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An Introduction to Ramon LluU's The Book of the Beasts **Manuel Duran**

Catalan Review, Vol. IV, number 1-2 (1990), p. 395-408

AN INTRODUCTION TO RAMON LLULL'S *THE BOOK OF THE BEASTS*

MANUEL DURAN

Perhaps the most amusing and pleasure-giving text by Llull, *The Book of the Beasts* is essentially a fable, or, to be more precise, an extended fable. The main characters are animals. The length of the text is the normal length of a long short story, almost a novella. The message is, as so often in Medieval prose, didactic. Its subject matter is politics, also human behavior, human folly and wisdom. This makes the Lullian book a close relative of a modern political fable such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Llull is dealing with an important subject, a problem that has refused to disappear and therefore will be dealt with time and again by modern writers and also probably by writers in the centuries to come.

Fables, we know, are short narratives either in prose or in verse; the characters are most often animals, yet human beings or gods, even inanimate objects, may occasionally appear. In Llull's text a human being is the witness, but soon animals take over and occupy the center of the stage until the end of the book.

Fables are an old and noble stream in the great river of literature. Fablelike stories are to be found on Egyptian papyri. Hesiod's *The Works and Days* tells a fable about a hawk and a nightingale. By the middle of the 5th. century B.C. the name of Aesop, a deformed Phrygian slave who lived one century before, became connected with several fables — soon all fables known in Greece were attributed to this half-mythical creator of tales. Llull inherited two great sources of fables, one coming mainly from Greek and Latin sources, and the second source being the Eastern fables of Indian and Persian origin. This second source became an integral part of the literature of Western Europe during the

Medieval period — indeed, without these Oriental fables many of the masterpieces of western Medieval literature would not have been written or would be substantially different from their known text. India is the source of the most influential book of fables. Around the middle of the third century A.D. an anonymous author assembled a collection of tables and short stories and gave them the title *Panchatantra*. Many of these fables came from Buddhist tradition and from the folklore of the Indian people. The book was written in Sanskrit. Around the year 550 it was translated into Pahlavi, or Old Persian. The text grew for two centuries, as many new stories and fables were added to it during the years that followed. The resulting work was translated into Arabic probably around 750 by Ibn al-Mukaffa and given the title *Kalilah wa-Dimna*. In the year 1261, according to the *explicit* in one of the extant manuscripts, the Arabic text was translated into Castilian, the translation having been sponsored by the king of Castile, Alfonso X, the Learned. However, since Alfonso is referred to as prince, not king, and taking into account that we are dealing with a later transcription, probably copied from older sources in the 14th. century, the date is an error due to a careless scribe and the translation most probably was completed in 1251. *Calila e Digna*, in the Spanish version, told the wise and witty sayings and the merry pranks of two smart jackals, Calila and Digna or Dimna. The fables could be enjoyed by young and old. As John E. Keller and Richard P. Kinkade point out,

Since Spain fell under Moorish domination in 711, we believe that the Arabic translation, *Kalilah wa-Dimna*, reached Spain not long after the Conquest. In Spain its stories were enjoyed just as they had been in the Middle East and for the same reasons. It was a wisdom book, but at the same time a work written for the pleasure of reading and, like the famous *Don Quixote*, held some attraction for everyone from sage to simpleton. Proof of this, at least insofar as the *Panchatantra* is concerned, may be found in the literatures of virtually every nation in the East, from Syria and Egypt to Siam and the Philippines. Without the *Panchatantra* and its subsequent recastings in other languages and cultures,

there could have been no *Thousand Nights and a Night*, no *Decameron*, no *Pentameron*, no *Disciplina Clericalis*, in the form in which we read them today, and many other books would be the poorer — *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Quixote*, Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, those of Hans Christian Andersen, La Fontaine, Timoneda, and Samaniego and Iriarte, as well as the folktales of many nations, even our own in Appalachia. Though Alfonso could not have known this, he was aware of the importance of *Kalila wa-Dimna* in the eastern world, which he respected, and it is not surprising that he caused it to be translated. Later reworkings came into Spanish from Latin, but the first complete edition was Alfonso's and it stemmed directly from the Arabic. Indeed, today Arabic scholars use the Spanish translation to fill in lacunae found in some Arabic versions.¹

Did Llull draw his inspiration from the Arabic text? We know he read Arabic as easily as Catalan or Latin. There was also a Latin version by John of Capua translated in Rome and dedicated to cardinal Orsini, a nephew of Pope Nicolas III. Llull could also have read the translation into Spanish done in 1251 by order of Alfonso X. This is a problem that cannot be solved. Be it as it may, Llull's *Book of Beasts* is a part of a larger work, *The Book of Wonders*, a work written probably in 1288-89. However, it is quite possible that the *Book of Beasts* was written earlier as an independent work and inserted later in the *Book of Wonders*. This hypothesis makes sense if we point out that the *Book of Wonders* deals with a young man, Felix, who travels around the world in quest of knowledge, talks to a king and to a philosopher, learns to wonder at the beauty and splendor of the earth and the sky. He often travels accompanied by a wise hermit. It is both a philosophical novel and a tale of adventure in strange lands. Felix, the protagonist, is present in all its chapters — except in the seven chapters of the *Book of Beasts*, from which he is excluded. There is one further clue which supports the theory of an earlier independent drafting of the *Book of Beasts*: in its preface Llull praises a religious sect by the name of Apostolic Order, or Apos-

¹ John E. Keller and Richard P. Kinkade, *Iconography in Medieval Spanish Literature*. Lexington, Kentucky, The University Press of Kentucky, 1984, pp. 41-42.

tolic Brothers, founded towards 1260 by Gerardo Sagarelli at Parma, an order of nomadic mendicant preachers whose extreme views included the tenet that everybody should renounce both marriage and earthly goods. This sect was condemned by Pope Honorius IV in 1286 and condemned again a second time by Pope Nicolas IV in 1290. Sagarelli was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1300, his disciples were exterminated in a battle near Milan in 1307. Llull speaks about this sect in favorable terms in his preface to the *Book of Beasts* — but criticizes two members of the sect in chapter 56 of the *Book of Wonders*, written after the condemnation of the sect by the Pope.

As for the originally or Llull's *Book of Beasts*, it is not difficult to find many aspects of the Catalan text that differ from its oriental sources. We must emphasize, on the other hand, that Medieval writers did not approach the problem of originality in the same way that a modern writer would. Medieval authors saw themselves as part of a long tradition that had to be enhanced, embellished, continued. The idea of total originality is relatively recent and does not flourish in literature until the Romantic period. Nevertheless Llull does not limit his text to the transmission of the Oriental fables to be found in Kalilah *wa-Dimna*. He reworks many of them, introduces new elements, new incidents, and above all manages to give a new direction, a new goal, to the main body of his book. The Arab text is a rather loose collection of fables, all interesting, but not having a clear goal. The Catalan text is tautly organized around important political issues. As Armand Llinarès states,

the main interest of Raymond Llull would seem to be, from the very beginning, the idea of royalty and all that it implies, especially the institution of royal power, the role of the king's advisors and the problem of the relationship between the king and his people, also between the king and other princes.²

² Armand Llinarès, Raymond Lulle, *Le Livre des Bêtes. Version française du XVe. siècle avec traduction moderne, introduction et notes*. Paris, C. Klincksieck, 1964, p. 29.

In other words, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, «avant la lettre», and emphasizing more than Machiavelli did both the role of intrigue at the king's court and the ethical problems posed by loyalty and perfidy.

There is another aspect of the Catalan text that differs from the Oriental sources: Llull introduces several autobiographical passages and personal memories. Thus the episode of the Muslim slave at the beginning of chapter III is basically the transposition of an event of Llull's own his life. Thus we read in Llull's autobiography, *Vita coetanea*, about his having bought a Muslim slave with the goal of having the slave teach him the Arabic language: one day in which Raymond was absent the slave cursed the name of Christ. Upon his return Llull found out what had happened and punished the slave by striking him in the mouth. The slave then, full of rancor, started to plot his master's death.³

Briefly, *The Book of Beasts* is much more than a collection of fables: on the one hand it gives us Llull's ideas on politics and society (here his conception of the king as a sovereign elected by his subjects is noteworthy) and on the other it paints a vivid portraird of Western society at the end of the 13th. century.

How did Llull approach the relationship between animals and men? We must remember that Llull's idea of the cosmos is strictly hierarchical. Yet his appreciation for animals is undeniable. We must also bear in mind that neither zoology were well developed during the Middle Ages. Many people believed in the existence of fantastic animals such a griffins, sirens, and strange beings such as those described by Mandeville. At the same time we may well suspect that the relationship with the animal world was then affectively more intense than it is today. Llull felt very close to the Franciscans. Saint Francis of Assisi's poetry offers proof of love for animals and respect for their life. According to

³ The Latin text is found in R. Llull, *Obras literarias*, Madrid, 1948, p. 50.

legend Saint Francis spoke to the birds and even preached a sermon to the wolf at Gubbio asking it to stop tormenting and attacking human beings.

For Llull animals are part of the «Great Chain of Being», a cosmic pyramid in which we ascend from matter to the lower animals, such as worms, then on to the higher animals, many of those being emblematic, symbolic, representing ideal principles and virtues; such are the lion, a symbol of strength and bravery, the fox, a symbol of cleverness, etc. Man stands above the animals, and the angels stand above man, linking man and God. And although man is always above the animals and possessess a soul man can understand animals because they are somehow enclosed, encapsulated in him. Man's body is a synopsis of all of Nature, in man's soul all the splendor of Nature is reflected through God's presence which is refracted and reflected in everything: in his nature and in his soul man participates in, and reflects, both the unity of God and His infinite richness. Animals are part of man's microcosmos, which in turn mirrors in condensed form the macrocosmos, the infinite world all around us. Man is partly an animal; man is an animal to which a new dimension has been added.

Conversely, animals as described by Llull in his book partake of many human weaknesses and possess some human or quasi-human traits, yet they are not simply human beings disguised as animals. At certain moments the royal court of animals, presided over by the Lion, will compared with the royal court of men, rule by a human king, and the comparison will be on the whole unfavorable to the human court.

Indeed the focus of Llull's book is the behavior of individuals in a society, the rules of the game of politics and power. At the beginning of the book we find all the animals assembled in a vast plain. They are getting ready to elect a king. Eloquent and crafty speeches fill the air, psychological and political intrigue develops. Some animals vote for the Lion, others for the Horse. The Lion

wins, after which the Horse and his ally the Ox go away, embittered by their defeat. They will try their luck among men — and men, we soon see, treat them harshly and exploit them without mercy. Meanwhile the Fox, unhappy because the Lion has not appointed her to any high court position, begins to weave a web of intrigue and deceit. She finds allies in the Elephant and the returning Ox. She sows dissension by helping the Lion fall in love with the Leopard's wife. Taking advantage of the Leopard's absence (he is travelling to the land of men, with a message intended for their king) the Lion seduces, kidnaps, rapes, the Leopard's wife. Upon his return the Leopard accuses the Lion of perfidy and treason. Only a duel between the Leopard and the Lynx (a mythical animal who will represent the Lion) can establish the truth of this accusation. The duel takes place once more the Fox plays a sinister role: a few words she whispers to the Lynx during the duel demoralize him and make it possible for the Leopard to kill him. The duel, however, has exhausted the Leopard and now the Lion slays him without too much trouble. Then the Fox proceeds to get rid of other animals occupying high positions at court, such as the Wolf, the Serpent and the Ox: she will now be the Lion's only adviser. The next step for her is now at hand: she will plot the Lion's death and offer the crown to the Elephant, an old friend.

The Elephant, however, hesitates. Murder is not something he can contemplate easily. Besides he suspects that sooner or later the Fox will betray him too. He then thinks of a subterfuge: he makes the Fox repeat the outline of her plot in the presence of two witnesses, the Peacock and the Hare, claiming that the secret pact will thus be reinforced and made more «legal». The Fox falls into the trap. The Lion frightens the two witnesses into revealing the truth, and realizing at last the Fox's perfidy kills her. Thus ends *The Book of Beasts*: it goes without saying that the most interesting of the characters created by Lull is the Fox, a truly diabolical heroine whose constant scheming may

remind us of the characters of Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Moreover, the psychological landscape with its labyrinths of plots and counter-plots, intrigue, seduction, makes the book a forerunner of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and, as mentioned before, Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

The book's structure is also worth mentioning. After a Preface or Introduction in which Felix, the witness to the tale, appears briefly and is told by two itinerant monks about the impending election of a king by the animals assembled near-by, the real story begins. We assume that Felix is now a witness of the intrigues and dramas that take place in the animal kingdom, yet since he does not appear in this section of the book we tend to forget about him. Perhaps he has become invisible. In any case his role is now that of the omniscient author of a novel. We are told not only about the external actions of the main characters, but also about their inner thoughts and motivations. The unfolding action, however, is interrupted time and again by the «secondary fables», or *exemples* told by one of the animals and encapsulated within the main fable. This structure reminds us of the *Arabian Nights* which Llull knew well (Armand Llinarès, in his excellent preface to the modern French version of the *Book of the Beasts* points out that one of these *exemples* can be traced to the *Arabian Nights*). This is also basically the structure of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Thus Llull's book can be seen as a bridge between the older Oriental books structured along the «principle of encapsulation» and the Western European works that will follow the same system of organization.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that both the structure and the materials of Llull's book owe much to the influence of the Orient. The great Spanish critic Menéndez y Pelayo was wrong in his assumption that the French *Roman de Renart* had influenced Llull's book. Such an influence, if it exists at all, does not go beyond the name of the cunning main character, Na Renard. The main source of materials, especially of «secondary fables», is the Oriental *Kalilah wa-Dimna*.

A comparison between the Oriental source and the Catalan text shows many similarities but also important differences. Dimna, the clever jackal who stirs up trouble between the Lion and the Ox, is obviously the inspiration for Llull's Na Renard. Yet Llull's book is better organized, with a main plot that is wellbuilt and full of suspense. Llull's book is a new building in which old building materials have been used. It manages to be both didactic and slightly cynical. It makes us think occasionally of a detective novel, perhaps an early Agatha Christie novel. Clues abound but mostly go undetected. Many characters appear to be guilty but are not. Finally the guilty character, Na Renard, has made the Lion become suspicious of so many of his court advisers that most of the important animals have been either killed by the Lion or exiled. Ironically the very success of the Fox is her downfall, since at the end only the Fox is the plausible traitor, and the Lion is forced to suspect her almost in spite of himself, compelled by the very situation created by the too clever Fox.

In other words, Llull has found the literary devices that create suspense and that many other authors will use successfully in modern times. These devices on the whole cannot be detected in the Oriental sources of Llull's book. Moreover, Llull's observations are always backed by a sound psychology and by sophisticated sociological and political observations. Llull knows all about daily life in feudal courts and is aware of the fact that loyalty to the feudal lord, unquestioned and unquestionable loyalty, is the solid foundation of society, the very essence of communal life, while treason is the blackest of crimes. When the traitorous Fox is punished at the end of the book everybody, including the modern reader, breathes a sigh of relief.

Until the very end, however, the text unfolds in a climate of deceit, cynicism, brutality, of what we would today call *Realpolitik*. The *Book of the Beasts* is thus, on the whole, the opposite pole (and the complement) of another book by Llull, the *Book of the Order of Chivalry*, in which ethical principles and correct

behavior are emphasized from the very beginning. Llull's realistic approach to courtly life is grounded upon long years of experience and we may suspect on occasion the presence of autobiographical elements. Thus when the Lion sends two messengers, the Leopard and the Lynx, to carry a message to the King of Men, they must wait many days before they are admitted to the royal presence. Llinarès comments:

Lulle a peut-être en mémoire un fait personnel. A propos de Philippe le Bel, R. Fawtier note: «...l'Ambassadeur du Roi d'Aragon, écrivant à son maître au sujet d'une affaire qu'on l'avait chargé de poursuivre à la Cour de France, déclare que le Roi est enfermé à Poissy depuis trois jours avec son conseil...» (*Hist. Universelle*, Paris, 1957, II, p. 863).⁴

An intertextual reading of *The Book of the Beasts* and *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* shows that during his long literary career Llull could handle realism, irony and cynicism on one hand, and on the other idealism and idealization. The simultaneous presence of such contradictory materials will give birth in Renaissance times to two masterpieces, the *Celestina* and *Don Quixote* (and by the way it seems to me that *Don Quixote* cannot be fully understood if we do not read first, or at the same time, Llull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry*).

To sum up: I agree with Anthony Bonner, who in his Preface to the excellent Princeton anthology of Llull texts points out that the most important contribution made by Llull can be found in his logic, his *Ars* (in the diverse versions he elaborated). But if Llull's *Ars* is the main dish of the intellectual feast he offers, the *Book of the Beasts* is undoubtedly a most delicious dessert.

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⁴ Llinarès, *op. cit.*, p. 113, n. 13.

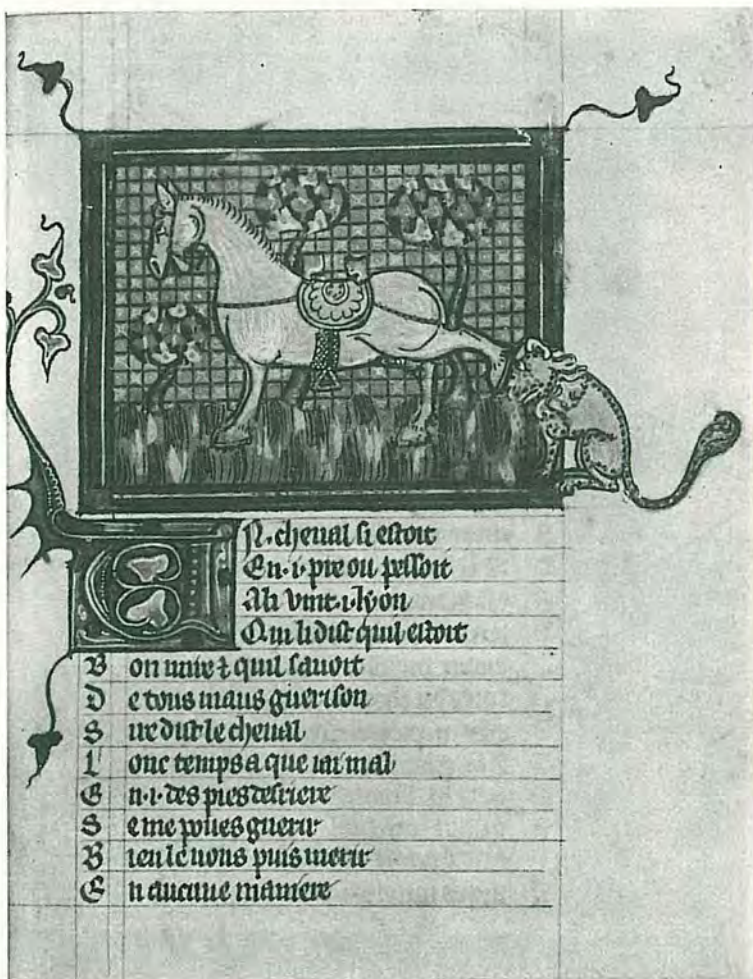
ou maufes nait l'ord' p'ou
 de la nature au lion.



Dors est q' p'imes v' dios
 de la nature dou lion
 li ons est vne bieste fiere
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 li lions lisi est vassaus
 C'ascune v' ens' au'ay dire
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A lion.

Miniature from Guillaume Le Clerc, *Bestiaire* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. fr. 14970).



A horse and a Lion.

Miniature from Richard de Fournival *Bestiaire d'amour* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. fr. 15213).

7 puis apres viles ouurer

6 tant bien i porres recouurer

la nature et loifant



elolifant ne deuo pas

la pole tenera gas

6 est la g'noirs beste k'out

7 lu plus g'nt fes poutoir

7 siest sage et entendable

7 en bataille couuena ble

An elephant.

Miniature from Guillaume Le Clerc, *Bestiaire* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. fr. 14970).

In the following translation of *The Book of the Beasts* we reproduce seven line drawings illustrating the 1261 edition of *El libro de Calila e Digna*, from J. E. Keller and P. Kinkade, *Iconography in Medieval Spanish Literature* (Lexington, 1984).