

The *Fier baiser*: a fantastic episode in Joanot Martorell's realism

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Abstract

Chapters CDX-CDXIII of Martorell's *Tirant lo Blanc* narrate knight Espèrcius' fantastic adventures after the shipwreck on the shores of Lango. Unlike the rest of the novel, which is characterized by the verisimilitude, this episode shows many typical *topoi* of fantasy fiction, particularly referring to Espèrcius' ultimate trial: *the Fier baiser*. Martorell draws from several sources - starting with Sir John Mandeville's *Le livre des merveilles du monde* - developing and adapting the legend of Hipocràs' daughter, turned into a dreadful dragon, to his purposes. By kissing the monstrous Dragon Maiden and breaking the spell Espèrcius completes his initiation thus fulfilling his destiny: he obtains the princess' hand and the sovereignty of the island. This episode represents a small break from the predominant realism of the novel, since in these chapters magic and fantasy take over the reality.

One of the most fascinating and recurring motifs of the literary narrative, especially during the Middle Ages, is the Perilous Kiss or *Fier baiser*. Its appeal on novelists, poets and critics is limitless – perhaps thanks to its evocative power of the world of Celtic mythology and its ancient legends.¹ Connected to many other motifs of the fantasy fiction, the *Fier baiser* represents the knight's ultimate trial in order to prove his courage and find a place within the royal court eventually.

Among the different traditions one may observe a constant pattern: a princess is turned into a serpentine or draconic creature by a sorcerer, waiting for the knight's kiss to be disenchanting. In exchange for his bravery he receives many gifts and the sovereignty of the lady's land. Besides the main outline, one may notice other persistent elements which surround the moment of the Perilous Kiss and allow us to identify such a motif within the literary tradition: the typical *incipit*, the authors' particular use of the setting, the knight's hesitation and reaction when facing the dragon maiden, and the final reward.

In the enormous work of Joanot Martorell, *Tirant lo Blanc*, one may find all these traditional elements gathered in a brief episode. Particularly in the chapters CDX-CDXIII, in the fifth part of the novel, entitled *Riconquista dell'impero*, according to the geographic division of Paolo Cherchi.² Unlike the rest of the story, which is characterized by the verisimilitude, this episode shows many typical *topoi* of fantasy fiction. In fact in his analysis of the novel, Martín de Riquer suggests that: “a Joanot Martorell se le ha discutido la paternidad o autoría del episodio.”(De Riquer 1992, 187)

¹ The motif is codified in Stith Thompson's *Motif-index of Folk literature* as motif D735 *Disenchantment by kiss*, vol. 2, p. 65; in Guerreau-Jalabert's *Index des motifs narratifs dans les romans arthuriens français en vers* one may find several motifs related to the *Fier baiser*: B11.1.3.01 *Transformed princess as dragon*; B11.6.13 (B) *Dragon kisses queen/knight*; D 565.5 *Transformation by kiss*; D1794 *Magic results from kissing*; Q 112.05.1(B) *lady and her lands as reward*.

² In the introduction to Martorell's work, Cherchi divides the novel into geographical subdivisions, in contrast with Martín de Riquer's previous thematic analysis. De Riquer situated this episode inside the section: *Tirant al Nord D'Àfrica*.

Yet by studying the whole text, he proves that such insertions fits perfectly the author's usual narrative technique, thus letting go any doubts concerning the text's paternity. However, it is clear that these three chapters contrast in a certain way with the rest of the novel, where realism is prominent, especially in the description of battles, love scenes and journeys. In this small section, Martorell collects many well-known motifs of the fantastic tradition.

The episode of the *Fier Baiser* is situated within the Knight Espèrcius' cycle of adventures: after a mission in Sicily, as ambassador on behalf of Tirant, in the attempt of reaching his lord's troops, with ten other men, Espèrcius is shipwrecked on the shores of a mysterious island. The land looks almost deserted: there are only four exiled couples and an old shepherd living in misery. Out of curiosity, Espèrcius begs the shepherd to tell him the story of that island, "que paria tan bona, e que així fos deshabitada." (Martorell ed. 1969, vol. 2, 443) Here the narration of the legend begins: Hipòcrates, lord of the Lango island, had a daughter who was turned into an awful dragon by the goddess Diana. The spell could only be broken by the *Fier baiser* of a brave knight, who, in return, would receive great wealth and the sovereignty on the island. On the contrary, failing to kiss her would bring him immediate death.

These three chapters present all the elements that prepare the reader for the great trial that the knight must overcome: the *Fier baiser*. First of all the beginning of the story, as pointed out by Cherchi, is typical of the fairy tales: "Senyor, vós deveu saber que antigament era príncep e senyor d'aquesta illa de Lango e de Cretes, Hipocràs, lo qual tenia una filla molt bellíssima."(Ibid.) The *incipit* performs the important task of placing the reader in an imaginary dimension, a different world of an unknown past where everything is possible.

Martorell's use of space

It is interesting to notice how Martorell displays some important motifs, especially those concerning the story setting, in order to announce the fantastic features of this episode: the island, *la terre gaste*, the castle, and the cave.

At the very beginning, the reader is introduced to a very particular place: “L’illa del Lango.” As Francis Dubost suggests, the island itself has a supernatural connotation, to whom different reasons can be provided as explanations. From a geographical point of view, it is a *lieu marqué*. The islands one reads about, in chivalric novels, are closed and isolated places where the hero arrives, usually after a shipwreck, and finds himself estranged from his normal environment: the court. Since it is an unknown and mysterious space, the island evokes strong emotions: “L’île se charge alors spontanément de toutes les potentialités du symbolisme amniotique et des images affectives et mitiques liées au lieu circulaire et clos.”(Dubost 1991, 284)

History teaches that insular spaces, along with mountains, have always been more favourable to the survival and preservation of ethnic and cultural minority groups. As a consequence, the island becomes “un espace de rémanence où la présence de l’autrefois est encore sensible, à travers de certains vestiges matériels et spirituels.”(Ibid.) It can be associated to forgotten rites and rituals, to esoteric knowledge and to the hidden ancient beliefs which find a solitary place to survive. Because of its isolation and of its wild and deserted appearance, the island fits the legends, for it is a place particularly suitable for magic, spells and curses: it is free from the physical laws and boundaries of the daily universe.

The well-known motif of the *terre gaste* - typical of the Arthurian novel - ³ is closely related to the supernatural character of the island. In his analysis of *Le bel inconnu de Renaut de Beaujeu*, Philippe Walter shows that such a *topos* is connected to a series of other motifs from which it cannot be separated: “L’état calamiteux de la cité s’explique peut-être par une malédiction au

³ This motif can be found in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* and in Renaut de Beaujeu’s *Le bel inconnu*. For further explanations see Marx, Jean. 1974. *La légende arthurienne et le Graal*, Genève : Slatkine, 159-166.

caractère trifonctionnel: sujétion des habitants, stérilité de la terre, impuissance guerrière.” (Walter 1996, 270) In most cases, the disastrous and supernatural event is caused by a serious guilt, an act of arrogance, or a strong transgression which leads to the unfruitfulness of the entire place, presented in its most negative aspect.

When Espèrcius arrives to the shores of Lango, the old shepherd tells him that: “Aquella illa era encantada e deguna cosa no hi podia profiter.”(Martorell ed. 1969, vol. 2, 443) In the novel, the *gaste* island is depicted as a barren and dead land, inhabited by the poor and the exiles: “En total’illa no hi havia població sinó un petit casal en què estaven quatre casats qui per llur desventura eren venguts aquí habitar perquè eran estats exelats de l’illa de Rodes, e vivien aquí en molt gran misèria.”(Ibid.) Martorell underlines the fact that the people who live in Lango do not belong to the courtly society.

The third important subject, connected to the fantasy tradition and to the motif of the *Fier baiser*, is the castle, the most polyvalent and suitable place for the encounter between the knight and the Dragon Maiden. In his work dedicated to the *Art fantastique*, Marcel Brion theorizes that: “Château et forêt s’opposent ainsi, l’un signifiant sécurité, ordre humain, protection ; le formel contre l’informe, l’immuable contre le perpétuel mouvant.” (Brion 1961,10) He suggests that castles are safe and protected places, in contrast with the wild surroundings of the forest. Nevertheless Dubost denies his forerunner’s opinion and demonstrates that in reality a castle may be a “lieu d’épreuve périlleuses et horrifiantes.” (Dubost 1991, 352) The *Art fantastique* proves how the safest of the places, a shelter for the knights, a courtly and civilized environment has turned into a dangerous site full of fear and terror: “C’est précisément l’insertion du surnaturel dans le cadre d’une pratique relevant du réalisme social le mieux caractérisé, la pratique de l’hospitalité, qui confère à l’épisode du château sa dimension fantastique.”(Ibid.) The *castell antic* of Lango is situated on a high mountain, a *puig* that many knights before Espèrcius, tried to reach and never came back. Martorell’s theme of the dangerous castle can be found in many medieval novels: it often represents a place to be conquered or released, set in a very far location.

The last component, which helps creating the reader's suspense until the knight's trial, is the cave: Hipocràs' daughter lives in a very dark *cova* within the castle. The cave, which often hides an unusual and symbolic connotation, has always played a very important part in the myth of origins, rebirth and initiation in many cultures. As a mysterious anteroom of a subterranean world, it is a very common motif, particularly suitable for legends.

Several ceremonials of initiation begin with the passage through a cave: it represents the embodiment of the *regressus ad uterum* as specified by Mircea Eliade:

The theme of new birth is accompanied, and sometimes dominated, by the idea that, as an initiatory ordeal, it must involve the risk of death [...] For we find the initiatory pattern of the perilous return to the womb, in a number of myths of an initiatory traversal of a *vagina dentata*, or a perilous descent into a cave or crevasse assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother earth- a descent that brings the hero to the other world. (Eliade 1958, 52)

This kind of trial was already known in the Eleusinian ritual and in many other primordial rites of initiation.⁴

Espèrcius, shipwrecked on the shores of Lango, penetrates the bowel of the castle, into the *cova*, in order to achieve two purposes: to overcome the most difficult trial, the *Fier baiser*, traditionally reserved to heroes, and to complete his initiation thus fulfilling his destiny.

In general the space is a very important component within the fantastic narration; depending on its aim, it helps creating different expectation in the readers' mind. By using all this spatial elements, connected to the fantastic tradition, Martorell's main purpose could be to prepare the reader for the

⁴ During this mystical rebirth there was full correspondence between the symbolic logic and the factual acts of initiation: the initiates were chained in a deep cave from which they had to escape in order to reach the light. For a more detailed explanation see Lippolis, Enzo. 2006. *Mysteria, archeologia e culto del santuario di Demetra a Eleusi*, Milano: Mondadori.

supernatural adventure that the knight should accomplish. In fact it is necessary to remark the fact that the final trial will take place in a different world, completely dissociated from the reality in which the knight used to live.

Sources of Hipocràs' legend

During the Middle Ages Hipocràs' legend was a well-known story, since it was transmitted and, often idealized, in many narrations. The setting where the legend took place was codified in the tradition not as the island of Cos where the renowned Greek physician lived, but as the imaginary mystic space which gives birth to fantastic stories.

Martorell's main source seems to be the passage reported in the fourth chapter of Sir John Mandeville's *Le livre des merveilles du monde*, which was one of the most popular novel at the time, since it was translated and copied profusely. The section of Mandeville's text, which Martorell adapts in his novel, tells almost the same exact anecdote, except for a discrepancy in the final part of the episode. Hipocràs's daughter was transformed into a hundred-foot long dragon by the goddess Diana; she lived in an old and isolated castle and only emerged three times a year waiting for a knight's kiss to be freed. Mandeville interrupts the narration, leaving the reader without a proper conclusion: the story ends with a prophecy: "Mes quant y vendra un si hardiz qe l'ouse aler baiser il ne mora mie, mes convertera la demoisele en sa droite fourme et sera sires du païs." (Mandeville ed. 2000, 119) In *Le livre des merveilles du monde* the motif of the *Fier baiser* is just alluded, however Martorell decides to continue the story of the Dragon Maiden and the *Fier baiser* in order to give the episode a happy ending.

In his article "La Légende de la fille d'Hippocrate à Cos," Gédéon Huet suggests that, beside Mandeville's testimony, the story is mentioned in two Latin tales, written by two reliable witnesses: the Dominican Félix Faber and the Italian Cristoforo Buondelmonti. (Huet 1918, 45-59) He

concludes: “On peut supposer que le récit de Mandeville est pour le fond, la reproduction d’une tradition populaire authentique, dans laquelle Hippocrate ne figurait pas comme médecin, mais comme seigneur de Cos.”(Ibid.) Indeed it is possible that the legend was originally an independent tale, linked to the ruins of a building, which belonged to an unknown king of the island; subsequently this mysterious sovereign would be identified as Hipocràs, because of the physician’s great reputation which, in the popular memory, made him a legendary character, a prince and the king of the island.

Martorell, grounding on Mandeville’s narration, does not mention the reason why the goddess Diana turned Hipocràs’ daughter into a dragon: “E fon mudada de forma, d’una donzella noble e bella en aquella figura de drac, per una encantació d’una deessa qui havia nom Diana; e devia ésser desencantada e tornaria en sa pròpia figura e en son estament quan trobaria un cavaller tan animós que la gosàs anar a besar en la boca.”(Martorell ed. 1969, vol. 2, 444)

To find out the cause of the spell one must research other traditions; for example in his analysis of the Catalan version of the *Roman des Sept Sages*, Gaston Paris suggests that in this variant there is an original and unknown anecdote about Hipocràs, which was never found before. This testimony narrates how the physician, out of jealousy, killed his nephew and then, when old and weak, he repented of his cruel and ignoble action, since no one could take care of him any longer. This story deals also with Hipocràs’ wife who, in the attempt to poison her husband, unleashed his wrath and got killed by him before she could accomplish her plan. (Paris 1876, 12) The great guilt which affected Lango and made it a *terre gaste* could be well explained by this anecdote: perhaps Diana’s enchantment was meant to punish the physician for his barbarous actions.

Other testimonies of the legend can be found in the *Estoire del saint Graal*, although the motif of the *Fier baiser* is completely removed. Moreover in the introduction to the Renaut de Beaujeu’s *Le bel Inconnu*, Antonio Pioletti shows how this story was handed down, until the XVII

century, particularly giving testimonies of a Friulan miller, Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio who wrote the very same version of Mandeville's. (Pioletti ed. 1992, 8)

The Dragon Maiden

A woman turned into a dragon or into a serpentine creature against her will is a common topic for both literary and iconographical works, throughout the ages and the different literary trends. The character of the Dragon Maiden or *vuivre* is found in many texts, over a wide range of time periods, and in many cultures.

The first records date back to the Classical period: for instance Hesiod's *Theogony* gives us one of the first exemple: Echidna, half woman half snake, known as the Mother of Monsters in classical mythology.⁵ She lived in a hidden cave, isolated from the rest of the world:

And in a hollow cave she bare another monster, irresistible, in no wise like either to mortal men or to the undying gods, even the goddess fierce Echidna who is half a nymph with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half again a huge snake, great and awful, with speckled skin, eating raw flesh beneath the secret parts of the holy earth. And there she has a cave deep down under a hollow rock far from the deathless gods and mortal men. There, then, did the gods appoint her a glorious house to dwell in: and she keeps guard in Arima beneath the earth, grim Echidna, a nymph who dies not nor grows old all her days. (Hesiod ed. 1914, 101)

Such testimonies come in a large numbers, in ancient literature.

⁵ A full description of Echidna, as mythological character can be found in Cinti, Decio. 1998. *Dizionario mitologico: divinità pricipali della mitologia greco-romana e di altre mitologie* Milano: Sonzogno, I, 96.

In the medieval tradition the *vouivre* captures the imagination of many writers which develop her legend by adding many fantastic element, as the motif of the Perilous Kiss. The dragon maiden is always depicted as a mixture of female and draconic or serpentine animal parts; only small details such as eyes or lips reveal her humanity. Indeed she retains her human faculties, but she is stuck to an animal form, waiting to be freed. Stories of Dragon Maidens appeared here and there during the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, and even in Postmodern literature.

Since the *vouivre* is such a popular figure of myth and folklore, it is difficult to trace all the direct or alluded references pointing to her; this problem is further complicated by the different variants of oral traditions. Nevertheless one may find a constant pattern underlying all testimonies. The Dragon Maiden usually lives in a far isolated place: she is the guardian of great wealth in some hidden cave under a mysterious castle. After many men' attempt and failure to kiss her in order to break the spell, she waits for the *Fier baiser* of the bravest knight: the confrontation with her savior represents the turning point of the whole narration.

There is a long fantastic tradition dealing with the encounter between a human being and a supernatural creature and, as Laurence Harf- Lancner infers, it takes two opposite directions. The first one concerns *les contes mélusiniens* which “s'intéressent à la venue d'une fée parmi les mortels, à son union avec l'un d'entre eux, union rompue par la transgression d'un interdit, après la naissance d'un ou plusieurs enfants.”⁶ On the contrary in *les contes morganiens*: “le voyage se fait dans l'autre sens: au lieu de venir au devant de l'élue de son cœur, la fée l'entraîne dans son royaume, où elle tente de le retenir.”(Harf-Lancner 1984, 203)

One may consider the encounter between Espèrcius and the Dragon Maiden as a *conte morganiens* and, as Alvaro Barbieri, points out: “Il travestimento animalesco della fata è una manifestazione esteriore dell'irriducibile distanza che separa la creatura oltremondana dal suo amante mortale. Entro schemi narrativi di tipo melusiniano il fiero bacio può essere visto come attrazione della fata-bestia nelle forme e nelle modalità esistenziali della società umana.”(Barbieri

⁶ Within this branch of the tradition one may take into account all the variants of the Mélusine's legend.

2009, 94-95) It is clear that the boundary lines between the two traditions are very subtle and there can be much confusion tracing all the medieval records.

When taking into account the character of the Dragon Maiden, one observes the immediate and evident result of her own duplicity. According to Philippe Walter, the *vuivre* bears positive values, probably referring to the pre-Christian cultural system of the Indo-European world.(Walter 96, 240) In fact many cultures considered her a positive and good creature, but, at the same time some others saw it as the symbol of negativity or, in the worst cases, a tangible representation of pure evil. This is, in a general reading, the direct consequence of the Christianity's influence.⁷ The biblical tradition and the hagiographic literature show a marked hostility towards snakes and dragons. As Philippe walter suggests : “Le christianisme a évidemment combattu une figure comme la *vouivre* à laquelle les superstitions populaires reconnaissent pourtant bien des vertus mirifiques.”(Ibid.)

In Martorell's novel, even if the *vouivre* shows an evident ambiguity and looks like a “tan lleja e espantosa figura,” she bears the positive values of the pre-Christian snake: it embodies the forces of sexuality and love and, at the same time, brings consecration and prestige to her saver. When Espèrcius decides to undertake the *quête*, he is well aware of risks and consequences in case of failure, but: “volia experimentar aquesta ventura car, puix Nostre Senyor l'havia fet venir allí no sens causa, e d'altra part se veia desesperat com se trobava en aquella illa deserta e no tenia manera deguna de tornar a Tirant.”(Martorell ed. 1969 vol. 2, 445) He chooses to find the Dragon Maiden in order to disenchant her and get the sovereignty of her kingdom, without informing his *companyons* since the tradition requires that all heroes must face their final trial alone.

⁷ It is important to notice that the positive or negative aspect of the dragon-snake is often depicted in a vague and confused way, probably due to the Old Testament story. This is why, from a general point of view, it acquires a negative value.

The *Fier baiser*: sources and interpretations

The origin of the *Fier baiser* is subject matter of many researches; there is a copious and currently updating bibliography, because of the consistent presence of this motif in the different European literary cultures, both during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Gaston Paris is considered the pioneer researching the sources of such a *topos*; in particular he believed that the legend of Hipocràs' daughter, in Mandeville's novel, was the true origin of the *Fier baiser*. In his essay concerning Renaut de Beaujeu's *Le bel inconnu*, he suggests that the Perilous Kiss hides an Oriental, maybe Byzantine, source – because of the setting in the island of Cos – and subsequently “a pénétré dans les contes celtiques, mais, comme bien d'autre éléments de ces contes, elle n'est pas d'invention celtique et provient d'une source étrangère.” (Paris 1886, 17)

Starting with Shofield's studies one may find many theories in clear opposition to Paris' idea, which show how the variants of the motif came directly from the local folklore. (Shofield 1895, 199-208)

Roger Sherman Loomis demonstrates that the real source must be found in the Irish mythology, introducing two Celtic related testimonies supporting his theories. (Loomis 1941, 104-113) These legends represent the original motif of the kiss to Sovereignty, which gave birth to all the variants of the *Fier baiser*.

The first one is a poem written in the XI century and tells the story of Niall, the youngest son of the King of Ireland: King Eochaid Mugmedón had four sons by Queen Mongfind and from a captive another son, Niall who was brought up at distance. When he was nine years old, he came back to his father and, one day he went hunting with his brothers. While they were looking for some water, they found a source, guarded by a dreadful hag who demanded a kiss in return for some water. The brothers refused to kiss her, but Niall accepted the woman's request and straightway she turned into a beautiful lady who ensured the prince's offspring the predominance over all the other clans of Ireland.

Another version of the legend tells a similar story. The king of Ireland, Daire, because of a prophecy revealing that a son of his, named Lughaid, should rule Ireland, named all his six sons Lughaid. He asked his druid which son should be king and the druid replied that whoever managed to capture a golden fawn should rule. When the fawn appeared the six brothers pursued it and the youngest caught it. They found themselves lost in a magic mist and snowstorm then, suddenly, they saw a great house with a very rich feast and a dreadful hag. She said she would grant them food after sleeping with her. Only Lughaid Laighe accepted and forthwith she turned into a beautiful lady; she declared to be the Royalty and gave him the sovereignty of Ireland.⁸(Brown 1943, 210-213)

By kissing the fearful hag, the protagonists release the allegorical character of the Sovereignty, trapped into a weak human body.

In his studies about the motif, Alvaro Barbieri includes a further connection: “La forma primitiva dell’avventura va riconosciuta nel mito del dio solare Lug che abbraccia la terra d’Irlanda avvizzita e infeconda per il freddo invernale, rendendola d’incanto ridente e fiorita. Questa unione cosmica del dio Sole con la madre Terra avrebbe poi fornito il modello alle nozze del re d’Irlanda con la Signora del Dominio.”(Barbieri 2009, 78)

Loomis’ theories have been commonly accepted and supported by many studies and researches: the origin of the motif, developed more than ever in the *matière de Bretagne*, goes back to the Celtic mythology from which it draws its main elements and finds its sense and coherence before being used as a literary device.⁹

⁸ For more detailed information about Celtic mythology see also De Vries, Jan. 1963. *La religion des Celtes*. Translated by Laurent Jospin, Paris: Payot, 250.

⁹ There are other important studies dealing with the motif of the *Fier baiser* and the Dragon Maiden’s transformation, among which one may quote: Kentish Coomaraswamy, Ananda. 1945. “On the loathly bride,” *Speculum*, 20: 391-404; Donà, Carlo. 2003. *Per le vie dell’altro mondo. L’animale guida e il mito del viaggio*, Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro): Rubbettino: 415-512; Donà, Carlo. 2009. “La metamorfosi segreta: dalla donna serpente alla puella venerata,” in *La metamorfosi*, edited by Francesco Zambon, 47-79. Milano : Medusa; Walter, Philippe. 1996. *Le Bel inconnu de Renaut de Beaujeu* Paris : Presses universitaires de France; Ferlampin-Acher, Christine, and Monique Léonard. 1996. *La fée et*

Over the centuries the motif of the Perilous Kiss has kept its primordial overtone of the kiss to the Sovereignty; however the story experienced some important changes, especially regarding the lady's appearance. At first depicted as an ugly old sorceress, she becomes a hybrid creature, with animal features eventually. The topic of lady's transformation into an animal can be found in almost all the variants of the original legend, which alternate both the draconic and the serpentine form.¹⁰

In his studies concerning the Indo-European and esoteric source of the Graal legend, Jean-Claude Lozachmeur shows the filiation of the Perilous Kiss with some rituals of initiation performed by the Ophites' Gnostic sect. Kissing a snake's mouth was a way to prove the neophyte's courage and ability, taking on the object of his *quête*: the true knowledge in his least tempting aspect. (Lozachmeur 1987, 45-63) This original meaning underlies all the variants of the motif which can be found both in popular tales and narrations within the European literary tradition; in fact as Mircea Eliade suggests: "All form of initiation of initiation, even the most elementary, involve the revelation of a secret and sacred knowledge. Some people call their initiates the 'knowing ones'." (Eliade 1958, 37)

Tirant and other traditions of the Fier baiser

As mentioned before the *Fier baiser* and the *guivre* represent two recurring and related motifs of the European folklore. In particular they appear in a quite consistent *corpus* of medieval texts. Besides the *Livre de merveilles du monde* and *Tirant lo Blanc*, the most renowned testimonies

la Guivre : Le bel inconnu de Renaut de Beaujeu, approche littéraire et concordancier (vv. 1237-3252), Paris : Champion; Lecouteux, Claude. 1982. *Mélusine et le chevalier au cygne*, Paris : Payot.

¹⁰ It is interesting to mention that the transformation motif is found virtually untouched in the English, hag-visiting, and Perceval tales. The concept of "Sovereignty of the land" is transformed into "Sovereignty over a husband" as one observes in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, and in the *Weddyng of sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*.

can be found in the novel of Renaut de Beaujeu's *Le Biaus Desconneüs* and its Anglo-German translations.¹¹ Another short version of the Fair Unknown, *I Cantari di Carduino*, was written in Italian, at the end of the XIV century and is attributed to Antonio Pucci. Some other testimonies of the Perilous Kiss can be found in Ulrich Von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet* and Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*.

One may quote another interesting text belonging to this *corpus*, *Le Roman de Belris*, a Franco-Venetian version of the Renaut de Beaujeu's *Bel inconnu*, which goes back to the second half of the XIV century. Unlike the other variants *Le Roman de Belris* adds an original element to the episode of the *Fier baiser*: the presence of a big lion attacking the Dragon Maiden. According to Jacques Monfrin: "On ne voit pas clairement quel rôle joue ce lion; il semble seulement être un moyen utilisé par l'enchanteur pour empêcher l'accomplissement du *Fier baiser*." (Monfrin 1989, 170-171)

Moreover there are many ballads belonging to the Anglo-German tradition which deal with the Dragon Maiden's story and the episode of the *Fier baiser*.¹²

When comparing all these examples, it emerges that they follow the same essential pattern and they share the main elements typical of the motif. It is interesting to notice though that they differ in some particular details.

Martorell's version of the episode presents some aspects that are not mentioned in his primary source. In fact it is possible that he knew some of such variants of the tradition; at least, as

¹¹ The anonymous Middle English version of *Le bel inconnu* entitled *Lybeaus Desconus* does not present any significant change since it represents a mere translation of Renaut de Beaujeu's novel; the German variant is entitled *Wigalois* and was written by Wirnt von Grafenberg in 1210.

¹² In particular Shofield observes that the motif of the *Fier baiser* can be found in many medieval ballads. He collects thirty-four instances, belonging to the English and German traditions. Many of these ballads can be found in Francis James Child's collection and in Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Märchen*. The main problem relies on the fact that most of these texts lie in some collections of the XVIII-XIX century, without any reference to medieval manuscripts and, as a consequence it is difficult to prove their verification.

M. de Riquer suggests: “Cabe la posibilidad de que Martorell conociera *Li Biaus Desconneüs*, o algunas de sus prosificaciones francesas, o incluso el poema inglés del mismo título, donde también la serpiente se adelanta a besar su libertador.”(Riquer 1992, 189-190)

The references to *Li Biaus Desconneüs* are quite consistent since it is one of the first medieval examples relating the Perilous Kiss episode. The story borrows some familiar elements from other Arthurian tales, most notably those of Chrétien de Troyes. The protagonist, named *Le bel inconnu*, must accomplish his final trial in order to find his own identity and find a place at King Arthur’s court. The *vouivre* lives in a besieged castle, swarming with monsters and enchanters; when he arrives and come across her, he shows some concerns and does not know how to react. Eventually the Dragon Maiden kisses him, retreats back into the cupboard she came from and meets the knight again in human form the next day. The lady, Blonde Esmerée, is extremely grateful and offers the knight her hand in marriage.

When Espèrcius arrives at the castle he:“entrà dans la cova tant com la claror li durà; e aquí ell llança un gran crit perquè lo drac l’oís. Com lo drac sentí la veu de l’home ixqué ab molt gran brogit. Lo cavallere, qui sentí la gran remor que lo drac portava, hagué grandíssima temor, e agenollà’s en terra dient moltes bones oraciones.”(Martorell ed. 1969, vol. 2, 446) The loud noise coming along with the Dragon Maiden is a clear reference to *Li Biaus Desconneüs*:

Cascuns enpait par tel vigor
Sa fenestre, quant il s’en part,
Que li palais tos en tresart.
Si durement batent et hurtent
Que tot li uis qui laiens furent
Qu’a poi qu’il n’abatent la sale
De la noise hidouse et male.

(De Beaujeu ed. 1929, 94)

The legendary encounter between the Dragon Maiden and the brave knight generates two different reactions in this last one's behaviour. The tradition splits into two directions: on one hand at the moment of the *Fier baiser* it is the creature who kisses the knight, taking advantage of his great hesitation, as in *Tirant, Li Biaus Desconneüs* and its translations. On the contrary, in the other tradition, it is the knight who takes the initiative and kisses the Dragon Maiden as in *Carduino*, *Orlando innamorato* and the German version of *Lancelot*.

One further observation must be made: before finding the Dragon Maiden, Espèrcius, is told by the shepherd about Hipocràs daughter's enchantment. However, at the moment of the trial, he hangs back and cannot kiss the creature. The *vouivre*, taking advantage of the knight's hesitation decides to kiss him: "E lo drac qué veu que l'home no es movia, anse stava esperant, molt gentilment e suau s'acostà a ell e besà l'en la boca; e lo cavaller caigué en terra esmortit." (Martorell ed. 1969, vol 2, 446)

One may notice some comic aspects which cannot be found in others traditions: the reader does not expect such a reaction from a hero who should be brave and fearless. Some critics suggest that this specific moment of the Perilous kiss could be seen as a parody.¹³ Yet the scene fits perfectly within the traditional folkloric pattern of the *Fier baiser*: the knight's fainting represents the initiation death which leads to the rebirth, the ultimate trial and the subsequent victory.

In *Le bel inconnu* the protagonist is not warned about the spell, so it makes perfectly sense that he hesitated and cannot kiss the Dragon Maiden.

In the second tradition the reaction in the hero's attitude when facing the Dragon Maiden is quite different. In *I Cantari di Carduino*, for example, the protagonist Carduino is a young brave knight who is told by a dwarf that a mysterious lady was turned into a terrible serpent and needed to

¹³ Regarding the controversy on the parodic side of this episode see Cacho Blecua, Juan Manuel. 1993. "El beso en el Tirant lo Blanch" in *Homenaje al profesor José Fradejas Lebrero*, edited by Romera Castillo, José, Freire López Ana and Lorente Medina, Antonio, I, 57. Madrid: UNED; and Siviero, Donatella. 1997. *Tirant lo Blanch e la tradizione medievale. Echi testualie modelli generici*, Soveria mannelli(Catanzaro): Rubbettino,190-191.

be freed, so he decides to undertake the *quête*. Unlike the other heroes of the literary tradition, he step forward and kisses the dragon turns into a beautiful lady, Beatrice. In return for her disenchantment he receives her hand and the sovereignty of her kingdom.

63.

Ma pur del suo caval(l) fu di smontato
E ricordossi del detto del nano
E colla ispada i'mano ne fue andato
Presso ala serpe il cavalier sovrano.
Nella man destra il brando è inpugnato:
La serpe istava allora umile e piano:
E Carduino la baciava in bocca:
Odi quie chenn'avien com'è la tocca.

64.

De! Odi quie una nuova novella:
Chè come quella serpe fu baciata
Ella si diventò una donzella
Legiadra e adorna e tutta angelicata;
E draghi e leoni e serpenti
Diventar come prima, ch'eran gienti.

(*I cantari di Carduino* ed. 1968, 41)

Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* represents another version belonging to the second tradition., particularly concerning the story of the knight Brandimarte. who is encouraged by a lady trapped in a palace to open a sepulcher, from which a huge dragon rises up. The damsel tells him

not to kill the dragon, but to kiss it. After much debate Brandimarte decides to kiss the creature that immediately turns into a beautiful fairy who gives the hero many gifts for his courage.¹⁴

Si come l'ebbe alla bocca baciata,
Proprio gli parve de toccare un giaccio;
La serpe, a poco a poco tramutata,
Divenne una donzella in breve spaccio.
Questa era Febosilla, quella fata
Che dificato avea l'alto palaccio
E il bel giardino e quella sepoltura
Ove un gran tempo è stata in pena dura.

(Boiardo ed. 1995, II, 978, XXVI)

The last testimony belonging to the second tradition is Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet*, a Middle-High German poem. In short the story follows the adventures of Lancelot, from his upbringing by the lady of the lake, to the quest in order to find his own identity as a King Arthur's knight. Lanzelet is told by his lady, Yblis, that Roidurant, a brave knight, met a speaking serpent in the woods who begged him for a kiss. The knight and all the men who found the serpent fled in fear. Yet Lanzelet decides to undertake the quest and find the creature; the particularity of this version relies on the fact that the serpent speaks directly to Lanzelet, convincing him to kiss her:

¹⁴ It is important to mention two important essays concerning the Italian tradition of the *Fier baiser*: Bart, A. Rossebastiano. 1982. "Alle fonti del Boiardo: il *fier baiser* nell'*Orlando Innamorato*," *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 25: 19-23; Bregoli-Russo, Mauda. 1981. "Un riscontro francese nell'*Orlando innamorato* del Boiardo (*il Fier baiser*)" *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 23: 97-105.

Lanzelet spoke: “Now tell me, whence came your human voice? Never in all my travels on water or on land I encountered a creature so fierce or so terrifying. If I should not incur everlasting shame by doing so, I should be glad to keep away from you.”

“No, no, hero, do not do that!” said the great dragon. “God has created people and lands through many a miracle, conceived of them with his mysterious power. I am one of those things. If only there now lived a knight who would kiss me on the mouth! Then I should be beautiful and instantly made whole again. But up till now I have never been able to persuade anyone; all who have ever seen me have fled most discourteously. Yet if a knight were willing to make haste and kiss me, he would better himself by it; for he who is destined for the deed is- without any perfidious deceit- the best knight now alive. No matter how much you desire to flee this place, someone will relieve me of my torment, and so I beg you, noble warrior, do it for the sake of Almighty God! Release me! This is no jest on my part, for I will entreat you again by the honor of all ladies, delay no longer and kiss me!”

Then Lanzelet said, “I will do it, no matter what happens afterward.” He dismounted onto the ground and kisses the most hideous mouth that he had ever heard of till now. (Von Zatzikhoven ed. 2005, 117)

All the versions both of the first and the second tradition share the same epilogue: the knight succeeds in his trial and the lady offers him a kingdom to rule. Most of the texts also end with the marriage of the knight with the lady. However there are some discrepancies concerning the disenchantment times of the *vouivre*.

In *Tirant*, the Dragon Maiden, after kissing Espèrcius, turns into a “bellíssima donzella” who tries to wake the knight up for more than an hour:

E lo cavaller Espèrcius estec per espai d’una hora esmortit e for a de tot record. E la gentil dama, incessantment fregant-li polsos e besant-lo per fer-lo retornar. Aprés passada l’hora, ell cobrà l’esperit e obrí los ulls e véu la donzella de tan grandíssima bellea, qui el besava molt sovint, pres molt gran esforç en si e dreçà’s, e ab esforçada veu dix paraules de semblant estil.(Martorell ed. 1969, vol. 2, 446)

Eventually he opens his eyes and the lady leads him to a “bellíssima cambra” within the cave, full of treasures; she offers him all the wealth along with her hand. The description of the scene

is quite hilarious as the author wants to show the weak side of the protagonist, in contrast with the typical hero tradition.

In *Le bel inconnu* the moment of the disenchantment is completely different. After the *Fier baiser* the *vouivre* retreats and leaves the knight alone:

Ensi s'en est la guivre alee,

En l'armaire s'en est rentree,

Et l'aumaires après reclot.

(De Beaujeu ed. 1929, 98)

It is just in the morning after that the knight's real identity is revealed by a beautiful lady who, turns out to be the disenchanted dragon maiden.

It is quite possible that Martorell drew from other versions of the story, as mentioned before, or perhaps it he drew directly from the King of Ireland's original legends.

Besides these discrepancies among the selected versions of the story, one may notice that the *topos* of the *Fier baiser* is a clear transposition of the original Celtic motif of the Kiss to the Sovereignty.

In addition one observes that it hides a deeper overtone, as it encloses a strong sexual connotation. According to Walter: "La valeur proprement érotique de l'épisode du *Fier baiser* ne peut être négligé. Elle découle directement de l'adaptation courtoise que subit ici le vieux mythe celtique où le baiser est investi d'une valeur rituelle et sacrée." (Walter 1996, 271)

The monstrous creature embodies a Sovereignty in chains, presented in its worst aspect, waiting for a brave savior to be freed, in order to reestablish her once lost prestige. She also takes on a crucial role for the knight's initiation and his subsequent sexual maturity. In Martorell's novel this aspect is underlined by the fact that the protagonists' sexual experience is openly described: "E sens no voler perdre temps en paraules, pres-la en braços e posà-la sobre la llit, e aquí coneguerenlos últims termes dels senyals d'amor." (Martorell ed. 1969, vol. 2, 448)

At the end of the episode one may find the typical fairy tales conclusion: “E vixqué aquest cavaller Espèrcius, ab la sua senyora, per llong temps senyors de l’illa e d’algunes altres entorn. E hagueren fils e filles que heretaren après ells e vixqueren pròsperament e quieta”(Ibid., 449)

Martorell closes this way the knight Espèrcius’ fairy tale, within the realistic narration of Tyrant’s cycle of adventures. This episode represents a very small break from the predominant realism of the novel, since in these chapters magic and fantasy take over the reality. Perhaps the author’s intention is placing the reader in a fantastic world and giving him the possibility to part from what he knows and expect in order to live, with Espèrcius, an unpredictable experience. Eventually the reader is forced to come back to Tyrant’s reality and his journey towards Constantinople.

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