# Princely pleasures

GABRIEL PAQUETTE

Javier Moro

EL IMPERIO ERES TÚ
553pp. Editorial Planeta.
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*El imperio eres tú* (You Are the Empire), which won Spain's Premio Planeta in 2011, is an entertaining romp through Brazil's history at the moment it gained independence from Portugal in the early nineteenth century. Largely informed by documentary sources, it focuses on the colourful love life of Dom Pedro, who became the first Emperor of independent Brazil.

Pedro was born into a fractious family, the Braganzas, reigning over an empire teetering on the brink of dissolution. Javier Moro skilfully interweaves familial with geopolitical elements in this process. Dom Pedro's mother, a Spanish princess, was locked in a loveless marriage with his father, the Prince Regent of Portugal. In late 1807, when Pedro was nine, the entire Court was forced to flee Lisbon and migrate to Rio de Janeiro, in the face of the invading Napoleonic armies. The transfer of the Court was an unprecedented event which augured the breakdown of Portugal's empire.

Moro picks up the story in 1816. In spite of the coming of a general European peace in 1815, the Braganza dynasty opted to remain indefinitely in Rio, preferring the delights of the Brazilian tropics to the thankless task of reconstructing an enfeebled, war-torn Portugal. This arrangement, Moro reveals, suited Pedro, who practised free love on a grand scale. Though more like a soap opera than a *Bildungsroman*, Moro's sometimes louche narrative captures the political mood prevailing in Rio on the brink of revolution. Moro overstates the parallel between Dom Pedro's testosterone-charged rebellion against his parents' preference for his choice of playmates and his role in Brazil's revolt against Portugal. Yet Moro writes gripping, historically nuanced prose, peppered with witty banter, so the reader is liable to forgive the many factual lapses.

For many decades, historians depicted Brazil's independence as the outcome of a family quarrel or intra-family agreement. Dom Joao and Carlota Joaquina, Pedro's parents, returned to Portugal in 1820, and it was left to the charismatic prince to insinuate himself at the front of the independence movement's leadership, thus saving the monarchy in Brazil and a throne for the Braganza dynasty. This view rests on a radical simplification and is now unfashionable. Many dynamics – class interests, proto-nationalist sentiment, fears of racial rebellion, political ideology, British machinations and more – were in play. To deny these forces is to present a sanitized account of what was a messy affair, beyond the ability of Dom Pedro, his siblings and his parents to manipulate.

But *El imperio eres tú* suggests and develops an important point beyond its catalogue of bedfellows, brides and royal buffoonery. The actions of highly placed individuals, and their relationships with each other, decisively influenced the outcome of Brazilian independence and succeeding events. Only by understanding the family intrigues, rivalries and alliances within the royal family, which Moro reconstructs adeptly, can a strange sequence of events be made intelligible.

Moro dramatizes the dysfunctionality of the royal family that unsettled Portuguese and Brazilian politics for a decade after the two sides of the Atlantic separated. Dom Joao and Dona Carlota Joaquina's bickering went unabated. The Queen recruited her youngest son, Miguel, to overthrow her husband, which he nearly did in 1824. She then manoeuvred to make Dom Miguel heir to the throne, replacing Pedro, who remained legal heir in spite of his leading role in Brazil's independence. The Brazilian Emperor, however, had different plans. When Dom Joao died in 1826, Dom Pedro sought to marry off his own seven-year-old daughter, Maria, to his wayward brother and thus keep both thrones, Portuguese and Brazilian, in the family and within his grasp. Dom Miguel's refusal to accept such terms, and usurpation of the Crown, precipitated internecine civil war in Portugal lasting six years.

Increasingly despotic in temperament and unpopular in Brazil, Dom Pedro was forced to abdicate in 1831, leaving his infant son behind as Emperor. Pedro returned to Europe without a clear purpose beyond hunting, philandering and attending the opera in Paris.

**Emperor Dom Pedro I, 1826, by Manuel de Araújo Porto-alegre**

He was soon enticed by a rag-tag group of liberal exiles plotting to invade Portugal, overthrow Dom Miguel, and install his daughter on the Portuguese throne. Having accomplished these improbable objectives by 1834, and before he could cause further turmoil, he fell ill and died, at the age of thirty-six.

Though too obsessed with Dom Pedro's sexual escapades at the expense of his political career, Javier Moro's lively, atmospheric novel captures the preoccupations, anxieties and spirit of an epoch in which an Old World crumbled and former New World colonies joined the community of nations.

# Wild forces

MIGUEL FERNANDES CEIA

Moacyr Scliar

THE CENTAUR IN THE GARDEN
Translated by Margaret A. Neves
216pp. Texas Tech University Press. $18.95.
978 0 8967 2730 4

KAFKA'S LEOPARDS
Translated by Thomas O. Beebee
96pp. Texas Tech University Press. $26.95.
978 0 8967 2696 3

It was not only in North America, with writers such as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, that the Jewish diaspora out of Europe produced great novelists: Moacyr Scliar, born in Rio Grande do Sul, in the south of Brazil, wrote about the same dilemmas and doubts, addressing the very same themes, with much the same elegance. For a practising, full-time physician, Scliar (1937–2011) had an extraordinarily productive writing life. He wrote more than twenty novels, several short story collections, fiction for children and young adults, and works of non-fiction.

*The Centaur in the Garden* tells the story of a Jewish family who have escaped an increasingly anti-Semitic Europe to southern Brazil. After producing three healthy children, the migrant mother gives birth to Guedali – a centaur – at which point she turns against her husband, rather than the other way round, for having brought them to the middle of the jungle, into the company of wild beasts. The newborn centaur, as she rightly senses, belongs to that wilderness. It is a kind of Gaúcho, as inhabitants of Rio Grande do Sul are called, but also a symbol of physical and sexual prowess, a mixture of man and beast. After growing up on his parents' farm, Guedali graduates to performing in a circus, only for him to meet a female centaur, Tita; and Scliar does not shy away from describing Guedali's sexual dawning. The lovers then leave for Morocco where they submit to surgery, severing their horse-like body parts, and allowing them to become fully humans.

While it is vague about places and procedures, such as what happens at the Moroccan clinic, *The Centaur in the Garden* carries real allegorical force. It raises questions about the dysfunctional feeling of self, Jewish identity and social ostracism, making it a landmark in Brazilian fiction of the twentieth century.

*Kafka's Leopards* is, by contrast, a playful novella, the purpose of which seems to be to pay homage to one of Scliar's literary heroes. But unlike the rewriting of *The Metamorphosis* in, say, *The Breast* by Philip Roth, *Kafka's Leopards* is not about physical mutations but rather mistaken identities and normal people who are put into abnormal situations and struggle to go on behaving normally. It concentrates on two important moments in the life of Mousy: first, in his youth, as a Trotskyite travelling to Prague on a mission to meet Kafka himself; and the second, in Brazil, when, in a final heroic act, he saves his nephew from the military police.

What stands out here is the variety of ways in which Scliar uses the figure of Kafka. He appears as the real writer, as impersonated by Scliar's narrator and, finally, as impersonated by Mousy himself. While meeting a *shammes* in the Prague synagogue, he is told:

> You've got something in common with Kafka . . . I warned him: we shouldn't create things we can't control. And fiction is just that, something that can't be controlled. You start to write, to imagine, and who knows where it's going to end. And then, more books for what? Everything important has been written in the Torah.

Though substantially different in theme and genre, both novel and novella eloquently attest to Moacyr Scliar's relevance. Both books have now been superbly translated into English. It should be pointed out that the translation of *Kafka's Leopards*, executed to a high standard by Thomas O. Beebee, is in fact a translation from the German edition. Surely there is no shortage of good translators who would have been willing to translate it from the Portuguese?