed by the Empress himself with one of Tirant lo Blanc's young companions. One of the princess's maids-in-waiting, the noble Pleasure-of-my-life, whose name is deliberately blatant, is at all times, the defender of the hero's desires. It's she who encourages him to honorably and fully satisfy them, and whose behavior in front of Carmesina is the explicit paragon of shamelessness.

For Pleasure-of-my-life, as part of a generally applied principle, if knights risk their lives and possessions in the defense of the empire, then the ladies have to prove equal to the occasion: "if he wants to kiss you," she says to the princess, "or even stick his hand up your skirt, in these times of need, you should let him, as when peace is restored, you can change vice back to virtue" (p. 257). And another of Carmesina's maids, the equally noble Stephanie, is the first to lead the way: one of Tirant lo Blanc's companions falls in love with her and she agrees to let him

kiss her three times on the mouth, to quote, "in honor of the Holy Trinity", and then she gives him permission to continue: "I now ask you to take possession of me, but only from the waist up. And Diaphebus, who was no sluggard, quickly began to caress her breasts, fondling the nipples and everything else he could lay his hands on." (p. 257). The person who grants this permission to the knight, and sets an example to the princess who witnesses the scene, is none other than the emperor's niece, the daughter of a "glorious prince", the sole heiress to a prosperous dukedom, and she is just fourteen years old, the same age as her cousin, the heiress to the empire. This is not just any old throng of carefree girls; the princess and her maids personify the height and perfection of the ideal of femininity: they are in the flower of youth, unboundingly beautiful, wise and discreet, and embody the highest imaginable degree of nobleness. "Never did I see such perfection in a mortal damsel! Your highness surpasses all others in wisdom and discretion...", exclaims Tirant lo Blanc enraptured, using words that could just as well have been Don Quixote's. The difference is that while he's saying all this inside the princess's rooms and in front of all the ladies, he's dancing with his beloved, kissing her incessantly and, despite her protests, trying to undo her dress. And later: "When he saw she was about to leave, and that he could not touch her with his hands, he stretched out his leg and slipped it under her skirt so that his shoe touched her in the forbidden place, and he slipped his leg between her thighs". The transition from one level to another, from the highest ideal of perfection to irresistible attraction for the "forbidden place", is instantaneous, peremptory, and there is no noticeable incongruence involved. On the contrary, the "forbidden place" has such great idealized and emblematic value that Tirant lo Blanc later has the shoe that had the privilege of touching her there embroidered with pearls, rubies and diamonds "worth more than twenty-five thousand ducats", in sign and token of her besieged virtue. It would be extremely difficult to find a literary testimony, contemporary or not, which so intensely exalts the female sex in its very physical sense, or so explicitly values this as the real and idealized center of the loved one. A little later, when they are together with the whole court, the princess asks Tirant lo Blanc why



one of his shoes is so richly adorned and the other not, and the knight reminds her that that foot has had the honor to touch higher up. To quote: “*where my love wishes to find fulfillment, if in this world that can be attained.*” The princess is not in the least shocked. On the contrary, she replies: “*That time will come when, just as you have one foot embroidered today, you will be able to embroider both of them, and you may place them where you wish.*” We know then, where happiness resides, what’s meant by freedom, and what the terms of the first skirmishes are.

But the war continues: the battles between Tirant lo Blanc and the infidels continue, and also Pleasure-of-my-life’s efforts to persuade him to be bolder in another kind of combat, when she warns him: “*lest we fail for a want of a little brute force*” (p. 361), and “*you must act as bravely and virtuously in bed as you do in battle*” (idem). She suggests to him, then, that he should get into Carmesina’s bed during the night and, confronted by the knight’s hesitation, encourages him to forget his moral scruples, by affirming that “*we are now under the rule of love and not justice*”, and she regrets that he is unwilling to accept “*the pleasurable delights that I have prepared for you, prizing my honor and, being the lady I am, pursuing the end that I have proposed*”. The idea of a “lady’s” honor is here given an altogether different significance: to encourage the knight in amorous combat: “*Since your wishes are honorable and your lover is worthy, go to bed when she is naked or in her nightshirt and attack bravely..., as I have known many knights whose hands were quick and courageous enough to win honor, glory and fame from their ladies*”. (p. 366).

The correlation is absolutely explicit: in the same way that a knight’s honor on the battlefield depends on his wits and his skill with his hands, he can also, by the same means, win honor, glory and fame in amorous combat. But Tirant lo Blanc’s courage failed him, and when he reached the princess’s bed “*...his heart, hands and feet were shaking.*” (p. 371). So he retires from the fray (take note: Tirant lo Blanc is no Don Juan!) and when Pleasure-of-my-life realizes, she exclaims: “*How now? In battle you are not daunted by all the nights in creation, and here you tremble at the sight of mere damsel.*” (ibid.). Confronted by Pleasure-of-my-life’s latest arguments, Tirant lo Blanc finally admits his sense of shame, his bashfulness (a quality that Don Quixote

so often deliberately displays), but it’s not a virtue but a vice: “*On my faith, you have enlightened me more than any confessor, however steeped in theology he might be...*” (p. 373-374). The irony is quite clear, and the subversion runs deep. Having said that, Tirant lo Blanc overcomes his shyness, slips into the bed, and there follows a long and delicious scene which only comes to an end when the princess wakes up, screams in fright before seeing who’s lying next to her, people rush to her aid, and the knight has to escape through the window.

The second round of combat takes place without any ruses and the knight no longer trembles. The princess deliberately waits for her lover. She’s dressed in the richest of garments and wearing the imperial crown. The maids escort Tirant lo Blanc to Carmesina’s rooms, and the lovers exchange long kisses. Until Pleasure-of-my-life, seeing that the preliminaries are lasting too long, approaches them and says: “*I shall not quit this battlefield until I see you bedded, nor shall I consider you a knight if you leave without shedding blood.*” (p. 421). The princess, who is ready for anything except what we might call full combat, declares that “*on this very day I will submit to your power of my own free will*”, but tries to fend off the knight’s advances with the following consideration: “*Behold these scales: on the right you see love, honor and chastity, while on the left you will find only shame, infamy and grief.*” (p.422). The maiden expresses here and in later entreaties what we may consider to be the orthodox position: loss of virginity represents infamy, shame and dishonor. But Tirant lo Blanc has already freed himself from this identification with conventions: he chooses the pan on the right which represents honor and love, and immediately demands of the princess the total fulfillment of his desires. For him, there is no longer any contradiction, and on hearing Carmesina’s entreaties—and now she only asks him to spare her virginity, he promptly replies: “*My lady, long have I waited to see you in your nightgown or naked*” (p. 423). And he uses a curious moral sophistry: he argues that since they have already promised in private to marry (a recourse which, as I mentioned earlier, often appears in the tales in *Don Quixote*), they must fully honor their vow because: “*Any man who marries a damsel and does not copulate with her when he may commits a mortal sin*”

(p. 423), and that she should not consent to his damnation, and even less so considering that he is a man who'll soon be risking his life in battle. During the amorous combat that follows, the knight Tirant lo Blanc finally yields in the face of the princess's pleas and tears and postpones the final assault. In any case, they spend the night together, "*playing and making merry*" (p. 424). In the morning, Carmesina, who has tried so hard to defend her virginity, exclaims despite herself: "*Alas that the sun should rise so soon! Would that our pleasure might last a year or never end*". (ibid.). The princess's scale of values is more and more similar to Pleasure-of-my-life's, in other words, the total subversion of the established order.

Pleasure-of-my-life, as is to be expected, on learning of the outcome of the nocturnal combat fiercely attacks Tirant lo Blanc for being so weak: "*Were I a man, I would challenge you to a duel, for you were with the fairest and loftiest damsel on earth, yet you cravenly yielded to her tears and supplications. If she lay down a virgin, she got up one too, much to your eternal shame and discredit*". (p. 426). For Carmesina, in a last ditch defense of conventional morality, the loss of her virginity carried with it shame and the risk of infamy (though she readily agreed to games in bed with her lover: *chastity* and *modesty* are now circumscribed to the final consummation). For Pleasure-of-my-life, in total defiance of convention, the knight's infamy and shame stem from the fact that he has respected this limit, that he has not concluded the victory and conquest. And for this reason she says that any woman would take him for "*negligent and clumsy*". In any case, Tirant lo Blanc's restraint was no longer a question of principles or ideology, but rather of pity, meaning feelings.

The "final combat" takes place when Tirant lo Blanc returns from his African adventures and conquests, the result of which Pleasure-of-my-life has become Queen of Fez. Newly in Constantinople, the new queen urges the knight to claim the long-awaited prize: "*Lord, worthy of all glory, you shall now be paid for your travails with sweet solace*" (p. 573)...in Carmesina's arms, naturally. Tirant lo Blanc swears, "*on this order of chivalry that I bear*", to follow this time all the new queen's instructions, "*which might have helped me in the past, had I been wise enough to heed them*" (ibid.). He is, then, totally convinced of the reasons of

pleasure, and also of the princess's inherent honor, and precisely by virtue of his own condition of honorable knight! This is the scolding argument used by Pleasure-of-my-life: "*Well now, let us see what you can do. Enter the lists and prove your mettle, for no worthy knight would lose this joust*". (ibid.). When it comes to the crunch, the princess, this time, also resorts to warlike analogies as an arm of defense: "*Abjure bellicose force, for a delicate damsel cannot resist a knight...put aside your insistence, my lord, don't be cruel, don't think this a camp or battlefield of infidels*" (p. 575) She no longer resorts to the conventional reasons of honor and shame, infamy and virginity: now she uses the language of the battlefield, where she knows she will be defeated. Even to the point of asking the knight, *in extremis*, for part of his strength, to fight with the same arms: "*Give me part of your manhood that I may resist you*" (ibid.). And she laments that her amorous adversary does not refrain in the use of the arm of war despite the pain it causes her: "*Oh, how can you hurt the one you love? Oh my Lord... by your virtue and nobility, please stop before you hurt me! Wait, poor thing! Love's weapons should not cut. Love's lance should not break or wound*". (ibid.) But Tirant lo Blanc already knows where his virtue lies, his knightly strength and his honor, which should not be restrained either by shame or pity. The princess's arguments and pleas are no longer a defense "*for in a short time Tirant had won the delicious battle, and the princess surrendered her arms...*".

After her defeat Carmesina faints, recovers with Pleasure-of-my-life's help, complains about the pain she has suffered, the bloodshed, and the cruelty of her lover and adversary. Pleasure-of-my-life, however, knows full well that these are empty words lacking in any conviction: "*Alas, lady fool, you are a great one for acting pitiful, but no knight's arms ever hurt a damsel!*" (p. 576). The princess's whole position, the "orthodox" position, has finally been demolished, and it's Carmesina herself who, after maintaining that stance for so long, at last crosses over, lock, stock and barrel, to the enemy lines. "*They spent the rest of the night in those pleasant games lovers are wont to play*" (ibid.), during which time Tirant lo Blanc tells the princess about his latest battles and conquests, but he adds that: "*nothing meant as much as having won her*" (ibid.). And the princess, forgetting her

previous hard-fought resistance, delightfully accepts the significance of her defeat: “...now I truly know what love is” (p. 577), and when it is time for Tirant to leave makes a completely new declaration of principles: “*Having captured me by force of arms, you must never forsake me [suggesting new encounters!], as you took my life liberty and person, yet you now seek to restore them. I accept in hope of your coming victory, which pleases me because it will increase your honor and might*” (p. 577). All principles and prior considerations have now disappeared, and the knightly language—more so feudal language—of possessions and lordship, takes on an almost literal meaning, beyond metaphor: the lady, person and conquered possession, is no longer her own mistress. Rather, her own life and person are subjected to rule of the victor, as his possession. And the higher the value of the conquered possession, the greater the glory of the new lord.

The story has come full circle with the final triumph not only of the knight, but also of the “non-conventional” treatment of the conditions and terms of chivalry: an unprecedented treatment, which it would be difficult to find in any other work in the same genre written at that time, an ironic and remarkably “modern” treatment. This subversive use of language (honor, shame, fame, infamy, victory and defeat, glory, courage, fear and so on) initially seemed to be the exclusive domain of one rather risqué maiden at the court. Tirant lo Blanc himself, despite the intensity of his desires, at first refuses to accept Pleasure-of-my-life’s point of view, while the princess reveals herself to be a stalwart defender of the conventional understanding of ideals and their application to circumstances. The triumph, in this respect goes to Pleasure-of-my-life, rather than Tirant lo Blanc: the triumph of subversion, of a woman—and this is a crucial point—with ideas typical “of a man”. Hence, the hackneyed “feminine” standpoint whose principle is to defend the body against the knight’s advances, in other words, desire, has no value here. On the contrary, for Pleasure-of-my-life the knight’s honor, his triumph and his glory, depend precisely on the energy, the force and the determination he shows in his advances. In the novel, this is the initial stance of a noble Byzantine maiden. In reality, perhaps it was the imperative stance of a noble Valencian knight. In any case, of all the duels

which unfold in the book’s well-nigh five hundred chapters this is certainly the most original and fascinating. Not so much to see who will win the long and uneven combat, but rather to discover which ideas, which standpoints, which concepts and which use of language—in other words, which basic ideology—will come out triumphant. In contrast to *Don Quixote*, the winner is clearly heterodoxy rather than conventional morality, the code of carnal knowledge rather than the idealistic code, not honor as the enemy of pleasure but pleasure as an honor. There’s a long century of change between Tirant lo Blanc and Don Quixote, between Joanot Martorell and Miguel de Cervantes, and it would be extremely interesting to go deeper into the reasons for the differences between them. To find out if both were equally a reflection or a product of their time, and, in particular, what the times they reflect were really like. I mean by this, the moral grounds, the ideology, the culture of those times. Quite a few unexpected conclusions might be drawn from the further comparison of the material that I have commented on here, and maybe from other works too. The classics, as anyone who reads them assiduously will well know, are an inexhaustible source of surprises.

## Fragments from *Tirant lo Blanc*

CDXXXIV

HOW TIRANT WENT TO CONSTANTINOPLE AND SPOKE WITH THE EMPEROR

“Seeing his lords in agreement, Tirant decided that he had reached his goal: he had an excuse to visit his mistress, and since the Turkish proposals involved his honour above all others’, he decided to call upon her father himself, thereby both assuring the empire’s peace and reposing tranquilly in his lady’s arms.

That night, after entrusting his camp to the Kings of Sicily and Fez, he sailed to Constantinople, which was twenty miles distant.

Having gone ashore in disguise with one trusted servant, Tirant went to the city gates and announced that he was an emissary. The guards quickly admitted him and he made his way to the Queen of Fez’s chamber, where the damsel, who had been praying, embraced him and cried: “Tirant, what joy to see you! Now I have greater reason to thank God, who despite my unworthiness has granted my pleas. As I spoke the last words, I know not what angel made me turn, whereupon I beheld you, the most virtuous of mortals. Lord worthy of all glory, you shall now be paid for your travails with sweet solace, and if you like, I shall give you what you have long desired, but should you scorn my advice, I shall forsake you and return to Fez.”

Tirant quickly replied: “Lady sister, if I ever disobeyed you, I now apologize and swear by my chivalry to follow all your instructions, which might have helped me in the past had I been wise enough to heed them.”

“Well then”, said the queen, “let us see what you can do. Enter the lists and prove your mettle, for no worthy knight would lose this joust. Now wait here, wile I go and ask the princess to spend the night with me”.

The queen entered Carmesina’s chamber as she as about to retire, and upon beholding her friend, Tirant’s beloved asked: “Why are you in such a hurry, sister?”

The queen joyously whispered: “My lady, come sleep with me tonight, I have many things to tell you, as a galley from Tirant’s camp has arrived and a man has come ashore with tidings of your knight.”

The princess happily agreed, since the two damsels slept together whenever they wished to share some intimacy.

The queen then took Carmesina’s hand and they returned to her chamber, which she found well perfumed according to her instructions. After helping the princess disrobe, her damsels departed, leaving their mistress to her enamored champion.

Once they had left, the queen dismissed her own maidens, saying she was going to finish her prayers and to go sleep. Then she entered the alcove where Tirant was hidden and whispered: “Glorious captain, take off everything but your shirt, and hurry to the side of one who loves you more than life. Dig in your spurs and show her no mercy, for if you spurn my advice you will never enjoy her favors.”

CDXXXVI

HOW TIRANT WON THE BATTLE AND FORCED HIS WAY INTO THE CASTLE

“Tirant, do not change our glorious reunion into bitter woe but calm yourself, my lord, and abjure bellicose violence, for a delicate damsel cannot resist a knight. Do not treat me thus, as love’s battles should be won through clever flattery and sweet deception, nor should you employ treachery except against infidels. Do not cruelly defeat one already vanquished by love! Will you brutally prove your mettle against a helpless damsel? Give me part of your manhood that I may resist you! Oh my lord, how can you delight in forcing me? Oh, how can you hurt the one you love? By your virtue and nobility, please stop before you hurt me! Love’s weapons should not cut; love’s lance should not wound! Alas, cruel false knight, be careful or I shall scream! Lord Tirant, show your compassion and pity a helpless

damsel! You cannot be Tirant! Woe is me! Is this what I longed for? Oh, my life's hope, you have slain your princess!"

Do not think the princess's pleas persuaded Tirant to leave the job unfinished, but although he won the battle, his beloved also fainted. He leapt out of bed, thinking that he had killed her, and summoned the queen to help revive his lady.

Pleasure-of-my-life quickly rose and found a bottle of rice water, which she sprinkled on the princess's face while rubbing her temples. When Carmesina had finally recovered, she heaved a great sigh and said:

CDXXXVII

#### HOW THE PRINCESS GENTLY REBUKED TIRANT

"Tokens of love should not be taken by cruelty, and now, lord captain I begin to doubt your virtue. Can such a fleeting pleasure justify abusing your beloved? You might have waited till our wedding day before entering my chastity's harbor, but you have not behaved like a knight or revered me as a princess. I fear that righteous wrath and the loss of my scarlet maidenhead will so weaken my offended delicacy that I shall soon enter Pluto's kingdom, whereby you will change our celebration into a sad funeral."

Refusing to let the afflicted princess continue, the queen turned to her and said: "Alas, lady fool, you are a great one for acting pitiful, but no knight's arms ever hurt a damsel! May God let me die as sweetly as you pretend to have been killed, and may I catch your disease if you are not cured by morning!"

The princess, who was still mourning her lost virginity, made no reply, whereupon Tirant climbed back into bed and the queen left them alone. They spent the rest of the night in those pleasant games lovers are wont to play.

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