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ÀNGEL GUIMERÀ

# ROYAL HONOUR

*Introduction by Mariano Martín Rodríguez and translation by Sara Martín*

Today, Àngel Guimerà (1845-1924) is remembered above all for his rural dramas. Among them, *Terra baixa* (*Marta of the Lowlands*, 1896) was a very popular play, later converted into the German opera *Tiefland* (1896) by composer Eugen d'Albert (1864-1932) and filmed a few times, once by none other than Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003) under the German title of the opera. In Catalan, it is an indisputable literary and theatrical classic. This success, as well as the large and widely successful dramatic output by Guimerà, has made many readers, and even scholars, forget that he was also a significant epic poet. In fact, he had become first renown in Catalan circles for his short narrative poems set in different historical places and periods. For instance, he

devoted poems to legendary historical figures such as queen “Cleopatra” (1876), Hebrew ancient hero “Jael” (1887) and the Iberian chieftains fighting against the conquest of their lands by Rome “Indibil i Mandoni” (Indibil and Mandoni, 1875), to name but a few. All these poems, as well as the one devoted to the apocalyptic legend of “L’any mil” (Year 1000, 1877), are significant pieces of nineteenth century epic poetry. All of them were all compiled by the author in 1887 in his volume of *Poesias*<sup>1</sup> (Poems), along with other more original poems regarding their subject. Indeed, Guimerà did not limit his poetic muse to heroic visions of ancient history. He was also a pioneer in his language of what later came to be known as high fantasy.

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<sup>1</sup> The original title is in Castilian. In Catalan, it would rather be *Poesies*.

If we understand high fantasy as the sort of fiction set in a legendary-looking secondary world subcreated along the lines proposed, among others, by J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), Guimerà's short narrative poem from *Poesias* titled "L'honor real" (*Royal Honour*)<sup>2</sup> would fit in, albeit it lacks the supernatural features that are popularly considered proper to that genre. These features are not essential to it, though. Some high fantasy classics such as *Tales of Nevèrjón* (1978) by Samuel R. Delany also lack them.<sup>3</sup> In "L'honor real" the supernatural is, in fact, almost completely absent, except perhaps the quick allusion to some mysterious islands from where the king of Hiriot and his wife return to their court. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the generic classification of the poem in high fantasy, in which the marvellous and the supernatural are not always manifest, provided that the story takes place in an imaginary civilisation not to be mistaken for any other having historically or mythically existed in our primary world.

Hiriot is an Oriental-looking, but fully invented kingdom, including with regard to cultural traits as substantial as its (pagan) religion. Despite this fact, the behaviour of the king, the poem's main character, could be related to some historical cultures in which man's honour and woman's virtue were not considered independent from each other. It was the case, for instant, in Spain if we are to believe the apparent stances taken by Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681) and his contemporaries, as well as modern recent popular playwrights such as José Echegaray (1832-1916). Similar stances can be seen

today in some Oriental cultures where honour crimes still seem to be the social norm. However, Guimerà does not target a particular civilisation. Orientalism is limited in his poem by the very fact of featuring an invented country and, therefore, eliminating unwanted cultural connotations. The heinous crimes perpetrated by the king of Hiriot in order to save his social reputation are not the result of a specific social code of conduct, but they respond to a general notion of masculine honour as depending on the exclusive possession and mastery of woman's body and sexuality. If this possession is threatened, violence had to be the answer. Otherwise, honour would be lost, and with the legitimacy of the power of the dominant male, in this case the king of Hiriot. Whoever boasts of having slept with his queen and then dares to publicly proclaim it has called into question the monarch's patriarchal supremacy. His reaction illustrates the antihuman extremes to which such idea of masculine honour can bring about. Guimerà does not comment upon those crimes, but his story suggests that he did not endorse them. An idea of honour supporting the killing of innocent people to hide marital shame is so obviously unethical that authorial comments upon the matter are unnecessary in this narrative. Its objective tone precludes any blatant moralism and didacticism. Facts speak for themselves. Readers are tacitly invited to draw their own conclusions from this powerful written poem, here adroitly translated into English with the intent of keeping as much as possible its masterful rhythm and the beauty of its language.

<sup>2</sup> The translation is based on the following edition: Àngel Guimerà, "L'honor real", *Poesia completa*, edició de Blanca Llum Vidal, Barcelona, Edicions de 1984, 2010, pp. 214-216.

<sup>3</sup> There are dragons in this book, but their description virtually excludes the supernatural. They are just animals with plausible biological features. The same could be said of George R. R. Martin's dragons in his pseudohistory *Fire & Blood* (2018). However, the fact that the subcreation of fully invented legendary civilisations not derogating from known natural laws is more common, for example, in French literature than in English language ones might be one of the reasons for Anglophone scholars in the field to usually ignore this fact.

# ROYAL HONOUR

The King of Hirirot and his arrogant wife  
Two days have been enclosed by sea and sky:  
Pilgrims, they approach from an eerie island  
Sailing against the wind back home.

Alone in their chamber for pleasure built  
On leopard furs together they sleep;  
Outside the south-west wind roars,  
And the rhythmic oars beat the water.

The white Queen has Moorish hair,  
Her breasts are pert like closed lilies;  
He, copper-coloured, by her side  
Looks like her body's giant shade.

When the King stirs with the dawn  
His Queen he wakes up alarmed:  
On the wall of the carved chamber  
These infamous words have been penned:

“Your wife, oh King, this perjurious night  
Over your breast has enjoyed love;  
Tomorrow Earth will know my pleasure;  
Today only I do. Farewell, Sir.”

Smiling all pleased, half asleep,  
The wife raises her eyelids,  
When, reading his face, screaming and pale  
From her husband arms slides.

—Forgive me! Forgive me!—without looking  
at her ]

He walks away with horrid laughter:  
With quiet step and still laughing  
He treads the deck serene.

The sailors keep noisily busy;  
Their captains play dice in a circle:  
The free men watching are humbled,  
The slaves kiss the rugs.

—I don't know who robs me of my luck,  
But he needs to die!—the king of Hirirot hums;  
And sailors and captains at his command  
Enter the darkened cabin.

They hang the oars in the sleepy water;  
Neither the horn nor the helm make a sound;  
The ship stops like one who is dead;  
None is left of the whole crowd.

Only a strangely clad eunuch,  
Of thick dark lips, squashed nose,  
Obeying his master, stops nearby  
Gently rocking his giant's body.

—I don't know who has turned off my sun,  
But I feel him down here, below my feet!...  
Yet—says the King— to wipe out his trace  
I have all the water in this sea—.

And at his command the mute slave steps up,  
And after closing the cabin's door,  
He locks it and throws the key in the sea  
Facing the King with an idiot's regard.

A boat rocks gently in the water;  
Both men together keep silent,  
And with the ship's axes break the bow,  
Through which the seawater tumbles down.

The wood creaks, all along; the keel is seen;  
In her belly a deep rumour sounds,  
And the King, much quiet, his back turned  
Watches his wild servant row.

The ship is sunk. The coast is close.  
The King gives another command, with his  
straight arm: ]  
Livid the slave has become, and in reply  
Plunges into the abyss: he's understood well.

Yet the King feels a chill, as his arm is caught  
In the boat with a firm tie;  
And with the whistling axe in anger he cuts it  
And the body sinks, and the arm behind it.

It was a splendid Spring's day  
When above the wave the wind carried  
The criminal boat to the shore,  
And the servants yell—All hail the King! —.

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The quiet sea was the King's accessory,  
Telling none on the ground about the offence.  
Everyone died, but God be praised!  
The monarch's holy honour is saved.