PROGETTO MAMBRINO
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Chivalry in the New World

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The message of this chapter can be summed up in a sentence, almost a headline. Charlemagne is not dead: he is living in Latin America, or he was until comparatively, recently. The New World came late to chivalry, since it was obviously impossible for its inhabitants to learn about this European value system and the romances which expressed it until 1492, and it may be thought that the behaviour of Cortés and Pizarro in Mexico and Peru did nothing to make the value system more intelligible to the Aztecs or the Incas. On the other hand, once the tradition had been transplanted, it was in the New World, or parts of it, that the romances of chivalry retained their appeal longest, notably in the north-east of Brazil.

At the time of the discovery of America, or to use a somewhat less ethnocentric expression, at the beginning of a series of encounters between the cultures of Europe and the cultures of America, the Renaissance movement had long been under way. However, as we have seen (above, chapter 8), the enthusiasm for classical antiquity did not drive out the love of romances of chivalry. In both the literal and the metaphorical sense these romances formed an important part of the baggage of the *conquistadores*.

In Spain in the Middle Ages, romances of chivalry were a popular oral and literary genre. Muslims as well as Christians composed, recited and read them, and a considerable number of these stories, including the usual giants, enchanted palaces, swords with names and female warriors, survive in Spanish written in the Arabic script (Galmés de Fuentes, 1967). As in other parts of Renaissance Europe, a number of Spanish humanists rejected the romances of chivalry as «foolish» or «silly books», generations before the more affectionate mockery of Cervantes. In 1524, Juan Luis Vives condemned *Amadís*, *Lancelot* and *Pierre de Provence*, and five years later, Antonio de Guevara condemned *Amadís* (Leonard, 1949, 68-69; Ife, 1985).

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Similar criticisms were made later in the century by the humanists Pedro Mexia and Benito Arias Montano and the preacher Luis de Granada. Whatever Don Quixote may have been doing, Cervantes himself was not tilting at windmills. In Spain in the first half of the sixteenth century, new romances of chivalry were published «at an average rate of almost one a year», while the total number of editions of such romances totalled over 150 (Thomas, 1920, 147; Chevalier, 1976, 67). The authors included at least one woman, the noble lady Beatriz Bernal of Valladolid, who published a romance in 1545, *Don Cristalián* (Bennassar 1967, 519).

One at least of these romances is still taken seriously by literary critics, and was recently translated into English: the fifteenth-century Catalan romance *Tirant lo Blanc*. Even the book-burners in *Don Quixote* agreed to save it because it was, as the priest said, «the best book of its kind in the world», a judgement shared by one of today's leading Latin American writers, Mario Vargas Llosa. Even more successful in the sixteenth century were two cycles of romances in Castilian. There was *Palmerín de Oliva*, which began publication in 1511, and there was *Amadís de Gaula*, first published about the year 1508. *Amadís* was not only much reprinted but followed by a series of continuations by some half-a-dozen authors, dealing with the adventures of the son of Amadís, the grandson of Amadís, and so on, heroes with names like Esplandian, Lisuarte and Amadís of Greece. By 1546 the cycle had been extended to twelve books. These adventure stories had a wide appeal in Renaissance Italy, in France, in England and elsewhere.

In Spain the *aficionados* of these romances included Emperor Charles V, the diplomat Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, and the reformer Juan de Valdés (Leonard 1949, 19-21). Among the more famous examples of documented reader response are the testimonies of two Counter-Reformation saints who happen to have left us accounts of their lives. In his autobiography, Ignatius Loyola tells us that he was «much given to reading the worldly and false books known as romances of chivalry» («muy dado a leer libros mundanos y falsos que suelen llamar de cabellerías») and that before he was ordained priest, he kept vigil before the altar of Our Lady of Monsarrat because «his head was full of [...] *Amadís of Gaul* and similar books» («tenia todo el entendimiento lleno de [...] *Amadís de Gaula* y de semejantes libros»).

Similarly, Teresa of Avila remarks in her memoirs that her mother was «a fan of romances of chivalry» («aficionada a libros de caballerías») and that she shared this enthusiasm in her youth, information which makes Beatriz Bernal's decision to write in this apparently male genre easier to understand. Research on the history of reading based on the study of library inventories confirms the impression of widespread enthusiasm for these books on the part of sixteenth-century Spaniards, merchants as well as nobles (Bennassar, 1967, 511-19; Chevalier, 1976, cap. 1; Berger, 1987). The romances were shortened and published in the form of verse chap-books or *pliegos sueltos*, which suggests that they had become part of popular culture (Norton and Wilson, 1969).

Like the Spaniards, Portuguese readers of the sixteenth century loved romances of chivalry, including the famous Amadís, which may have been originally composed in Portugal around the year 1350. Books 7, 9 and 10 of the continuation were printed in Lisbon in the sixteenth century (Anselmo, 1926, nn. 789, 815, 364).

The humanist João de Barros was not only a famous historian of the exploits of the Portuguese in Asia, but also the author of a romance, *Clarimundo* (1520), which enjoyed considerable success. The Palmerín cycle was continued by Portuguese writers such as Francisco de Morães and Diogo Fernández. When the poet Luis de Camoes introduced his epic *The Lusiads* (1572) by contrasting his narrative with the «fantastic» or «fabulous» deeds of Roland and Roger, he could assume that his readers were familiar with these romances. One publisher of the Amadís and Palmerin cycles was Marcos Borges, who had been appointed royal printer in 1566. The king on the throne at the time was Sebastian, who was killed at the battle of Alcazarkebir in 1578 after invading North Africa to conquer and convert the «Moors». Whether or not the king was a particular enthusiast for romances of chivalry, Sebastian certainly tried to behave like one of the heroes of these romances, while after his death he would be assimilated to these heroes, as we shall see.

Given this continuing interest in the genre in Spain and Portugal, it is scarcely surprising to find references to romances of chivalry early in the history of the conquest and settlement of the New World. Whether Columbus read them or not we cannot be sure, but a number of these romances could be found in the library of his son Fernando (Huntington, 1905). References in the letters of Cortés imply that he too was familiar with this literature (Leonard, 1949, 50). By 1531 the government was worried enough by the spread of this enthusiasm to order the House of Trade at Seville to prohibit the export to the Indies of «vain» romances such as *Amadís* (Sánchez, 1958, 246-247).

One of the most interesting pieces of evidence comes from the history of the conquest of Mexico written by Bernal Díaz del Castillo. When Díaz is describing the first sight of the Aztec capital, the city in the lake, he writes that «we said that it was like the enchanted things related in the book of Amadís because of the huge towers, temples, and buildings rising from the water». As in the case of the travellers [...], we find life imitating art, or more exactly experience influenced by fiction. Díaz also made the revealing assumption that a reference to *Amadís* would make this exotic land seem more familiar to his readers. His aim was «to translate [...] the utterly strange into what we might call the familiarly strange» (Sánchez, 1958; Gilman, 1960-1963; Hulme, 1994, 170).

Another interesting early piece of evidence about chivalry in the New World is a name: California. By the middle of the sixteenth century, it was already being used about the Pacific Coast of North America. However, the name was first used of a fictional island. In the romance *Esplandián*, a continuation of the Amadís story first published in 1510, we learn of a group of war-like women ruled by a certain Queen Calafia, «mistress of the great island of California, celebrated for its great abundance of gold and jewels», an island on which men are forbidden to set foot. The queen challenges both Amadís and his son Esplandián to single combat, is vanquished, and becomes a Christian. The application of the name California to part of America suggests that other people besides Bernal Diaz and his comrades perceived the New World through spectacles coloured by romances of chivalry.

A similar point could be made about the vast region of Amazonia, which began to be explored by the Spaniards in the early 1540s. The expedition led by

Francisco de Orellana is said to have given the River Amazon its present name after a fight with the local Indians in which women took active part. According to the Dominican friar Gaspar de Carvajal, who took part in this expedition, the women warriors were tall and pale, they were armed with bows and arrows, and they lived in villages of their own, subject to a fe male ruler called Coroni (Carvajal, 1955, 97, 105; Sánchez, 1958, 250-4).

Traditional myths or stereotypes of the so-called «monstrous races» were thus revitalized and projected onto the New World (Friedman, 1981, 9, 170-171, 197-207). Although the myth of the Amazons went back to classical times, as humanists well knew, it had been revived in fifteenth-century Italy. It was at this time that viragos begin to play an important role in Italian romances and that we find the topos of the maiden who will only accept as a husband a man who vanquishes her in battle, like Galiziella in the *Aspramonte* of Andrea da Barberino, an Amazon from the «kingdom of women» (*regno feminino*). The figure of Marfisa in Matteo Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (1483), of Bradamante in Ludovico Ariosto's still more famous *Orlando Furioso* (1516) and of Clorinda in Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) are the most memorable examples of this tradition(Rajna, 1872, 49-52; Tomalin, 1982, 82 ff.). It may at least be suggested –and it has indeed been suggested– that the Renaissance revival of interest in the classical tradition of the Amazons was encouraged by Columbus's report of Amazons in the Indies (Leonard, 1949, 53). For Carvajal and Díaz alike, the New World seemed to be the place where European romances of chivalry came true.

The emigrants from Spain to Mexico and Peru took these romances of chivalry with them, or had them supplied by book-sellers, as has been shown by the American scholar Irving Leonard, who studied records of book shipments preserved in the archives of the House of Trade at Seville (Leonard, 1933). Thanks to his research, it is now known that in Mexico City in 1540, the printer Juan Cromberger had no fewer than 446 copies of *Amadís* in stock in his shop (Leonard, 1949, 98). In Lima in 1583, *Amadís* was «still among the favourites» (Leonard, 1949, 223). In Tucuman in 1597, a provincial synod condemned the spread of «immoral books and romances of chivalry» (Leonard, 1949, 88). In 1600, 10.000 copies of the romance *Pierres y Magalona* entered Mexico (Marín, 1911, 36). Among the New World enthusiasts for these romances was the «Inca Garcilaso», a Peruvian noble-man and historian who emigrated to Spain (Durand, 1984, 263).

At this point we are faced with a gap in the evidence. In the case of Brazil, there appear to be no sixteenth-century references to romances of chivalry. Indeed, a history of the press in Brazil remarks on the absence of books of any kind from inventories as late as the seventeenth century, in striking contrast with the Spanish viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru (Sodré, 1966, 12). Books might be imported, but they were not allowed to be printed in Brazil until the early nineteenth century. All the same, it is in Brazil that we find the richest documentation for chivalry in the New World in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Charlemagne and his paladins occupied a significant place in the popular imagination.

About the year 1840, an American Protestant missionary, the Reverend Daniel Kidder, was visiting the small town of Maceió, in the north-east of Brazil, on the

coast between Salvador and Recife. He entered a shop and found the shop assistant reading at the counter. «His book», Kidder remarked, apparently with some astonishment, «was a life of Carlos Magno» (Kidder, 1845, vol. 2, 86). The missionary should not have been surprised, for the interest in stories about Charlemagne was in no way unusual for the region and the period.

The *Historia de Carlos Magno* which the shop assistant was reading is the key text in the Brazilian reception of the romances of chivalry. It was still being read in the twentieth century, when the avant-garde writer Oswald de Andrade recorded his enthusiasm for the book, an enthusiasm which he shared with anarchists and labour leaders (Meyer, 1993, 147-59). Research on the history of this text goes some way towards filling the gap mentioned above. In the National Library of Lisbon there is a chap-book of 1794 with a similar title, *Historia nova do imperador Carlos Magno e dos doze pares de França.* It has been shown that this text was derived from a Spanish romance of 1525, which drew in turn on a French romance of 1486. The gap between Portugal in 1794 and Brazil in the 1870s has to be filled by conjecture, but it is plausible enough to suggest that the Portuguese chap-book was exported to Brazil, which as noted above relied more heavily on Europe for books than the Spanish American colonies did.

In Brazil itself, chap-books, which used to be called *folhetos* and are now best known as «stories on a string», *literatura de cordel*, began to be printed only in the later nineteenth century. These texts are still produced in considerable numbers today. As in the case of early modern European chap-books, they were and are well adapted to a situation of restricted literacy. They are generally in verse, normally what are known as *sextilhas* (six-line stanzas with seven syllables to the line). They were (and are) generally printed on small presses and distributed in the first instance by the composers or *cantadores* themselves, who gave oral performances accompanied by music in marketplaces on market days and then sold the texts to the listeners. The text may be regarded as a kind of souvenir of the performance, or the performance as a kind of commercial for the text. It does not matter too much whether the buyers can read or not, for it is generally possible for them to find someone else who will read or chant the text to them (Arantes, 1982; Slater, 1982).

The repertoire of these *cantadores* was and remains varied, but an important group of late nineteenth –and early twentieth– century *folhetos* was derived from the romances of chivalry and dealt with the exploits of Roland, the treason of Ganelon, and so on (Ferreira, 1979; Peloso, 1984, 62 ff.). For example, the first major writer of *folhetos*, Leandro Gomes de Barros, who died in 1918 , was well known for his *Batalha de Oliveiros com Ferrabrás*. The story of Fierabras is a medieval French verse epic which was adapted into other languages such as Provençal, Spanish, English, German and Italian. Like the Spanish *conquistadores*, the poets of north-eastern Brazil appear at times to see the world through the spectacles of romances of chivalry. The famous bandit Lampiao, for example, who was finally killed by the police in 1938, was described in contemporary ballads as «worse than Robert the Devil» («pior do que Roberto do Diabo»), a reference to a medieval French romance which was still circulating in Brazil at that point in time (Peloso, 1984, 75).

Even today, a few *folhetos* dealing with subjects from romances of chivalry can still be found, as well as modern works which exploit this tradition. Jorge Amado, whose novels were sometimes inspired by the *cordel*, has created several modern Amazons with knives in their skirts, such as Rosa Palmeirão and Tereza Batista. The great classic of modern Brazilian literature, *Grande Sertão* (1956), by João Guimãraes Rosa, may also be interpreted as a New World transformation of the romance of chivalry, by an author familiar from childhood with the *Historia de Carlos Magno* (Meyer, 1993, 147-59). *Grande Sertão* deals with the adventures of Riobaldo and Diadorim, a pair of *jagunços*, that is, honourable men of violence who live in the backlands. The two comrades are as close as Roland and Oliver, or perhaps closer, but it is only at the end of the story, when Diadorim is killed in a shoot-out, that we learn that she was a beautiful woman in disguise, a warrior maiden (like Bradamante in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*), who had taken to the backlands to avenge the death of her father. An Amazon not so far from Amazonia (Rosa, 1956; Meyer, 1993, 147-59). The relation of Guimarães Rosa to popular culture was not unlike that of Ariosto. A diplomat, polymath and polyglot who was well acquainted with European literature, he had earlier practised as a doctor in the backlands of Minas Gerais. It is said that when his patients could not afford to pay him, he asked them to tell him a story instead. He was certainly an assiduous student of the local folklore, which appears in his own stories, coexisting and interacting, as in the case of Diadorim, with themes from European high culture.

This classic novel was recently made into a film. Hence the remark at the beginning of the chapter that Charlemagne is still living in Latin America, and the decision of a recent Italian student of the *cordel* to call his book «The Middle Ages in the Backlands» (Peloso, 1984).

Why have the Middle Ages survived so long in this region? There is of course a sense in which we can say that the romance of chivalry still forms part of Western culture. Children and adults still read adventure stories of different kinds, and some of these genres owe a good deal to the traditions of the medieval romance. It is commonplace to say that stories and films about cowboys are transformations of stories about knights, armed struggles between good and evil with the heroes using six-shooters in the place of swords and the villains wearing *sombreros* (or in Mexican films, stetsons) instead of turbans. The Amazon or virago has also survived as in the case of Annie in *Annie Get your Gun* (1946) or her lesser known American predecessors such as Hurricane Nell. Science-fiction offers another type of transformation, drawing some of its material (not to mention plot structures such as the quest) from the magical world of medieval romance.

How do we account for the persistence of these themes? The answers which have been given to this question are very diff erent. On one side we have the ideas of the Canadian critic Northrop Frye about the universal appeal of the basic plot of the romance, the importance of the quest and so on, a brilliantly developed literary analysis which assumes what it ought to prove, the universality of the appeal of this type of adventure story (Frye, 1959, 186 ff.). It may be worth remarking in passing that Frye does not discuss the adventure stories of China or Japan, from the *Water Margin* to *The Forty-Seven Ronin*, and it may be doubted whether these stories, despite

their superficial similarities to «eastern westerns» would altogether fit his categories. For example, the collective heroes of the two stories just cited are very different from the «Lone Ranger» tradition of Western individualism.

This contrast between East and West supports explanations of the persistence ot motifs which are framed in terms of cultural traditions and of social conditions which favour the persistence of these traditions. Let us investigate this possibility in the case of the romance of chivalry.

The case of Brazil is not a unique one. In Sicily, a popular puppet theatre featuring Rinaldo and other heroes from romances of chivalry was still flourishing in the early twentieth century, even if it is the tourist industry which keeps it alive today (Lanza, 1931). The tales of Charlemagne and his paladins were the favourite boyhood reading of the famous bandit Salvatore Giuliano, who was killed in 1950(Maxwell, 1956, 34). In France, the stories were still being reprinted in cheap format in the middle of the nineteenth century, and it is said that during the First World War, some Breton soldiers passed their time in the trenches reading the medieval romance *The Four Sons of Aymon*. Vargas Llosa's admiration for *Tirant lo Blanc* has already been mentioned (Vargas Llosa, 1970). All the same, the continuing importance of the romance of chivalry in the culture of rural Brazil, at least in the north-east, still cries out for explanation.

In parts of Brazil, such as Minas Gerais, Bahia, Pernambuco and Cearà, certain features of the popular culture of early modern Europe remain very much alive. The most obvious example is carnival – not just the big commercialized carnival of Rio, as much for the tourists and the television cameras as for the locals, but the smaller, more traditional, participatory, violent carnivals of Olinda, Salvador, Maranhao and elsewhere (Burke, 1997, 148-161). Again, *Irmandades* or religious confraternities together with their church-ales or quermesses still flourish in the small towns of Minas Gerais. The survival of the chap-books, and in particular of the romances of chivalry, is not an isolated phenomenon.

But how does one explain these survivals? To speak of «archaism» is to describe, not to explain. To note other cases (such as the Appalachia studied by the musicologist Cecil Sharp) in which colonies or ex-colonies are more faithful to the cultural traditions of the mother country than the metropolis itself is helpful but not sufficiently precise (Sharp, 1907). If we accept the suggestion that a culture's heroes tell something about its basic values, a suggestion which has been developed in an interesting way in the case of Brazil by the anthropologist Roberto Da Matta, the problem appears even more central, without of course coming any nearer to a solution (Da Matta, 1978).

If we are trying to explain the survival of the romance of chivalry in Brazil, it is of course crucial to establish –if we can– what these stories mean to the participants. We need to take into account the responses of the readers. As it may well be imagined, this task is not an easy one (Meyer, 1993, 147-59). It is at least possible, however, to focus on one relatively well-documented episode in twentieth-century Brazilian history in which the reading of romances of chivalry played a part. This is the popular revolt of 1912-15, the so-called «war of Contestado». It was a revolt of the periphery against the centralizing state, similar in

this respect to the more famous revolt of the holy man Antonio Conselheiro in 1896-7, who founded the holy city of Canudos in the backlands of Bahia, in north-eastern Brazil. This revolt has inspired a classic of Brazilian literature, Euclides da Cunha's *The backlands* (*Os Sertoes*, 1902), and, more recently, a novel by Mario Vargas Llosa, *The War of the End of the World* (1980) (Levine, 1992). The Contestado rebellion, in the backlands of Paraná and Santa Caterina, in southern Brazil was also led by holy men, including the monk José Maria, who read to his followers from the *Historia de Carlos Magno*, the same text which the American missionary Kidder found in the shop in Maceió. The rebels included a small group of skilled fighters who were known as «the twelve peers of France» (Monteiro, 1974; Diacon, 1991, 2, 116, 137, 152).

This rebellion gives us some kind of context in which to place Charlemagne. This is a context of what Eric Hobsbawm has called «primitive» rebellions against the modern secular state, with its taxes, its censuses and so on (1959). The Brazilian rebellions were viewed by participants as a holy war against this infidel, diabolical state centred in distant Rio de Janeiro. The rebels appealed to «Dom Sebastião», the sixteenth-century king of Portugal already mentioned, a figure who seems to have been amalgamated with St Sebastian and was expected to return, like King Arthur, in this case to free Brazil from the yoke of the Republic. The disobedience of Roland, who ignored the orders of Charlemagne to retreat and lost his life fighting the Moors, seems to have legitimated a revolt against a modern state (Cunha, 1902, 136, 164; Monteiro, 1974, 109 ff.).

This political interpretation is a plausible one, but it needs to be placed in a wider cultural context. Like the North American cowboy and the South American *gaucho*, the Brazilian *jagunço* may be viewed as a descendant of the medieval knight, especially the knight-errant, thanks to his nomadic way of life, to his concern with honour and not least to his horsemanship, a skill displayed in dramatic form in the rodeos which still take place in Brazil as well as in the USA. As an English medievalist once remarked, «it is impossible to be chivalrous without a horse» Denholm-Young, quoted White, 1962, 38). Like medieval La Mancha, Don Quixote's stamping-ground, and Extremadura, the native region of so many *conquistadores*, north-eastern Brazil was a frontier area, a relatively empty territory of cattle-raising and violence, out of reach of the short arm of the law (Bishko 1963). In such a region, stories of individualized heroic deeds would find a public ready to listen to them.

In other words, the frontier environment is important to the romance of chivalry as well as to related literary genres such as the ballad and the oral epic (Entwistle, 1939; Lord, 1960). The backlands of north-east Brazil were a frontier society. The New World of the sixteenth century was a frontier society. Come to that, the Iberian peninsula of the late Middle Ages was a frontier society, lacking a central authority and engaged in a constant struggle of Christians against Muslims (Bishko, 1963; MacKay, 1977, 36 ff.). In all these places, the ethic of independence prevailed and defiance of a distant authority made good sense. In each region the romance tradition was adapted to local circumstances, but it was because there was already some degree of «fit» between the tradition and the circumstances that chivalry

appealed to local writers, singers, listeners and readers. Transplanting is only possible in the right soil.

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