

PEÑAS AND TORNEOS: EL RITO TAURINO IN OLD CASTILE

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Five days into our trip to Valladolid, and ours had already been an eclectic week. Apart from the somewhat surreal experience of touring rejoneador Sergio Vegas' ranch in the dark, watching shooting stars and bulls' horns glistening in the moonlight, we had enjoyed media attention and journalistic hype – causing me to wonder what Valladolid's regional paper *El Norte de Castilla* lacks, that it found it needed to interview me. We had also spent a morning rolling happily around the campo perched atop a bale of straw while observing the bull in his natural habitat, before returning for lunch in a restaurant with bits of that same straw dropping out of our hair and clothes. It might have been fun, but glamorous it was not.

Now here we were in little Montemayor de Pililla – David and Penny Penton, Judith, Holly and Lucy Burman, Richard and Annette Walker, myself and my husband, Bryan – and I found myself dancing a kind of mock flamenco with a cheerful Spaniard even shorter than I am, to the delight of a crowd of strangers. All this, and we had only just returned from being taken to view a collection of intricately carved stone and a tractor converted into a jolly toro bravo. Well, they did warn us that concoction of brandy, wine and whisky was potent.

But this was Montemayor, and they do things differently there. This is the other side of the fiesta brava. No grand plaza, no figuras, no arte de toreo – not of the kind, at least, that most aficionados look for. While the modern corrida can trace some of its roots back to the early modern period, these local festivals boast traditions that have been unchanged for centuries; in that, indeed, lies their pride.

We were met by Raúl Redondo and various of his colleagues from La Empalizada, which is the organisation dedicated to preserving the traditional fiesta there. After a drink or two in the premises of the various peñas, we made our way towards the calle Industria, where people were gathering with the local brass band to accompany the lorry containing the bull on its way to the Plaza de Toros where the evening's capea was to take place. The intention being to retard the vehicle's progress, and as it trundled along at slower than walking pace (how can it be driven so slowly?) the plaza was filling up. Those wishing to take part in the capea aligned themselves beneath the stands, in what amounts to the callejon. We were escorted politely into the seats above; not, perhaps, from fear that the braver amongst us would try our luck with the bull, but that we would impede the activities of the experts.



Holly Burman and Bryan Strange behind the burladero in the 'medieval' plaza de toros in Montemayor de Pililla. (Diane Strange).

Made entirely of wood, and erected every year for the fiesta – at other times the area is used to store sugar beet – this little rectangular plaza is reputed to be the only one of its kind in Spain and, being more akin, in shape at least, to a town's plaza mayor, is the kind of environment in which all such rural events would have taken place before the first modern bullrings were built in the eighteenth century.

Once the lorry arrived at the plaza, the bull was removed into the toril, and moments later, to the tune of that well-known pasodoble Jingle Bells, he was released onto the sand. Twenty or thirty hopefuls were in the ring with him, most of them shrinking back into the safety of the callejon when he charged. There were no capotes and no muletas, the protagonists avoided the bull by running from him or by deft body movements. Nobody was injured, and the bull was returned to the toril – we suspected, but were not sure, that he would be fought again the following day; which, if

so, is another link with the past, for in medieval and early modern corridas bulls that were not killed would be returned to the plaza to be fought again, a factor that surely contributed to the high mortality rates in those times.

Once the capea was over, we made our way towards a bar, where we were conducted into a private function room and were fed courtesy of the Town Hall from whom we had received an official invitation. They served us a mixture of dishes that included calamares, sopa, and huevos revueltos con setas, the mushrooms being a local delicacy that were sold, I was assured, to top restaurants for large amounts of money.

Presents were exchanged and promises made to return again in 2010. The Mayor, Oscar Reinoso, presented us each with a tee-shirt bearing the slogan "I love Montemayor de Pililla", which, after the friendly welcome and the hospitality that was extended to us, and the enjoyment I derived from this rural fiesta, is certainly true.

The following day, Tuesday September 15th, the torneo known as 'El Toro de la Vega' took place. The Toro de la Vega has a long history. Some historians date it back to 1355 and the reign of Pedro I 'The Cruel' (1334–1369). As part of the events celebrating the birth of his daughter Isabel, Pedro I ordered that the torneo, which had formerly taken place in the Plaza Mayor, was to be moved to the campo.

Today, the torneo takes place on open land across the bridge over the Duero, on the edge of Tordesillas. Barriers are erected throughout the town from the bullring, where the bull is released, to the campo, where he is free to go wherever he pleases. Once in the campo, he encounters lanceros on foot and on horseback.

Once the bull is amongst them, participants may only confront the bull one at a time and the man who deals the final blow is awarded a prize, which is presented in the Plaza Mayor afterwards. If the bull manages to go beyond the limits within which the participants can enter into combat with him, he can be indulted as the 'vencedor del torneo'.

Tordesillas is where Joan the Mad, 'Juana la Loca', was imprisoned in 1509, in the monastery of Santa Clara, having gone almost completely insane following the death of her husband, Philip the Fair of Burgundy, in 1506. Juana's obsession with her husband had been intense while he was alive; now he was dead, she would not be separated from the corpse or allow it to be interred, but had it carried with her, periodically having it opened so that she might embrace the decaying body.

The anti-taurinos would doubtless claim that there is still madness in Tordesillas. Not the morbid love of a queen for her deceased husband, but the madness of bloodthirsty animal-haters. Some 500 antis from across Spain and other parts of Europe had gathered outside the town to protest against the event – a forlorn hope against the 30,000 people who attended – and although they were keen to be allowed into the town to protest, this was hotly contested by the town itself, which tenaciously defends its right to hold its traditional annual event. A court ruling ordered the protestors to keep out. There was a justifiable fear that if they were allowed inside, fighting would break out, given the anger of the people of Tordesillas about the objections to their rite.

Although I have no sympathy with anti-taurinos, I admit that I regarded this event with consternation. The first reason was nothing to do with the torneo itself, but only the time of the day at which we had to drive to Tordesillas in order to secure a good viewing point. Scarcely recognisable as a human being before mid-morning at any time, when in Spain, after a night making the most of Montemayor's hospitality, I stood to be an incoherent shadow of my usual self. The second reason was the nature of the killing of the bull. It is true that whether he is in the bullring or in a field the bull dies, but there is a great difference between what happens in the plaza de toros and what happens in the campo during this torneo, where the bull is despatched with a spear by one of many men either on foot or on horseback, who each take their turn with him until he is killed. In many ways, the struggle can be regarded as equal – the bull with his horns is pitched against the torneante on horseback with a lance. Still, I was unsure whether in the event it would seem noble, or, after many stabs, reminiscent of a matador who cannot kill his bull, a sight which I never fail to find distasteful.

We were a small party who made our way to Tordesillas. Apart from myself and Bryan, David Penton, Annette Walker, and Lucy and Holly Burman made up our group.

By the time we arrived, at around 9.30am (the event was due to begin at 11.00am), the crowd had already begun to gather and the best viewing points were taken, occupied not by people but by coats and sticks, their owners having placed them there like beach towels on sun beds while they popped into the bar for a quick caña. We found ourselves standing against some railings with a sheer drop behind us and a road in front of us down which the bull was due to charge from the town towards the bridge. A number of men were positioned in trees nearby, or behind the railings, in relative safety providing they did not look behind them down to the Duero, which lay hundreds of feet below. They

stared at us bewildered, as if we were as mad as Juana. One of them was kind enough to point out that it was, as we already suspected, a very dangerous place to stand. David and Annette decided to walk across the bridge, towards the campo, where the bull would be killed; proving ourselves less willing to get so close to the action, Lucy, Holly, Bryan and myself found spaces in a small plaza which gave us a good view across the bridge. Only after we had made ourselves as comfortable as is possible on a few inches of stone did we realise that we had chosen a spot right next to the fireworks. Knowing that in Spain there is no such thing as a damp squib, we anticipated their moment of glory with more immediate trepidation than the lancing of the bull.

With an hour to wait, we had plenty of time to watch the build-up to the fiesta and ‘enjoy’ the fireworks, which exploded above our heads half an hour before the bull was due to run. The crowds began to thicken as a long procession of horses and people made its way across the bridge, some carrying the long, beribboned lances that they would use to attempt to kill the bull. The style of the lances is centuries old. They are constructed out of wood and have a razor-sharp and highly polished steel blade (the polish is said to reduce friction), the lance being around 250 centimetres long.

A great number of men on horseback were by now waiting in the campo. I had not expected to see so many horses; there must have been at least a hundred. Men on foot with lances were ranged in front of them. It is regarded as a great honour if these lanceros can kill the bull before he reaches the horses.

When the event begins, it happens very quickly. Our first sight of the bull came as he trotted across the bridge towards the fields, accompanied by a scattering of runners. Each year the bull is chosen by the town’s Comisión de Festejos, and this year he came from the ganadería of Victorino Martín Andrés. Named Moscatel, he was born in February 2005 and weighed in at 540 kilos.



El Toro de la Vega 2009, Victorino Martín’s ‘Moscatel’, amongst some of the 30,000 who had come to the event. (David Penton)

Having crossed the bridge, Moscatel reached a roundabout, which was crowded with people. The bull was invisible from where we stood, but the mass of movement back and forth as people surged towards and from him indicated where he was.

Then there was a roar of surprise – instead of proceeding towards the open country and the waiting torneantes, Moscatel was making his way back across the bridge towards the town. How far he got we could not tell, as he was not visible to us, though it was certainly up beyond where we stood; but after two or three minutes his form appeared again, as he made his way once more across the bridge.

This time he made it into the fields, and we saw a surge of horses move forward to meet him. The sight of this army of horses charging across the campo in a cloud of dust puts one in mind of a cavalry charge more than of a bullfight. By this time I was regretting my decision to position myself so far away from the action. If we return another year, we will certainly stand on the other side of the bridge to get a better view of the action.

Unusually, for the bull is normally killed in the field or the trees, Moscatel had left the field; announcements over the loud-speaker informed us that he had reached the road to Salamanca. Of course, being the kindly person that I am, it never crossed my mind to hope that he had given five hundred antis a short course in bullfighting on his way.



Horses and riders congregating in the *campo* during the running of the bull. (David Penton).

All we could see by this time was a cloud of dust rising above the trees in the distance. We had little idea of what was happening until it was announced that the bull had been killed by Alvaro Hernández, from Medina del Campo. Afterwards, this claim was contested, and a lancero from Tordesillas claimed the honour. Ultimately, neither man was given the prize, on the grounds that the bull was killed outside the campo.

I had seen too little to draw a conclusion about whether or not I approved of the nature of the bull's death. However, the torneo was afterwards declared to have been a great success. There was some talk that Moscatel should have been indulged, in regard that he had proceeded so far without being killed. The Toro de la Vega of 2009 would as one newspaper report subsequently said, 'pasó a ser leyenda'.

A quick drink at a café and we made our way out of Tordesillas, and back to the hotel to catch up on some much needed sleep.