Cristòfol Despuig: Dialogues: A Catalan Renaissance Colloquy Set in the City of Tortosa. Cristòfol Despuig.

In recent decades, increasing attention outside Spain has been paid to early modern Iberian literatures other than Castilian. One of the publishing houses responsible for this is the Woodbridge-based Tamesis, whose Textos B (Spanish Studies) has been a highly regarded series of scholarly editions of Castilian texts in their original language for half a century. In the last ten years, and in collaboration with the Barcelona-based publishing house Barcino and the Institut Ramon Llull, they have been adding to the series some of the most important medieval and early modern Catalan authors in accurate English translations, almost totally free of notes and, overall, very nicely presented and aimed at an audience well beyond specialists. Ramón Muntaner, Francesc Eiximenis, Bernat Metge, The Book of Sent Soví, Isabel de Villena, and Ausiàs March have already been published under this arrangement, and Tamesis projects to foster this task — together with the edition, not translation, of Castilian texts — for years to come. The most recently recovered classic of Catalan literature to become part of the series is Cristòfol Despuig’s (1510–74) Col·loquis de la insigne ciutat de Tortosa, a translation of the excellent introduction and edition prepared four years ago by Enriq Querol and Josep Solervicens (2011), with the arguable exception of the chapters on the transmission and reception of the work, the notes to the text, and, more justifiably, the criteria for the edition of the Catalan text. The only extant copy, probably prepared in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, is the MS B-20 from the Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, together with the edition by Fidel Fita (1877), made over a manuscript that has since been lost, although Querol and Solervicens used other partial testimonies for the first time for their critical edition. The value of Eulàlia Durán’s pioneering edition of Despuig’s Col·loquis is rightfully acknowledged by Henry Ettinghausen in the “Translator’s Preface” (29).

Cristòfol Despuig — a knight by birth, literate and a courtier by education, and a bourgeois by marriage — played an important role in the social, political, and military life of the flourishing city of Tortosa during the second third of the sixteenth century. With his always unfavorable opinion of the political power of the Church, he was educated and received minor orders from the bishopry of Tortosa; played a part in the siege of the city as a member of the faction of the Viscount of Castellbò, an inlaw relative; endeavored as a procurator, magistrate, and captain of one of Tortosa’s citizen militias; took part in the conspiracy with his son to set fire to the house of Cosme Castellar, constable of the Inquisition; and was involved in the subsequent mysterious assassination of Onofre Despuig in Valencia — all of which comprise moments in a biography gathered by Querol and Solervicens to depict a man of action. His Col·loquis (1557, but with later additions), the only
work he ever wrote, gives, on the other hand, far more than the motivations of the man for his deeds, as they have been deservedly considered the most important work of literary prose written in Catalan during the sixteenth century. The reasons for this high esteem are grounded not only on the vivacity of his writing — Professor Ettinghausen should be acknowledged for producing such an exquisite text that it hardly seems a translation — but also on the importance of the topics tackled by Despuig, whose three characters stroll around Tortosa discussing education and politics, the value of Catalan as a language of culture and confronting the always pressing Crown of Castile, botany and limnology, matters related to the customs of the Church, and the role of merchants and noblemen in society, offering in sum a fresco of the Catalonia of the time. Far more importantly, Despuig excels at translating the regional into the universal, grasping overtones from some of the most influential European and Spanish humanists of the time, including Alfonso de Valdés, Erasmus, and Castiglione, without resorting to mere repetition or reelaboration, but rather imposing his own views long ago assimilated and forgotten. This modernity of Despuig has been marked by Solervicens as a distinction between the humanist, which he is not, and the Renaissance man.

Overall, Henry Ettinghausen’s magnificent translation of the six dialogues offers a unique opportunity for students and scholars of the Renaissance and early modern Europe unable to read Catalan to access an informative edition of the text.

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