

TIRANT LO BLANC, "THE WORLD'S GREATEST NOVEL"



TIRANT LO BLANC ACHIEVED CONSIDERABLE SUCCESS IN ITS OWN TIME, AND WAS SOON TRANSLATED. ITS INFLUENCE IS CLEARLY VISIBLE IN LATER WORKS, SUCH AS ARIOSTO'S *ORLANDO FURIOSO*, SHAKESPEARE'S *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING* OR CERVANTES'S *DON QUIXOTE*, NOT TO MENTION VARGAS LLOSA'S *LETRAS DE BATALLA PARA TIRANTE EL BLANCO*. ALL THIS IS HARDLY SURPRISING. AS MIGUEL DE CERVANTES WROTE: "FOR ITS STYLE, THIS IS THE WORLD'S GREATEST NOVEL".

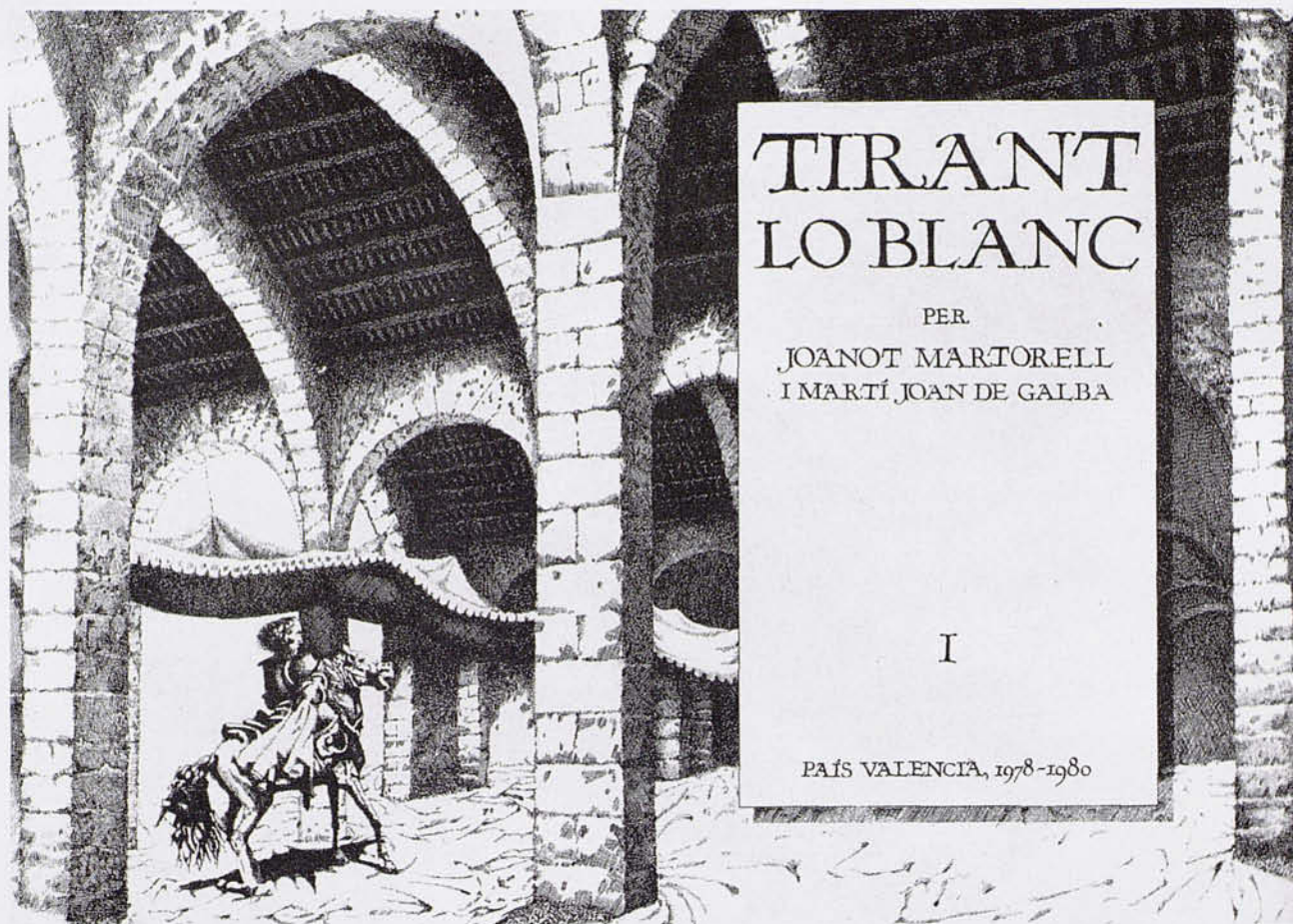
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The thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries make up, without any doubt, the golden age of Catalan literature, the age of its greatest triumphs within the European scene. Alongside the intense and varied work of Ramon Llull, the historical-chronicles—two of which, those by Jaume I and Pere III, are the only surviving autobiographical texts by medieval kings—and the acid verses of Ausiàs March and Joan Roís de Corella, the chivalric novel stands out in fifteenth century Catalan literature as the first important step forward in western fiction. Throughout the Middle Ages, the world of chivalry was reflected in a series of Arthurian novels filled with the wondrous elements of a fantastic universe set in remote times. In keeping with the new bourgeois and humanist approaches of the time, this world underwent important changes in the Catalan literature of the fifteenth century, with heroes

appearing on a human scale in an identifiable geographical location and a not so distant time. The principal and most symptomatic characteristic of the new genre is its realism, its everydayness.

The term *novel·la cavalleresca* (chivalric novel) is the one used by most literary critics and historians to differentiate this genre from the earlier *llibres de cavalleria* (books of chivalry). The most outstanding examples are the Catalan novels *Curial e Güelfa* and *Tirant lo Blanc* and the French novel *Le petit Jean de Saintré*. Of these, there is no doubt that *Tirant lo Blanc* is the best, both from a strictly literary point of view and on account of its chivalric, historical and realistic elements, without forgetting the sensuality of some chapters, the skilful use of irony and its cosmopolitanism and universality. The book tells the story of Tirant, a young Breton, starting with his participation in festivities at the English court,

where he is made a knight, and ending with his death as Caesar and Captain General of the Greek Empire, in Constantinople. It is here that much of the action takes place, as well as in Sicily, France, Rhodes and Tunisia. Tirant, the protagonist and hero, is simply someone who wins tournaments and battles, not so much due to his strength, which can at no time be described as supernatural, but through his cunning, quick-wittedness and common sense. Although Tirant reaches a social position which is way above his humble beginnings, he also suffers great hardships in his attempts to win the favours of Princess Carmesina, daughter of the Emperor of Constantinople. This is reflected in highly amusing passages which are not particularly heroic in the traditional sense of the word. The novel draws its strength, precisely, from the amorous plot, in which one of the most important figures is Plaerdemavida, the princess's servant and a delightful lit-



erary character, as well as from the chivalric plot. It is remarkable for certain fantastic elements—more rhetorical than anything else—, such as the appearance of King Arthur in the hero's dream, historical events, erotic scenes featuring a large number of the principal and secondary characters, lessons on military strategy and brilliant sketches of social behaviour.

Tirant lo Blanc, then, is a thoroughly modern novel, which represents a break with medieval ideals—religious faith, for example—and the adoption of bourgeois ideals—mainly pleasure, reason and humour—, set in the framework of an unsophisticated, free-and-easy account of the everyday life of the time. Another point of interest in the novel is the world it portrays: at once simple and complex, ironic and serious; as reflected in the style,

which is generally colloquial and rich in plays on words, spontaneous exclamations and imagination.

Tirant lo Blanc was almost entirely written by Joanot Martorell, between 1460 and 1468, and later completed by Martí Joan de Galba, who had it printed in 1490. Martorell was born at the beginning of the century, in Gandía, a Valencian town which also produced the two other great Catalan writers of the fifteenth century, Ausiàs March and Roís de Corella. He himself was a fiery-tempered nobleman who travelled extensively in Europe and had a first-hand knowledge of the King of England's court, where, it must be remembered, his novel starts. Joanot Martorell left a considerable collection of *lletres de batalla*—an indication of his warlike nature—and another, unfinished novel, *Guillem de*

Varic, in which he reworked a French version of the Anglo-Norman romance *Guy de Warwicke*, adding elements from Ramon Llull's *Llibre de l'orde de cavalleria*, and which he included, in an enlarged version, in the first part of *Tirant*. *Tirant lo Blanc* achieved considerable success in its own time, and was soon translated into Castilian and Italian and later, in the eighteenth century, into French. More recently, in keeping with the interest of today's readers, it has been translated into English. Its influence is clearly visible in later works, such as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* or Cervante's *Don Quixote*, not to mention Vargas Llosa's *Letras de batalla para Tirante el Blanco*. All this is hardly surprising. As Miguel de Cervantes wrote: *for its style, this is the world's greatest novel.* ■