

JOAN ROÍS DE CORELLA

JOAN ROÍS DE CORELLA IS THE LAST GREAT WRITER OF THE 15TH CENTURY, THE GOLDEN AGE OF CATALAN LITERATURE. IN HIM, THE THREATENED VALUES OF THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES OVERLAP WITH TYPICALLY RENAISSANCE ATTITUDES. OF ALL THE GREAT WRITERS OF THE CLASSICAL PERIOD OF CATALAN LITERATURE, CORELLA REACHES THE HIGHEST DEGREE OF FLEXIBILITY AND BEAUTY IN HIS USE OF THE CATALAN LANGUAGE.

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Amongst the great writers who made the 15th century the golden age of Catalan literature, the last, chronologically speaking, was Joan Roís de Corella. The date of his death, October 1497, has sometimes been used as a marker to indicate the end of this era. Be that as it may, the threatened values of the end of the Middle Ages overlap in him with typically Renaissance attitudes both to life and to literature, and the conflict resulting from this contradiction has given rise to interpretations of his work as "a typical case of interior dissociation" (J. Rubió). The violent contrast between, for example, the coarseness of the in-

sults he directs at Caldesa (the lover who has been unfaithful to him) and the pious, remote serenity of his religious writings could give the impression that the works in question belong to two different poets.

As the eldest son of a family of the lesser nobility of Gandia (where, it seems, he was born some time soon after the first third of the century), he was destined for the army, just as Ausiàs March and Joanot Martorell had been, and for the same reason. However, Roís de Corella avoided this profession, so unsuited to his peaceful, sensitive nature, and devoted himself to the study of Theology. We have written



evidence that he preached at the cathedral of Valencia, and that he was famous for his sermons, though none of his work in this field has survived. All this has suggested the possibility – though it cannot be definitely confirmed – that he belonged to the clergy, a hypothesis which is strengthened by the fact that, in spite of having led a fairly hectic love life (“sailing on the tempestuous sea of false love I have often risked shipwreck in great storms striking the rocks with the prow of my desires which is for ever aimed at ungrateful women”), he never actually got married, not even to the woman who it seems was his most lasting love, Isabel Martínez de Vera, who gave him two children. What is absolutely certain is that Theology was not the object of his most ardent passion. At times, he has been made out to be a profoundly religious man, almost a mystic, but this idea has always been shown to arise from short-sighted or blatantly incorrect interpretations. Amorous experience is the real centre of his life and the inviolable subject of his writing. Even when he mentions famous warriors (Ajax, Ulysses, Jason, Achilles, Paris, etcetera), it is never in reference to their military activities, but to speak of the

problems of love. The chivalrous spirit which characterizes the whole of earlier literary history disappears completely with Corella. And his amorous behaviour is also radically new, as we see in the reaction to infidelity as he describes it in his *Tragèdia de Caldesa*: “With diversity of such impossible thoughts I left the chamber or tomb where I had suffered such pain. Taking the pen, which often calms great ills, I wrote this with my own blood, because the colour of the ink matches the pain that speaks.”

Taking the pen, which often calms great ills: the motivation behind his writing which this phrase reveals, in other words, literature taken expressly as a cure or a consolation for the failures of real life, is another of the most original characteristics of Corella's work. In the words of J. Carbonell, one of the people who has studied Corella in greatest depth, “not only the formal aspects are new in Corella, but also – and to a greater extent – the human aspects, the penetration of a new reality, a new vital spirit, which was to enrich literature and all aspects of life in Europe with the Renaissance. This, then, was the crisis of the chivalrous spirit in the person of a gentleman”.

In spite of everything, until very recently he has not received the recognition he might have done. Critics and historians of Catalan literature all agree as regards his leading role, and this opinion is especially unanimous when it comes to his poetry, though he wrote so little (Joan Fuster, for example, as circumstance as usual, speaks of “four or five excellent poems”). Martí de Riquer stresses his lapidary style, and people also tend to point out the fluid, musical quality of the metre, which differs from the dryness of Ausiàs March or the stress pattern of the troubadouresque decasyllable and comes closer to the *dolce stil nuovo* which developed from Italy. But the Baroque of his prose, the winding syntax of the Ciceronian period, and, also, the “lack of originality” (Fuster) of his primarily Ovidian subject matter, have, for some, been a sign of decadence. Perhaps it is for this reason that, of all the great writers of the classical period of Catalan literature, Corella is still the least studied and possibly also the least published, although today's taste, without reservations, sees in it the highest degree of flexibility and beauty reached by our language in the century of its maximum literary splendour. ■