

# Emilia PARDO BAZÁN

## The Shadow

TRANSLATION BY ÁLVARO PIÑERO GONZÁLEZ  
AND INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY MARIANO MARTÍN  
RODRÍGUEZ

The Countess Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) stands out as one of the leading storytellers of her time. Although she has always been better known for her Naturalist novels, such as *Los pazos de Ulloa* [*The House of Ulloa*] (1886-1887), she has also authored many short stories showing her keen interest in exploring new thematic avenues in fiction. Her shorter tales are often realistic, but she did not eschew other more varied and exotic approaches. Being an extremely well-read writer, Pardo Bazán was perfectly aware of different literary and cultural traditions, both modern and ancient, as the setting of many of her stories show, from classical Greece to classical India, from Persia to early Arabia. Unlike some of her contemporaries in Spain, Pardo Bazán rarely used her outstanding ability to create plausible exotic scenarios in ancient legendary times to build up a wholly secondary world. She usually preferred to keep her more exotic creations in places recorded in human history. Nevertheless, she made at least a contribution to a particular strand of high fantasy that had already a certain tradition in her home country,

namely orientalist high fantasy written in the form of parables on different aspects of human nature and society in the framework of oriental-looking imaginary kingdoms, either unnamed or having invented names. Some examples of this sort of high fantasy parables coming from Spain have already been translated into English, such as “La esclava perfecta” (*The Perfect Slave*, 1872) by Federico de Castro (1834-1903) and “Benagissal, el profeta” (*Benagissal the Prophet*, 1924) by Alfonso Maseras (1884-1939). To these we add here “La sombra” (*The Shadow*) by Emilia Pardo Bazán, first published in the journal *Pluma y Lápiz* in 1900 and not collected in book form by the author.<sup>1</sup>

“La sombra” is a short tale featuring king Artasar, the monarch of one of the allegedly wealthiest and most powerful kingdoms in world history. However, no record of such kingdom exists as such. It is rather a purely legendary place with a monarch still more legendary than biblical Solomon, to whom he is favourably compared. Although there is an allusion to the Magi of Christian lore, the world of Artasar still remains vague with regard

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<sup>1</sup> The translation is based on the following modern reissue of the tale: Emilia Pardo Bazán, “La sombra”, *Cuentos completos*, published by Juan Paredes Núñez, volume 4, La Coruña, Fundación “Pedro Barrie de la Maza, conde de Fenosa”, 1990, pp. 262-263.

to its place and chronology. Pardo Bazán uses the universal term 'templo' (temple) instead of church or any word related to Christianity. Moreover, Artasar uses 'tablillas' (tablets) to write his maxims as he were a Mesopotamian ruler. He keeps female slaves and is defended by guards from Nubia and the Caucasus. All these details build up an eclectic, oriental-looking secondary world akin to those of high fantasy, rather to those of true ancient history. Thus, Pardo Bazán could exploit the exotic appeal of her imagined place without compromising the universal validity of the moral lesson imparted through her parable. Artasar suffers from his low height, as it is shown by his own mocking shadow, which reads as a symbol of his physical

complex. This complex can be understood by all of us. Even successful and powerful people are not immune to it. What distinguishes Artasar as a wise king is that he is able to use his reason to accept himself and his shadow as they really are, *good* in themselves. He can then escape the golden prison of his own making and present himself in public, in front of his people, likely to rule as wisely as it can be expected from such an idealised monarch. This useful lesson is delivered by Pardo Bazán through a fine tale where the beauty of its style rivals that of its setting within a well-paced narrative. Furthermore, this story suggests that Pardo Bazán was a successful writer of the Aesthetic Movement as well.

EMILIA PARDO BAZÁN

# The Shadow

King Artasar, who after Suleiman or Solomon was the mightiest and the most opulent in the orb and who dreamt of having a palace hitherto unseen in which to accommodate his court's magnificence and the fantastic riches of his treasury, nursed another dream too, apparently more modest, yet infinitely harder to make true: to make himself taller. It should be noted that Artasar the Great and the Feared was of low stature, and in such heroic ages signs of strength and bodily sturdiness were worshipped. And when Artasar, after stepping down from his palanquin of cedar, ivory and gold, walked solemnly to the temple where his ancestors, the Magi, had worshipped the living God and where such saint worship still lingered on, and the crowds formed a double rampart of populace to see the king passing by, the latter's self-love suffered cruelly comparing the projection of his own shadow, tiny and lacking in majesty, with that of the herculean officers of his Nubian guard or with that of the handsome bowmen from the Caucasus, who freed the way ahead of him in the street. Like some sort of grotesque buffoon walking inseparably by his side and mocking the grandeur of his name, the irony of his short shadow accompanied him everywhere.

To prevent such sad effect, Artasar had shoes heightened with five-layered soles made for himself and began wearing a monumental tiara-like adornment around his temples. And it was as the saying goes, the cure was worse

than the disease. The soles were the parody of a ridiculous plinth and rendered the king's walking awkward and clumsy, as if he were on stilts. As for the tiara, the burden of its weight forced him to bend his head, making his shadow take bizarre shapes, leading to mockery.

Desperate and weighed down by the mortification of his vanity, which suffered every time he appeared in public, Artasar resolved not to leave his palace ever again. Within the bounds of the palace there were most agreeable gardens and thick groves, and Artasar, in finding solace in them, began to forget his shadow's length and ceased to compare it to that of the rest of the mortals. And so he stopped worrying about the shape of his shadow, his soul regained peace and his heart was again at ease – the happy and serene times were back. What mattered his shadow to him? Did his shadow prevent him at all from reveling in the running of water, in the freshness beneath thickets, in the zither's chords, in the gazelle eyes and honey lips of the female slaves? Did it bar him at all from the joy of study and intellectual prowess? One day Artasar remembered, looked at his shadow... and reconciled with it – it was no longer ironic, it no longer humiliated him. It was a shadow like any other: harmless, natural, a *good* shadow...

And so, Artasar called for the scribe that wrote down in wax tablets the most memorable events of his reign and the maxims uttered by the monarch to compile them in a book meant to eclipse the *Proverbs* by Suleiman (what a

shame that those tablets went lost in history!)  
and dictated him the following sentence:

‘When we walk amongst men, we only  
exist for the length of our shadow. When we

retire, it is the capacity of our soul that makes  
us live.’