Spotlight on Collections: Rare 15th Century German Manuscript

The publication recently of NLI Ms 32,513, entitled '*Defensorium inviolatae virginitatis beatae Mariae'*, is an event of some importance to the history of medieval European theology and (in particular) medieval art history, as well as cultural relations between medieval Ireland and the German lands. The text of the manuscript (which includes some Latin) consists of a translation from the Latin original into a late-medieval South German dialect of a series of propositions in defence of the inviolate virginity of the Virgin Mary.

The author of the original, an Austrian Dominican friar named Franz von Retz (1343-1427) taught theology in the University of Vienna. He appears to have written the work under consideration between 1400 and 1425. As might be expected at the period in question, the arguments employed are based not on any rigorous system of scientific investigation, but on marvels derived from classical antiquity, as well (allegedly) as the natural world. The thinking behind it is simple: if God permitted, or still permits, such wonders, he could surely have allowed Mary to remain a virgin before, during and after giving birth.

Fourteen other manuscript versions of the work are extant. However, the NLI's copy is unique, being a deluxe edition, containing thirty-eight illuminations in miniature. Not only are these of extraordinarily high quality, but in their natural depiction of both human and animal figures, as well as landscape, and their employment of perspective, they are astonishingly modern. Particularly striking are their brilliant colours, derived from rare and costly pigments. Stylistic features indicate that the illuminations are a product of the artistic school of Cologne and that the manuscript dates from around 1470.

Two of the 'exemplars' which the manuscript provides in support of von Retz's thesis, and the accompanying illuminations, focus on Irish natural wonders – a tree that produces birds (geese?) and a willow, ivy or oak the fruit of which produces wine. These serve as a reminder of Irish religious and cultural influence in the German lands, albeit by von Retz's time this was in steep decline.

Little or nothing is known concerning the provenance of the manuscript. It is thought, however, that it was presented around 1949 to the Director of the NLI, Dr Richard Hayes, by a donor who may have been a Catholic priest. The attention of the scholarly world was first drawn to it by Dr Noel Kissane, former NLI Keeper of Manuscripts, in his magisterial *Treasures from the National Library of Ireland* (Dublin, 1994). The fact that German scholars were previously unaware of this particular version of the work indicates that it had left Germany long before reaching its present home.

A facsimile of the manuscript, similar in all respects to the original, has been published by the NLI in collaboration with the German publishing house of Verlag, Mueller und Schindler, specialists in publication of high-grade facsimiles of illuminated medieval manuscripts. The facsimile is accompanied by two separate sets of ancillary volumes containing commentaries – in German and Spanish respectively – by three German art historians. In addition, both sets contain a foreword and introduction in English by (respectively) Aongus Ó hAonghusa, former NLI Director,

and Gerard Lyne, former NLI Keeper of Manuscripts. It was intended to publish a third ancillary volume in which the scholarly commentaries would appear in English, but this, unfortunately, had to be abandoned due to the refusal of the publishers to provide an English translation.

Gerard Lyne

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