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Translations:

Isabel de Villena
Kathleen McNerney

Catalan Review, Vol. XV , No. 1 (2001), p. 151-153

TRANSLATIONS

Isabel de Villena (1430-1490), illegitimate daughter of the writer and noble Enric de Villena (1384-1434), changed her name from Elionor Manuel when she took religious vows at the age of fifteen. She lived and died at the Trinity Convent of Valencia during a period of great economic and cultural activity. As Abbess, she wrote *Vita Christi* in the 1480s in Catalan for the nuns in her convent. Her only known work, it was printed in Valencia by her successor, Aldonça de Montsoriu, at the request of Queen Isabel I.

Villena's work fits within the religious movement that inspired a number of other writers such as Thomas à Kempis, Ludolf of Saxony, and the catalan preacher Francesc Eiximenis, and is informed by patristic erudition. She enriches Biblical sources on the life of Christ with allegorical personifications, focusing especially on the activities of women and social classes, from peasants to the greatest nobles of her time, whom she knew well. Her style is direct and clear, far from the affected, exaggerated work of many of her contemporaries. She writes in the Valencian version of fifteenth-century Catalan. She also took part in the debate on the good or bad nature of women, challenging misogynistic arguments of many writers of her epoch and earlier. She and Christine de Pisan are both known to have refuted that long tradition

In writing about women to a female readership, Villena seems to be creating a system of interlocking cells within her community. In a book that falls within the tradition of the life and miracles of Christ, the real protagonists are the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Saint Anne, and other women from the Gospels. Her descriptions of the nobility are informed by her early courtly life at the side of Maria de Luna, wife of Alphonse the Magnanimous, and they are rich in details about dancing, music, protocol, fashion, and jewels. In contrast, she captures her sisters in the convent by dwelling at length on such tasks as sewing, child care, cooking, and cleaning. I have chosen the following passage for its depiction of a domestic scene, full of maternal love and neighborly affection as well as tension.

HOW THE WOMEN WHO WENT TO THE RIVER TO WASH ASKED
OUR LADY TO SEND HER SON WITH THEM TO WATCH OVER
THE CLOTHING

By the time Our Lord had reached the age of five or six, the women who washed their clothing in the river near Our Lady's house had developed a certain familiarity with her. Seeing her Son so gracious, humble, and well behaved, they greatly loved Him, and they asked several times if she would please allow them to take Him along to watch over the clothing they spread out to dry. With a heavy heart, not wishing to refuse the women, she told her Son to accompany them and to do as they wished. Our glorious Lord obeyed her gladly and spent the entire day in the sun, burning His divine face. Our pious Lady went to her door often to look out after Him, for she could not rest in any place without the sweet company of her beloved Son. When the clothing was dry, the women it belonged to folded it, and Our Lord helped

them with great pleasure. Seeing how gentle and obedient He was, they kept Him for a long spell. When the clothing was folded, they placed on His head as much as He could bear at such a tender age, and they carried the rest. Taking Him by His little hand, they led Him to their houses, where they relieved Our Lord of the load He was bearing and gave Him a bit of bread, placing some fruit in His little tunic. They returned Him to His mother's home, thanking her for the service her Son had done for them and praising how well brought up He was. They prayed that God would lend Him to them again for their enjoyment. Oh, Lord! With tender pity pierced the heart of Our Holy Mother as she listened to those women speak, knowing that they were unaware of the divine secrets that had been so completely revealed to her! After the women left, Our merciful Lord gave the bread and fruit he was carrying to His mother. Our Lady, her eyes filled with tears of love, embraced Him, saying: «Oh, my darling! You, who are King of kings and Treasure among divine riches, Creator and Lord of all things, you own creatures pay your work with a bit of bread fruit! Oh, My Lord! How much men owe to you, for it is for love of them that you allow yourself to be humiliated, submitting yourself to such extreme poverty!» And Our Lord and His mother often spoke at length of this humiliation.

COM LES DONES QUE VENIEN A LLAVAR AL RIU PREGAVEN LA SENYORA
MANÀS AL SEU FILL QUE ELS GUARDÀS LA ROBA¹

E com lo Senyor hagué atesa l'edat de cinc o sis anys, aquelles dones qui venien a llavar al riu, prop la casa de l'excel·lent Mare sua, començaren haver molta familiaritat ab sa senyoria; e, veent lo seu Fill així graciós e humil e ben criat, amaven-lo molt, e diverses vegades deien a sa excel·lència que fos de sa mercè manar al seu obedient Fill que els guardàs la roba que havien estesa a eixugar. E sa senyoria, ab molta dolor de cor, no gosant dir de no a les dites dones, manava al senyor Fill seu que anàs ab elles e fes lo que elles volien; e lo gloriós Senyor obeïa-la de molt bon grat e estava tot lo dia al sol cremant-se aquella sua divinal cara. E la Senyora piadosa eixia adés adés a la porta per mirar-lo, car en nengun lloc reposar no podia sense la dolça companyia de l'amat Fill seu. E com la roba era eixuta, les dones aquelles de qui era la plegaven, ajudant-los lo Senyor ab molt plaer; e elles, veent-lo tan benigne e de tan bon manament, servien-se d'ell molt llargament. E, com la roba era plegada, posaven-la-hi al cap tant com ne podia portar segons l'edat sua, e lo restant portaven elles. E, prenint-lo per la maneta, anaven a ses cases; e aquí descarregant lo Senyor, daven-li un tros de pa, posant-li en la faldeta una poca de fruita. E tornave-lo a la posada de la senyora Mare sua, regraciant a sa mercè lo servir que lo seu fill los havia fet, beneint-la del bon criament que donat li havia, pregant Deu que lo hi prestàs e li'n deixàs veure goig complit. O, Senyor! E quanta tendror de pietat travessava lo cor d'aquella santíssima Mare oint així parlar aquelles dones, coneixent que del tot ignoraven los

1. *Antologia de la prosa catalana*. A cura de Lluís Nonell. Barcelona: Selecta, 1957. 128-29.

secrets divinals a sa mercè llargament revelats! E partint-se'n les dones, lo clement Senyor donava a la sua mare lo pa e la fruita que portava. E la Senyora, ab llàgrimes de molta amor, l'abraçaven, dient: «-O, vida mia! I vós, que sou Rei dels reis e tresor de les riqueses divinals, creador e Senyor de totes coses, ab un trosset de pa vos paguen de vostres treballs les creatures vostres! O Senyor meu! I de quant vos resten obligats l'òs homens, car per amor d'ells vos sou tant humiliat, sotsmetent-vos a tan extrema pobrea!» E d'aquesta humiliació parlaven sovint lo Senyor e la mare sua molt llargament.

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