

August BOVER I FONT (Ed.). (2023). *Espill de la vida religiosa (Desitjós)*. Barcelona: Editorial Barcino, 440 pp. ISBN 9788416726066.

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August Bover i Font's recent publication of a critical edition of the sixteenth-century Catalan allegorical narrative *Espill de la vida religiosa* concludes years of research by this eminent literary historian.

Currently a professor emeritus of the University of Barcelona, Bover has been studying this influential text and its reception in Europe since the early 1980s. In dozens of smaller and larger studies, he has investigated its spiritual and literary origins, European transmission, and translations into, as he determined, thirteen languages, including Polish. In early modern Poland-Lithuania, this Catalan allegorical tale was published six times before the end of the eighteenth century in Kasper Wilkowski's translation as *Desiderosus abo ścieżka do Miłości Bożej* (first edition in 1589). The book reached a wide audience and has become one of the most popular readings in early modern women's convents. Superiors and confessors recommended reading it *ad mensam*, during the community's meals. It is mentioned as one of the favorites in the biographies of a few saintly nuns. Additionally, the Polish translation made it easier for *Espill* to reach Orthodox readers, since the Ukrainian and Russian versions were based on the Polish translation.

It is primarily Bover's comprehensive, thorough, and decades-long research that highlighted the phenomenon of this true bestseller of early modern Europe, the text that changed its identity repeatedly following successive translations and rifacimentos. This long-awaited edition presents *Espill* magnificently in its original Catalan version for the first time since the sixteenth century.

*Espill de la vida religiosa* is an allegorical spiritual tale that reflects the influence of Ramon Llull's novels. The first edition was published in Barcelona in 1515, followed by the one in Valencia in 1529. *Espill* tells the story of a monk called Desitjós, who decides to embark on a journey in search of a master to guide him along the path of perfect love for God. Throughout Part One, which is more narrative in nature, the successive stages of the ascetic-mystical journey are described, including purification, enlightenment, and union.

The protagonist encounters allegorical figures who guide him towards the right path, as well as those who attempt to lead him astray. Having been guided by Shepherd and

accompanied by the dog Goodwill, he first arrives at the monastery of Humility where he meets both the personifications of monastic virtues and their enemies lurking at the gates. Then, guided by Fear of God and Simplicity, he heads to the next monastery, where he encounters the coveted master, Love of God. Under his instruction, Desitjós prepares himself for meeting God, so Part Two of the work is essentially a dialogical treatise on the principles and practice of contemplative prayer.

Despite its apparent simplicity, this allegory is a truly intriguing work inspired by the mysticism of Ramon Llull. Also, it appears to be influenced by the currents of Modern Devotion on the Iberian Peninsula and contributes to the rich spiritual and intellectual context, in which such prominent reformers as García Jiménez de Cisneros, St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Teresa of Ávila emerged. According to Bover, *Espill*, which would be attributed to several authors, most frequently to the Hieronymite Miguel Comalada, was probably written in a Franciscan milieu. In the years following its first printing, the work has enjoyed a life of its own, and successive translations and adaptations have added to it many of the ideas characteristic of sixteenth-century spirituality, with its tendency to reform and reshape individual devotion.

In fact, Bover's edition represents the sum of all available knowledge regarding *Espill de la vida religiosa*. It is the essential reading for those wishing to explore the many mysteries of this fascinating book and for readers interested in the ideological entanglements of early sixteenth-century Iberian spirituality. The extensive, well-documented *Introduction* provides a monographic overview of the work. The author begins by presenting the intellectual and spiritual context of late medieval Catalonia, where *Espill* was born (including Llull's school of spirituality and writing), and explains in detail its title, attribution, composition, as well as the hypothesis of the existence of an older text, from which *Espill* is an abridgement. A fascinating analysis of the themes and motifs present in both parts of *Espill* more than convincingly demonstrates the deep roots of the second part of the work, which is a treatise on contemplation, embedded in the Llullian tradition, as well as the strong ties to Montserrat Abbey's school of spirituality. Additionally, Bover's detailed philological analysis of the first printing revealed that it had been adapted from a manuscript containing a text with West Catalan linguistic characteristics.

Readers who are interested in the reception of the work will find the portions of the Introduction, in which, Bover meticulously reports on the results of his many years of research and analysis related to the European transmission of *Espill* to be fundamentally enlightening. After discussing Catalan editions and surviving manuscript transmissions, he proceeds to demonstrate the profound extent of the text's influence. Between 1527 and 1857, at least 133 editions of the book were published, most of them in translation. The book has been rendered into Italian, Castilian, French, German, Latin, Polish, Dutch, English, Irish, Ukrainian, Danish, Russian, and Portuguese. Interestingly, the Jesuits, who contributed to the production of some editions of the work, also ensured its transmission to India and Japan. Bover examines the existing translations in detail and reveals some of the interrelationships between them, as most of these translations were produced as relay translations mediated by other languages. A unique feature of *Espill* was its universal

appeal. It transcended both linguistic and confessional boundaries, reaching readers of different Christian denominations.

Bover based the edition on the Barcelona *editio princeps* (1515), represented by the unique copy preserved in the Biblioteca de Catalunya. The critical apparatus presents the variations in the text of the second edition (1529), and the commentary details the sources of quotations and contextual references. In an extensive appendix, the reader will find the text of the Latin letter from Miquel Jeroni Cruïlles to the educated and informed nun, Sister Jerònima Eixarch, a valuable catalog of all editions of the original and translations with a list of representative copies, photographs of the title pages of the most significant editions, a description of the allegorical characters, objects and allegorical places that appear in the work, as well as an extensive bibliography and glossary. In fact, the reader of this edition is provided with all the tools necessary for further research into the impressive and puzzling career of this mysterious text, which sheds a remarkable light on the currents of religious renewal in sixteenth-century Europe, revealing their deep, non-obvious origins, and peculiar unity.

The edition compiled by August Bover is outstanding in every regard. Developed over many years of truly Benedictine work, this book provides valuable insight into the complex and not so obvious routes of the text transmission during religious reform and renewal. Rather than being divisive, *Espill* is almost confessionally transparent, encouraging individuals to develop personal forms of faith and guiding them to encounter God through contemplative experiences. Its edition is an exemplary work by a historian of literature and ideas, as well as a philologist, showing through this very significant case study how important currents and works from Catalonia are to the early modern ideological panorama. The publication of this book in English (including a bilingual presentation of the narrative) would be invaluable, as *Espill* represents a work of universal importance.

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