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THE BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY IN THE *LIBRO DE BUEN AMOR*

In three of the early sections of the *Libro de buen amor*, Juan Ruiz explains to his public how, for various reasons, he is conditioned to love women. In stanzas 71–76 he uses the unimpeachable authority of Aristotle to argue that men and animals are biologically determined to seek ‘juntamiento con fenbra plazentera’ (st. 71d),¹ and since he is a man like any other, it is natural, perhaps even inevitable, that from time to time he too should feel the attraction of the opposite sex.² Paraphrasing St Paul (1 Thessalonians 5.21), the Archpriest tells us rather cheekily that one must taste things in order to be in a position to decide whether they are good or bad. Only then can one reject what is bad and retain what is good.

In stanzas 105–14, Juan Ruiz cites Solomon as his authority and discusses the theme of ‘vanidat’. Whereas for Solomon it is futile (a ‘vanidat’) to seek the things of this world, for the Archpriest demonstrable futility (‘vanidat provada’) lies in courting a lady who has no desire to be courted. As he declares: ‘Partíme de su pleito, pues de mí es redrada’ (st. 106d). Since, however, God never intended man to be alone, and created woman to be his companion, Juan Ruiz, having lost one love, feels entitled to go in search of another. There then follows the ‘troba caçurra’ relating the Archpriest’s attempt to use Ferrand García’s services as a go-between to win the love of Cruz.

The next section tells the story of King Alcaraz’s son. The King summons astrologers to his court because he wishes to know what the stars hold in store for his recently-born son. Five astrologers ‘de más conplido saber’ (st. 130b) predict that Alcaraz’s son will die, although they each predict a different cause of death: that he will be ‘apedreado’, ‘quemado’, ‘despeñado’, ‘colgado’, ‘afogado’. In view of their apparent lack of agreement (‘juicios desacordados’ (st. 132a)), the King orders them to be cast into prison. It seems clear to him that the varied predictions of the astrologers all have to be wrong: ‘dio todos sus juizios por mintrosos provados’ (st. 132d). Time passes, and one day the young prince goes hunting with his tutor. Care is taken to select a fine day for the outing since the tutor is mindful of the predictions of the astrologers. Not everyone, it seems, shares the incredulity of Alcaraz. As it happens, the weather takes a turn for the worse. There is a hailstorm, the prince is struck by a bolt of lightning, he falls from a bridge, his clothes are caught on the branch of a tree and, finally, he is drowned in a river. All five predictions turn out to be correct.

Now, the interpretation of this episode is rather less straightforward than that of the two sections just discussed. It has been argued, not unpersuasively, that the

¹ Quotations from the text are from Arcipreste de Hita, *Libro de buen amor*, edited by Alberto Blecuá (Barcelona, 1983).

² The importance of punctuation in determining meaning is correctly stressed in D. Clotelle Clarke, ‘Sacerdotal Celibacy and the Archpriest’s Vision’, *Studies in Honor of John Esten Keller*, edited by Joseph R. Jones (Newark, Delaware, 1980), 103–12 (p. 104, n. 4). However, none of the potential readings which Clarke offers of stanza 76a affects the substance of my argument.

story of Alcaraz's son is intended to offset that of the Greeks and Romans.³ Whereas in the latter the Greek and the Roman both offer plausible, but incorrect, interpretations of each other's signs, the astrologers give unlikely, yet correct, interpretations of the planetary signs. This suggests, so the line of argument runs, that it is unwise to seek a single correct interpretation of the *Libro de buen amor* as a whole. Such a conclusion is clearly not easy to dismiss. However, the view that the Alcaraz episode is concerned with 'disputed interpretations', all of which turn out to be correct is, I think, challengeable. Juan Ruiz tells us:

Entre los estrelleros que-l vinieron a ver,
vinieron cinco dellos de más conplido saber;
(st. 130a)

Apparently, only five of the astrologers responding to Alcaraz's summons were sufficiently skilled to be able to offer interpretations of the planetary signs. In other words, in contrast to the manual signs of the story of the Greeks and Romans, the signs appearing in the heavens at the time of the birth of Alcaraz's son seem to belong to a *scientific* code which can be deciphered only by those who are sufficiently skilled in the 'science' of astrology. Furthermore, the different interpretations of the astrological signs offered by the master astrologers are not in the end conflicting. As Ian Michael, Luis Beltrán, and A. A. Parker have suggested, they are simply different aspects of a single truth, a truth which, as Parker reasons, is 'essentially univocal'.⁴ As this last statement implies, there is, I think, a very real danger here of not distinguishing between aesthetic codes, which naturally incline towards polysemy and ambiguity, and logical or scientific codes which are rooted in denotation, excluding, in so far as this is possible, all connotative values from the signs which belong to the code. The master astrologers, then, fail to comprehend the entire message contained in the stars not because the astrological configurations conveying the message are ambiguous or confusing but because even their understanding of the complex science of astrology is incomplete.

But if the story of Alcaraz's son is not related to the overall purpose of the *Libro de buen amor*, what is it all about? It has been suggested that the exemplum is introduced 'to prove an assertion about astrology', that Juan Ruiz is concerned fundamentally to demonstrate the power of the stars in shaping man's character and destiny.⁵ This view seems to be convincing not least because it helps to explain the significance of the different predictions given by the five astrologers. Such is the power of the stars that even what seems implausible and contradictory can come to pass. So much for the general proposition advanced in this episode.

There is, of course, also a more specific purpose: to instruct the reader in the way in which the stars have shaped the character and destiny of the protagonist of the

³ See A. D. Deyermond, 'The Greeks, the Romans, the Astrologers and the Meaning of the *Libro de buen amor*', *Romance Notes*, 5 (1963), 1-4. Deyermond has the support, among others, of Marina Scordilis Brownlee, *The Status of the Reading Subject in the 'Libro de buen amor'* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1985), pp. 74-75.

⁴ Ian Michael, 'The Function of the Popular Tale in the *Libro de buen amor*', in '*Libro de buen amor*' *Studies*, edited by G. B. Gybbon-Monypenny (London, 1970), 177-218 (p. 189); Luis Beltrán Fernández, *Razones de buen amor: Oposiciones y convergencias en el libro del Arcipreste de Hita* (Valencia, 1977), p. 109; A. A. Parker, 'The Parable of the Greeks and the Romans in the *Libro de buen amor*', *Medieval Hispanic Studies Presented to Rita Hamilton*, edited by A. D. Deyermond (London, 1976), 139-48 (p. 141, n. 8).

⁵ Parker, p. 141, n. 8. According to Olaf Pedersen, 'the Middle Ages drew to a close having been unable to solve the problem of whether astrology is true or false', in Olaf Pedersen, 'Astrology', *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, edited by Joseph R. Strayer (New York, 1982), 604-10 (p. 608).

Libro, Juan Ruiz himself. Although there is some circularity in his argument, Juan Ruiz informs us that his delight in serving women suggests that he was born under the sign of Venus:

En este signo atal creo que yo nascí:
 sienpre puné en servir dueñas que conosci;
 (st. 153a)

In other words, he was born to be a lover. This is his nature. But the stars have something else to say about Juan Ruiz. He has already been unsuccessful in two amorous adventures. The second, involving Cruz and Ferrand García, immediately precedes the story of Alcaraz's son, which itself is prefaced by a statement about the futility of trying to go against one's destiny. There are those, for example, who devote all their time and money to the pursuit of 'clerezía' without ever achieving their aim:

En cabo saben poco, que su fado les guía:
 non pueden desmentir a la astrología.
 (st. 125c)

The Alcaraz episode, then, seems designed to demonstrate that it is foolish for man to fight against his destiny. Juan Ruiz, it appears, is destined to be unsuccessful in love: 'A muchas serví mucho que nada non acabesçí' (st. 153d). Unfortunately, however, the stars apparently also dictate that Juan Ruiz should be venerean in character. Character and destiny are in conflict:

Comoquier que é provado mi signo ser atal
 (en servir a las dueñas punar e non en ál),
 pero, aunque omne non goste la pera del peral,
 en estar a la sonbra es plazer comunal.
 (st. 154)

This conflict leads the Archpriest to accept, for the moment, that in the absence of its fruit, the shade of the pear tree will have to do.

Another advantage in seeing the Alcaraz episode as constituting first and foremost a defence of the power of the stars is that it allows this part of the *Libro* to be linked with the prose prologue, the story of the Greeks and Romans, and the Aristotle and Solomon passages. Roger Walker has referred to an interesting parallel between the Aristotle, Solomon, and Alcaraz passages and a particular section of *El libro del caballero Zifar*.⁶ The *Zifar* author, in an effort to underline the sinfulness and danger of sexual love, argues strongly that man cannot justly use biological, theological, or astrological arguments to explain his inability to lead a chaste life. The fact that Juan Ruiz, who was almost certainly familiar with the *Zifar*, uses these same arguments in defence of sexual love, persuades Walker that here we see the Archpriest in jocular mood. The core of Walker's reasoning is as follows:

⁶ Roger M. Walker, 'Juan Ruiz's Defence of Love', *Modern Language Notes*, 84 (1969), 292-97 (p. 297). The King of Mentón advises his sons to cultivate 'buenas costumbres', especially that of chastity. He argues that it is perfectly feasible for men to be chaste, since, unlike animals, they possess reason and free will which enable them to control their biological urges and to overcome the influence of the stars. The cultivation of 'buenas costumbres' implies respect for God and His Law and also for kings, who enforce that law on earth. Here the main aim of the *Zifar* author seems to be to persuade the reader to accept kingly authority. See *Libro del caballero Zifar*, edited by Joaquín González Muela (Madrid, 1982), pp. 240-44. For a discussion of Juan Ruiz's likely familiarity with the *Zifar*, see A. D. Deyermond and Roger M. Walker, 'A Further Vernacular Source for the *Libro de buen amor*', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 46 (1969), 193-200.

I feel it is more than mere coincidence that the three arguments in justification of sex that are discredited by the *Zifar* author should be virtually identical to three arguments that are put forward in the *LBA* in defence of the pursuit of love. The point takes on added significance when we realise that these are the *only* arguments in favour of love advanced by the Archpriest. He does, of course, launch many attacks on love on the grounds of its futility, its deceitfulness, its destructiveness and, above all, its sinfulness; and these attacks far outnumber the three attempts at justification. It seems to me that the use of these three particular arguments, to which clear answers had already been given in a work which he certainly knew, is another example of the Archpriest's self-mockery, as well as being, in a sense, a burlesquing of the censoriousness of his model. The fact that he uses discredited arguments to defend *loco amor* with his tongue in his cheek underlines once again the fundamentally serious moral purpose of the work, and provides us with a further illustration of the brilliant subtlety and elusiveness of the Archpriest's literary technique. (p. 297)

Leaving aside for the moment the question of moral purpose, it is probably fair to say that in these passages we do indeed see Juan Ruiz in jocular mood. Although it is clearly possible to hold sincere views contrary to those of the *Zifar* author (and the twelfth-century cleric, the Anonymous of York/Rouen, provides evidence of this), the tone and style of these three sections of the *Libro* make it difficult to believe that the Archpriest's defence of love is anything but tongue in cheek.⁷ What seems to be most interesting, though, is the fact that in each case Juan Ruiz sets out to shift the responsibility for his sexual behaviour away from himself on to God, the stars, or the anatomy of man. This desire constantly to shift responsibility away from himself as protagonist and author of the narrative is not, however, peculiar to these three passages. We find it in the episode of the Greeks and Romans, which precedes the first of the sections discussed above, and in the prose prologue.

The story of the Greeks and Romans is intended to warn the reader to take great care not to *misunderstand* the meaning and purpose of the work as a whole:

Entiende bien mis dichos e piensa la sentençia:
non me contesca contigo como al dotor de Greçia
con el ribald romano e con su poca sabiençia,
quando demandó Roma a Greçia la çiençia.

(st. 46)

Rome asks Greece for her laws. Reluctantly Greece agrees, on condition that Rome shows herself worthy to receive them. The test which must be passed involves a debate between a learned man of Greece and a representative of Rome. Rome accepts the challenge but, given the language barrier between Greeks and Romans, she requests that the debate be conducted in sign language ('por señas de letrado' (st. 49d)). As the day of the test approaches and they are still unable to find a suitable champion, the Romans become more and more agitated. Finally, they elect a ruffian, a man both crude and unlettered. They explain to him in only the most general terms the nature of their predicament:

Nós avemos con griegos nuestro conbid
para disputar por señas; lo que tú quisieres pid'
e nós dártelo emos; escúsanos d'esta lid.

(st. 52b)

⁷ See *Die Texte des Normannischen Anonymus*, edited by Karl Pellens (Wiesbaden, 1966), pp. 204–09. The Anonymous of York/Rouen uses logic, scriptural authority, and the notion of predestination to argue that clerics should be permitted to marry. The introduction of sacerdotal celibacy, he claims, is the work of man, not of God: 'Traditio igitur hominis est, non Dei, non apostolorum institutio' (p. 204).

The ruffian agrees to represent Rome and is dressed up 'como si fuese dotor en la filosofia' (st. 53b). The Greek arrives and initiates the debate by holding up one finger. The Roman replies with three fingers. The Greek shows the Roman an open palm and the Roman responds showing a clenched fist. At this point the Greek declares Rome worthy to receive the laws of Greece. The people who have witnessed the debate and not understood the exchange of signs ask each disputant in turn to interpret the proceedings for them. The Greek explains how he had interrogated the Roman on theological matters. He had terminated the debate as soon as it was apparent that the Romans believed and understood the Trinity. The Roman, on the other hand, offers a very different version of events. He had been threatened with physical violence by the Greek and it was only because he refused to be intimidated that the Greek finally desisted and withdrew.

The different interpretations of the exemplum offered by scholars vary just as enormously as do the radically different perceptions which the Greek and the Roman have of the debate in which they have participated. Sara Sturm maintains that 'much of the humor of the story derives from the fact that a real degree of opaqueness is necessary in the Greek for him to interpret the Roman's signs as theological arguments'. The Roman's behaviour, on the other hand, is precisely what one would expect of a 'vellaco'. Consequently, 'the *cuerto* who finds *cordura* in the work through the exercise of his *buen seso* is not the reader who "gets the point" of the Archpriest's book'. Leo Spitzer argues that although language is essentially ambiguous, God is, nevertheless, able to guide the reader through the text and thus 'alcanzar sus propios y justos fines'. María Rosa Lida de Malkiel suggests that the moral of the story is that any number of interpretations is possible, but that some interpretations are better than others.⁸ Accordingly, the interpretation by the Greek is better than that by the Roman. Both Luis Beltrán and A. A. Parker argue forcefully that the different backgrounds, characters, and intelligences of the disputants make it impossible for them to understand each other (Beltrán, pp. 80–81; Parker, p. 144). All language, says Parker, is 'morally indifferent', so that evil lies in the eye of the beholder. The responsibility for interpretation thus lies squarely with the reader. Malcolm Read, in an extremely stimulating article,⁹ concludes that the *Libro* is a reflection of the contemporary crisis between philosophical realism and nominalism in so far as this refers to the nature of the linguistic sign (pp. 251–52). The Greeks and Romans exemplum illustrates that no certain signs exist in language and this realization leaves Juan Ruiz 'vainly beseeching his reader to extract from the *Libro* a message impossible to deduce from his words' (p. 258). Ian Michael cautiously, and no doubt very wisely, concludes that the Greeks and Romans episode serves simply to demonstrate the dangers of misunderstanding (p. 186).

I find it very hard to believe that the Archpriest intended the reader to take seriously the stated moral of the exemplum, 'non á mala palabra si non es a mal

⁸ Sara Sturm, 'The Greeks and the Romans: The Archpriest's Warning to his Reader', *Romance Notes*, 10 (1968), 404–12 (pp. 408, 411); Leo Spitzer, 'En torno al arte del Arcipreste de Hita', *Linguística e historia literaria*, second edition (Madrid, 1968), 87–134 (p. 105); María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, *Two Spanish Masterpieces: The Book of Good Love and the Celestina* (Urbana, Illinois, 1961), p. 32.

⁹ M. K. Read, 'Man against Language: A Linguistic Perspective on the Theme of Alienation in the *Libro de buen amor*', *Modern Language Notes*, 96 (1981), 237–60.

tenida' (st. 64b).¹⁰ I would not deny that part of the reason why the Greek and Roman fail to communicate is that they are very different characters from entirely different social and intellectual backgrounds. But what the moral suggests and Parker appears to accept (namely, that evil lies in the eye of the beholder and so responsibility for interpreting the *Libro de buen amor* rests exclusively with the reader) not only constitutes a deliberate distortion of the true nature of the linguistic sign but is also, I think, undermined by certain key elements of the story. I have already alluded to the fact that the Roman ruffian is given only the barest information about the nature of the challenge issued by the Greeks. It is not at all clear that he knows what he is getting himself into. He reacts to the Greek's signs the way he does not merely because he is a ruffian but also because he has no reason to suppose that he is expected to react differently.¹¹ Similarly, the Greek expects to take part in a learned debate and when the Roman appears disguised as a 'dotor en la filosofía', this expectation is confirmed. So completely is the reaction of the Greek determined by the expectation that he is confronting a learned Roman that he is able to dismiss as irrelevant to the supposed topic of discussion what, under any other circumstances, would have been unmistakable signs that the Roman is furious and clearly not considering questions of a theological nature. We are told that after witnessing the Greek's first sign, 'levantóse el ribaldo, bravo, de malpagar' (st. 55d). This, it seems, is also a sign, but one which simply has no meaning within the convention of learned debate and is, therefore, understandably discounted by the Greek.

Now, it could be argued that I am reading into this exemplum far too much, and clearly there is a danger of attaching importance to details which the author himself did not consider especially significant. However, the fact that the Roman champion in the *Libro de buen amor* is in disguise is unlikely to be unintentional. Lecoy, for example, has shown that the basic exemplum of a debate in sign language — often between two characters of completely different social and intellectual backgrounds — has given rise to two separate strands or traditions, only one of which retains the element of disguise.¹² It is perhaps worth noting that the version of Accursius, which of all known versions most resembles that of Juan Ruiz and which therefore has been proposed as its source, does not contain this element of disguise.¹³ In our present state of knowledge it is certainly possible to conclude that Juan Ruiz was familiar with both traditions. He may well have used Accursius as his main source (the similarities between the two versions are considerable) and borrowed the element of disguise from another form of the story.

¹⁰ Stanza 64a ('Por esto diz' la pastraña de la vieja ardida') should, I believe, be understood as an attempt by Juan Ruiz to give to the moral of the next line the weight of popular wisdom. This type of wisdom, it may be recalled, was authoritative in the Middle Ages. Whether the moral is intended to be taken seriously or not is, of course, another matter and must be determined on the basis of how well it matches the preceding exemplum rather than on that of uncertain interpretations of 'pastraña' and 'ardida'. See Joan Corominas, 'Ardido', 'Patraña', *Diccionario crítico etimológico de la lengua castellana*, third edition, 4 vols (Berne, 1976), I, 264, and III, 694.

¹¹ The ruffian is informed that he will be required to 'disputar por señas' (st. 52c). He is not, however, told that the sign system which it has been agreed will operate in the debate is to be that used by learned men on such occasions ('señas de letrado' (st. 49d)). Nor should it be assumed that the donning of a fancy robe is sufficient to make the ruffian aware of the likely subject-matter of the disputation. He has, after all, been selected to represent his countrymen in an international debate and it is hardly likely to surprise him to find that the event is accompanied by a certain amount of pomp and ceremony.

¹² Félix Lecoy, *Recherches sur le 'Libro de buen amor' de Juan Ruiz Archiprêtre de Hita*, second edition, with new prologue, supplementary bibliography and index by A. D. Deyerdmond (Farnborough, 1974), pp. 167–68.

¹³ Julio Puyol y Alonso, *El Arcipreste de Hita. Estudio crítico* (Madrid, 1906), pp. 183–84.

I emphasize the element of disguise and the importance of expectations because they seem to suggest that Juan Ruiz was well aware of the true nature of the linguistic sign. He appears to have known that signs have two essential qualities: arbitrariness and conventionality. It is precisely because they are by nature arbitrary that signs must be rooted in convention if they are to function as signs at all. The absence of a common convention, brought about by an act of deception on the part of the Romans, makes communication between the Roman ruffian and the learned Greek impossible. The different social and intellectual backgrounds of the disputants, while obviously not facilitating mutual comprehension, may function here as a deliberate red herring. What I am saying, then, is that the moral of the story of the Greeks and Romans ('non á mala palabra ...' (st. 64b)), which emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign while neglecting to mention its conventionality, is at odds with the exemplum preceding it.¹⁴ Consequently, Juan Ruiz's attempt to shift onto the reader exclusive responsibility for interpreting the work correctly cannot be taken seriously.

There are two further reasons why the reader should not be taken in by the declared moral of the parable of the Greeks and Romans. First, I have already said that in the Aristotle, Solomon, and Alcaraz passages Juan Ruiz attempts to shift the burden of responsibility for his sexual behaviour away from himself onto God, the stars, and the anatomy of man. I know of no scholar who has suggested that in these three instances the reader should take Juan Ruiz at his word. In the story of the Greeks and Romans and in the prose prologue — where the declared moral of Greeks and Romans is again found — we see the Archpriest trying to exonerate himself from responsibility for having produced a work which might be seen to encourage 'loco amor'.¹⁵ I see no reason why the transfer of responsibility in these two sections should be thought to be any less jocular than in the three passages in defence of the protagonist's sexual behaviour. Secondly, about half way through the *Libro*, shortly after the Doña Endrina episode, the Archpriest falls in love with yet another lady (sts 910–44). He enlists the services of an old bawd who slowly but surely brings the lady under her spell. However, just when things seem to be working out for Juan Ruiz, the old woman decides that she no longer wishes to serve him. The text continues:

¹⁴ I do not mean to suggest that moral and exemplum are entirely unrelated. There is clearly a link between them. However, the message of the moral is at best only half true and is used by Juan Ruiz to mislead the reader. He does this again in stanza 70 ('De todos instrumentos yo, libro, só pariente:'). It is certainly true that the sound of an instrument will vary according to the competence of the person who plays it. But the musician, however accomplished, cannot make the trumpet sound like a piano. The craftsman who fashions the instrument thus limits the range of interpretation of the musician. Similarly, the author of a book determines the range of readings which can be made of his text. This may be relatively small, as in St Augustine's *Confessions*, where the author seems genuinely concerned to communicate with the reader, or, as in the *Libro*, so large as to permit entirely antithetical readings of the text. The ambiguity of the *Libro* is contrived and often leaves the reader bewildered. It is therefore difficult to see how he alone can be held accountable for his interpretation of the work. Juan Ruiz must surely share that responsibility. For two differing assessments of the importance of Augustine for an understanding of the *Libro*, see Brownlee, pp. 25–35, and E. Michael Gerli, 'Recta voluntas est bonus amor: St Augustine and the Didactic Structure of the *Libro de buen amor*', *Romance Philology*, 35 (1982), 500–08.

¹⁵ The moral of the episode of the Greeks and Romans appears in the prose prologue restated as follows: 'Et ruego e consejo a quien lo [the *Libro*] leyere e lo oyere, que guarde bien las tres cosas del alma: lo primero, que quiera bien entender e bien juzgar la mi entención, porque lo fiz, e la sentençia de lo que ý dize, e non al son feo de las palabras: e segu[n]d derecho, las palabras sirven a la intençión e non la intençión a las palabras' (ll. 126–32).

Yo le dixé como en juego: 'Picaça parladera,
non tomes el sendero e dexes la carrera;
sirve do avrás pro, pues sabes la manera,
que non mengua cabestro a quien tiene çivera.'

Non me acordé estonce d'esta chica parlilla,
que juga jugando dize el omne grand manzilla;
fue sañuda la vieja tanto que a maravilla,
toda la poridat fue luego descubrilla.

Fue la dueña guardada quanto su madre pudo:
non la podía aver así tan a menudo;
aína yerra omne que non es aperçebudo:
o piensa bien qué fables o calla, fazte mudo.

(st. 920)

The Archpriest jokingly reproves the bawd for threatening to withdraw her services. Unfortunately for him, however, she does not interpret his remarks in the way they were meant, but instead is deeply offended. She therefore talks openly about the protagonist's relationship with the lady and the result is that the latter's mother locks her daughter away, thus preventing her from having any contact with the Archpriest. He then laments his careless use of language and exhorts the reader always to think very carefully before speaking. Now, all this clearly contradicts the moral of the exemplum of the Greeks and Romans, where the onus is on the reader or listener to get it right. Here we are told quite explicitly that it is the responsibility of the speaker to ensure that his message is not misunderstood. The burden of responsibility, on this occasion, is not transferred and it becomes apparent that Juan Ruiz understands the nature of the linguistic sign much better than the supposed moral of the Greeks and Romans story might lead one to conclude. The conventional aspect of signs, we are told, is often forgotten at the signmaker's peril.

All this suggests that Juan Ruiz is hardly being serious when, in his account of the debate between the Greeks and Romans, he asks those of us who are about to ingest his words to wash them down with generous quantities of good will. Aquinas reminds us that 'Venus dicitur ab Aristotele dolosa' and that 'Venus agit ex insidiis, et furatur intellectum multum sapientis'.¹⁶ I wonder whether Juan Ruiz had this in mind when he tells us in the Alcazar episode that he was born under the sign of Venus?¹⁷

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¹⁶ Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Summa Theologiae*, 5 vols (Madrid, 1951), III, 2-2 q. 55 art. 8, pp. 358-59.

¹⁷ I am most grateful to Dr R. Hitchcock and Dr D. A. Trotter of Exeter University, and Dr Jane Whettnall of Westfield College, London, for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper shortly before it was delivered to the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland at Westfield College on 28 March 1988. I benefited also from discussion with members of the Association during the conference and would like to record here my thanks to them all.