

# THE LANGUAGE OF RAMON LLULL AND HIS LITERARY WORK

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**R**amon Llull is commonly attributed a number of peculiarities. This is the case of the unusual choice for his time of a popular language in which to transmit a message of salvation in a philosophical tone and of the resort to literature to direct this message to a public without higher education. To do justice to Llull's greatness, I shall present these two points through a reflection on his cultural context, singling out Llull's links with the society he lived in instead of stressing the contradictions. Let us start with his choice of Catalan in writing works such as the *Llibre del Gentil i dels tres savis*, the *Llibre dels principis de medicina* and the *Art demostrativa*. These works predate Llull's decisive stay in Paris between 1288 and 1289 and form part of his initial programme. The *Gentil* is a book about religious polemic and belongs outside the university culture governed by ecclesiastical Latin. In it Llull pays equal attention to converting the infidel and to stirring up the luke-warm Christian. Remember that between 1271 and 1274 Ramon had written the enormous *Llibre de contemplació en Déu*, a mystic's encyclopaedia four times the length of *Don Quixote*. Guided by a radical pragmatism and not following any literary or national guidelines, Llull chose the language of the infidels and started writing this book in Arabic. The fact that not a single page of this original version has reached us does not



MINIATURE FROM MANUSCRIPT BR52, FALSELY ATTRIBUTED TO RAMON LLULL, KEPT AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY IN FLORENCE

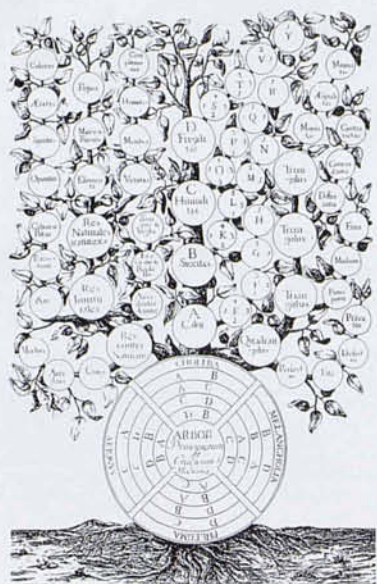
mean that we should disbelieve Llull when he describes the surviving Catalan version as an adaptation of the earlier Arabic one. In fact, after the infidels (present all around him; Mallorca was occupied by James I in 1229), those most in need of his message of moral reform were the Christians: Arabic for the infidel public, Catalan for the Catalans, who in turn could pass the message on to other Christians or Arabs. What is so extraordinary here is not the choice of languages but the fact that a layman without a university education should have felt driven to win over Moors and Christians for the Truth.

Why did Llull write about religion in Catalan if Saint Thomas did so in Latin?

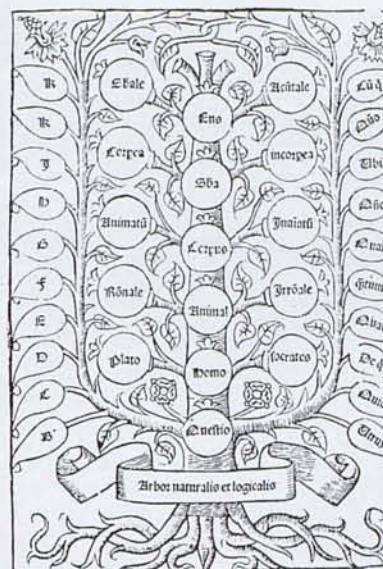
The reason is that Llull wasn't a priest; the mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans), to which Thomas of Aquinas belonged, dominated the universities in the second half of the thirteenth century and extended their evangelizing web into all levels of Western society. The mendicants used Latin in the university and the vernacular with the men and women in the street. Remember that Saint Francis's *Cantico di fratre Sole* is cited as the first example of Italian literature. The mendicants also travelled to the land of the infidels to preach in the local languages.

Llull was a self-financed free-lance, but his horizons were those of his age: he was one of the "religious laymen" who all over Europe in the thirteenth century joined the fight to bring the faith into people's lives. Some of these laymen were canonized, such as Eleazar de Sabran, a Provençal nobleman who chose to live a marriage of continence. Others organised themselves in parareligious orders like the Beguines ("poor and spiritual" men and women). Others excelled at converting Jews in public debates, like the Genoese merchant Inghetto Contardo. Finally there were those who ended up involved in heterodoxies of varying perilousness, like the "Lullists" of the fourteenth century who were fought by the inquisitor Nicolau Eimeric.

Writing in Catalan about medicine between 1280 and 1300 is not a com-



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NATURAL AND LOGICAL TREE (WOOD-ENGRAVING).  
VALENCIA 1512

plete rarity. There is a healthy repertory of translations into the other Romance languages, partly datable to the time of King James II of Aragon (1296-1327): the *Articella*, in the Salernitan tradition; the *Canon* of Avicenna; the *Llibre d'Almansor*, of Rases; etc. The studies by Lluís Garcia-Ballester and Michel McVaugh, editors of Arnau de Vilanova, have dug up the treasury of the "natural" and "medical" knowledge available to the Catalan-speaking urban population along with an understanding of the social function of doctors, surgeons and barbers. The importance Llull gives to medicine in his *Doctrina pueril* can only be related to the fact that in Montpellier, which then formed part of the Kingdom of Mallorca, there was an active faculty in this field, but we mustn't forget that there were surgeons during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as Guillem Corretger, who were great translators into Catalan.

Finally, writing the *Art demostrativa* in Catalan is another case altogether. Here what is so extraordinary is the Art as a system of thought and especially this early version, which uses algebraic language to discuss logic and theology. Although Llull wrote in Catalan, he had versions of his work made in other languages (Latin, as well as Occitan or French). Of the more than two hundred and fifty works by Llull, the majority have

a Latin version, especially the theological and philosophical works. Of these, it is even frequently the case, especially after 1290, that only the Latin version exists: *Liber de ascensu et descensu intellectus*, *Liber de fine*, *Ars generalis ultima*, etc. Llull was therefore a multilingual intellectual, without a trace of linguistic subordination in his attitude. He was, after all, the son of colonizers. However, Llull's relationship with his mother tongue was no ordinary one; we know that before his "conversion to penitence" in 1263, Ramon was a more or less typical courtier and troubador—in other words, he wrote adulterous love songs.

Llull's rejection has nothing to do with his later relations with poetry in particular and literature in general. For this convert, anything to do with literature was superfluous and therefore unbecoming unless subjected to rigorous renewal. The mendicants, though, already had the formula for the transmutation of literature to morality; poetry is redeemed through praise of the Creator (see Saint Francis), fiction becomes a repertory of universally applicable stories with educational ends. This was what was referred to as "example", and examples were the high point of the sermons directed at the people by official preachers.

Llull made the effort to recover quality fiction for religious teaching, hence the novel *Blanquerna*, in which the biography of

the protagonist and his parents sustains a considerable number of different stories. He also attempted a book of spiritual journeys, the *Fèlix*, which in fact provides the front for an encyclopaedia. Llull used the examples from the mendicant tradition in all sorts of ways, reducing them to proverbs and maxims, making up new and outlandish versions, combining them in every possible way, theorizing on how to create them indefinitely, etc. It is worth mentioning the *Arbre exemplifical*, which is a quite unique and extraordinary book. In fact, after the thirteen-nineties, Llull abandoned full-length fiction and took up the art of the sermon in its theory and practice (*Rhetorica nova*, *Liber de predicatione*, *Llibre de virtuts e pecats*, etc.).

In his poetry Llull was even more creative, because he did not just redeem it through the praise of God and the Virgin but returned to the use of the first person to narrate in verse the misfortunes of a certain Ramon de Mallorca who had devoted himself to the cause of God and the conversion of the infidels, thanks to an Art he had received from God. In his propagandistic assumption of the authorship of his own work, he makes an example of a controlled biography embellished by the use of poetry. This is the *Cant de Ramon: amidst vines and fennel / Love seized me. God made me love.*