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Autobiography in the *Libro de buen amor*: Was the Poet's Use of the *Pamphilus* Suggested by the *De vetula*?

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To what genre can one assign the *Libro* as a whole? Is there a preexisting type? Or is the poem perhaps *sui generis*? On the one hand we have episodes and themes which sometimes lack for mutual compatibility; in places one even notices the presence of contextual confusion. On the other hand we have an autobiographical pretense which runs the length of the work and provides—with varying degrees of success—a connecting link over most of the ensemble. General unity, in short, would seem both present and absent at the same time. The critical reader is therefore bound to wonder: was the formation of the *Libro* unique, or was there a precedent?

The first commentator to make a serious attempt to fix the *Libro* within a previously existing literary tradition was Américo Castro.¹ According to this former dean of Hispanists an adequate interpretation of the Archpriest's poem must proceed from the premise that the work is a compound of Western and Arabic elements, the creation of an artist who was familiar with both sides of the cultural divide. And doubtless to some extent the proposition is sound: for clear evidence of the presence of Islam in the *Libro* one need only consider the poet's use of the *zéjel* in sts 115-120 (and elsewhere), his use of Arabic expressions in 1509-1512, and his assessment of musical instruments in 1516-1517.

The proposals made by Castro concerning the role of Islamic philosophy and literature in the *Libro* are many and manifold. Of interest for us here, however, are his two contentions that 1) the autobiography in the *Libro* is of Arabic origin, and 2) Ibn Hazm's treatise on sexual love, *The Dove's Neck Ring* (11th century), served as a model for the Spanish poem.²

Just how strong are these views? Underlying the first contention is the notion that medieval Arabic literature contains a good deal of erotic autobiography while medieval Western literature does not. But the consensus among experts is otherwise: the Moslems were just as disinclined as the Christians to draw up a history of their sexual lives.³ Examples do exist,

to be sure, but they are the exception, not the rule. Castro's position is built on exaggeration.

What can one say of the *Libro-Dove's Neck Ring* dependency? To demonstrate the relationship is particularly important for Castro since in his view the composition constitutes an example of erotic autobiography. And yet, here too, the contention involves exaggeration: *The Dove's Neck Ring* is not so much an autobiography as rather a treatise on love enriched now and then by anecdotes from the author's personal experience. But be that as it may.⁴ In support of the dependency Castro adduces a number of passages in the Spanish poem which constitute, as he maintains, a borrowing from the Arabic work. A critical examination, however, seems to indicate that none of the alleged carryovers is so close in expression or so singular in thought as to be conclusive.⁵

Nonetheless, is it possible that the Archpriest was at least indirectly familiar with *The Dove's Neck Ring*?⁶ Even this appears uncertain. The treatise was little known among Spanish Arabs both in the time of the author and later in the 14th-century. With good reason: the book is aristocratic and exquisite, a work of art intended for a select few. If such, then, was the case among Muslims in the 1300s, who among the Christians of Castile in the same century would have been familiar with the composition? Formal testimony to the effect that anyone did is lacking.

Castro was not the only scholar of distinction to associate the structure of the *Libro* with a form of non-Christian literature. In a number of publications M. R. Lida sought to place the Spanish masterpiece in the tradition of the Hebrew *maqâmat*.⁷ More precisely, this Argentine commentator pointed to a particular manifestation of the type entitled *The Book of Delights* written by the Barcelonian rabbi, Yosef Ben Meir ibn Zabara (12th century).

As Lida would have it, Ben Meir's work and the *Libro* have much in common, including—above all—an autobiographical development.⁸ And yet, this Hebrew narrative, when compared to the *Libro* autobiography, is deficient in one important respect: there are no amatory or sexual adventures. The commentator is able, however, to compensate: she indicates that other renditions of the *maqâmat* contained such stories (*Estud. de lit.*, p. 24). At which point, therefore, the cautious reader will pause to reflect: the model for the *Libro* was not one, but several compositions.

How was the Archpriest able to acquire such knowledge? Was he versed in Hebrew? Lida, in no uncertain terms, proposes an indirect familiarity (*Estud. de lit.*, 24-25), and points to *Libro* stanza 1513 as evidence that our poet was well disposed to the Jews of Spain. The passage runs as follows:⁹

Después muchas cantigas fiz de dança e troteras
para judías e moras e para entenderas;
para en estrumentes, comunales maneras:
el cantar que non sabes, oïlo a cantaderas.

Needless to say verses *ab* (the ones which count, and then only in part) convey no sure indication that the author was familiar with Hebrew since the language of everyday parlance among the Jews was *romance*. Nor need the verses imply that he felt attracted to Jews to a greater degree than any other *juglar* who composed compositions for public festivals.¹⁰ He was simply ready and able to provide entertainment for the general run of Castilians. He was also ready and able to refer to his own creations.

Indeed, there is reason to believe he was personally supportive of the antisemitism of his day, a bias which would seemingly have caused him to keep his distance from Jewish religious practice and scholarly activity. At the beginning of the *Libro* in stanza one we read:

Señor Dios, que a los judíos, pueblo de perdición,
saqueste de cativo del poder de Faraón, (vv *ab*)

Lida sets down this notion of "people of damnation" as "solemnidad de portada" (*Dos obras*, p. 20)¹¹. But such is far from the case. In stanza 1053 we read as follows concerning the injustice done to Christ:

A la tercia ora
Cristos fue juzgado:
juzgólo el Atora,
pueblo porfiado:
por aquesto mora
en cativo dado,
del qual nunca saldrá
nin avrá librador.

And in 1063:

Por salvar fue venido
el linaje umanal;
fue de Judas vendido
por muy poco cabal;
fue preso e ferido
de los judiós muy mal:
est Dios, en que creemos,
fiziendo castigo

The reference is again, of course, to Christ. And at length in 1657 we have:

El Señor de Paraíso
a cristianos tanto quiso
que por nos la muerte priso:
matáronlo los judiós;

The Jews as pertinacious Christ tormentors and killers! Our poet was quite conscious of the meaning of "people of damnation" and did not fail to bring it out. That he would also seek in the very same work to imitate rabbinical literature seems unlikely. This consideration alone is enough to render Lida's case for a *Libro*-maqâmat relationship suspect.

On the other hand, in the *De vetula* (authorship unsure, probably mid-13th-century) we have a viable alternative to the works proposed by Castro and Lida.¹² Like the *Libro*, the 2,357 Latin hexameters which make up the poem contain a large number of thematically heterogeneous pieces including—to mention only those having a sure counterpart in the Spanish composition—a statement concerning the effects of love (Book I, vv 1-51), a statement concerning musical instruments (I, 64-70), a reference to a decorated wall said to contain an inner meaning (I, 92-97), a criticism of games of chance (I, 358-576), a satire directed at the legal profession (I, 737-765), a complaint against the power of money (I, 766-810), a description of an ideal female type (II, 243-336), a description of a grotesque female type (II, 500-508), a prisoner's lament (III, 439-450), an astrological development (III, 451-643), and a prayer to the Virgin Mary (III, 772-811).

Many of these similarities were first pointed out by Francisco Rico in an article published in 1967.¹³ But the principal overall affinity between the *De vetula* and the *Libro*—and here too, an affinity pointed out by Rico—consists in an autobiographical pretense which extends throughout the two compositions and serves to bind together the potpourri of subthemes. The presence in itself, however, of an autobiographic development represents only part of the similarity: also apparent is that this proffered personal history comes especially to the fore in a central episode, an episode which is amatory in theme and takes up an especially large extension of verse.

In question, of course, with respect to the *Libro* is the "Endrina adventure" (sts 575-891), the well-known account of how the Archpriest with the help of an old woman go-between managed to seduce (or better, sexually overwhelm) an attractive widow.¹⁴ The counterpart in the *De vetula*, on the other hand, is little known, and it would be well to review the plot. But before doing so we might take stock of the work as a whole.

The author and "I" narrator is supposedly the Roman poet Ovid. The at-

tribution, needless to say, is spurious: in reality the poem can be associated with a mass of pseudo-Ovidiana generated by imitators in the high Middle Ages.¹⁵ But as it is, "Ovid" relates in Book One of the *De vetula* and the initial part of Book Two his interests and views (essentially a variety of "gentlemanly" topics) prior to the love adventure which takes up the remainder of Book Two. Book Three deals with his interests and views (now for the most part philosophic and religious) which came about as a result of the love adventure. Most of Book Two, therefore, constitutes an amatory episode represented as a turning point in the life of the Augustan writer.

More specifically, the plot in this part of the *De vetula* goes as follows: To start off, "Ovid" draws up a description of an ideal female type which, as he informs us, depicts his ladylove.¹⁶ But he was unable to approach her, we are told, because of the protection afforded by her parents. So he decided to persuade a certain old woman, i.e. a *vetula*, to act as go-between. To get the latter to consent was not easy: he had to haggle a good deal over payment. But presently she agreed and set about the task. After a lengthy wait the old woman was able to inform him that she had made arrangements: he was to come to the lady's house in the dead of night and pass through a certain door into a chamber; there he would find his beloved in bed and could take his pleasure with her. He did as instructed, but alas, once in bed, found himself embracing not his lady, but the go-between herself! He returned home filled with resentment and railed in anger at the trickster. Nonetheless, he eventually went on to possess the beloved. That, however, did not occur until many years later when she too had become something of a *vetula*. True satisfaction, therefore, was not to be his. He began accordingly to turn from the pursuit of sexual love to philosophic and religious inquiry (an account of which follows in Book Three).

Evident from the preceding—an important factor overlooked by Rico—is that the reader is face to face in Book Two with a reworking of the Latin elegiac comedy, the *Pamphilus*, so retold as to constitute a key event in "Ovid's" autobiography.¹⁷ And likewise is it with the "Endrina adventure" in the *Libro*: the Spanish poet has made use of the same source so as to constitute a key event in the love life of his "I" narrator.¹⁸

Here, then, in the *De vetula* is a similarity to the *Libro* in both structure and theme which easily outdoes the semitic proposals set forth as a model for the Archpriest's poem. Indeed, the procedure is not limited to the "Endrina": brief adaptations of the *Pamphilus* woven into the autobiography turn up repeatedly in the *Libro*. Among other instances one might mention "Una apuesta dueña" (910-944), "Una dueña hermosa" (1321-1330) and "Doña Garoça" (1332-1507)¹⁹ Our poet has made use of a goodly number of reruns for his pretended personal history.

And there is more: prior to the "Endrina" one comes across several incidental ideas relative to the amatory plot which seem to derive directly from the *De vetula*. In *Libro* stanzas 438 and 439 we read as follows about the appropriate type for an intermediary:

Si parienta non tienes atal, toma unas viejas
que andan las iglesias e saben las callejas:
grandes cuentas al cuello, saben muchas consejas;
con lágrimas de moisen escanátan las orejas;

grandes maestras son aquestas paviotas:
andan por todo el mundo, por plaças e por cotas,
a Dios alcan las cuentas, querellando sus coitas:
¡Ai cuánto mal saben estas viejas arlotas!

The verses occur in the *ars amandi* recited by the love god don Amor to the lovelorn Archpriest (sts 423-575, i.e., the episode immediately preceding the "Endrina"). And we know, of course, that the lover-protagonist will go on in the "Endrina" to achieve a seduction with the help of such a go-between. But what is the source of the go-between's type? Of interest here is not that she is an old woman (a characteristic obviously necessary for continuity), but that she is given to religious ostentation. The *Pamphilus* itself says nothing in this latter respect; the most we are told is in the following verses which convey the protagonist's intent to seek an intermediary:²⁰

Hic prope degit anus subtilis et ingeniosa
Artibus et Veneris apta ministra satis.
Postpositis curis ad eam vestigia vertam
et sibi consilium notificabo meum. (vv 281-284)

(There's a smart, quick talking old woman who lives near here; she knows quite well how to be of use in matters of love. So I'll just stop worrying and go find her and let her know what's on my mind.)

If we turn, however, to the equivalent event in the *De vetula* we find that "Ovid" has this to say in connection with his need for a go-between:

Talia cum vigli cura meditarer apud me
totque revolvissem vetulas et sepe diuque
singula librassem lustrans urbem spatiosam,

occurrit tandem, quod erat paupercula quedam
linguiopentis, mee vicina sororis, apud quam
sepe dabatur ei cibus intuitu pietatis,
et fuerat quondam dilecte sedula nutrix. (II, vv. 355-361)

(While I was giving careful thought to these things, looking about the metropolis, evaluating many old women, and considering often and at length one thing after another, it happened that a certain poor old woman with a gift for gab turned up; she was a neighbor of my sister and was often given something to eat in her house because of her pious appearance. In addition, she had once been her dear old nursemaid.)

Was this "pious appearance" the point of departure for the attribution of religious fakery to the *Libro* go-between? One need not think, of course, that our poet's masterful portrayal as a whole had a written source: it may well have come from his personal experience and artistic imagination.

Another *Libro* passage possibly based (one is tempted to say probably based) on the *De vetula* is stanza 527 where don Amor gives to the lover a piece of advice relative to his dealings with the go-between:

Guárdate non te abuelvas a la casamentera:
doñear non la quieras, ca es una manera
por que t' farié perder a la entendedera:
ca una conlueça de otra siempre tiene dentera.

Felix Lecoy once described these verses as a "survival," i.e., an unsuitable carryover from Ovid's *Ars amatoria* where at one point (Book I, vv 375-398) the lover is advised not to seduce his lady's handmaid.²¹ But the position is open to question. The Archpriest's go-between, as we have seen, is an old woman while the age of the Roman poet's handmaid is left undefined (are we to assume that she too is an old woman?). In any case, if we adhere to Lecoy, we are required to assume that our poet either ignored or forgot the type of his intermediary and in a sudden isolated stanza (there is no contextual connection to the preceding or following stanza) introduced advice to the effect that the lover not seduce her.

On the other hand, with one stroke the problem of stanza 527 is resolved if we interpret the passage in the light of the *De vetula*. All one need do is take the sense as an ironic allusion made en passant to the sexual farce in the pseudo-Ovidian poem. And this approach has more than just simplicity to speak for it: on balance the evidence that our poet knew the

imitative work is as great, if not greater, than the evidence for his having known a true composition of Ovid.²²

The similarity of the *Libro* to the *De vetula* is so striking to be set aside. Among other affinities both works contain an adaptation of the *Pamphilus* serving as a pivotal event in a pretended autobiography. It would seem quite possible, then, that the Archpriest had knowledge of the 13th-century poem. But a question comes up: was his knowledge direct or indirect? A just response would have to incline to the latter: as of yet one can point to nothing definite in favor of a direct familiarity. This much, however, is certain: all the source models that have contributed indisputably to the formation of the *Libro* derive from the Western Latin legacy. And so too is it with the *De vetula*: the poem stands squarely in the European tradition.

The same cannot be said for Castro's and Lida's Semitic proposals: not only were the two scholars obliged to posit an indirect knowledge on the part of our poet, but were also obliged to speculate as to how he was able to acquire that knowledge. Did they succeed? Given the existence of the *De vetula* their arguments—never bolstered by hard evidence—appear less than persuasive.

• NOTES

¹ Castro's views can be found in his *España en su historia. Cristianos, moros y judíos*, pp 371-469.

² See Castro, pp 402 and 404ff.

³ Cf. G.B. Gybbon-Moneyppenny, "Autobiography in the *Libro de buen amor* in the Light of Some Literary Comparisons," pp 64-65.

⁴ The difference, though noteworthy, is not crucial. The erotic anecdotes in *The Dove's Neck Ring* might still have served as a catalyst for the *Libro* love episodes (assuming, of course, that the Archpriest knew the Arabic work).

⁵ For the opinion of an Arabist see pages 77-82 in the introduction to a translation of the treatise prepared by E. García Gómez.

⁶ Castro (p. 402) concedes that our poet's knowledge may have been gained via oral transmission.

⁷ For her comments on the *Libro* see *Dos obras maestras españolas*, pp 11-62, and *Estudios de literatura española y comparada*, pp 14-91.

⁸ Lida, *Estud. de lit.*, pp 23-26. Other similarities according to Lida (p. 24) are: a taste for scriptural reminiscences, aphorisms, instructional disquisitions, tales, fables, anecdotes, liturgical parodies, a dissertation on the art of physiognomy, a description of a woman tantamount to a caricature, a humorous portrait based on antithesis and verbal paradox, an attack on wine drinking, a litany of

name calling directed at a companion, jokes, a pervading bourgeois spirit, and restraint in demonstrating rhetorical and grammatical virtuosity. Owing to the number the affinities make an initial impression of strength. Upon reflection, however, they prove, again and again, to be too unspecific to matter. The use of tales, fables and anecdotes, for example, is a commonplace in medieval Christian literature. Needed for a proposal as radical as Lida's is some hard evidence, such as, say, a quotation from a Jewish writing (discounting, of course, the documents revered by Christians and Jews alike). But of such there is nothing in the *Libro*. On the other hand quotations from Western Latin sources exist aplenty.

⁹ The edition cited here and throughout is that of J. Corominas.

¹⁰ If the stanza is indicative of a scholarly or literary interest in Judaism, this is not evident. The poet's concern with Jewish and Moorish women seems rather to relate to a jamboree of *juglares* (cf. R. Menéndez Pidal, *Poesía juglaresca*, pp 98-99).

¹¹ In *Estud. de lit.*, p. 25, Lida cites *Libro* 78d, 554c, 1183-1184, 1212b as revealing "traces" of the poet's familiarity with Jews. And yet, the information concerning Jews in these verses is limited and commonplace. The content of 554c, for that matter, is not without a degree of hostility (the Jew as usurer).

¹² All references to the *De vetula* (which is divided into three sections of "Books" of roughly equal length) are in accord with the edition of P. Klopsch. For a long time the authorship was assigned to a certain Richard de Fournival, an attribution shown by Klopsch (pp 78-99) to lack for substance.

¹³ See his "Sobre el origen de la autobiografía en el *Libro de buen amor*."

¹⁴ Lida (*Estud. de lit.*, pp 17-19) holds that the protagonist in this mid-way episode in the *Libro* is not the Archpriest. Her position, however, is undermined by stanzas 576, 608, and 645.

¹⁵ For this imitative literature in general see P. Lehmann, *Pseudo-Antike Literatur des Mittelalters*.

¹⁶ The piece is nothing other than a standard rhetorical *descriptio*. For particulars see E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XII^e et du XIII^e siècle*, pp 75-81.

¹⁷ Cf. Klopsch, p. 152.

¹⁸ The reader will recall that the lover's success with Endrina represents a change in fortune; his prior record at seduction had amounted to failure.

¹⁹ Most of the 175 stanzas comprising the "Doña Garoça" are given over to the recitation of *exempla*. The love story proper is fairly brief.

²⁰ The quotation is from the edition of F. Becker.

²¹ Lecoy, *Recherches sur le Libro de buen amor*, p. 305.

²² In pp. 290-306 of the *Recherches* Lecoy tried to show that the *ars amandi* of stanzas 423-575 is based to some extent on the *Ars amatoria* of Ovid. But his rapprochement is inconclusive (too much explanation for too much disaccord). In addition, the study of the Classics declined during the last several centuries of the Middle Ages; few persons read the *Ars* directly. Not so with imitative Ovidiana:

was much in vogue. There can be no doubt that our poet knew the *Pamphilus*. Could he not have known the *De vetula as well?*

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**"De una abbatissa vos quiero fer
conseja": teatralidad y arte
dramático en El milagro XXI de Berceo**

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Una lectura atenta de las obras de Gonzalo de Berceo y, en concreto, de los *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* deja ver entre líneas el intento del clérigo riojano de explicar los milagros de la Virgen imitando a los narradores medievales de cuentos e historias de su época. De ser así, las narraciones recogidas en los *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* podrían contener abundantes e interesantísimos caracteres dramáticos. El diálogo, por ejemplo, se pudo sustituir perfectamente por el mimo del lector logrando así una mayor vitalidad en la recitación.

El propósito de este artículo es realizar un análisis literario del milagro número XXI de Berceo, el conocido como "La abadesa preñada". Este análisis parte del enfoque del texto desde la perspectiva de la difusión, es decir, las relaciones autor-público oyente o lector. No es mi intención encuadrar el milagro XXI en el género dramático pues los conceptos de género literario "épico", "lírico" o "dramático" fueron algo tardío por lo que aplicarlos a la literatura medieval y, en este caso a Berceo, sería impreciso.

En 1972 John Keller señaló que Berceo había hecho un intento definitivo de conectar con su público constituido, al parecer, por los monjes y frailes de San Millán de la Cogolla y los peregrinos con quienes Berceo debió compartir su lectura. En 1980 Harriet Goldberg estudió la importancia de la voz del autor en la obra de Berceo y en el *Libro de Alexandre*. Poco después, en 1986, Richard Kinkade propuso la idea de interpretar la difusión del Mester de Clerecía como un arte dramático. En primer lugar, Kinkade dio pruebas de que el drama litúrgico y el drama popular coexistieron en la Edad Media, negando así que éste derivara de aquél. Contrariamente, Kinkade aseguró que el drama popular y sus técnicas fueron imitadas en los sermones eclesiásticos. Más recientemente, Mary Jane Kelley ha expuesto algunas interesantes ideas sobre los *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* y Michael Gerli ha estudiado con detalle algunos aspectos del lenguaje y el público oyente de Berceo, referidos todos a los *Milagros*. Ya antes, en 1971, Carmelo Gariano apuntó algunas interesantísimas ideas respecto a lo que él llamó la actitud poética de Berceo ante el lector. Según