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*Romance of Evast and Blaquerna* by Ramón Llull (review)

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*Llull, Ramón. Romance of Evast and Blaquerna. Introduction by Albert Soler and Joan Santanach. Translation by Robert D. Hughes. Serie B: Textos, 60. Barcelona & Woodbridge: Barcino-Tamesis, 2016. 564 pp. ISBN: 978-1-85566-304-6*

Ramón Llull's curious, fascinating, and very long *Romanç d'Evast e Blaquerna* (ca. 1283) has not been the subject of much critical attention. If one compares the bibliographical entries for this work with those of other contemporary narratives, such as the *Libro del Cavallero Zifar* or the *Gran Conquista de Ultramar* (both written around 1300), it is not much of a contest. Despite Llull's status as one of the great foundational figures of Catalan literature, even in Catalonia *Blaquerna* has attracted less scholarly attention than later works of prose fiction, such as Bernat Metge's *Lo somni* (1399) or the anonymous *Curial e Güelfa* (ca. 1450). This makes Hughes' translation even more of a boon to anyone interested in medieval Iberian literature, scholars and aficionados alike.

The work is pretty much unknown to non-specialists, to many Iberianists whose main focus is Castilian literature, and, of course, to general readers. *Blaquerna* has been waiting a very long time for this new English translation. Whatever you may think of Allison Peers' 1926 translation, this volume was already ninety years old when Robert Hughes brought the current one to light, and –frankly– a lot has happened in the interim. Hughes' new annotated translation, together with the substantial introductory essay by Albert Soler and Joan Santanach (editors of the 2009 Catalan edition), is a major step forward in *Blaquerna* scholarship, perhaps the single most important intervention ever in this very small field.

Soler and Santanach's introduction is a rich and comprehensive view of the work, with sections on Llull in the context of the literature of his age, the title of the book, its structure and theme, the work's intertextuality with Llull's *Book of the Lover and the Beloved* and the *Art of Contemplation*, its narrative models, its transmission, and, finally, a bibliography. Soler and Santanach's introduction to their 2009 Catalan edition of the text is shorter and almost exclusively codicological and philological in nature, but their thematic and literary historical study of *Blaquerna* attached to Hughes' translation is a real feast for the literary critic. While there have been several excellent articles and essays on various aspects of *Blaquerna* in recent decades, this is the first substantial literary historical treatment of the text since Martí de Riquer's *Història de la literatura catalana*, published in 1964.



Hughes is forthcoming, specific, and explicit regarding his approach to translating Lull's work. He explains in his preface that his aim is to "produce a readable and plausible, if complex, modern rendering [of *Blaquerna*,] (given that the source text is one of considerable complexity itself), while still preserving some of its more technical lexical features, and, to a lesser degree, those of its syntax" (81). In this he definitely succeeds. He is quite knowledgeable about historical Catalan linguistics and combines this knowledge with a highly sensitive translator's eye, respectful of both original language and modern reader as he goes about arranging for the two to get together.

His own reflections on the translation process leave the reader wanting to read more. For example, he writes that he "tried to remain sensitive to the mood of verbs in the original text, [which may] lend the text in its English form a more wistful and provisional sense than it has in the original Catalan, which ... manifests very directly a great definiteness in terms of conception, methods, and objectives" (79). His words conjure up a scene with a stern-faced and earnest Lull, his hand in *declamatio* pose, who spins theories, taxonomies, and neologistic terminology that would give any medieval reader a headache, as Hughes listens patiently and thinks about how best to make this crazed polymath understood to Anglophones living in an ardently secularist world of smartphones, low-cost air travel, and reality television.

Hughes writes that, in the notes to the translation, he "aims to shed light all the same upon certain intellectual, cultural, ecclesiastical and ecclesiological traditions underlying much of Ramón Lull's text, as well as upon historical events, institutions and personages of significance thereto, not to mention Lull's own considered responses to such traditions" (81). He hits the mark in this regard as well, and is very consistent in explaining the nuts and bolts of medieval history, geography, and cultural life for the non-specialist. Such examples include his explanation of Lull's ideas on the attributes of God, the use of sequences in liturgy, and the *morabetin* (Castilian *maravedí*) coinage.

One area in which he might have provided more documentation is in the bibliography of secondary studies, which he provides intermittently. For example, he provides secondary bibliographical references in his notes on Lull's doctrine of first and second intentions (178 n.82), Kublai Khan and Christianity (351 n.266), and the use of the silver mark as coinage in France during Lull's life (399 n.304). Other times he leaves us wanting to know more and does not

provide any references, such as in his notes on the Franciscan notion of the poverty of Christ (107 n.28), on spinning as a “chaste and honorable profession” for women (166 n.72), and on Noahic traditions of ethnic origins in the Middle Ages (382 n.290). After looking at the notes in some of the other titles in the series, Hughes’ notes are actually more complete than most, and so we must chalk this up to editorial policy and not to any shortcoming on Hughes’ part.

As in the translator’s preface, the really interesting bits are when Hughes lets us into his translator’s mind in the notes. In some cases, they are philological notes explaining the medieval lexica, their etymologies, and the semantic field attached to the medieval versus modern forms for a given word or idea. Other times he directly discusses the choices he has made in rendering a word or idea, such as the note on the terms that Lull uses for the attributes of God (99 n.18). In another example, he discusses choices made by the editors of the Catalan text and how it affected his own process in bringing it over into English (100 n.20).

One other bit of good news is the book’s price point, a very reasonable \$25.95 in paperback, which means that you can actually assign it in its entirety for a course. The question remains as to whether or not you could actually get students to read five-hundred pages of medieval theological fiction, as readable as it might be from a stylistics vantage. The series in which it appears –Serie B: Textos– also includes a number of other reasonably priced titles in paperback that one might teach, such as *The Catalan Expedition to the East: from the Chronicle of Ramon Muntaner*, also translated by Hughes (2006), *The Book of Sent Soví: Medieval Recipes from Catalonia*, edited by Joan Santanach and translated by Robin Vogelzang (2008), *Francesc Eiximenis: An Anthology*, translated by Hughes (2008), and *Portraits of Holy Women: Selections from the Vita Christi by Isabel Villena*, edited by Joan Curbet and translated by Hughes (2013), among others.

In sum, Hughes’ translation of Lull’s *Blaquerna* is scholarly, readable, well-annotated, and –in my opinion– a very good translation for both specialist and non-specialist audiences. The introduction by Albert Soler and Joan Santanach is an important intervention in *Blaquerna* scholarship, and the edition’s price point opens up the possibility of teaching the work in its entirety, as well as putting it in reach for interested general readers.

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