

Ebola The “Celebrity Virus”, Excalibur and the Psychic Impact of the Ebola Pandemic

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Global Research, October 12, 2014

Region: [Europe](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

Ebola is inflicting its devastating psychic toll on countries, even though its devastating impact remains essentially confined to various West African countries. Brutal and lethal as it is, there is a sense that Ebola has become a celebrity virus, enraging and exciting those who so happen to wind their way back from a country suffering from an outbreak. Four thousand deaths, tragic as it is, doesn't quite push the pandemic button. The blogging estate, some media outlets, and those manoeuvring through the Twatosphere, suggest otherwise, fearing infiltration.

Spain has certainly been very much in the Ebola news cycle. It became the first non-African country to see a genuine spread of Ebola. While African countries have been subjected to something of a smear campaign be it in terms of resources, and assistance, states are all going for the clamp down, restricting flights, running strict medical tests and controls. But the Spanish tale to the virus took one dramatic, even idiosyncratic twist.

The flashpoint here was the nurse, Teresa Ramos of Madrid's Hospital Carlos III, who caught the virus after leaving a room where the missionary Manuel García Viejo was being treated. (Viejo, along with his colleague in robes, Brother Miguel Pajares also died from Ebola.) A sense of fury and nerves crept through the administrative establishment – the pandemic was lurking, and here, finding its form in a nurse who had not been aware of contracting the virus. There were “slip-ups” in the response, and a good deal of tardiness in what became something of a panoramic bungle.

But perhaps the strangest feature of the latest round of Ebola mania came in the response to the fate of Ramos' pet canine. *The Daily Mail* could barely resist waxing on the script, sounding like a Roman poet about to take his life by imperial decree: “Final day of freedom: Excalibur, the dog of the Spanish nurse, barks from her balcony in Madrid, on Wednesday.”[1] After the quarantining of both Ramos and her husband, Javier Limon, authorities deliberated over what to do with the animal. It did not take long: Excalibur would have to die.

Then came the flurry of images as part of a campaign to shame and convince, pulling on heart strings to spare the doomed animal. Limon had been busy, releasing a video calling for a campaign to save the animal. King Arthur's sword of legend became associated with a quadruped pet in Iberia. What, exactly, was being fought for started to get rather blurry. In this view, it is not the rights of the animal, but the entitlement of owners to speak on behalf of animals as humanised appendages, that found expression in a range of manipulated images.

Dogs, cats or birds, having no concept of consent one way or the other as to whether they

were fronting up for a political advertising campaign, would have cards and items of paper placed in front of them. Desperate snaps were taken and posted on Twitter. Such items had Twitter hash tags with such expressions as “#SaveExcalibur” and “#SalvemosAExcalibur.” Effectively, they were becoming empty vessels for moral outrage, instruments for the indignation of their human masters.

It did not take long for some to note that the petition to save Excalibur had become an expression of “asymmetrical” feelings on mercy and justice.[2] The late Brother Pajares was obviously in the wrong line of work in helping the poverty stricken. Instead of saving Africans, he might have gotten more sympathy for saving dogs. The parameters of the debate were decided in advance, enraging those who could not see why individuals might scream claims of assassination in defending the life of an infected dog but ignore the “demographic suicide” of a country.[3]

Over 350,000 signatures of purported salvation were registered through a Change.org petition. (As a matter of comparison, the plea to help Christians in northern Iraq got a mere 90,000 on the same site.) They were to be disappointed. The drama of resistance culminated in the confirmation by the Minister of Health for the Community of Madrid that Excalibur had been euthanized. The body was subsequently taken to Paracuellos del Jarama for incineration. It had been a true model of disaster non-management.[4]

As Hal Herzog of Western Carolina University would argue, the canine was seen as no less than a human child. “In a way, the moral revulsion we’re seeing for euthanizing the dog is the same revulsion we’d have for euthanizing a child” (*National Post*, Oct 8). As one comment doing the rounds of Twitter confirmed this: “They have entered their home and murdered a family member.”

The efforts to save Excalibur certainly acted as a diminution of other sufferers. It was not Sierra Leone or Liberia in the news, with their genuine problems in containing the virus, let alone the names of victims. It was not even individuals who had returned to Spain and had subsequently died that mattered. It was Excalibur, immortalised pet and anthropomorphic phenomenon. Animal advocates such as Jorge Javier Vázquez and Fernando Tejero got itchy with tweets and re-tweets on canine welfare. The writer Arturo Pérez-Reverte suggested a formula that got much attention: put the dog under clinical observation and sacrifice the health minister, Ana Mata.[5]

The other side of the argument, one put forth by the authorities, was also rather shoddy. The demon dog, or at least one with potentially demonic potential in infecting a community, was not even kept to be studied, examined, or monitored. Eric Leroy, a global authority in the field of Ebola studies, told *El País* that “the dog did not need to be put down because it is important from a scientific viewpoint.”

Felipe Vilas of Madrid’s Official College of Veterinarians was not going to take the risk.[6] A 2005 report from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted that “dogs might be asymptotically infected by Ebola virus”.[7] It also noted that, during an outbreak in Gabon in 2001-02, several dogs were exposed through the consumption of contaminated dead animals. The results on transmission between canines and humans it, for all of that, remains inconclusive.

Grace and dignity have tended to be the ultimate casualties in the Excalibur affair. The fate of a pet, tragic as it was, tended to outshine other Ebola victims in an orgy of

sentimentality. But this affair also betrayed a good deal of incompetence while reaping a harvest from the fear factory, with authorities refusing to even consider monitoring the doomed canine. The impression given here was that Spain was under siege from an exotic, murderous African problem. And just to confirm that sentiment, the hash tag #VamosAmorirTodos (“We Are All Going to Die”) began trending.[8]

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2785036/Police-clash-protesters-angry-threat-Spanish-Ebola-dog-Excalibur-s-life-s-carted-away-authorities.html>

[2]

<http://www.outono.net/elentir/2014/10/08/un-perro-llamado-excalibur-saca-a-la-luz-el-asimetrico-sentido-de-la-piedad-de-algunos/>

[3]

<http://www.outono.net/elentir/2014/10/08/un-perro-llamado-excalibur-saca-a-la-luz-el-asimetrico-sentido-de-la-piedad-de-algunos/>

[4] <http://sabias.es/sanidad-confirma-sacrificio-perro-ebola/>

[5]

<http://www.vertele.com/video-articulo/salvemos-a-excalibur-el-perro-del-ebola-tt-con-televisivos-eco-internacional-y-la-animalada-de-perez-reverte/>

[6] http://elpais.com/elpais/2014/10/08/inenglish/1412758903_315088.html

[7] <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/11/3/pdfs/04-0981.pdf>

[8]

<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2014/10/man-bites-dog-spanish-ebola-panic-spells-death-for/>

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