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Rhyme and Reason in Jaume Roig's Spill **Thomas R. Hart**

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RHYME AND REASON IN JAUME ROIG'S *SPILL*

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The first thing a reader notices in Jaume Roig's *Spill* is its verse form: four-syllable lines, more than 16,000 of them, arranged in rhyming couplets. Martí de Riquer considers Roig's choice of meter unfortunate: "Al meu entendre, el gran error de Jacme Roig fou escriure el *Spill* en vers, i precisament en aquest vers tan curt. [...] Si hagués escrit la seva obra en prosa, avui la llegiríem amb molt més gust" (242). Rosanna Cantavella, too, believes that "La redacció en noves rimades tetrasil·làbiques, i la larga extensió [...] n'han dificultat sempre la intel·lecció, fins al punt que avui dia segueix essent una de les peces del nostre segle d'or menys conegudes pels lectors —i a desgrat de les edicions recents" (40). Roig's contemporaries and their immediate successors seem not to have been troubled by his tetrasyllables. There are three sixteenth-century editions, two printed in the author's native Valencia (1531, 1561) and one in Barcelona (1561).

For Riquer, Roig's choice of verse form is a major reason why the *Spill* is "molt sovint de difícil lectura per raó de la complicada ordenació de paraules i supressió de partícules a què l'autor es veu obligat, cenyit a tan estretes condicions narratives" (242). I believe that the difficulty of the text comes largely from Roig's choice of unfamiliar words rather than from his departures from conventional syntax. Hyperbaton is rare; the omission of the subordinating conjunction *que* in sentences like "trobí cumplia / los trenta-i-dos" and "ella tenia / una cosina; / tantost barrina / fos muller mia," both from the beginning of Book 2, Part 1 (lines 1960-61, 1988-91), not only poses no difficulties but also helps to speed the narrative tempo. The popularity of the *Spill* may have been achieved not despite but because of its language. Roig invites his readers to admire his skill in handling a difficult meter:

noves rimades,
comediades,
aforismals,
facecials. (Preface, Part 4; lines 681-84)

Perhaps readers is not the right word: the *Spill* was composed toward the end of the 1450s, before the printing revolution, and must have been intended as much for listeners as for readers.

Although the end of a sentence invariably comes at the end of a line of verse, it does not usually come at the end of a couplet. In a

sample passage, the narrator's account of his first marriage (Book 2, Part 1; lines 1955-3145), the sentence ends in the middle of the couplet about three times as often as at the end. Syntax and rhyme constantly work against one another.

Like other medieval writers, Roig frequently expands his text by using the rhetorical device of *amplificatio*. He is especially fond of the type of amplification called *divisio*, division into kinds or classes. His list of types of women at the beginning of Part 3 of the Preface is a good example:

Doncs dic que totes,
de qualque stat,
color, edat,
llei, nació,
condició,
grans e majors,
txiques, menors,
jóvens e velles,
lleges e belles,
malaltes, sanes,
les cristianes,
juïes, mores,
negres e llores,
roges e blanques,
dretes e manques,
les geperudes,
parleres, mudes,
franques, catives,
quantes són vives,
qualssevol sien,
tot quant somnien
ésser ver creen. (412-33)

In "jóvens e velles, / lleges e belles," the juxtaposition of *velles* and *lleges* suggests that both terms describe the same persons, while the rhyme connects the contrasting terms *velles* and *belles*, which are pronounced alike in many Catalan dialects. Most lines present opposing groups: "malaltes, sanes," "parleres, mudes." Sometimes a single term fills an entire line: "les cristianes," "les geperudes." The meter permits, or forces, the poet to favor sometimes polysyndeton, sometimes asyndeton. Although the subject *totes* in the first line is separated from its verb *creen* in the last by more than two dozen nouns in apposition, the sentence does not present a disorderly world but a world that lends itself to classification in many different ways. The passage is built on the proposition that, although there are many different types of women, all are alike in their refusal to act reasonably.

The narrator reinforces this proposition by repeating the subject ("quantes són vives, / qualssevol sien") and by making all the nouns govern a single verb, the rhetorical device of hypozeuigma.

Another passage, near the beginning of Book 3, Part 1, is constructed in the same way but is developed more elaborately. The speaker, who appears to the narrator in a dream, is Solomon. His 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11.3), whom he groups together as "mil enemigues," have given him an encyclopedic knowledge of his subject:

Tota llur çuna,
 llei, art e manya,
 pràtica stranya,
 hipocresia
 e ronceria,
 te vull mostrar
 e declarar
 curt, en semblances.
 Per llurs usances
 així diverses
 e tan perverses
 obres e manyes,
 són alimanyes;
 serp tortuosa
 són e rabosa,
 mona, gineta,
 talp, oreneta,
 mussol, putput,
 gall, cutibut,
 aranya ab tela,
 tavà, mustela,
 vespa, alacrà,
 e rabiós cà,
 la sangonera
 e vermenera,
 mosca e grill,
 llebre, conill,
 drac calcatrís,
 tir basalís,
 vibra parida
 e cantarida,
 la onsa parda
 e lleoparda,
 lloba, lleona,
 la escurçona.
 Són llop de mar,
 lo peix mular,
 drac e balena,

polp e serena,
de milà coa. (7686-7725)

Solomon suggests both that some women are like one animal, some like another, and also that an individual woman may behave like different animals at different times, but always in order to further her own ends. The list juxtaposes real animals and imaginary ones: dragon and whale, octopus and mermaid. Some have not been identified (the *cutibut*); the hoopoe (*putput*) may have been included simply because its name is comic. Because Roig's verse line is so short, the reader hardly has an opportunity to appreciate individual metaphors. There is no time to wonder how a woman is like a cricket or a mole, although medieval readers would have had no difficulty in finding reasons for comparing her to a vixen, a wasp, a scorpion, or a mad dog. Roig's technique is like a sestina in reverse, offering a series of new words of more or less similar or contrasting meanings, rather than the same words in new and surprising combinations. The overall impression is one of speed and of inexhaustible verbal facility. The list has something of the quality of the classifications in Borges's imaginary Chinese encyclopedia.

In other passages, the dominant trope is not metaphor but metonymy. The narrator seems fascinated by lists of material things. Thus, he complains that his first wife and her friends spend their evenings at the baths, where they eat and drink at his expense:

perdius, gallines,
pollets petits,
juleps, solsits,
ous ab gingebre,
los dus ab pebre;
grec e clarea
sense perea;
la malvesia
per cortesia
en gobellets;
los artalets,
no'ls hi preaven,
e s'hi ampraven
pegats de llambre,
benjuí, ambre,
aigües, almesç;
feia fer fresc
molt citronat,
carabassat,
prou gingebrons,
e canyelons,

fin tartugat
e caponat
en lletovari. (2660-83)

The items are not mentioned for their own sake but because, as Roman Jakobson says of Boris Pasternak, "images of the external world function as contiguous reflections, or metaphorical expressions" of a self (307). Passages such as this one have led some readers of the *Spill* to speak of Roig's realism, though of course there are other reasons for doing so, most obviously the references to people and events in Valencia, some of which are placed incongruously in the mouth of Solomon (Book 3, Part 1).

Although Jaume Roig is fond of amplification by a division into kinds or classes, he also knows how to tell a story briefly and effectively. Many sentences are so short that he is able to fit them into a single four-syllable line:

Un jorn plorava.
Dix-li: -Per què?
-Oi, per ma fe
no plor per res.
Dic: -Queucom és.
Dix: -Bé'm fartau!
Per què'm matau?
Llexau-me estar. (2144-51)

Roig divides his material effectively between scene and summary, often indicating the difference by using the imperfect tense in opposition to the preterite or the historical present to show that one action stands for a series of similar actions. Sometimes he combines telling and showing, using dialogue to suggest that he is reproducing a particular scene while assigning the words spoken to a group of persons rather than an individual and introducing the quotation with an imperfect tense:

Dilluns següent,
com fom dinats,
los convidats
tots se'n partien
e sols me dien:
-Gràcies grans,
e molts infants
vos done Déu;
si res voleu,
io só tot vostre,
si bé no ho mostre:

del que sé fer,
al menester
manau de mi. (2308-21)

Sometimes Roig collapses the distinction between scene and summary by introducing a bit of dialogue with an imperfect tense, suggesting that the same conversation occurred not once but many times:

Aprés rallava;
si io callava,
no responent,
deia: -Dolent,
¿só endiablada
o só orada?
No'm responeu?
Mal esclateu! (2363-70)

At other times he erases the distinction between scene and summary by using the present tense, which in Catalan, as in other romance languages, may refer either to single actions or to habitual ones:

La novençana
romàs ufana;
com pagó vell
mirant-se bell,
roda ben alta,
dels peus sa falta
nunca mirant. (2325-31)

In all these cases, Roig produces what Gérard Genette calls iterative narrative, narrating once what happened *n* times (116). But though he often uses one type of Genette's pseudo-iterative narrative, which uses "a singular event to illustrate an iterative norm by serving as an example ('Thus, once ...')," (39) he never uses the other type in which a singular event is presented as an exception ("('Once, however ...')") (39). In the *Spill*, women always behave badly.

Although Roig's narrator often lets us see his wife act and hear her speak, he never goes beyond her actions and words to suggest what is in her mind or how she might justify her actions, as Chaucer does in the self-revelations of the Wife of Bath in her Prologue, which incorporates a great many of the motifs found in the *Spill*. The actions of the narrator's wife are sometimes foolish and self-defeating, but they are always evil and always presented without explanation as the result of the kind of person she is. The narrator never tries to explain how she became that kind of person by telling us about her past life: since all women are alike, her personal story is irrelevant.

Roig treats women a good deal more harshly than Juan Ruiz had done in the *Libro de buen amor* a hundred years earlier. Ruiz's Archpriest is an attractive figure in part because of his enormous vitality, his evident pleasure in pursuits that many readers also find pleasurable. Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, he repeatedly justifies his actions by selective quotations from the Scriptures and from Aristotle. Unlike her, however, he realizes that his conduct is not irreproachable. We may suppose that he himself sees the weakness of his arguments and finds them less convincing than he would like them to be. He does not try to deceive his readers but tries simply to excuse his own errors, though, this, of course, leads him repeatedly into self-deception.

Roig's narrator in the *Spill* is very different. Unlike the Archpriest and the Wife of Bath, he is never driven by sexual desire. The narrator does not present himself as attracted by women; his reasons for deciding to marry in Book 2 have nothing to do with sexual desire, much less with love for an individual woman. His account of his youth in Book 1 says nothing about his being attracted to women. In the *Spill* there is no such thing as a happy marriage, while Juan Ruiz allows us to suppose that don Melón and doña Endrina live happily ever after. The narrator undertakes his first marriage because of the promise of a rich dowry, which turns out to be non-existent, and at the insistence of his godfather's wife, who thinks she can profit by persuading him to marry her cousin (lines 1978-87). He undertakes his third marriage, to a widow, at the suggestion of a priest, who reminds him that marriage is a sacrament and that he is getting older:

No ignorau
que'l casament
és sacrament
per Déu manat
e ordenat
dins Paraís.
Per ço us avís
per caritat.
Ja la mitat
teniu del temps;
a veles, remes:
vos ve vellea. (4222-33)

At the beginning of Book 3, now a widower, he decides to marry again so that he will have an heir:

com no tenia
ni'm romania
algun hereu,
lo temps tan breu

de poca vida
 a mi convida
 prengués muller,
 sols per haver
 o fill o filla. (6415-23).

As before, the narrator makes his decision on purely rational grounds, though this time, dissuaded by Solomon, he does not follow through with his plan.

Riquer insists that the *Spill* is not meant to be funny: "No oblidem que el *Spill* no és escrit amb humor, sinó seriosament, i si alguns dels seus episodis resulten divertits i pintorescos, això és purament marginal o accidental, car el qui hi val i hi té pes és la crua diatriba i l'exasperada virulència" (239). I am more inclined to agree with Josep Romeu that Roig's work "tan sols emmiralla una part de la vida, la més sòrdida, tot destacant-ne els trets més grotescos i més mereixedors de sàtira. No és tragèdia, tanmateix, sinó divertit i escèptic espectacle contemplat per un home que torna de tot, però sense amarguesa, i que entén que la vida humana no és més que una comèdia absurda" (91). Rosanna Cantavella similarly observes that "la crítica al sexe femení és tan exagerada [...] que no podem considerar que Roig militàs cabalment en el que anava escrivint. Sens dubte aqueixes exageracions, aquelles anècdotes esgarrifoses, no pretenien més que entretenir d'una manera plaent, i no poden llegir-se més que amb el somriure [...] als llavis" (161). The "detalls verament repugnants" (229) that Riquer notes in the narrator's account of his first wife in the *Spill* may have seemed laughable to fifteenth and sixteenth-century readers. There is plenty of evidence that Cervantes's contemporaries laughed at material that many people today find disgusting, like the scene in which Don Quijote and Sancho vomit after drinking *el bálsamo de Fierabras* (Part 1, chapter 18).

There is more than a hint that the narrator is responsible for his own misfortunes in his inability or refusal to make his wife obey him. Hortensio and Lucentio in *The Taming of the Shrew* are clearly comic figures because they are unable to control their wives, and the same can be said of the protagonist of the *Spill*, at least in his first marriage. Though we need not take too seriously the narrator's claim that all women are evil, we may suppose that Roig, like almost all his contemporaries, believed that the goodness, happiness, and dignity of every being consists in obeying its natural superior and ruling its natural inferiors. When it fails in either part of this twofold task we have disease or monstrosity in the scheme of things until the peccant being is either destroyed or corrected. One or the other it will certainly be; for by stepping out of its place in the system (whether it

step up like a rebellious angel or down like an uxorious husband) it has made the very nature of things its enemy. It cannot succeed. (Lewis 72)

Roig's narrator is a comic rather than a tragic figure.

Rosanna Cantavella points out that a large part of Roig's book is devoted to religious themes: "de l'apartat a què l'autor dóna major importància, la lliçó de Salomó o llibre tercer —uns nou mil versos—, les parts segona i tercera estan dedicades a temes religiosos en general [...] i a la Mare de Déu en particular, amb un total d'uns cinc mil versos" (159). She demonstrates also that virtually every detail of Roig's attack on women, including the incidents of the narrator's life, is found in many other texts. Neither Roig's overt didacticism and inclusion of much devotional material nor his repetition of familiar themes would have made it less attractive to his contemporaries and their sixteenth-century successors. They may have been attracted as much by the traditional subject matter of his book as by its unusual verse form. C. S. Lewis notes that "medieval readers [...] enjoyed books that told them what they already knew" (200) and Keith Whinnom reminds us that the real best-sellers in the Spanish Golden Age were religious works; Fray Luis de Granada's *Libro de la oración* and *Guía de pecadores* were reprinted more often in the sixteenth century than *La Celestina* or *La Diana* (194).

Both Roig's inclusion of so much religious material and his misogyny hinder the appreciation of his book by modern readers. Few people now read devotional literature and Roig's attitude toward women will be rejected, with good reason, by many readers. There is the additional danger that readers unfamiliar with his arguments may think them idiosyncratic and personal rather than the accepted commonplaces they were. This does not mean, of course, that Roig himself necessarily accepted them at face value; Riquer observes that "el narrador del *Spill* és un personatge que no pot ésser identificat amb Jacme Roig, [...] home que només es casà una vegada, amb Isabel Pellisser, de la qual servà un tendre record i amb la qual tingué sis fills" (239). For modern readers, and perhaps also for fifteenth and sixteenth-century ones, the appeal of Roig's book lies in his delight in the resources of language and his skill in deploying them. In the *Spill*, the rhyme is the reason.

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