

RAMON LLULL, *Romance of Evast and Blaquerna*. Translation and notes by Robert D. Hughes. Introduction by Albert Soler and Joan Santanach. Barcelona: Barcino/Woodbridge: Tamesis. 2016. 564 pp.

For modern Catalans, the lay philosopher and theologian Ramon Llull (1232–1316) is a ‘cultural hero’ of Catalonia’s medieval past, on a par with Dante in Italian or Chaucer in English. Plazas, streets and cultural institutions bear his name today throughout Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands. During his long career, Llull produced over 250 works, in Latin and Catalan, most devoted to expounding his idiosyncratic ‘Great Universal Art’, an encyclopaedic system for demonstrating how all knowledge confirms the truth of Christian doctrine, designed especially for promoting the conversion of unbelievers to Christianity. Though little noticed during Llull’s own lifetime, his work became enormously popular in the later Middle Ages, Renaissance and early modern era, with figures as important as Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno and Leibniz all claiming inspiration from Llull’s system. A few dozen of Llull’s Catalan vernacular writings also stand as landmarks in the development of Catalan literature. The *Romance of Evast and Blaquerna* (hereafter *Blaquerna*) is, arguably, the most important of those writings, and a remarkable contribution to the evolution of narrative prose in Western medieval Europe.

For modern Anglophone audiences, whether popular or academic, Llull’s celebrity and accomplishments remain very imperfectly known, thanks in part to the lack of English translations of Llull’s major writings. For half of the twentieth century, the only English versions available were the several works translated by E. Allison Peers, including his translation of *Blaquerna* (London: Jarrolds, 1926). Anthony Bonner, the late Yanis Damberg and other scholars have subsequently provided additional translations of other important works by Llull. Peer’s translation of *Blaquerna* was based on the best, but imperfect, Catalan sources available in his day. After years of patient labour, Albert Soler and Joan Santanach published in 2009 (Palma de Mallorca: Patronat Ramon Llull) a new critical edition of *Blaquerna*, in itself a monument of Lullian scholarship and Catalan philology. Robert D. Hughes’ translation, based on the edition by Soler and Santanach, offers to Anglophone readers the best possible English version of *Blaquerna*.

Completed early in Llull’s career (1283), *Blaquerna* is a kind of *Bildungsroman*. It recounts how its eponymous hero renounces wealth and privilege in order to pursue a life of Christian perfection: Blaquerna first shuns marriage, then enters monastic life, accepts a bishopric and finally ascends to the Papal See, an office that he ultimately abandons to become a hermit (uncannily presaging the brief tenure of Pope Celestine V in 1294). Through the several stages of Blaquerna’s career, Llull offers a comprehensive critique of the failings of Western medieval Christian society. The novel includes, as an intercalated segment, *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved* (420–89), one of Llull’s best-known devotional writings.

The Introduction by Soler and Santanach (11–72) provides for non-specialist readers an excellent summary of Llull’s contribution to Catalan literature; the dating and exact title of *Blaquerna*; the novel’s plot structure; the religious and social reforms that it advocates; the devotional themes of *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*; medieval narrative models for *Blaquerna*; the novel’s transmission through the centuries; and a bibliography of essential scholarship. Soler and Santanach mercifully avoid detailed explanation of the arcane mechanics of Llull’s ‘Great Art’, and of its exemplarist theology and metaphysics, since *Blaquerna* does not require familiarity with these elements from non-specialist readers.

A brief translator’s Preface (79–82) explains Hughes’ rationale for the need to translate flexibly certain basic Catalan vocabulary, and his handling of the terminology for concepts from Llull’s ‘Great Art’ that occasionally appear in *Blaquerna*. Hughes’ expertise as a translator of medieval Catalan literature is already familiar to students and scholars in that

field, thanks to his previous translations of the *Homilies d'Organyà* (Barcelona: Editorial Barcino, 2004), Ramon Muntaner's *The Catalan Expedition to the East* (Woodbridge: Tamesis/Barcelona: Barcino, 2006), *Francesc Eiximenis: An Anthology* (Woodbridge: Tamesis/Barcelona: Barcino, 2008), Isabel de Villena's *Portraits of Holy Women* (Woodbridge:Tamesis/Barcelona: Barcino, 2013) and various scholarly works.

In his English translation of the text (83–556), Hughes strives to make Lull's sometimes diffuse prose 'readable and plausible' (79), an objective that he fulfils admirably, rendering the fervour, theology, social ideals and narrative interest of *Blaquerna* accessible to modern readers. Footnotes appear only where necessary to annotate the meaning or literary analogues of specific passages. A Bibliography (559–64) helpfully compiles all works cited in the notes.

Any quibbles that specialist readers might have with the presentation of Lull's work in the Introduction, or with Hughes' rendering of Lull's prose, are surely insignificant in comparison with the achievement of making Lull's masterpiece available to modern English audiences.

One can only hope that this new translation of *Blaquerna* will inspire another generation of Anglophone readers to recognize and study Ramon Lull's contributions, not simply to the development of Catalan literature, but to the culture of medieval Europe.

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