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Subjectivity and Hermeneutics in Medieval Iberia

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9

SUBJECTIVITY AND HERMENEUTICS IN MEDIEVAL IBERIA

The example of the *Libro de buen amor*

Robert Folger

The *Libro de buen amor* is a challenge – and a provocative one – for literary critics and modern readers in general, although it exemplifies many of the features deemed typical of medieval literature.¹ The text is framed by the autodiegetic narrator Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita, but we have no definite information on its historical author. Despite this pseudo-autobiographical plot, the book does not construct a clearly identifiable authorial subject, much less a reliable narrator. The archpriest metamorphoses on occasion into a certain Don Melón; at one point the book itself addresses the reader. Another typically medieval feature of the text is its *mouvance* (Cerquiglini 1989), that is, the instability of a text which has come down to us in three manuscripts which differ significantly from one another. This textual instability contributes to the problem of establishing a date of composition, which may have been 1330, as indicated by the Gayoso manuscript, or 1343, if we consider the colophon of the Salamanca manuscript as evidence for the completion of the work (Lawrance 2004). The text itself does not show the degree of internal cohesion that the modern reader expects. Although the roamings and erotic adventures of the Archpriest provide a feeble overarching plot, the text is, in typical medieval fashion, a patchwork of original passages and set pieces which the poet reworked and parodied, ranging from brief *exempla* to adaptations of well-known texts, such as the *Pamphilus de amore*.

At the same time, the *Libro de buen amor* seems to challenge many commonly held assumptions about a monolithic Dark Age, with an emphasis on religious orthodoxy, a repudiation of eroticism, obscenity, and subversive humor, and, perhaps most importantly, a penchant for straightforward didacticism and indoctrination (see Aers [1992], who discusses the misconceptions of early modernists regarding medieval subjectivity). The introductory passages of the *Libro de buen amor* present the book essentially as an inquiry into the nature of “good love,” opposing the pious love of God to the mundane pleasures of worldly passion and sex. However, the text does not provide its reader with clear answers, but with a wealth of ambiguous “love affairs” equally capable of celebrating sexual exploits and condemning them. The *Libro* is characterized by an irreducible polysemy that is often seen as the hallmark of modern forms of literature. Juan Ruiz eschews flat didacticism, focusing instead on the very process of determining the nature of good love. In recent decades, scholarship has indicated that this particular poetics of the *Libro de buen amor* is a masterful *mise en scène* of medieval

hermeneutics (Muñoz-Basols 2010), rather than a historical oddity or case of Renaissance pluralism and valorization of earthly matters *avant la lettre*. As E. Michael Gerli (2002) has shown, in an article which draws on his earlier work regarding the influence of Augustine on the work, the *Libro de buen amor* is a reflection of the Augustinian idea that, in the fallen world of men, all signs are essentially polysemous and can at best be transcended in an anamnesis of the divine truth. John Dagenais, in particular, has reconstructed a form of medieval hermeneutics based on an “ethics of reading” that requires the active engagement and “a series of ethical meditations and of personal ethical choices” (1994, xvii) of a reader who does not seek an overarching meaning inherent in a text, but extracts and assimilates exemplary material to his own value system.²

These reconstructions of medieval hermeneutics help us understand the rationale of the text, but they do not allow us to fully explore the historical pragmatics of the text, that is, the effect it had on its readership, or was supposed to have. In hermeneutics, a notion of subjectivity is always implicit. It manifests itself both in the composition of a text and in its effect on the recipient; the literary text, the cultural artifact, indeed every phenomenon in a world that is supposed to be “authored” and made meaningful by God, requires the interpretive act of a subject that reacts to these phenomena (see further Hans Blumenberg’s comments on the “Lesbarkeit der Welt” [readability of the world] [1979]). Juan Ruiz’s text is unique in the degree of hermeneutic effort or violence which it requires from its reader, who has to come to terms with ambiguity and avoid the pitfalls of immorality, but the hermeneutic principle and the underlying notion of subjectivity are by no means exceptional in themselves.

The *Libro de buen amor* is arguably the most quintessentially “medieval” text of Iberian letters, in the sense that it is a dazzling display of medieval hermeneutics. It has a close formal relationship to the *mester de clerecía*, learned poetry in *cuaderna vía* (stanzas of four rhymed alexandrine verses with fourteen syllables), examples of which include the works of Gonzalo de Berceo or the anonymous *Libro de Alexandre*. Like the texts of the *mester de clerecía*, and the substantial body of didactic and gnomic medieval literature (such as the thirteenth-century *Poridat de poridades* and *Bocados de oro*, or Juan Manuel’s *El conde Lucanor*, which is contemporaneous with Juan Ruiz’s work; see Fernando Gómez Redondo [1998–2002], 241–294 and 1148–1183), the *Libro de buen amor* presupposes a reader who does not simply accept a didactic message, or strive for a global interpretation of a literary work that is supposed to encapsulate a meaning encoded by an authorial subject. Instead, the reader of these texts will draw his own “ethical” conclusions from elements which he finds in the larger text, such as Berceo’s *exempla* or the deeds of Alexander. The pertinence of the *Libro de buen amor* to the medieval Iberian hermeneutic tradition is, perhaps, best highlighted by another quest for spiritual perfection in a world full of temptations: *El llibre d’Evast e Blanquerna*, composed around 1283 by the Catalan missionary, philosopher, and theologian Ramon Llull. Llull uses Blanquerna’s “biography” to give his work an underlying structure, onto which he then grafts a concatenation of *exempla* and ethical reflections that are supposed to guide the reader, together with the protagonist, to a godly life (Johnston 1996).

At the same time, the *Libro* marks a watershed in Iberian letters because it explicitly reflects upon the underlying principles of epistemology and hermeneutics, particularly in the Salamanca manuscript with the prose prologue. We can only speculate that this explicit reflection is an indication that the medieval code of reading is on the wane, and there is therefore a need to spell out to the reader what the “natural” mode of reading was before. It is apparent, however, that after the *Libro*, the *mester de clerecía* faded from prominence, along with Sem Tob’s *Proverbios morales* and Pero López de Ayala’s *Rimado de palacio*. In the latter’s *Crónica del rey Don Pedro*, we find the first clearly discernible indications of the emergence of a new

form of subjectivity that is grounded on introspection and an opaque self that is sealed off from the environment (Gumbrecht 1990, 110–119). Of course, the model of subjectivity and hermeneutics underlying the *Libro de buen amor* do not suddenly disappear in the second half of the fourteenth century. Works such as the misogynist diatribes *El Corbacho*, written by Alfonso Martínez de Toledo in the 1430s, and Jaume Roig's *Espill*, composed roughly three decades later, bear witness to their survival, and even in the Golden Age of Spanish literature they are still "residual" and help us understand important aspects of the literature of the time.³ However, the fifteenth-century vogue of literature *de amore*, with its typical reflections on the nature and effects of passionate love (Cátedra 1989), and its literary supplement, sentimental romance (in particular the works of Diego de San Pedro), indicate that a new form of subjectivity emerged which was predicated on a self that was capable of identification with other subjects imagined as possessing depth (Folger 2009).

In the following pages, I will focus on the role of subjectivity in medieval literature and its implications for poetics and hermeneutics. I will first trace a model of premodern subjectivity based on Galenic-Aristotelian ideas of the workings of the mind – in the light of "postmodern" theories of subjectivity. I will test this model against the *Libro de buen amor*. My objective is, on one hand, to contribute to our understanding of this enigmatic text. On the other, I propose that the *Libro de buen amor* highlights several essential characteristics of medieval literature in general. The following reflections on medieval subjectivity in the *Libro de buen amor* are thus offered so as to illuminate a range of medieval texts, notwithstanding the fact that emerging and residual epistemologies must be taken into account to understand the whole of medieval Iberian literature.

Premodern subjectivity

When scholarship addresses the issue of subjectivity in relation to medieval literature, it routinely does so to expose a deficiency. Subjectivity as the internal and autonomous reality of human beings is associated with modernity, to the point where it becomes a defining characteristic of modern man. From this perspective, "medieval subjectivity" is an oxymoron of sorts. An antithetical and, at the same time, complementary position to this view considers subjectivity as an anthropological characteristic that has determined the psychic reality of human beings in all periods of human history; the argument runs that as human societies evolved, subjectivity gradually prevailed over other modes of self-consciousness that are essentially determined by social groups.⁴ However, subjectivity can also be seen as a configuration of the self which changed fundamentally over the course of history, requiring a form of historical explanation and contextualization that rejects teleological reductionism.⁵

In a study of subjectivity in medieval French literature, Peter Haidu has succinctly defined subjectivity as "potentiality for action" (2004, 114). Thus subjectivity is a mental structure that allows the 'I' to interact with an environment and other subjects. Since René Descartes postulated the split between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, this potentiality for action is understood to give the individual a "unique or privileged access to his or her own inner discourse – an access that could not legitimately be contradicted by any collective process or external authority" (Heller and Wellbery 1986, 5). The autonomy of the modern Cartesian self is the decisive difference that sets it apart from premodern ideas of subjectivity, because the latter does not imagine subjectivity as interiority. Premodern subjectivity sees the self as embedded in and permeated by an environment that is not radically exterior.⁶

Following the lead of Jörg Dünne, this form of subjectivity may be described as "weak."⁷ Unlike the autonomous, disembodied Cartesian subject that opposes an exterior world of

objects, the “weak subject” is the result of a practice or “technology of the self” (Foucault 1993, 203) based on repetition. It works the phenomenal world into the self. The weak subject is not pitted against the exterior, nor does it mirror the exterior in an individual act of interiorization. In his interpretation of Michel Foucault’s notion of subjectivity, Gilles Deleuze (1986b) speaks of a folding (*Le pli*), in which the subjective interior must be understood as the interior of the exterior, “le dedans du dehors” (Deleuze 1986a, 134).

The epistemic grounding of the self-practices of folding in is provided by Jacques Lacan’s “scopic field.” James F. Burke (2000) holds that the premodern subject can be understood in analogy with Lacanian subject constitution (Lacan 1966; see also Madeline Caviness [2001] on “scopic economy”). According to Burke, this subject is embedded into:

[a] generalized, choric visual field that encodes within it the precepts of the symbolic order. This gaze involves a vast number, an enormous array, of projecting, interwoven ocular planes that can be understood to proceed not only from the eyes of those who look but also from inanimate objects that in the ancient and medieval understanding were thought to emit *species* that in some fashion conveyed the imprint of their essence.

(Burke 2000, 25)

Burke correlates this notion with medieval faculty psychology (a detailed description of faculty psychology and reviews of pertinent scholarship is provided by Folger [2002, 33–56, 2009, 42–103]), which, in turn, is the expression and foundation of contemporary epistemology. Since Greco-Roman antiquity, two models of cognition and perception have co-existed. The older model, based on Platonic ideas, presupposes that an interior “fire” emits seeing rays through the eyes. These rays scan external objects, absorb the objects’ light or “fire,” and transmit it to the observer’s mind.⁸ With the enthusiastic reception of Aristotelian writing in the twelfth century, the so-called intromission model gained prominence and became the dominant view, particularly among learned natural philosophers. Intromission means that objects emit *species* (*formae*, *phantasmata*), which travel in the surrounding medium, normally the air, and are therefore also known as *species in medio* (Tachau 1982). The external senses convey the *species* to the brain and the internal senses, which are located in the ventricles of the brain.⁹ The exteriorized *species* are no less than a protuberance of the observer’s *anima sensitiva* (also known as “animal soul”) beyond the limits of the body.

In the brain, *facultates*, mental faculties, process the *species*. The complex and varied architecture of the mind in individual treatises can be reduced to a model with three basic faculties, located in the three ventricles of the human brain.¹⁰ The first ventricle is the seat of the *imaginatio*, the second is the location of the *vis aestimativa* [judgment], and in the third we find the *memoria*. Imagination receives *species*, disassembles them, and associates them with related *imagines* stored in the chambers of memory. Therefore, “thinking” is always an activity of composition and remembering. The *aestimativa* extracts so-called *intentiones*, which can be understood, according to Mary Carruthers (2000, 124–126), as “attitudes” or emotional inclinations and intensities. The activity of the *aestimativa* produces orectic impulses, *appetitus*, which stimulate the heart to emit *pneuma* or spirit, the extremely rarified matter that is instrumental for all mental operations. Positive judgments of a *species* result in the desire to “obtain” an object and to “use” it (*appetitus concupiscibilis*); negative judgments have the opposite effect, that is, they cause flight response or aggression (*appetitus irascibilis*). This psychosomatic complex is called “passion” (*passio*). The resulting mental *imago*, which consists of *species* and “judgment,” is finally permanently stored in the chambers of memory.

It must be emphasized that perception and cognition are essentially pneumofantasmatic (I adopt this notion from Giorgio Agamben [1977]). From an Aristotelian-naturalist perspective, all mental operations depend on *phantasmata*, including the operations of the rational soul. This soul is unique to human beings, consisting, according to St. Augustine, of intelligence, will, and memory. The faculties of the rational soul mirror the faculties of the sensitive soul: intellect allows more complex, abstract operations than imagination; will is the superior orrectic faculty that checks the instinctual reactions of judgment; and rational memory is also a repertory of “memories” of the eternal divine truths. However, the higher faculties cannot operate without sensitive *species* and *imagines*. Thus, in *De memoria et reminiscencia*, Aristotle states that thinking is impossible without images – a view confirmed by the authority of Thomas Aquinas (Folger 2009, 48–50). This means that texts evoke images that are ontologically equivalent to images perceived by the external senses.¹¹

The mental operations I have sketched belong to the realm of the *anima sensitiva*, the animal soul. Although the theological perspective privileges the rational soul as the defining feature of humanity, it is obvious that the *anima sensitiva* is an interface of sorts between man and world, which allows the individual to interact with the world. The sensitive soul is the location and instrument of the folding of world into self. The parallels Burke postulates between the medieval scopic field and the Lacanian theory of subject constitution are obvious. Lacan conceives of this scopic field as an aggregate of individual imagined gazes: “Things look at me, and yet I see them” (1998, 109). The subject is a function of impersonal, disembodied *regards* (gazes). They produce self-consciousness, founding man as a “*speculum mundi*” (Lacan 1998, 75). By analogy, the premodern subject can be understood as a *speculum mundi*, with the difference that the *regards* of “things” are not seen as imagined, but imagined as “real” *species*.

This subject is constituted by a scopic field produced through extromission (by objects) and intromission (by a subject). The individual is embedded into and, at the same time, permeated by this field. Theo Kobusch (1998, 747) emphasizes that *existimatio*, honor, reputations, and appreciation, granted by the others, determine a concrete individual as *ens morale* (moral being) in a social context. In the words of Petrus Aureoli: “esse morale non constitit in re extra, sed in aestimatione hominum” [being moral is not in an external thing, but in the esteem of the people] (quoted in Kobusch [1998, 747]). Guillaume de Conches, a twelfth-century author, explains that the onlookers’ gazes imprint upon the viewed “qualities” through their appreciation or rejection (Hahn 2004, 175). Therefore, the cogito of the premodern subject is, in the words of Burke, “I see and am seen” (2000, 26–27). The subject is what it sees (and reads) and how it is seen.

The effects of seeing and being seen are, of course, not temporary but constitute what Stephen Greenblatt calls a “sense of personal order” (1980, 1). The ever-shifting constellations of *regards* and *species* are checked against the contents of memory and integrated into the psychic apparatus. Similar to Foucault’s (1984) *cura sui* (self-care), the self is the result of a lifelong working-in of others’ “opinions” (*existimatio*), which are always imagistically conceived; experiences; and, not least, readings. This practice establishes and fortifies *habitus* or *hexis* in memory (Burke 2000, 30). *Hexis* is a term originating in Aristotelian ethics. It provides, by means of repeated “mental actions,” a stable, active disposition which encodes social norms and mental patterns of behavior and thought.¹²

This is the meaning of “potentiality for action.” It implies that habitualization is not only and not primarily a somatic mechanization of actions, but also a mental regime, which was necessarily, in the context of medieval epistemology, a negotiation of sensorial *imagines*. In premodern understanding, the constitution of stable mental structures (*hexis*, *habitus*) implies the processing and fending off of “influences” in the form of *imagines* and *species*. *Habitus* are

structures that establish an order among the semi-autonomous faculties of the sensitive soul. They provide the individual with “a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires,” as Stephen Greenblatt (1980, 1) characterizes the self.

It should be emphasized that *habitus* and *hexis* do not refer to innate structures or biological characteristics of a subject. They are the result of continuous mental exercise in which the sensorial input is transformed into the building blocks of socially accepted mental dispositions. This mental exercise is primarily related to the faculty of judgment: it is essential to extract the correct *intentiones* and evaluate them, which requires an already existing honed judgment, and fosters, if successful, the *habitus*. The notion of *hexis* and *habitus* and the need to build them up and foster them is essential for the understanding of the rationale of Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de buen amor*.

Before I proceed to read the text against the backdrop of this notion, I would like to point out two important aspects of the corollary of premodern subjectivity for medieval literature. The notion of thinking as a process of judging that provides the building block for *hexis* implies that the text is broken up into “digestible” units that can be folded in. Texts preferably do not take the shape of longer, complex narrations with gradually unfolding plots as we know them from the modern novel. Modern forms of literature require from the reader an immersion and bracketing of experiential reality. This form of attention and suspension of judgment is alien to medieval literature. Premodern literature requires a punctual reading; that means stepping out of the fictional world and folding the reading matter back into the individual *hexis*.

Secondly, the medieval meaning of “intention” marks more than a semantic difference to our own understanding. Although an author has an intention, that is, a purpose for his writing activity, *intentio* is not essentially associated with the subject of enunciation: the text or textual units, as the basis for the formation of *imagines*, have intentions that must be properly judged by the reading subject. The author’s intention is not the primary object of hermeneutic activity, because the literary artifact has its own intention, and this intention is not something to be merely discovered and accepted. On the contrary, the intention must be altered in the folding process, relating it to an already built-up *hexis*. The modern reader’s habit of deciphering a coherent authorial intention in a text is therefore a futile and anachronistic exercise; the medieval author or narrator usually provides only a weak and unstable organizing thread, rather than the principle of textual coherence.

Both piecemeal poetics and hermeneutics, as well as the secondary importance of authorial intention and the emphasis on the intentionality of textual blocks, are characteristic features of the *Libro de buen amor* and medieval didactic literature in the broadest sense.

The *Libro de buen amor* : an instrument of *hexis*

The Salamanca manuscript of the *Libro de buen amor* begins with an “oración” (1989, 1) in which the poet expresses existential spiritual anguish and pleads for divine help.¹³ This prayer is followed by a prose prologue that has puzzled modern readers because its apparently serious religious didacticism seems to clash with the following “erotic autobiography” of the Arcipreste.¹⁴ In a 1967 article, Pierre L. Ullman debunked the widespread view of the prose piece as a parody of a sermon (*sermon joyeux*), analyzing it in terms of paraenetic rhetoric as a serious homily about the human inclination to sin. Ullman claims that the prologue is informed by Augustinian voluntarism, rejecting Thomist intellectualism as an important influence. He comes to the conclusion that the author marshalled “a justification using Augustinian voluntarism to argue that evil is in the eye of the beholder and not in the book” (1967, 161).

Ullman's otherwise incisive analysis is dissatisfying in two respects. Firstly, the exclusion of Aristotelian-Thomist thought is not admissible. Medieval treatises on the workings on the human mind are predominantly eclectic, privileging Aristotelian natural philosophy to explain the actual phenomenology of the subject, and drawing on Augustinian thought on the faculties of the rational soul to remedy the difficult theological problems implied by naturalism. Secondly, Ullman's interpretation of the prologue not only denies it the status of an introduction ("It is not initiatory; on the contrary, it was probably added in the second redaction" [1967, 154]), but also fails to indicate the purpose of the *Libro* and, more importantly, its *utilitas*, which was a crucial item in the *schema* of the *accessus* (Quain 1945, 215). In medieval eyes, a text merely claiming not to be harmful was by no means justified. It is advisable, then, to read the prose prologue not as a theological text, but as an actual paratext, or *accessus*, which provides the readers with clues on how to read difficult texts (Dagenais [1986] has related the prose prologue to the *accessus Ovidiani* tradition; see also Dagenais [1994, 37]).

The prologue is based on an exegesis of the psalm "Intellectum tibi dabo et instruum te in via hac gradieris firmabo super te oculos meos" (2) [I will give you judgment and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you].¹⁵ The author recognizes in this psalm:

tres cosas, las cuales dizen algunos doctores filósofos que son en el alma e propiamente suyas. Son éstas: entendimiento voluntad e memoria. Las cuales, digo, si buenos son, que traen al alma consolaçión, e aluengan la vida del cuerpo, e danle onra con pro e buena fama. Ca, por el entendimiento, entiende onbre el bien e sabe dello el mal.

(1989, 2)

In this passage, he is referring to the faculties of the rational soul, reflecting the Holy Trinity: intellect, will, and memory. Divinely infused intellect or understanding enables man to distinguish between good and evil. This is the basis for desiring the good:

E desde que está informada e instruida el alma, que se ha de salvar en el cuerpo, e pienssa e ama e dessea omne el buen amor de Dios es sus mandamientos. [. . .]. E otrosí desecha e aborresçe el alma el pecado del amor loco deste mundo.

(1989, 2)

Understanding is supplemented by will, which naturally desires the good love of God. Will and intellect enable man to make the right judgments and act accordingly, choosing the love of God that will save him, and rejecting the temptations of the *loco amor* and earthly pleasures. Memory assures that the right actions are executed at all times:

[D]evemos tener sin dubda que obras sienpre están en la buena memoria, que con buen entendimiento e buena voluntad escoge el alma e ama el amor de Dios por se salvar por ellas.

(1989, 3)

Although God has given human beings an immortal soul with all the powers necessary to live a virtuous and holy life, they are always in danger of succumbing to evil: "E viene otrosí esto por razón que la natura umana, que más aparejada e inclinada es al mal que al bien, e a pecado que a bien" (1989, 3). Although there seems to be a contradiction between this pessimistic

view of human nature and the harmonious picture of the human soul sketched in the initial sermon, the argument is consistent with premodern subjectivity. The “*natura umana*” refers to man’s postlapsarian earthly existence, and hence the workings of the sensitive soul. The noxious *intentiones* of objects and people (particularly as potential sexual partners) generate “appetites” that lead the individual to commit sinful acts, if they are not properly checked. The onslaught of *imagines* weakens the faculties of the unprepared mind. The “*mengua del buen entendimiento*” and the “*pobredad de la memoria*” (1989, 4) are the reason and, at the same time, the result of this fatal attraction to carnal delights. In addition to devotional and meditative practices, reflected in the *Libro* in serious prayers (e.g., the Marianic *gozos* and meditation of the *passio Christi*), understanding must be trained, and memory must be stacked with appropriately processed materials. This is the rationale of the *Libro de buen amor*:

E compuse este nuevo libro en que son escriptas algunas maneras, e maestrías, e sotilezas engañosas del loco amor del mundo, que usan algunos para pecar.

Las quales leyéndolas e oyéndolas ome o mujer de buen entendimiento, que se quiera salvar, descogerá e obrarlo ha.

(1989, 4)

A person with a properly acquired and structured *hexis* will condemn *loco amor*. Judging the related examples of ungodly passion correctly, the examples of the *Libro* will be stored in the treasure house of memory with the appropriate “tag” (“good love” or “mad love”), further fortifying the *hexis* located in memory.

The author claims, however, that individuals who have not acquired a beneficial *habitus* will also benefit from his work:

Otrosí los de poco entendimiento non se perderán; ca leyendo e coidando el mal que fazen o tienen en la voluntad de fazer, e los porfiosos de sus malas maestrías.e [sic] descubrimiento publicado de sus muchas engañosas maneras, que usan para pecar e engañar las mujeres, acordarán la memoria e non despreñarán su fama: ca muchos es cruel quien su fama menospreña.

(1989, 4)

In the *Libro*, the archpriest makes public his deceitful ways and suffers humiliation after humiliation in his erotic quest. The reader who shares his delight in carnal pleasures will recognize that this behavior is detrimental to his *existimatio* and even though he does not have enough *entendimiento* to understand the superior values of spiritual salvation, he will refrain from sinning because it would harm his standing (*fama*) in the world of men.

The argument is weak, to say the least, as the author acknowledges in a disclaimer: “Enpero, porque es umana cosa el pecar,si [sic] algunos, lo que non los consejo, quisieren usar del loco amor, aquí fallarán algunas maneras para ello” (1989, 4). This is the price the author is willing to pay to reach his goal of fortifying the faculties of the soul. Explicitly and unambiguously negative or positive examples are harmless, but they will not hone the mental skills necessary to live a virtuous life in a fallen world, where all signs are potentially or actually polysemous and require the right judgment. This is the reason why the other great theme of the *Libro de buen amor*, besides the nature of good love, is the reflection on and the practice of hermeneutics:

Non tengades que es libro de neçio de devaneo,
nin creades que es chufa algo que en él leo;

ca según buen dinero yaze en vil correo
así en feo libro está saber non feo.
(1989, 5, stanza 16)

This “saber” is not simply a prefabricated truth, but knowledge of how to determine, or judge, whether the *amor* presented in the book is good, godly love, or harmful appetite. The presentation of the carnal desire and adventures of the Archpriest is perfectly suited to elicit the *appetitus* that the higher faculties of will and intellect are supposed to check, resulting in a beneficial *hexis*. This is also the reason why the book does not present *exempla* with obvious didactic messages, but lessons *in utroque*, requiring a violent act of interpretation or determination according to the pre-established mental habits of the reader, rather than a fixed meaning in the text.

This violent act of interpretation is foregrounded in the “disputación que los griegos e los romanos en uno ovieron” (1989, 9). The Romans and Greeks communicate in sign language, and the picaresque champion of the Romans, disguised as a learned man, misunderstands the Greek’s theological arguments as insults. The Greek philosopher in turn misinterprets the recriminations of the Roman oaf as signs of the Romans’ cultural maturity and decides that they are worthy of receiving Greek wisdom. This humorous story of *translatio studii* is, on the one hand, an exercise in the intricacies of interpretation and the treacherous nature of signs (Gerli 2002). On the other, the kernel of the story is also that an interpretation which exerts hermeneutic violence rather than doing justice to the intention of the producer of signs (the Roman *ribaldo*) may achieve beneficial effects (the revelation of the *dotrina*). The introductory matter of the *Libro* ends with the highly appropriate metaphor of the book as a musical instrument:

De todos instrumentos yo libro só pariente;
bien o mal, qual puntares, tal te dirá çiertamente.
Qual tú dezir quisieres y faz punto y tente;
si me puntar sopieres sienpre me avrás en miente.
(1989, 11, stanza 70)

The *Libro* is an instrument for the honing of the mental faculties. The actual content is primarily matter for mental exercise, and thus secondary to the pragmatics of the text. Only if the book is “played,” interpreted, and processed correctly will it “always be in the mind,” as part of a mental habit in memory. The remaining text of the Archpriest’s book is a corollary to this principle: from the Aristotelian argument that justifies the archpriest’s appetite for “manutençia” and “juntamiento con fenbra plazentera” (1989, 11, stanza 71), which requires the reader’s acumen to recognize the logical flaw in confusing animal soul and rational soul (Rico 1985), to the final perplexing praise of the advantages of the book:¹⁶

Buena propiedad ha do quier que sea,
que si lo oye alguno que tenga muger fea,
o si muger lo oye que su marido vil sea,
fazer a Dios serviçio en punto lo desea.
(1989, 170, stanza 1627)

Juan Ruiz is certainly right in affirming that “sobre cada fabla se entiende otra cosa” (1989, 170, stanza 1631), because this is the principle of the didacticism of the book:

The *Libro de buen amor* is a superb example of this perilous didacticism, because it will benefit the few already properly instructed (“ome o mujer de buen entendimiento;” 1989, 4), and possibly shame sinners into virtuous behavior, but it may also be misused as a text book for those addicted to the “amor loco deste mundo” (1989, 2). This was most certainly not the author’s intention:

E Dios sabe que la mi intencion non fue de lo [sc. el libro] fazer por dar manera de pecar, ni por mal dezir, mas fue por reducir a toda persona a memoria buena de bien obrar, e dar ensienpo de buenas costumbres e castigos de salvacion.

(1989, 4)

It was no unfamiliar concept during the Middle Ages that authorial intention was relevant to the interpretation of a literary text: the *intentio scribentis* was one of the subdivisions of the *accessus ad auctores* tradition that provided readers with clues to the understanding of a text.¹⁷ It would, however, be misleading to suggest that this authorial intention was the hermeneutic guarantor of the meaning of the whole text. Instead, textual fragments have their own *intentiones*, and it is the reader’s task to judge these intentions and fold the textual fragments into his or her own mental structures. In this *mise en scene* of medieval hermeneutics on the Iberian Peninsula, the *Libro de buen amor* is unique in its virtuosity, and an exemplary illustration of premodern subjectivity.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of *Libro de buen amor* studies, see Deyermond (1987) and Haywood and Vasvari (2004).
- 2 Manuscript S and its autobiographical rendition of the *Libro del Arcipreste* suggest that some readers in the fourteenth century already had different reading habits, indicating emerging forms of modern subjectivity; see Folger (2003).
- 3 I use the concepts of “residual,” “dominant,” and “emerging” following Raymond Williams (1977, 121–128) as indications for contemporaneity and the imbrication of discourses and power formations to explain the “overlapping” of stages of history.
- 4 Anthony Low holds that subjectivity gradually replaced the “emphasis on community,” in a historical process of alienation through “psychological pressures that thwart personal desires” (2003, x and xviii).
- 5 For a more detailed discussion of scholarship on subjectivity, and the reasons for using the concept in relation to medieval texts, see my *Escape from the Prison of Love* (27–42).
- 6 In the sixteenth century, according to Natalie Zemon Davis, “the line drawn around the self was [still] not firmly closed. One could get inside other people and receive other people within oneself, and not just during sexual intercourse or when a child was in the womb” (1986, 56). On the “embodiment” of the premodern subject, see Biernoff (2002).
- 7 Dunne’s study (2003) focuses on the literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Weak subjectivity is based on Deleuzian “naked” repetition, which is situated between the interior repetition of the “strong” subject and Nietzsche’s eternal return, which actually negates subjectivity.
- 8 See Michael Camille (2000, 205). Boccaccio’s Fiammetta, for instance, falls victim to lovesickness because she is caught by the pneumatic rays Pamphilo emits through his eyes; see also Ioan P. Couliano (1987, 29–30). Phenomena like the evil eye are also based on the assumption that a human being emits seeing rays; see Burke (2000, 63–77).
- 9 See Biernoff (2002, 63–107). Roger Bacon argues in his *Opus majus* (5.1.7.4) that *species* which are emitted by objects are “*aided and excited* by the species of the eye” (quoted in Biernoff [2002, 87]; Biernoff’s emphasis).
- 10 The most common model is based on five internal senses; all premodern descriptions of the human mind show considerable variations in terminology; see Folger (2003, 27–33) and Wolfson (1935).

- 11 *Imagines* are not merely visual in our modern understanding, but synesthetic. “Common sense,” situated in the front of the brain, is the first receptor of the sense impression; it has the function of fusing the visual stimuli with the sensorial data conveyed by the other external senses.
- 12 According to Thomas Aquinas, *synderesis* is the expression of a successful habitualization of virtuous thinking. *Synderesis* is the conscience of practical reason and *habitus*: “*synderesis dicitur instigare ad bonum et murmurare de malo, in quantum per prima principia procedimus ad inveniendum et iudicamus inventa*” (1970, 188–190; *Summa* 1a. 79,12): see Philippe Delhaye (1968, 112–14). Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* as “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (2002, 72) of social practices and representations is indebted to this tradition, naturally reflecting a radical change in epistemology.
- 13 I use Anthony Zahareas’ synoptic edition (Ruiz 1989) because it more faithfully reflects the text that the medieval reading subject encountered.
- 14 The prologue has attracted considerable critical attention and produced widely diverging interpretations. Alastair J. Minnis sums up the discussion (2001, 64–70). In his own view, the *Libro* is connected to the “Medieval Ovid:” “the art of love and its remedy are interrelated; the one presupposes the other” (2001, 69).
- 15 I have modified the standard English version of Psalm 32:8, which translates “Intellectum tibi dabo” as “I will instruct you,” in order to emphasize the hermeneutic imperative that would be obvious to medieval readers.
- 16 In the Salamanca manuscript, after the colophon (stanza 1634) there are further materials that suggest a change in reading habits during the fourteenth century; see Folger (2003).
- 17 See Quain (1945). The *accessus* was reserved for actual *auctores*, but Juan Ruiz claims for his book, possibly tongue-in-cheek, the status of a “libro de testo” that deserves a “glosa” in the form of a “grand prosa” (1989, 170, stanza 1631).

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