

THE LEGEND OF COUNT ARNAU: FROM OLD CATALONIA TO MALLORCA



SANT JOAN DE LES ABADESSES



GOMBRÈN

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THE LEGEND OF COUNT ARNAU MUST HAVE ORIGINATED IN THE CATALAN PYRENEES, IN THE LANDS OF OLD CATALONIA. THERE, AT A DATE IT IS DIFFICULT TO BE SURE OF, THE SEED OF THIS FIGURE SPROUTED, A FIGURE DESCRIBED IN TWO EXAMPLES OF THE ORAL TRADITION OF LITERATURE: A SONG AND A LEGEND.

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The song doesn't seem to have arisen as a result of any particular historical events, or in hatred or praise of a real person. In 1948, Josep Romeu i Figueras established two possible geographical origins for the song: the towns of Gombren and Ripoll. The oldest versions can be found in Gombren, a village in which there was a very deep-rooted tradition referring to Count Arnau. In Ripoll, on the other hand, we can find all the different versions, the oldest and the later creations. Eventually, our expert set the origin of the song in Ripoll –almost certainly at

the end of sixteenth century– and that of the legend in Gombren.

The song of Count Arnau is a ballad: a long narrative song dealing with a dramatic and moving episode. In Catalan, ballads are also known as *romanços*. The song (ballad or romance) of Count Arnau belongs under the heading of ghost songs, but throughout the conversation between the apparition and his wife various subjects come up which later gave rise to a great variety of literary recreations. We hear that Count Arnau is condemned, that the flames of hell appear

around his eyes, his lips and his arms, in full medieval symbology. There also appears the specific and real reason for the Count's condemnation. Arnau was condemned because he wouldn't pay his men's wages. The count failed to fulfil a contract. He didn't follow the established rules for relations between lord and servants in the Middle Ages. Respect for these rules in Old Catalonia must have been not only an essential element of social harmony, but also an unquestionable rule of conduct. The places where the song grew up, in short, the places that formed



THE MAJORCAN COAST

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the nucleus of what was to be Catalonia, must have been governed by a very complex system guided by feudal laws. In a feudal society, it was the master's duty, at least in theory, to protect his subjects. Breaking the contract was therefore inadmissible. And this is the main reproach the verses of the song direct at the condemned count. Perhaps –treading the slippery ground of hypothesis– the purpose of the song at the time of its birth was precisely that: the common people question the legitimacy of a master who is unable to keep his word, who fails to pay the wages due his men. Perhaps this is the reason why the character was born, a figure created to represent a particular attitude which is explicitly rejected by the common people. A catalyst for public rejection, in spite of never having lost its fascination –a curious contradiction–, the figure of Arnau could in theory exemplify one of the defining features of the Catalans: their capacity for collective work and the wish to be paid for this work. If the established exchange doesn't come about, the result is the most absolute condemnation, a condemnation so virulent that it manages to give rise to the figure of the eternally damned count.

The song of Count Arnau presents the figure of the apparition, but also of the feudal lord. When he visits his widow, Arnau is concerned for the most immediate members of his little fiefdom: he asks for his wife, he asks for his daughters, whom he would like to see married (although he realises that his misuse of his riches is probably what has prevented their marriage), and he asks after the servants. Condemned to roam the earth on a horse that ever awaits him, he makes another direct reference to what in the song appears as the second subject of his punishment: his sexual relations with the nuns of the convent of Sant Joan, whom he visited by means of an underground tunnel.

In the course of time, and this is something very interesting, this accusation,

which in the song is always a secondary issue, becomes the main cause of the punishment. In a society no longer marked by the parameters of the feudal world, the subject of the unpaid wages gradually loses importance, and the moralizing intention fades, while the subject of the count's illicit relations takes on unexpected importance. This opens up all sorts of possibilities to literary recreators of history.

There then appears the figure of the abbess of the convent of Sant Joan, a central character in the Arnau legend. The abbess, though, is also a changeable character, very often the victim of the passion the count inspires in her and of his nature as a man who destroys affections; sometimes she is the seducer who is at the same time seduced, a woman enslaved by her desires. Nevertheless, there may well be a certain historical basis to this character. The name of Sant Joan de les Abadesses (Saint John of the Abbesses) is the name which after the eleventh century replaced the original name of Sant Joan de Ripoll. The monastery was founded by Count Wilfred the Hairy, in 885, for a community of Benedictine nuns whose abbess was to be his daughter Emma, who headed the community from about 898 on.

The third geographical nucleus where we find two versions of the song *El comte Arnau* is Mallorca. However, the essential difference between the versions found in the Principality and the Majorcan versions has nothing to do with the moralizing aspect. In Mallorca, all reference to the subject of the wages owed his subjects by the count has disappeared. The song merely speaks of the terrifying sight

of the apparition surrounded by flames. Thus the moral background that not only characterized but also singularized the song in the Principality has been eliminated.

The song and the tradition of Count Arnau must have existed in Mallorca by the mid-seventeenth century. In the process of its adaptation in the island, though, tradition came up with the existence of another legendary character, Count Mal, to which it was joined. Historically he can be identified with Ramon Safortesa Pachs-Fuster de Villalonga i Nét, Count of Santa Maria de Formiguera and lord of the ancient cavalries of Hero, Santa Margalida, Alcudiola, Maria, Puigblanc, Castellet i Tanca, born 15 August 1627 and died 25 October 1694. The pugnacious nature of this noble, who subjugated the people and forced them to live with his violence, earned him the name of Mal (Evil). This is why his subjects applied the song and the legend of Count Arnau to him.

Every age has spoken of Arnau. First, in the voices that pass on legends and ballads. From the time of the Romantic movement, in writing. For this reason, its readers, the children of their age, have managed to interpret it in so many different ways. Because our age conditions our reading of it and makes us look in the written text for a little bit of our own world and of ourselves. And here lies the strength of the character, in this capacity to raise questions and give a thousand answers. Because Arnau is not a museum piece, mute and static, but has all the voices of the land on his lips.

Like Don Juan or Faustus, Arnau is known to a group –in this case, Catalan society– who are able to recognize him. He has therefore transcended a specific moment in history, a particular genre, and even all the authors who have ever spoken of him. Because the character, sometimes vague and uncertain like a ghost, sometimes well defined and characterized, is a complex figure. ■