

'The Dream' of Bernat Metge, translated with an introduction and notes by Richard Vernier (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). xxxviii + 87 pp. ISBN 0 7546 0691 0.

Bernat Metge (1340/46-1413) was brought up in the entourage of the Aragonese Royal Chancery, where he was to become a highly-ranked official. His position involved a mastery of curial Latin and eased his contact, via Avignon, with the book production spanning from early Italian humanism. In 1388 he declared his inclination for reading philosophers and poets, while stressing his preference for Petrarch, *poeta laureat*. Such interest made progress. Some years later, in the few extant pages of his *Apologia* (1395?), Metge recorded for posterity his intellectual self-portrait: Bernat is in his private room, reflecting upon the writings of great dead men, who keep him company; he 'converses' with them, in a Petrarchan fashion, and the following paragraphs make crystal-clear the imprint of Petrarch's *Secretum* and Cicero's *Tusculanae* on Metge's dialogue—an imprint which is also apparent in *Lo somni* (1399), a dream-vision in which Bernat debates the immortality of the soul with the ghost of King Joan I, questions Orpheus about the underworld, and disputes with Tiresias about love.

Metge's classical inclination gained him a reputation as a rationalist philosopher from 1889, when he became the flagship of an alleged early vernacular humanism—any Catalan reader conversant with the classics knows of him because of the scholarly series of editions launched by the Fundació Bernat Metge in 1922.¹ Such a reputation was somewhat tarnished when archival research proved Metge's involvement in the politics of his time as one of the royal officials who were charged with corruption and held responsible for King Joan's accidental death. At this turning-point, Martí de Riquer published his *Obras de Bernat Metge* (Universitat de Barcelona 1959), which remains not only the reference edition but the best overall account of Metge's literary and political activity. Perhaps the most far-reaching, even if not universally accepted consequence of Riquer's study is that Metge ceased to be regarded as a true philosopher to become a shrewd courtier and a master of the craft of fiction. For Riquer, *Lo somni* was a second, tongue-in-cheek *apologia*, in which Metge resorted to a wide range of sources with a distinct aim: to ingratiate himself with the new king Martí I (*Obras*, pp. *145-49).

¹ For a critique of both 'Catalan humanism' and the modern reception of Metge, see Lola Badia, *De Bernat Metge a Joan Roís de Corella* (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1988), pp. 13-38 and 59-62, and Francisco Rico, 'Petrarca y el "humanismo catalán"', in *Actes del sisè col.loqui internacional de llengua i literatura catalanes (Roma 1982)*, ed. G. Tavani & J. Pinnell (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1983), pp. 257-91.

But for all the appeal of his figure, Metge has never enjoyed the international readership and critical attention he deserves. Richard Vernier's book offers the first translation into English of *Lo somni*, appended with a rendering of Metge's *Apologia*. Both the introduction and the translation are judiciously grounded on Riquer's edition, which additionally provides a wealth of footnotes on Metge's sources and a faithful version into Spanish facing the Catalan text. As a breakthrough in the modern dissemination of Metge's masterpiece, Vernier's effort is most commendable: bridging over centuries of oblivion, it places the English reader at the 1959 stage and provides him with an excellent translation. However, scholarly readers of this text should bear in mind that post-Riquer studies have established new important sources of *Lo somni* (e.g. Seneca's tragedies) and set Metge's medieval Epicureanism in context, even if the final interpretation of his work remains open to debate.² Some of these contributions are too recent to have reached Vernier's book in time; others already figure in Lola Badia's edition of *Lo somni* (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1999), which Vernier only cites as a useful piece of *vulgarisation* (p. xxxvi), although it breaks new ground regarding Metge's Petrarchan sources. In the current status quo there would be little agreement with Vernier's repeated claim that Metge was a clear-cut humanist—a label which he also attaches to Metge's stepfather just for having translated Palladius' *De re rustica* (p. x) and which eventually leads him to wonder about Metge's choice of Catalan over Latin (p. xxxiii)—though such statements often make, in essence, a valid point, as when it is observed that Metge's display of learning was 'perhaps even above all, a show of humanistic virtuosity' (p. xxxii). Likewise, the description of the historical circumstance of *Lo somni*, which is so vividly depicted in the introduction, would now require a more nuanced assessment. The financial problems of the Crown date back to the times of the so-called Catalan empire, as shown by J. N. Hillgarth (*English Historical Review, Supplement 8*, 1975); the 'catastrophic crisis' that King Joan and his officials were facing (p. vii) should be regarded as another episode of a long-held political struggle between the monarchy and the city councils (see an overview with bibliography in Cingolani, *El somni*, pp. 91-97). A grasp of *realpolitik* helps us understand that *Lo somni* was certainly an effort to please King Martí l'Eclesiàstic, both for its display of erudition and for clearing the reputation of the monarchy, but the assumption that Metge was a culprit trying to convince Martí of his innocence seems to be superseded.

When discussing controversial issues, to have a view detached from recent develop-

2 An updated bibliography on Metge can be gathered from the articles included in *Literatura i cultura a la Corona d'Aragó (s. XIII-XV)*, ed. L. Badia, M. Cabré & S. Martí (Barcelona: Curial & Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2002). See also Stefano Cingolani, *El somni d'una cultura: Lo somni de Bernat Metge* (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2002) and his 'Un geniale lettore di Petrarca: Bernat Metge', *Studi Petrarqueschi*, 15 (2002), 187-219.

ments is often advantageous. In this respect Vernier's introduction is insightful and compares favourably to many a reading of *Lo somni*. King Joan was married to the king of France's niece; his brother Martí wedded Maria de Luna, a relative of the anti-Pope Benedict XIII. Both kings sided with the Avignon papacy when the solution of the Great Schism was a main issue in European politics. Vernier touches on it several times and finally poses the question (pp. xxiv-xxv): why does Metge seem in favour of the French 'way of cession', if *Lo somni* was intended as a pleasant reading for Martí and Queen Maria? The cautious conclusion states: 'the author's intentions were far from simple' — a reminder that research on *Lo somni* has still a long way to go. Equally on target is the question about the reception of Metge's heterodox views and Martí's permissive attitude (p. xxxi). These observations are bonus points for the English reader, whose expectations, I believe, will be satisfied by a translation above average.

Lo somni is an enduring masterpiece of Catalan prose writing. As far as I can judge, Vernier renders it with panache. As Garcilaso said of Boscán's *El cortesano*, the translation is faithful and the book does not seem to have been written 'en otra lengua'. There are, naturally enough, minor omissions (e.g. 'de la carn', Riquer, p. 170, l. 25; 'turmenten si mateys', p. 202, l. 4), and occasionally one may object to Vernier's breaking up Metge's long periods: the celebrated opening sentence of *Lo somni* runs through eleven lines in Riquer's edition; Vernier splits it in two (p. 3), for he reads 'Poch ha passat que estant en la presó [...] studiant' as 'Shortly after I had been put in jail [...] I was studying', while it means 'Not long ago, while I was in prison [...] studying'. But there is no doubt that the translator has been attentive to the minute detail (e.g. 'generalment' becomes 'as a rule', p. 37; cf. 'universalmente' in Riquer, p. 260, l. 12), taking pains to avoid banality (e.g. 'ab bon gest e alegre cara': 'with pleasant countenance and merry visage', p. 37) — one minor quibble would be to the temptation of embellishing the English version a little too much (e.g. Metge's standard adverb 'contínuament' becomes 'without cease', p. 27). Vernier is fully aware that the author had 'a keen ear for the spoken language' (p. xxxv), and thus he is careful when dealing with expressions such as 'Jo ladonchs [...] fiqué la orella' ('so did I lend an ear', p. 37) and 'per tal que alguna desestruga se trench lo coll' ('until another unfortunate woman puts her head in the noose', p. 71). Other aspects of Metge's language are understandably lost, or sacrificed in favour of a more readable outcome, as in the case of his Latinate lexis (e.g. 'disceptar': 'discuss'; 'imputat a': 'put down to'; 'constituït en': 'presented before'; 'diversori': 'room') and syntax (e.g. 'Sabuda per mi la sua dolorosa mort, devallé': 'As soon as I heard of her sad death, I came down', p. 37).

The text is well presented, despite the occasional misprint ('dicontinuous', p. vii; 'would also would', p. xxxii). Regrettably, no editor has taken care of the abundant misspellings of Catalan names ('Pí', '*Barri gotic*', 'Espèciers', 'Vivò', 'Elisende', etc. should be 'Pi', '*Barri gòtic*', 'Especiers', 'Vivó', 'Elisenda'), nor of the inconsistent reference to royal soubriquets (thus King Joan is 'Amador de la Gentileza' and 'el Cazador',

both in Spanish, and then 'el Descurat', in Catalan). None of this detracts from the fact that Metge is being introduced to a new wide readership in a distinguished way, both for the general public and students of medieval history and culture. They may find in his cleverly crafted dream, as Vernier has perceived (p. vii), a kindred spirit of Geoffrey Chaucer.

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