

## THE ROLE OF SEX IN THE *TIRANT LO BLANC*\*

### I

The general subject of this article is a universal one, and yet it has more often been ignored by students of literature than explicitly referred to — and, it should be said, for reasons some of which meet with the approval of the present writer. The common practice has been to treat the subject obliquely or to give it only implicit attention. Yet as a basic aspect of human experience and of the understanding of man — and, it can be said, of his understanding of himself and of God — it would be most surprising if it did not play a large and a necessary part in poetry and prose alike of all ages and of all cultures.

One does not have to be an adherent of his doctrine to argue that Freud and his ideas have made our generation more conscious of the role of sex in general. Thus sex is discussed more fully and frankly in contemporary intellectual and critical writings than it was in an older generation. This increased self-consciousness may perhaps allow us to consider more successfully than hitherto the sexual connotations of a medieval novel in itself remarkable for its uninhibited treatment of the subject.

### II

If sex cannot be said to be a universal element in *Tirant lo Blanc*, it is a pervasive one. It is true that most of the incidents in which it plays an important part are from the second third of the novel, that is, the part which deals with Tirant's life at the court of Constantinople. As a subject in this novel it can, then, be said to belong to the courtly tradition, which

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uses sex in prose and verse, in one way or another, as a constant feature. It must also be said that those sections which precede and follow the courtly episodes (namely, the Guy of Warwick and the Garter sections, the journey to Sicily, and then the lengthy adventures in North Africa together with the final episodes in and around Constantinople and the Balkans) make up an equally significant part of the total work. For instance, *Tirant* is presented as a hero who is not only brave and physically strong, but who is a strategical genius. As others have pointed out, there are several facets to the character and achievements of *Tirant* the man which make of the novel something exceptional if not unique in its genre. As Cervantes said, through the mouth of the priest: «aquí comen los caballeros y mueren en sus camas y hacen testamento antes de su muerte, con otras cosas de que todos los demás libros deste género carecen»; for him it was a «tesoro de contento», a «mina de pasatiempos» (see *Don Quixote*, Part I, Ch. 6).

In a word, *Tirant lo Blanc* is a realist novel in a sense that recalls much more certain 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century fictional conventions than either the novel of chivalry or the picaresque. In fact, Menéndez y Pelayo drew attention to the relative innocence, by comparison, of the *Amadís*, which, however, gives a straightforward account of the relations of the hero's parents after their «marriage of vows», of his birth before the solemnization of their marriage and of his own similar relations with Oriana, not to mention the further occasional examples of casual sexual affairs of the knights and the ladies.<sup>1</sup>

Dámaso Alonso has of recent years written eloquently about Martorell's preoccupation with such details of everyday life as the habits of women at court which he sees as an example of literary vaudeville. He equally draws attention to the minute description of military tactics

1. «Mucho más honesta es Oriana, rindiéndose la primera vez que se encuentra a merced de su amador en el bosque, que la refinada princesa de Constantinopla, que se complace en excitar brutalmente sus sentidos en repetidas entrevistas, y no cede del todo hasta la última parte del libro. Hay en todo esto una especie de *molinosismo* erótico sobremanera repugnante [...]. Adviértase que Martorell describe todas estas escenas sin correctivo alguno, antes bien, con especial fruición, y las corona escandalosamente con el triunfo de Hipólito, elevado nada menos que al trono imperial de Constantinopla por el desaforado capricho de una vieja loca.» Cf. *Orígenes de la novela* (Madrid 1905), I, CCXLI-CCXLII. It will be seen that Menéndez Pelayo takes up what, in English-speaking countries, would be called a Victorian attitude of disapproval which, it must be said, prevents a balanced critical assessment of the subject-matter of the novel. On the other hand, one must pay tribute to Menéndez Pelayo's perceptive analysis of other aspects of the *Tirant* and to his impressive account and discussion of its many sources. — On the general subject of the marriage by vows, see the very useful monograph of JUSTINA RUIZ DE CONDE, *El amor y el matrimonio secreto en los libros de caballerías* (Madrid 1948), which includes separate chapters on the *Tirant* (III) and the *Amadís* (IV).

as when a sailor sets fire to the Genoese ship. He makes the important point that the «realismo típico» of such medieval literature as the *Libro de buen amor*, the poetry of Chaucer or the *Decameron*, is replaced in the *Tirant* by what he calls «realismo vitalista», by which he wishes to draw a distinction between the restrained treatment of certain subjects and the picture of restless and bubbling life, with its humour and sheer vitality, of the court scenes at Constantinople.<sup>2</sup> The point should be stressed: the *Tirant* is exceptional among its fellows in the medieval literary tradition for the extremely restricted use of standard formulae (which, however, do occur here and there) and for the general use of lengthy and full descriptions of love-making. Among the important aspects of Martorell's realism one should mention the wealth of «natural dialogue» (side by side with much formal debate), his accounts of the unblinking brutality of war and jousting (how different on the whole from what one gets in the *Amadís*!) and the medieval scorn for life in such occupations, plus the dwelling upon the physical aspects of love-making itself (Dámaso Alonso, while speaking of this last topic, does not expand upon it).

Another contemporary critic, the late Professor W. J. Entwistle, spoke of the mores of the *Tirant* in some detail. He says that Plaerdemavida, although free in speech, was chaste in conduct, while Estefania, though free in her conduct, becomes an admirable wife. Carmesina's case, with her consciousness of being of royal blood, and that of Tirant, with his refusal to accept any rank between that of knight and that of Caesar (which he eventually wins), are more complex. As in *La fuerza de la sangre*, the common use was (that is, up to 1564, the date of the Tridentine resolutions) to marry by vows, and to celebrate the ceremony later. (This, as indicated above, is also true for the *Amadís*, and can also be made to apply to many Spanish *comedias* of the Golden Age.) For Entwistle the heroines of the *Tirant* are not lascivious but simply reflect the preference for the secret marriage through promise and the immediate consummation of the union. This is precisely what Carmesina's friends continue to urge upon her. Entwistle then goes on to show that there are parallels (for example Félice in the *Guy de Warewic*) for Carmesina's refusal to marry a man of lower rank. He adds that neither the Princess nor Tirant disapproves of these practices, but that they find their relationship limited by social station and a certain *pudor* of their «rather magnanimous temperaments».<sup>3</sup>

2. Cf. «*Tirant lo Blanc*», *novela moderna*, in *Primavera temprana de la literatura europea* (Madrid 1961), 204-53.

3. Cf. «*Tirant lo Blanc*» and the social order of the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *ER*, II (1949-50), 149-64.

One cannot, however, accept all of Entwistle's thesis about the disinclination of Carmesina. It is true that she continually refuses to consummate her love for Tirant until they are fully married, but, in fact, they do consummate their love before the solemnization and before he is made Caesar by the Emperor. It is also a fact that earlier Carmesina and Tirant had pledged their troth through vows and that they swore to leave the consummation till later. This, as has been stated, did not happen. Further, Entwistle does not adequately explain the constant urging of Carmesina by Plaerdemavida and by Estefania and Diafebus, not to mention the frustrating and constant overtures by Tirant himself. Carmesina, it is true, retains her virginity for long on the plea that she is who she is, but it is an incomplete picture to suggest that she succeeds in living up to this conviction.

With these few introductory remarks, let us now see a few examples of how in fact the whole question of relations between the two sexes is dealt with by Martorell (it is perhaps relevant to mention that the second author, Galba, probably added nothing to the book until sometime after the central adventures at court, a fact which, if accepted, would lend some force to the argument that Martorell may well have been giving a picture of life as he knew it at the court of Valencia).

### III

At his very first meeting with Carmesina, Tirant is so overcome by the sight of her bare bosom that he takes to bed:

«E per la gran calor que feia, [...] les finestres tancades, estava mig descordada mostrant en los pits dues pomes de paradís [...] les quals donaren entrada als ulls de Tirant, que d'allí avant no trobaren per on eixir, e totstemp foren apresonats en poder de persona lliberta, fins que la mort dels dos féu separació.»<sup>4</sup>

Thus, we are asked to see the faithful and unbroken love of the hero and heroine as taking its origin from a purely physical attraction. Now while this may be standard for much medieval and other literature, it forms a striking contrast to the love of Amadís for Oriana which thrives as much on his idealisation of her and her qualities and is, thus, much more typical of later Romantic love.<sup>5</sup>

4. The edition used in this article is that prepared by MARTÍ DE RIQUER (Barcelona 1947), which reproduces the *princeps* of 1490. All readers of the *Tirant* are greatly in the debt of Dr. Riquer whose lengthy introduction is as remarkable for the completeness of its scholarship as for the maturity of its criticism.

5. Cf. J. RUIZ DE CONDE, *op. cit.*, 173-227.

A further example of the importance of the physical aspect of their love is provided by the episode when Tirant puts on over his armour Carmesina's *camisa* or innermost garment.

Again, when Estefania is urging Carmesina to marry her lover, she comments as follows :

«si ell m'alçava la falda del meu brial, jo li alçaria la mia camisa que ell no ves, e el contentaria en gran part.

Aquest es aquell qui us faria cercar tots los racons de la cambra, adés tota nua, adés en camisa» (p. 306).

Carmesina, in her turn, tells Estefania and Diafebus to kiss. This they do («tres voltes en la boca, a honor de la santa Trinitat»), and Estefania says that she is ready

«que a voluntat mia prengau possessió de mi, però de la cinta amunt» (p. 443),

which Diafebus does :

«posà-li de continent les mans als pits, tocant-li les mamelles e tot lo que pogué» (*ibidem*).

Tirant, on his side, later declares to Carmesina that he cannot accept the countship or any title from her father until she fulfills his desire. He recalls how her breasts, her hair and face captivated him the first time («d'aquell dia ençà la mia ànima és estada cativa de vostra altesa», p. 514), after which he kneels and makes the sign of the cross, which, he says, he worships like «la vostra persona». Thus again are we presented with the firm juxtaposition of the devotional and the erotic.

Passing over other episodes in which Plaerdemavida has the curious dream of wish-fulfillment in which she sees Tirant and her mistress again making love, we come to a very striking passage that most modern readers would regard as gross and indecent were it not for the prevalent mood of free eroticism mixed with devotion to the beloved which pervades all these adventures :

«Tirant no pogué satisfer sinó que les donzelles li tenien les mans, per les burles e jocs que li feia perquè no la deslligàs. E com véu que se n'anava e ab les mans no la podia tocar, allargà la cama, e posà-la-hi davall les faldes, e ab la sabata tocà-li en lo lloc vedat, e la sua cama posà dins les sues cuixes [...] Com Tirant fon en sa posada, descalçà's les calces e sabates ; e aquella calça e sabata ab què havia tocat a la Princesa davall les faldes, féu-la molt ricament brodar ; e fon estimat lo que hi posà, ço és, perles, robins e diamants, passats vint-e-cinc milia ducats» (p. 587).

He then goes out on the day of the jousts thus adorned, to the amazement of all, that is, with his left leg only clothed in armour, and a figure of the Holy Grail on his helmet!

There then follow several incidents in which Plaerdemavida continues her attempts to get her mistress to satisfy Tirant's desire. Finally, in another scene of advanced sensuality, the lady-in-waiting brings Tirant to his mistress when she is asleep in bed:

«E Tirant tenia la mà sobre lo ventre de la Princesa, e Plaerdemavida tenia la sua mà sobre lo cap de Tirant, e com ella coneixia que la Princesa s'adormia, fluixava la mà e llavors Tirant tocava a son plaer; e com ella despertar-se volia, estrenyia lo cap a Tirant i ell estava segur. En aquest deport estigueren per més espai d'una hora, i ell tostemps tocant-la. Com Plaerdemavida conegué que ella molt bé dormia, afluixà del tot la mà a Tirant, i ell volgué temptar de paciència de voler dar fi a son desig, e la Princesa se començà a despertar, e mig adormida dix: "Què mala ventura fas? No em pots lleixar dormir? Est tornada folla que vols temptar lo que és contra ta natura?"» (p. 674-5).

Tirant is then discovered in the act. It should be mentioned here that several of these scenes must be taken as partly humorous, even burlesque, although it should not be thought that this quality of the writing excludes the more normal straight-faced account of the love-making. Undoubtedly one of the important features of the eroticism in the book is precisely its normality of presentation, to put it thus. A subsequent adventure emphasises this mixture of humour and seriousness, when Tirant in escaping from Carmesina's room falls and breaks his leg, a misadventure which holds up his activities as military leader of the Christian hosts!

We shall also pass over the truly lascivious activities of the Viuda Reposada, whose ruses cause the temporary estrangement of the two faithful lovers. One will recall that a somewhat similar misunderstanding (although less serious in its immediate consequences) caused Amadís and Oriana to separate for some time. Martorell would appear to leave us in no doubt that the Viuda Reposada is a figure of lechery and discord, and, in fact, she ends her life with fitting sordidness. A set of episodes of a rather similar tone to those of this woman concern Hipòlit and the adulterous Empress although their later life together rather compensates for their earlier affair.

Before their love life is upset by the wiles of the widow, Carmesina and Tirant do manage to take solemn marriage vows. They join hands over a holy reliquary with a piece of the true cross, and then kiss in the name of SS. Peter and Paul, Carmesina promising to keep her virginity until Tirant had won the war, when he would possess her and inherit the

Empire. This climax, for once, forms an unusual contrast to that in the *Amadís* where the lovers, having taken their vows, proceed to consummate the union. Indeed, a certain striking difference in the sexual morality of the affair of Tirant and the Princess occurs when he in fact desists from consummation, at the pleas of his beloved, and when, before departing, his action is described thus by a lady at court :

«ell ha usat de gran virtut com a valentíssim e cortès cavaller que ell és, que més ha estimat perdre son delit que enujar a ma senyora» (p. 789).

Their union is, as readers will know, finally consummated towards the end of the book, when the author tells of the incident in terms of combat and stretches his realism to describe the physical pain suffered by the Princess in this encounter. This long-awaited issue is referred to by the use of a formula much more common to other pieces of medieval literature :

«Los dos amants estiguieren tota la nit en aquell benaventurat deport que solen fer los enamorats» (p. 1129).

One might almost be reading the *Amadís* or the *Decameron*. If the final winding-up of this long-drawn out affair is conventional, the *Tirant* does not, however, permit the lovers to enjoy their union for long, since they both die before the whole story comes to its end.

#### IV

After having savoured the erotic element in the *Tirant*, one feels that it is the tone, the approach, plus the details with which it is treated that are of particular interest and that make the whole thing strikingly unusual. One is very much impressed by the trueness and the naturalness of the author's vision, as if he were simply drawing on the universal experience of the race. It would appear that the subject is also seen as one other significant aspect of courtly life (that is, rather than of courtly love, whose literary complexities go beyond the probable bounds of actual historical social conduct). Sex is introduced with the same apparent general desire to describe things fully and factually. Thus, the fine detail of the theory and practice of chivalric encounters, the minutiae of letters of defiance and the detailed arguments about statecraft and strategy, not to mention the account of actual battles, sieges, cities, navies, armies, landscapes and so on, all of which is presented to the reader with far more attention to detail than one finds in the novels of chivalry. Although, as Dámaso Alonso says, the love scenes in the *Tirant* lack the subtler psychological

points of much courtly literature, nevertheless Martorell's lovers are clearly-defined people, moving in a clearly recognisable world and speaking at length about their feelings and beliefs, even if all this lacks something of the remorse usually associated with the *gay saber* and the tormented prose of the sentimental novel. On balance, the *Tirant* presents fuller if simpler human types who have the great attraction of people brought close to us in the whole setting in which they are made to live. Even the Emperor and the Empress are portrayed with a mundane directness, just as the battlescenes and other cases of great peril are described in unforced horrific detail. We may find that the characters are prey to their lusts and instincts with little preparation or explanation by the author or by themselves, but at least the effect is immediate and vivid. The occasional, rather than the pervasive, overtones of humour and irony in these erotic episodes do not cushion the modern reader for the shock experienced at meeting with unblushing and very frank accounts of physical love-making. This, however, can be said to characterise the creation of people acceptable as human beings of our own world of experience rather than of creatures caught up in a destructive if sublimating passion and dedication. In fact, one can think of few greater contrasts within the whole tradition of the erotic in literature than that between the lovers of the *Tirant* and the idealised, even etherealized, lovers of the pastoral novel or the eclogues of the Renaissance. If an element of fantasy can be attached to *Tirant* and his group of courtiers it is in their vitality as creatures of an inherited and unconscious freedom, albeit practised within a dispensation of religious belief and devotion.

## V

It is perhaps fitting that this account of sex in the *Tirant* should include some attempt to make a general comparison of its treatment by Martorell with that of other medieval writers. Boccaccio's *Decameron* springs to mind, and a few words on this famous example of erotic literature will not be out of place. As is well known, this set of tales introduces us to a world of rampant sexuality, often adulterous and seldom relieved by the grace of a true love. The general effect is, of course, humorous, satirical and anti-clerical. The actual descriptions of love-making, however, differ from those in the *Tirant*. Although Boccaccio vividly suggests the scenes, at the same time he makes much use of the normal formulae referred to above, while the actual details of voluptuousness are not given. The *Decameron* achieves its effects rather through innuendo and humorous dialogue, and the total impact at least upon the modern reader must be one of widespread promiscuity. Even if Boccaccio excuses this state of



affairs by reference to the loosening of morals as a result of the plague at Florence, one is left with a clear impression that such habits were accepted as a topic of much entertainment for the gentle and the well-bred of the period. This conviction is not dispelled by the attempts of Boccaccio in his conclusion to answer criticism or when he avers that his *novelle* are in no sense unsuitable reading. He calls upon God as his witness and says that even the Bible can be misunderstood and that friars normally live holy lives. This may not indicate hypocrisy but it can be held to possess more than a certain degree of irony.

Martorell at no point defends his book, but rather leaves the reader with the feeling that human nature is like this and thus it must be accepted. His range of moods is smaller than Boccaccio's nor is it possible to regard him either as a satirist or as a cynical observer of the human comedy.

Something of what one can say of the attitude to sex in the *Decameron* can be applied to the *Libro de buen amor* (here the remorse and the consciousness of sin are certainly more frequently expressed and made much more explicit), the fabliaux, Chaucer and the *Roman de la Rose*. All these deal with love, illicit and sensual, and the manner of presentation is at once sly, burlesque and satirical, in differing proportions, as well as moralistic. Further, the use of formulae to describe actual scenes of love-making is the common practice in these medieval classics.

What of the *Celestina*, perhaps the closest parallel in time and manner to the *Tirant*? Rojas does give certain examples of frank reference to sexual indulgence, but again, and here perhaps because of the dramatic form and its requirements, the detail of Martorell is missing and much is hinted at by formulae. It is true that Melibea regards her consummation at times with pride but she will then revert to a deep sense of guilt and, also, she will reject the idea of marriage. In fact, the actual dwelling upon physical union occurs only in Acts XIV-XIX and it is undertaken by Rojas with some misgiving. The case of the *Celestina* is, thus, very different from that of the *Tirant*, its contemporary. The Castilian work further reveals a strong sense of moral conflict and hardly anything of the free admission of what one might call the function of sex. While the interpretation of the *Celestina* is still a subject of much controversy, it can be said that the use of the complexities of courtly love in this book makes it a much more enigmatic work than the *Tirant*. The latter with its more or less one-dimensional treatment of sex based as it is upon the convention of the marriage of vows offers fewer problems of exegesis.<sup>6</sup>

One is thus driven far back into history to find anything like a close

6. I am grateful to my colleague, A. A. Heathcote, for his help and comments on this aspect of the *Celestina*.

parallel for the *Tirant*, although one does so with many qualifications, since what was permissible in pre-Christian Europe is a subject demanding much study of an alien morality and society, and a subject darkened by a great deal of prejudice, ignorance and easy misinterpretation. For what it is worth, however, one may briefly refer to the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius and Petronius' *Satyricon*, both of them works, it is true, of an admittedly humorous and burlesque nature, but at the same time with full and uninhibited descriptions of sexual practice. One is introduced to a society in which these things existed on a quite different level of values and in which indulgence would not have gone under this name at all. Certainly the love-affair of Photis and the hero of the *Golden Ass*, or the homosexual affairs in Petronius, take place with something like the gaiety and the vividness we find in Martorell. This comparison, as suggested, is at most a tentative one. The *Tirant* reveals human beings in their physical relationships with little of the sense of guilt and without the many humorous and often obscene overtones with which this subject is presented in much literature of the Christian era. The prevalent moral strictures which accompany the topic in the *Libro de buen amor*, not to mention the conspicuous absence of scenes of love-making in, say, Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares* (in which he is Boccaccio's successor in other things but not in this), come to mind in trying to place the *Tirant* within the fictional traditions of Europe. One would not of course refer to it in this respect as a latter-day pagan novel, but one is tempted to compare it in certain ways with the pre-Christian fiction mentioned above.

## VI

Whatever one makes of the total *Tirant*, the intention of this article has been to show that any full assessment of its meaning and its qualities must take account of what the writer believes to be an important attempt by Martorell to present human beings *sub specie aeternitatis* as creatures who are endowed with instincts, both noble and ignoble, with which they live and which can lead to professions of fidelity and the cult of beauty. Not to blink at sex, rather to deal with it frankly and without any of the accretions that besmirch it, is in itself an achievement of some note. The *Tirant* is outstanding for its amazing coverage of human life, and it belongs to a tradition that is often forced to adopt an equivocal attitude towards one of man's richest and most disturbing gifts.

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