

BOOK REVIEWS

Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (2003). *Erec y Enide*. Ed. Debolsillo: Barcelona. 253 pages (in Spanish)

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reviewed by Fiona Taler (Flinders University)

This review is offered in memory of don Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, who died tragically in Bangkok on 17 October 2003 on his return home after a lecture tour of Australia and New Zealand. His kindness, intelligence and ever present humour during his visit to Flinders University are fondly remembered.

The use of myth to illustrate the malaise of present day society is neither new nor original in contemporary literature, but it is not often attended by analysis of such scholarly splendour as it is within this text. Vázquez Montalbán's novel *Erec y Enide* is named after the work of the same name by Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 1175), in which the adventures of Geraint (Erec) are narrated as he drives his unfortunate wife, Enid (Enide) through innumerable dangers in order to prove his love for her as well as his valour as a knight of Arthur's round table. In Vázquez Montalbán's novel, Chrétien's text is the most elaborately worked, but it is not the only Arthurian myth represented. The novel draws upon the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, the philosophy of Percival and, insistently, the forbidden love between Tristan and Iseult, in order to illustrate the inevitable and complete isolation of the individual within what one would normally consider a well integrated society. Thus, upon reflecting on the Arthurian world through the rich pages of *Erec y Enide*, one is made aware of the futility of knightly endeavour and, by analogy, of the futility of endeavour in the contemporary world. The courage displayed by Erec as he saves his wife from frequent danger, which is so entrancingly narrated by Chrétien, is paralleled by the attempts of two of Vázquez Montalbán's characters to give medical help in war-torn Guatemala, with an equally fruitless outcome. Other Arthurian myths are shown to be as applicable in conception today as they were in mediaeval Europe, notably issues such as the base betrayal of the concept of courtly love in the guilt ridden relationships between those notorious couples, Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Iseult. All of the characters in *Erec y Enide* are searching for a way out of their isolation but are unable to see that this can only be achieved by working together on their relationships with a daily sharing of experience. It is not gratuitous that in the novel the lonely and mostly fruitless search for the Holy Grail on the part of the knights, especially Sir Percival, is mentioned with insistence.

Erec y Enide is set in contemporary Spain and tells three different tales, all of them inextricably intertwined and each one illustrating some aspect of Arthurian myth. The first and perhaps guiding story relates to the illustrious academic and Arthurian specialist, Julio Matasanz. He is at the end of his career and has gone to Galicia to receive homage in a ceremony to mark the achievements of his life's work. The ceremony is attended by all the important medievalists in Europe and the United States as well as Spanish political, academic and social personalities, who have come to hear him deliver a lecture which will be the culmination of his work and he has chosen one entitled 'The mythical transubstantiation of Erec and Enide'. We meet him as he awaits the arrival of his admirers and through his stream of consciousness we are made aware of the situation. The highly erudite reflections on the part of this character regarding academic matters, clearly demonstrates the erudition of the author, who in fact, was a scholar in mediaeval literature. However, in addition to the scholarly reflections, we are treated to the entire text of the proposed lecture, in which the relevance of the myths to the present day is highlighted, with the added comment that the myths can be variously interpreted and applied according to the circumstances of those involved in studying them at the time. Yet, before the reader's admiration for this great scholar is allowed to grow too much, his thoughts are interspersed with asides and one becomes painfully aware that next to all the erudition there is a more pressing issue. Julio is impatiently expecting the arrival of Myrna *War Breast*, the voluptuous British mediaevalist with whom he has been sleeping for many years. They are both growing older (he must call upon the help of a dose of Viagra that very same night) but their passion is, at least from his point of view, still vibrant. We are not privy to the opinions of Myrna herself. Julio proceeds to pepper his scholarly reflections with reminiscences of his many sexual encounters, including some with his own students. His detachment and lack of engagement with these women recalls the cool behaviour in love displayed by some of Arthur's knights as they kept their minds on their guiding lady. This lady did not always have to be the wife and Julio's off-hand dismissal of his relationship with his wife, Madrona, is very revealing.

Julio's reflections give context to the other two story-lines in the novel and are an ironic precognition of the ultimate fate of the characters. Madrona, Julio's wife is discovered in chapter two, as she punishes her anorexic body at the gym. Born into a rich Catalan family belonging to the high society of Barcelona, she has had the typical upbringing of women of her class. Aspiring to intellectual refinement, she has been allowed merely to touch the surface of erudition but not to acquire the deep knowledge that would put her on the brink of having a profession and a job. This would make her less attractive on the marriage market. Madrona's stream of consciousness fills in the gaps left by Julio on the subject of their marriage and the almost total alienation they suffer within it. His good looks and brilliant intellect were what attracted her to him even though he was of immigrant, working-class stock. His family would have belonged to the wave of poor immigrants who came to Barcelona from the south in search of work and a better life. He overcame his class disadvantages and made a life for himself through academic brilliance. Ironically, he learned Catalan and speaks it better than his Catalan wife. The upper classes in Barcelona prefer to speak Castilian among themselves rather than their own tongue. Madrona reflects on the alienation she endures from her husband and, aware of his many affairs, she is driven to exact vengeance in a vicious cult to her body, which she drives to near annihilation at the gym and to a love affair which is so

loveless it is closer to a rape. The theme of infidelity, found in the stories of Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Iseult, appears not only in the case of Madrona and Julio but in a subplot in which she becomes embroiled when she befriends a woman at the gym. This story affects Madrona directly as it involves one of her brothers-in-law and serves to illustrate the sordid nature of adultery. Yet in Arthurian myth as studied and researched by Julio, adultery is exalted and revered as characterising the hopeless and overwhelming love felt by Guinevere and Lancelot or Iseult and Tristan for each other. In the legends it is accepted that adulterous love is wrong, but in spite of that it is beautiful, inevitable, inspiring and, above all, tragic. In the stark reality of the present day it is nothing more than sordid.

Madrona, as King Arthur before her, aware of the infidelity turns her attention to her other duties. Arthur has his knights and Madrona her widespread and conflictive family and the preparations for the coming Christmas celebrations. Her ambition is to have them all together in her country house, aptly called '*La Alegría de la Corte*' (The Joy of Court), for a family Christmas, even though tensions and alienation between family members will make the gathering stressful. Someone she is particularly keen to bring home is her adopted son Pedro, who is working in Guatemala as a doctor with the organisation Médécins sans Frontières.

Pedro and his girlfriend, Myriam, act out the myth of Erec and Enide. This story, which engages the academic concerns of Pedro's father as he prepares to give his lecture, is central to the plot and draws all the strands of the story together into a cohesive whole. The area of Guatemala in which they find themselves is one of conflict and civil war, and the doctors of their organisation are the object of assassination attempts at the hands of the authorities and their allied paramilitary groups. In a trajectory obviously intended to recall that of the mythical protagonists, Pedro and Myriam avoid close calls on their lives and engage in terrifying adventures. Pedro has gone there following the lead of the adventurous Myriam, and seems engaged in proving his love and regard for her, just as Erec had done for Enide. In this violent adventure Pedro and Myriam are engaged in resolving the difficulties within their relationship just as their predecessors had done and in effect achieve similar results. One interesting aspect of this part of the novel, related in third person narrative in contrast to the first person of the other two, is that the violent tropical forest in which they find themselves has an air of unreality and a mythical quality not found in the sections set in Galicia and Barcelona. One could speculate that, being a Spaniard, Vázquez Montalbán might not be familiar with the realities of Central America and might fail to bring a sense of authenticity to the scenes set in the area. However, Vázquez Montalbán had experienced that part of the world in a recent visit to the rebellious indigenous people of Chiapas in Mexico, the heroic Zapatista Army of National Liberation. The realities of Chiapas, so close to Guatemala, would be well known to him. One could conclude then, that he intentionally gave that part of the novel an atmosphere of myth in order to bring home to the reader the connection between the speculations of the father and the adventures of the son.

On the whole, this novel is a challenging and an exciting read. Vázquez Montalbán has provided a book whose erudition is there for the reader who wants to take a deeper look at Arthurian scholarship and its relevance to the modern age. On the other hand, someone hoping to understand some of the malaise of contemporary society would be able to identify with the postmodern preoccupations of the protagonists as they

struggle to reconcile themselves to the world that surrounds them and to their isolation within it. One is reminded of the search for the Holy Grail which so fruitlessly engaged so many of King Arthur's knights, and perhaps Percival most specifically. It is advisable, when beginning to read this novel, to have at one's elbow a copy of Chrétien de Troyes for reference and any other book on Arthurian legend. There is no doubt that you will have an overwhelming desire to refer to them before you have read many pages.

This novel is also recommended for the reader who is looking for entertainment. The story is told in an exciting narrative with some events of unbearable suspense heightened by the interruption of philosophical musings that are always interesting and accessible. True to the standard that he set throughout his long career, the author engages the reader irresistibly with his flowing writing style and an ever present humour.

The only regrettable point is that this excellent story has not yet been translated into English; a fault that one can only hope will soon be remedied.