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An Interview with Dr. John Esten Keller

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University of Kentucky

John E. Keller
University of Kentucky

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INTERVIEW

An Interview with Dr. John Esten Keller

The Ariel Staff is extremely proud to congratulate Dr. John E. Keller, our faculty advisor, recipient of a great honor this year. The King of Spain, through his Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has awarded Prof. Keller the Cross of the Order of Isabel La Católica, making him a Knight of the prestigious Order. Dr. Keller spoke with Ariel on aspects of his arduous, yet interesting, work in Spanish literature which earned him the condecoración from the grateful Spanish government.

ARIEL: Dr. Keller, Ariel congratulates you. We are very proud to have a Knight of the Order of Isabel La Católica as sponsor of our journal. Isn't it unusual for an American to receive this condecoración?

DR. KELLER: Yes, it is. I am also very proud to have this honor. Presently, only two people in Kentucky have been granted the Order. I understand that Mrs. C.V. Whitney received the medal for her work in the reconstruction of a castle in Spain.

ARIEL: Dr. Keller, the Spanish government is expressing its appreciation for your distinguished research and publications in peninsular medieval literature. Would you comment on some aspects of your work?

DR. KELLER: Since 1949, when I published a Motif-Index of Spanish Exempla at the University of Tennessee, I have done extensive work in the field of editing medieval cuentos published by the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas in Madrid. I have published nineteen books, some of which are critical editions of Spain's most important collections of medieval exempla. *El libro de los engafos* or *The Book of Wiles of Women* was the first of these, published in 1953. In 1958, the Consejo published my critical edition of *El libro de los gatos*, and later in 1961, a large volume of exempla, *El libro de los exemplos por a.b.c.*. In 1965 the Consejo published my critical edition of *Callia e Digna* (with Robert Linker), and in 1980 critical edition, *Barlaam and Josafat* (also with Robert Linker).

ARIEL: In 1969 you and Dr. J.R. Jones of U.K. translated Petrus Alfonsus' *Disciplina Clericalis*, *The Scholar's Guide*. Do you have other translations?

DR. KELLER: In 1977 my translation of Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor* (with Dr. Clark Keating) was published. Earlier, in 1964, I collaborated with Francisco Lopez Estrada in the edition and translation of *The Abencerraje*, published by the University of North Carolina Press. Lopez Estrada's edition and my translation appear on facing pages. With Dr. Alberta Seaver, retired U.K. professor, I translated Alonso Fernandez de Avellaneda's *Don Quijote*, which that author called the second volume to the *Quijote*. It was published in 1980 by the Juan de la Cueva Press at the University of Delaware.

ARIEL: Presently, you are one of the best known scholars in the field of the 13th century Cantigas of Alfonso X, and have lectured extensively on these. Would you tell us about that?

DR. KELLER: I have lectured at eighty universities and colleges on the Cantigas, and also at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Library of Congress, and the American Musicological Society. University students here as well as at Berkeley, Chicago, Virginia, Vassar, Duke, etc., and abroad — Oxford, Seville, Toronto, and Coimbra, have been interested.

ARIEL: Dr. Keller, your *Pious Brief Narrative in Medieval Castilian and Galician Verse*, U.K. Press, 1977, is proof of your research into Spanish medieval narrative other than exempla. We have all used your Twayne texts on Alfonso X, 1968, and Gonzalo de Berceo, 1972. Which of texts do you consider the most valuable to Spanish graduate students?

DR. KELLER: In terms of practical value, the most used text has been my *Brief History of Spanish Literature* (with N.B. Adams), of 1960, which was translated and published in Spain in 1964. It has been valuable because it is a short compendium designed for graduate students preparing for Qualifying Examinations. But the most "valuable" and most original text is my latest: *Iconography in Medieval Spanish Fiction*, U.K. Press, 1984, prepared in collaboration with Dr. Richard P. Kincade, Dean of Humanities at the University of Arizona. Incidentally, *Pious Brief Narrative* will soon appear in Spanish translation with much new material added.

ARIEL: Dr. Keller, we know you have published numerous articles in prestigious journals such as *Speculum*, *Kentucky Foreign Language Quarterly*, *Hispania*, *Romance Notes*, *Symposium*, *Kentucky Review*, and others. Do you have other publications we have not mentioned?

DR. KELLER: I have some sixty articles in a number of journals here and abroad, and of course, I have written numerous book reviews, and introductions or forewords to a number of books. At times I have also served as editor or have been on the editorial boards of various journals - *Speculum*, *Hispania*, *Crítica Hispánica*, *Studia Humanitatis*, and others.

ARIEL: Dr. Keller, what honors have you received in this country for this remarkable scholarly work?

DR. KELLER: In 1982 I was granted an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters by Plymouth State College of the University of New Hampshire. Two years earlier, in 1980, my colleagues had honored me with a beautiful volume, *Medieval, Renaissance and Folkloric Studies in Honor of John Esten Keller*, ed. by Prof. J.R. Jones. Also, since 1964, I have been corresponding member of the Miguel Cervantes Institute of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas. In 1972 I was appointed corresponding member of the Hispanic Society of America.

ARIEL: Although you have been extremely busy with all your research, you still spend a great deal of time working with graduate students, encouraging them to write and publish in the future. How many dissertations have you directed?

DR. KELLER: Altogether I have directed forty-one dissertations, eighteen of those at the University of Kentucky since 1968, twenty-seven at the University of North Carolina and one at the University of Arizona.

ARIEL: Are you a University of Kentucky graduate?

DR. KELLER: My wife and I are native Lexingtonians. In 1940 I received my undergraduate degree from U.K. and also a Master of Arts in 1942. At that time, U.K.

did not have a doctoral program in Spanish literature, so I went to Chapel Hill where I earned a Ph.D. in 1946. From 1946-47, I was assistant professor here at U.K., left, and taught at the University of Tennessee from 1947-50. I went back to North Carolina and taught there for eighteen years before returning forever to U.K. in 1967.

ARIEL: Dr. Keller, you literally built the Spanish Department at this university when you returned from Chapel Hill in 1967. Some people may not be familiar with the circumstances. Would you comment on that?

DR. KELLER: I couldn't have built much without my colleagues. When U.K. offered us the excellent opportunity to build up a department here, I came, and with me came six professors: Dr. Margaret Jones (our present chairman), Dr. J.R. Jones, Dr. William McCrary (now deceased), Dr. Daniel Reedy (who is still teaching, and is also Associate Dean of the Graduate School), Dr. Sara Strum and Dr. Harlan Strum, who later moved to the University of Massachusetts. This department is young, but since 1967, we have labored to make it one of the top programs in the United States.

ARIEL: Dr. Keller, recently dubbed Knight of the Order of Isabel La Católica by King Juan Carlos of Spain, again we congratulate you for this great honor you have received. We feel you have amply deserved it for you have not only labored in scholarly endeavors, but also you cared and helped the graduate students beyond professorial duties, as mentor and friend. Thank You!