

# FAIRY TALES AND FANTASY: MAPPING THE CHRONOTOPE OF *OLVIDADO REY GUDÚ*<sup>1</sup>

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**A**na María Matute is one of the most celebrated twentieth-century Spanish writers. However, although a consensus about her lyrical prose of extraordinary quality has been reached, none exists over her relationship with the so-called Generation of '50. Her literary style and her personal worldview, both strikingly unique, distinguished her from her contemporaries, but also highlighted her otherness and reinforced her isolation. In fact, Sanz Villanueva labels her as part of the imprecise category known as "Other writers" (Vassileva Kojouharova, 1994). He is one of the academics that misjudges the use of fantasy and folk-tale characteristics in Matute's narrative. Sanz Villanueva comments on the overflowing fantasy, which he suggests that is irreconcilable with her previous works. In the light of these considerations, the purpose of this paper is to challenge the notion that an insurmountable barrier isolates her "medieval trilogy" from the bulk of her work. Despite being one of the most laureate Spanish authors, none of the novels that constitute this medieval trilogy received

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prestigious awards, contrary to most of her early texts, which were nearer to social realism. Since 1996, the renowned prizes Matute received were devoted to her whole career, but not to the work she considered to be her magnum opus: *Olvidado Rey Gudú* —literally, *Forgotten King Gudú*.

Among these honours, she was elected as a member of the *Real Academia Española* —literally, Royal Spanish Academy. In 1998, she delivered her acceptance speech, which was titled *En el bosque* —literally, *In the forest*. However, it should be noted that, as Matute indicated in an interview with Gazarian-Gautier, the original title was *El territorio de la fantasía* —literally, *The territory of fantasy*. This modification is enlightening, especially if the whole speech is taken into consideration. *En el bosque* is a heartfelt plea for the appreciation of fantasy. Matute passionately states the importance of the folk tale as an ancient, long-lived and highly knowledgeable voice that, despite its primitiveness and crudeness —or precisely because of it—, blends fantasy and reality. According to her, life is enriched and nurtured by fantasy. Fairy tales amuse, but not instruct, as there is no moralistic approach. Their purpose is to offer guidance and counsel that may foster readers' —and listeners'— imagination and reasoning. In his essay *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bettelheim focuses on children. However, his ideas may be extrapolated to humankind. Therefore, "wisdom does not burst forth fully developed like Athena out of Zeus's head; it is built up, small step by small step, from most irrational beginnings" (1975/2010, p. 3). It lasts a lifetime, during which folk tales can fulfil a decisive role: "Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings" (*ibidem*, p. 5). This gradual and incessant change has developed a distinctive style: "The fairy tale simplifies all situations. Its figures are clearly drawn; and details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique" (*ibidem*, p. 8). In fact, "The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent" (*ibidem*, p. 9). Polarization is a rule in tales. Nevertheless, the radical dichotomy between good and evil should not be considered an appeal to ridicule: "Presenting the polarities of character permits the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two [...]. Then the child has a basis for understanding that there are great differences between people" (*ibidem*, p. 9). This

idea is stressed by Matute, who condemns the stupidity and the trivialisation many assume to be traits of the folk tale. Just as Bettelheim, Matute claims that fairy tales "embodied the cumulative experience of a society as men wished to recall past wisdom for themselves and transmit it to future generations. These tales are the purveyors of deep insights that have sustained mankind through the long vicissitudes of its existence" (*ibidem*, p. 26). For Matute, fairy tales carry the voice and the wisdom of bygone times, of truths long forgotten. This knowledge is symbolised by the forest, an association that relates Matute to the ideas of the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano, who in her essay *Forest glades* referred to "the word of the forest", that word which "cannot be entirely understood nor forgotten" (1977, p. 85).<sup>2</sup>

*Forgotten King Gudú* is born in that vague frontier between memory and oblivion. As Puértolas states, "we are in the atemporal realm of dreams, in the splendour of time both past and to come" (2017, p. 350). This novel that narrates the story about the Kingdom of Olar occurs "*between* remembrance and oblivion" (Torralba, 2010, p. 231). As anticipated by the title, the mere existence of the novel entails a paradox: if King Gudú and the Kingdom of Olar have been forgotten, how is it possible that their story features in a written narration?

*Forgotten King Gudú* is largely enriched by the efficacious way in which time and space create a synergistic chronotope. Thanks to it, "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 84). This chronotope evokes the characteristic aura of folk tales: a familiar, although also ethereal, imprecise, and remote, spatiotemporal location. To be so, the Kingdom of Olar is born from an innovative re-combination of elements and attributes gathered from the real factual world, but also from the fairy-tale tradition. In other words and according to Tolkien's theory of Sub-creation, the selected elements from the primary world —the real factual world— are artistically and thoroughly rearranged in order to sub-create a secondary world, that is, a diegetic world. This creative process sub-creates the Kingdom of Olar. Its origins drenched in blood, violence, and insalubrity, as well as the recurring topics of knighthood and vassalage, are a suggestive allusion to the imaginary

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2 Whenever a quotation comes from a work that is included in the reference list with its title in Spanish, it has been translated to English by the author herself.

associated with the European Middle Ages. Moreover, the lands which are adjacent to Olar's boundaries reinforce the idea that the spatial location may be found in medieval Europe. These lands are four.

Beyond the Northern forests and past the fiords, Viking pirates sailed in their *drakkar*, longships with dragons as figureheads. From the East rode barbarically the *Jinetes Esteparios* —literally, Steppe Horsemen—. Also known as *Diablos Negros* —Dark Devils—, their ferocity and equestrian skills relate them to the huns. In fact, the description the narrator provides of their supreme abilities as horsemen —"Olar [...] envied and loathed those creatures that seemed the continuation of their magnificent mounts" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 47)— is similar to the one provided by Ammianus Marcellinus: "they are almost glued to their horses" (1939, p. 383). As for the South, it is favoured by a Mediterranean-like climate that fostered a prosperous, civilized, and fertile wine-producer culture. Lastly, to the West stretches a vast tundra that leads Olar to —or isolates it from— the Great Western Kingdom. The allusions to a Great King and a Great Warrior, together with the Catholic influence, make it possible to relate the Great Western Kingdom to the Matter of France and Charlemagne. In addition, before the offensive against the Steppe Horsemen, Gudú reread past military deeds and conquests, such as the ones completed by Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus, and Julius Caesar.

The sketches, drafts, and outlines that have been safeguarded constitute corroborative evidence for the in-depth research Matute undertook in order to substantiate *Forgotten King Gudú's* worldbuilding. Moreover, she did declare that Olar "is an imaginary kingdom of Central European echoes set in the tenth century" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 118). However, she also hinted that *Forgotten King Gudú* "is not a historical novel" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 117). Therefore, no equivalence should be scouted between Olar and a real Central European location, because Olar is not a re-creation, but a sub-creation.

The results of this profound research were greatly enriched by the ancient literary tradition of folk tales. Concerning the novel's chronotope, this trait is especially relevant. Bakhtin provides the following definition of "the literary artistic chronotope" understood as "a formally constitutive category of literature": "We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the

intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1975/1981, p. 84). In *Forgotten King Gudú*, the sole temporal reference is the narration's inner chronology the reader may infer from the experiences and the aging of the characters. Nonetheless, one of the most compelling aspects of this novel is the confrontation between the diegetic and linear chronology and the vague and remote temporal indicators typical of fairy tales. The nature of this magical time is described precisely by a fairy-tale character: "On certain occasions, Time, when it weaves backwards, tells me stories about people who have not arrived yet. On others, when it weaves rightwards, from people who will never arrive" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 431). *Príncipe Once*, a character inspired in Andersen's *The Wild Swans*, explicitly states a narrative premise basic for *Forgotten King Gudú*'s plot. Queen Ardid, eager to guarantee a prosperous and splendid reign for his son Gudú, wished to protect him from the destructive febleness she considered love to be. Therefore, she decided to "totally incapacitate [him] from whatever possible love for any fellow human being" (*ibidem*, p. 252). *El Hechicero* —literally, the Sorcerer— and *el Trasgo* —literally, the Goblin— warned Queen Ardid about the complexities of the issue: "if love is eradicated from a being, its ability to cry is simultaneously removed". However, "if under any unknown circumstance [...], the subject treated with such procedure sheds a tear, the subject, as well as wherever its foot had trodden in and whoever had it related itself with, will forever disappear in Oblivion, in Time, and on the Earth" (*ibidem*, p. 254). However, the Queen foresaw no danger despite the Goblin's caveat: "Bear in mind [...] that our power is no absolute power. Not even completely exempts of all contamination do Goblins have knowledge of All the Possibilities. [...] Something, perhaps, we may have forgotten or have not realised" (*ibidem*, p. 255). Indeed, in the end, Gudú

ran to the Lake, looked at himself in it, and did not see the King of Olar reflected, but a scruffy, lumbering and old man instead. [...] Ardid, the Goblin and the Sorcerer had not foreseen that the King could love no one but himself. [...] With a faint cry, he wept for the first time. [...] And the tears fell into the Lake, and it grew. [...] And both him and his Kingdom, as well as whoever lived with him, vanished into Oblivion" (*ibidem*, p. 948).

Therefore, similarly to Princess Tontina, King Gudú's story is a narration "detached from Time" (*ibidem*, p. 313). The "Dragon that reached him from the obscure memory of his blood, from Sikrosio's fear" (*ibidem*, p. 948) was a grim fate impossible to avoid. Gudú was destined to fail in his attempt to save Olar from oblivion. Succumbing to terror, he cried and condemned both he himself and his Kingdom.

This conception of time is materialised and detailed by the diegetic space. On the first pages of *Forgotten King Gudú*, a symbolic reading code concerning the narrative space is provided:

At times, when inebriated, Sikrosio spoke incoherently. He pointed North and murmured: "From the Wilderness, mystery arrives". He then aimed East: "From the Steppe, destruction, fire, death". Later, he turned South: "From the other side of the mountains, dream, impossibility... and lie". At last, with a voice in which a mysterious grief underlay, he pointed West: "And far beyond the tundra, oblivion" (*ibidem*, pp. 58-59).

These four main points of the compass relate to those four surrounding environments and to the four rulers from the Olar dynasty. For instance, the last of these rulers, the one after whom the novel is named, King Gudú, is tightly linked to the Eastern Steppe. Gudú auspiciously ruled Olar under the threat of the Steppe Horsemen. However, in the end, the increasing attraction he felt towards the East became a perverse and fatal obsession. The Kingdom of Olar's fate was determined by its unbreakable bond with the Great Western Kingdom, likened to oblivion. Despite the attempts to create a rift and to establish a true independency, Olar had been foredoomed from the moment Sikrosio creaked under the menacing vision of the Dragon. Sikrosio surrendered to the tempting void of slumber and therefore bungled the task he had been imposed, a task similar to those that heroes-to-be must successfully perform in fairy tales. In fact, repose is included in the Aarne-Thompson index as one of the interdiction the hero may be addressed. Sikrosio, then, openly flouts a taboo and thwarts Olar's future, as it becomes tethered to a reoccurring ill omen. *Príncipe Once's* words suggest that the Kingdom is fated to relive its story whenever it is rescued and retold, just like in *The Neverending Story*. Sikrosio, Volodioso and Gudú strove

to elude all connection to the Great Western Kingdom. Unfortunately, Gudú's tears and the vision of the Dragon reset the story to the starting line, to the demise he struggled to avoid. Unable to refrain his fervent desire for military domination, when he launched the offensive against the Steppe, he actually marshalled Olar towards the End of the World, as it is explicitly stated in the map that precedes the novel.

In addition to the tasks assigned to the heroes-to-be, other fairy-tale characteristic traits that can be found in *Forgotten King Gudú* are character-types, motifs and functions of the dramatis personae. Among the dramatis personae, the Sorcerer, the Goblin and Queen Ardid should be spotlighted. The Sorcerer was an old mysterious sage versed in various scientific disciplines, but also in arcane magic, who fostered and tutored Ardid. It was him who kept Ardid safe during the occupation of the South and who, in order to guarantee her safety, dubbed her Ardid because "it cannot be unequivocally told whether this name should be attributed neither to a man or a woman nor to a noble or a peasant; not to say that (if your disposition is appraised) it will suit you well" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 112)<sup>3</sup>. As a result, Ardid is baptized in a fairy-tale way: similarly to heroines such as Cinderella, Ardid's birthname is not mentioned, as from that moment onwards everyone would know her and remember her as Ardid. Moreover, when the Sorcerer found in her eyes "the special and very rarely conferred Stellar Trickle" (*ibidem*, pp. 106-107), he acted as a provider or donor that acknowledged Ardid's worthiness as a fairy-tale heroine. Ardid is also helped by a magical agent, that is, the Goblin from the South. It is described as "a creature from the lesser gnome family" (*ibidem*, p. 115). As a fairy creature, his disposition towards magic and nature, as well as his profound and invaluable knowledge of both, is innate. However, his love for humanity, symbolized through his fondness for wine, distances him more and more from his magical essence and finally causes his demise. In an outcome that greatly resembles the end of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, the Goblin

was already visible even for the simplest of loggers. Nevertheless, Gudú, his beloved Gudú, who he confused with Gudulín, and because of whom he lost Ardid's

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3 In Spanish, Ardid is not used as a forename. It is a noun used to describe a clever trick schemed to achieve a certain purpose. Throughout the novel, Queen Ardid's plots would honour her name.

protection, was incapable of seeing him, but he did see what once was bunch, and cause of his fall into ruin. And in that bunch blossomed from love, where the human hearts are held, just a single grape was left. Gudú picked the grain with his fingers, ripped it, and devoured it. The Goblin thus disappeared for evermore with a lasting lamentation, and became —just as the Lady of the Lake had warned him— autumn leaves, deer footfalls on the grass, singing butterfly chirps in the night (*ibidem*, pp. 946-947).

Among other meaningful fairy-tale motifs in *Forgotten King Gudú*, Gudú's disablement to love should be remarked. This event evokes the external-soul motif described in *The Motif Index of Folk Literature*. When Ardid decided to deprive Gudú of the capacity to love, she harboured the ambition of consolidating her son's reign. In her eagerness to empower him, the Snow Queen's promise to Kay can be recalled: "He laid out whole patterns, so that they formed words —but he could never manage to make the word she wanted —the word 'eternity.' The Snow Queen had said: 'If you can make that word you shall be your own master, and I will give you the whole world and a new pair of skates'" (Andersen, 1844/1977, p. 78). In fact, similarly to *The Snow Queen*, in *Forgotten King Gudú*'s end tears are also decisive. However, whereas the ones shed by Kay returned him the ability to love and saved him, Gudú's weep unleashed oblivion. Therefore, *Forgotten King Gudú* seems to distance itself from fairy tales in a basic feature: happy endings.

Misfortune is a recurring feature in Matute's narrative. The denouements of her stories, therefore, do not correspond to Tolkien's idea of eucatastrophe. Nonetheless, the novel's mere existence is a glimmer of hope itself. As it has been pointed out, *Forgotten King Gudú* is not meant to exist, as "both him and his Kingdom, as well as whoever lived with him, vanished into Oblivion" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 948). But Matute rescued Olar, its inhabitants, and their stories as a response to the genuine desire to explore the realm of possibilities and to glimpse other worlds. In her own words, "*Gudú* is my way to retrieve memories. In a sense it is the synthesis of what has led me to be who I am" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 129). In this regard, the novel's dedication is highly significant: "*I dedicate this novel to the memory of H. C. Andersen, Jacob and Wilhem Grimm, and Charles Perrault. To everything I have forgotten. To everything I have lost*" (Matute,

1996/2020, p. 8). Ultimately, *Forgotten King Gudú* "is like a great tale. It is a great fairy tale, and, like every fairy tale, it is immoral, amoral, sanguinary, cruel, poetic, sweet, heartening, perverse, innocent" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 115).

Even so, *Forgotten King Gudú* still stimulates debate. This novel has been described as a "deviation from Matute's course towards the medieval universe" (Ortuño Ortín, 2011, p. 20), and as "a novel that does not resemble at all her previous works and that marked a milestone" (Taylor Domínguez, 2020, p. 12). Moreover, it has depicted as a "striking change in tone and stylistic features" (García Montero, 2024, p. 14). But a narrative continuity and consistency can be traced among the whole of her literary work. The defining characteristics of *Forgotten King Gudú's* chronotope are common to previously published texts. The Beautiful Country featured in *El saltamontes verde* — literally, *The Green Grasshopper*— is a world imagined by Yungo. Despite being an invention of his own, Yungo manages to get there with the grasshopper's help. The way Pedro and Paulina, the main characters in *El tiempo* —literally, *The time*—, think of time, can be related to *Príncipe Once's* words:

Time. Time. There was no time left now. But he was overwhelmed by a monstrous joy, by endless images of beautiful, cherished things in the soul. Ensnared by the open golden eyes, that looked at him with absolute astonishment, like a dusty dream behind the window glass, he pressed that creature against him. "We cannot wait". "We must save us from time", he confusedly heard (Matute, 1963, pp. 67-68).

As for *El río* —literally, *The river*—, it is described as "a hybridisation in which the past becomes continuous present and reaches a different and divergent existence: [...] a circularity, maybe involuntary but obsessive, that closes itself, changeably and windingly, over childhood" (López Alonso, 1994, p. 213). If Mansilla de la Sierra —Matute's beloved childhood village— was drowned by the marshland, Olar did so because of Gudú's tears. However, Matute managed to retrieve these places from oblivion. In *Fantasies of Space and Time*, examples of fantasy authors who recover worlds that belonged to their childhood paracosms in their formal literary works are provided. C. S. Lewis and Narnia, a world inspired in his land of Animals that Talk, are a case in point (Fimi, 2019). Matute

should be another one. She always kept alive in her work what Martín Garzo named as her "secret centre": "the idea of magic as a physical expression of what exists only at the bottom of our souls" and what is recovered by magical means that "almost always have to do with words" (Martín Garzo, 2024, p. 30). In fact, words were at the core of Matute's literary world. Only thanks to them was she able to blend fairy tales, imagination, and fantasy in her magical forest. In the countdown to the centenary of her birthday, these words are all that is needed to make an approach to her literary work, and, as she pleaded, to believe in the characters and stories she had invented precisely because they had been invented.

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