

Egil Kraggerud (red.): Johannes Nicolai. Biskop Jens Nilssøns latinske skrifter. Oslo-humanistene: Skrifter i utvalg 4. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 2004. Pp. 382. ISBN 82-15-00318-4.

Bokomtale ved Claes Gejrot

Bishop Jens Nilssøn of Oslo (1538–1600) stands out as one of the most important Norwegian writers of the 16th century. Sermons and other material directly related to his episcopal duties, written in Danish, have already been published by Norwegian scholars. In the present volume, his Latin writings are made available in modern editions and translations. The book is the result of the impressive efforts above all by the editor Egil Kraggerud, but also by a number of other Oslo scholars, who have taken part in the translation work.

The texts — verse and prose — all reflect the various fields that interested Jens Nilssøn. We find here didactic poems that show the bishop's knowledge of the astronomical achievements of the time (he was an acquaintance of the famous Tycho Brahe), learned biblical commentaries, and — on a more personal level — wedding poetry and elegies over loved ones as well as a short autobiographical piece.

On one hand, the scope of the contents and the erudite (often mythological) references in the texts make them typical writings of a learned man of this period. But on the other hand, as they tell us so much about the man himself and his family, they are also notable as original products.

The first text in the book was written in 1577. The poem *De portentoso cometa* (translated by Anne Katrine Frihagen and Bjørg Tosterud) consists of 106 verses — as all the poetry in the volume written in elegiac distichs. It alludes directly to Brahe's earlier observations (*De nova stella*, 1572) and conveys to the reader the widespread notion that the comet now seen was a sign of the sins and misery of the world.

This poem is followed by *Elegidion* (translated by Kraggerud). This interesting poem — which in spite of its title ('A Little Elegy') is almost 900 verses long — gives us glimpses of the author's private life and thoughts. The initial framework of the poem is the compulsory and exasperating episcopal visitation of distant parishes in the summer of 1581, but the narration reaches a dramatic turning point when the bishop is reached by terrible news from home: his beloved daughter (only three years old) has suddenly died. The large remaining part of the poem then reveals the mournful father and Bishop coming to terms with the old Christian problem of accepting what God has decided. In the first part, the modern reader is struck by fascinating

Latin renderings of the Norwegian landscape and peculiarities: as for instance in the description of the mountainous Tinn region (p. 60, v. 73–74 : *Est locus, aërias ubi Thinna paræcia rupes / inter et anfractus undique pressa iacet*), where we can see how in order to cross the snowy summits of *Gaustadfjellet* the inhabitants had to tie skis to their feet. As is suggested in the commentary, our writer cleverly borrows the Mercurian winged shoes — *talaria* — for this rare concept: *Attamen oppositis plantis talaria nectens / transit inoffenso per iuga celsa gradu* (ibid. v. 89–90). Also the relatively short piece printed after this poem, *Monodia* (with a translation by Hilde Sejersted and Kari Skard), is an example of Jens Nilssøn's lamenting poetry. Here, he mourns the death of his first wife in 1583.

We meet quite a different category in the set of writings called *Epideigma* and *Stikhidion* (with a translation by Frihagen and Tosterud), Bible commentaries in prose and in verse respectively. The prose text is a traditional *expositio* of the initial chapter of Genesis, intended for the use of pupils in Oslo. Not surprisingly, he takes the opportunity to educate his young readers in astronomical details, but he also adds some basic topographical and zoological facts (pp. 176–186). The 52 distichs that follow after the prose text repeat and emphasize important parts of Gen. 1–2. In the same field, the present volume also includes a lecture of 25 Latin pages exposing Gen. 1 (*In Genesis*, with a translation by Mette Heuch Berg and Nils Berg).

Idyllion and *Adversus calumniam hyperaspistes* (with translations by Sejersted and Skard) are poems written on the occasion of the author's second marriage (in 1586). The reading of the first one (258 verses) is heavily burdened by a multitude of Graeco-Roman mythological references, and it is only at the end of the learned poem that the author actually turns to his bride, Anna Glad (Lat. *Anna Læta*), who was only fifteen years old. He cannot resist the obvious possibilities of making puns: *et probitate sua curas mihi Læta molestas / leniet ac verbis officijsque pijs. // Viuat Læta mihi sociali fœdere iuncta / et paragat Lætos ambrosiosque dies* (p. 256, vv. 228–242). The brief (32 verses) but indeed furious poem that then follows stands in sharp contrast to the other text. The author's anger is directed at the malicious gossip and slander that his marriage to the young Anna seems to have caused. The slanderer is compared to rodents gnawing at the innocent (*insons*) bishop: *Insontem rodīs, sed frustra, dente maligno / eructans miris impia verba modis* (p. 258, vv. 13–14), but, in the end revenge will come: *Et conturbatos trepida formidine vultus / insons ridebit despicietque tuos* (p. 260, vv. 25–26).

The edition ends with the autobiographical *Sylvula* (translated by Kraggerud). In addition to these works, a couple of poems by other authors and a contemporary verse translation of one of the poetic works are also included (pp. 374–379).

The introductions to the separate texts and the following notes to the contents (all

in Norwegian) are valuable and in most cases they answer the questions that may be raised by a reader not familiar with Jens Nilssøn and his ideas. (Sometimes, though, the reader is left without explanations: e.g. *Wollinus* p. 244.) The notes also explain most of the references to Graeco-Roman mythology. The translations into Norwegian are printed parallel to the Latin texts. They are easy to use, and they are generally characterized by precision and fluency. In the introduction (p. 16) the editor declares that the translators have intended to follow the Latin texts closely, and this is true throughout the book with only a few exceptions (e.g. p. 348 where *Stafuang/er/* is left out of the translation).

In the short introductory part of the book the reader will also find the guiding principles for the Latin editions (pp. 13–16). As to normalizing the punctuation and orthography, the editor has wisely chosen a middle way with the ambition to simplify for the reader only where this is necessary. Although many of the orthographical inconsistencies that were of course typical of the time (cf. e.g. p. 66: *fædere* and p. 256: *fædere*) are preserved, the result is a printed Latin text that helps the reader to quickly grasp the syntax. A small detail might be mentioned here: The square brackets that on some occasions are used in the text need to be explained, for instance those enclosing a passage of 12 lines on pp. 342–344. The signs are perhaps added to show that the lines are a later addition, but as nothing is said about it, the reader cannot be certain.

Some critical notes have been placed directly below the Latin texts. Here we find information on the few certain misprints in the 16th-century prints that have been corrected by the editor. Furthermore, the editor has added a number of textual comments in a separate chapter (pp. 353–373). These are explanations of the sometimes complicated syntax, remarks on the vocabulary or on suspected printing errors. But we also find interesting discussions on parallels in classical and later texts. All the commentaries are very useful, but their presentation in the book is slightly irritating for the reader — especially before you have understood the system. If you want to check if there are any comments to a certain passage it is necessary to look up three separate sets of notes. Sometimes you meet only cross-references: For instance, note 16 in the translation on page 31 leads to the notes on the contents (on p. 38), and there it says ‘see n. to the Latin text’ (‘se n. til den lat. teksten’). Most readers would then look below the Latin text, but the comment referred to is instead found in the additional commentary on the Latin text, in this case on p. 354. (An additional problem for the reader in this case is that the commentary on p. 354 refers to the wrong line in the Latin text: line 26 instead of 25. Unfortunately, several line references to the first text seem to have been mixed up during the printing stage of the book.)

But these are minor matters. All in all, the present volume is a remarkable achievement. Admirably fulfilling its most important purpose — to present and explain to modern readers texts that display not only the learned writings and ideas of an Oslo humanist in the 16th century but also something of his private life and thoughts — it is a most welcome addition to our knowledge of Nordic Neo Latin.

Claes Gejrot, 1960, docent i latin, huvudredaktör för Svenskt Diplomatarium. E-post: claes.gejrot@riksarkivet.ra.se. Hans forskning har framför allt rört svenskt medeltidslatin och nylatin samt birgittinska texter och diplomatik. Publikationer bl.a. *Diarium Vadstenense: The Memorial Book of Vadstena Abbey* (1988, 1996), *Diplomata Novevallensia: The Nydala Charters 1172-1280* (1994), *Poems for the occasion (Neo-Latin Poetry from Seventeenth-Century Sweden*, med A. Ström, 1999), *Diplomatik och äkthet: Om medeltidsbrevens autenticitet – metoder och exempel (Arkiv, samhälle och forskning*, 2004), *Diplomatarium Suecanum* 7:6, 9:2–4, 10:3–4, 11:1 (1991–2006).
