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Publication Date

2008-11-11

“On his Majesty Nebuchadnezzar’s Secret Service:
Ibn Wasif’s *The Jewels of the Seas* and Alfonso the Learned’s *Grand and General History*”

Paper read for The Humanities Club, University of California, Berkeley, Monday, 19 October 1992, in the O'Neill Room of the Faculty Club.

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Alfonso el Sabio, King of Leon and Castile 1252-84, is justly renowned for having been the founder of Spanish historiography in the vernacular. Alfonso believed firmly in team efforts; I suppose we might compare him in this regard to Hubert Howe Bancroft. Having made the decision to promote the writing of history, he proceeded to gather together a group of scholars versed in all the necessary disciplines. The first effort of this team was a history of Spain from time of Tubal, grandson of Noah, down to the time of the death of Alfonso’s revered father, Fernando III (1252).

However, the *Estoria de España* was not seen through to a final royal version; though the complete text appears to have existed in draft form, only the 1st part, ending with the Arabic conquest, was actually copied in the royal scriptorium. In the decade of the 1270s, Alfonso threw himself and his scholars into a more grandiose project, a history of the world from the Creation to his own time. Most students of Alfonso’s reign have concluded that this *Grande e general estoria*, was undertaken as more befitting the dignity of Holy Roman Emperor, a title that Alfonso sought to claim after the death of his chief rival, Richard of Cornwall.

Alfonsine prose remains but little explored by scholars devoted to the historical grammar of Old Spanish; for one thing, huge portions of his work remain unpublished, e.g., the 3d, 5th and 6th parts of the *General Estoria*, and perhaps his outstanding accomplishment, the *Siete Partidas*, is not available in a form that would be useful to diachronic linguists. Nevertheless, the excuse of inaccessibility has not been available since 1978 with regard to Part IV of the *General estoria*. This part of Alfonso’s great world history constitutes a singularly attractive object for linguistic study, not only because it is extant in a manuscript copied in the royal scriptorium and dated in the year 1280, but also because the full text with exhaustive concordances is available in microfiche form, thanks to the indefatigable energy and industry of Lloyd Kasten, John Nitti, and their co-workers in the Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies in Madison.

Since philologists are so often concerned with determining the period when works were composed, we often tend to lose sight of the fact that the vehicles preserving those works, i.e., the manuscripts, were usually copied long after the moment of composition. The *Poema de mio Cid*, just to cite one notable example, may have been set to vellum in the early 13th century, but the only extant MS belongs to the 14th century. The fact is that the Alfonsine scriptorium MSS

antedate virtually all the MSS that preserve the classics of 13th-century Castilian literature, i.e., Berceo, the *Libro de Alexandre*, the *Poema de Fernán González*, and so on. Consequently, a MS of *GE IV* dated in 1280, while the editor-in-chief, so to speak, was still alive, provides a view of 13th-century Castilian completely free of the linguistic refraction that inevitably affected the texts of works copied in the 14th century and later.

Part IV of the *General estoria* purports to be a history of the world from the time of Nebuchadnezzar to that of Alexander the Great and his immediate Hellenistic successors. The bulk of the material is Biblical, extending from the books of the prophets Jeremiah and Daniel to the maxims of the Ecclesiasticus. The account of Nebuchadnezzar's reign occupies ff. 1r-59v; one of Alfonso's chief sources for this portion of the history is a Moslem historian, introduced in the first part of the *General estoria* as "un sabio delos arauigos que ouo nombre alguazif & escriuio las estorias de egipto" (160r24; cf. Solalinde's brief commentary 1930:xiii). Alguazif is Ibrāhim b. Waṣīf Šāh al Miṣrī, who wrote *Ġawāhir albuḥūr*, or "*The Jewels of the Seas*," a fabulous history of Egypt (completed before 606/1209, according to Brockelmann 1943, 1:409; see also 1937:574-75, and 1898-1902, 1:335-36). So far as I know, *The Jewels of the Seas* remains unpublished; consequently, I am unable to draw a firm line between traits present in the source and the particular adaptations carried out by Alfonso's team of historiographers, and will treat the text synchronically, that is, as it was intended to be read.

My eye was caught by a curious series of episodes narrating the Nabuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt, involving the activities of an astrologer turned secret agent whose name was Drimiden. Briefly stated, Drimiden's mission was to disable the Egyptian front-line defenses, a group of magic idols that for over a millenium had repelled all invaders. By insinuating himself into the good graces of the keeper of the idols, a personage referred to throughout only as "*la vieia*," he old woman', who appears to have been a sort of concierge living on the premises of the temple in question, Drimiden finds the opportunity to defile the idols appropriately, and is then protected from discovery by the Egyptian authorities through the cleverness of *la vieia*, no mean sorceress herself. All goes according to plan, the invasion is successful, Egypt is conquered, and at length both Drimiden and *la vieia* are rewarded handsomely by Nebuchadnezzar.

The narration is not continuous, but rather consists of three principal interwoven strands, i.e., Drimiden's adventures, Nabuchadnezzar's mobilization and invasion, and King Vafre of Egypt's fruitless efforts to defend his realm, along with other digressions. To keep his readers abreast of the constantly changing narrative perspective, Alfonso regularly addresses them directly, often including revealing details of and sober judgements about his sources, as though the intended audience were in fact scholars like himself. Most often these, technically speaking, apostrophes, appear immediately before rubrics that introduce new chapters; in fact, they sometimes read like glosses on the rubrics, which often cover much of the same ground. The result is a highly self-conscious form of discourse, in which the author ceaselessly strives to orient his readers' attention along the various narrative lines as well as to provide cross-references to foregoing and subsequent events and to other authorial pronouncements.

After describing Nebuchadnezzar's parliament (*cortes*), summoned with the intention of declaring war on Egypt in view of Vafre's refusal to turn over to Nebuchadnezzar the Jews that had taken refuge in Egypt after the destruction of the Temple, and the Babilonian King's approval of Drimiden's proposal for top-secret covert action, Alfonso suspends the narration of Drimiden's infiltration:

Agora dexamos a drimiden yr su carrera pora egypto & en quanto el ua
tornaremos alas razones del Rey Nabucodonosor & del Rey uaffre . . . (16v68-71)

We return to Drimiden's story some time later, so that a brief resume seems called for:

queremos agora tornar a la razon de Drimiden el sabio de Nabuchodonosor &
dezir uos emos de como fizo en so camino & uino a Manip en Egipto & guiso
como posasse en el templo del Barbe mismo o estauan las ymagenes de los
ydolos que yua el desencantar & desfazer. (20r56-62)

The narration frequently shifts into direct discourse, and, while the result hardly anticipates the delightful dialogues of the Archpriest of Talavera or of Fernando de Rojas, the liveliness of the account is considerably heightened:

La uieia quandol uio atal, ouo duelo del & dixol «fer lo e mas luego que ouieres
comido luego ue.» Dizel «fare como mandaredes.» . . . A la manana dixol la
uieia «Toma lo tuyo & ue tu via.» Respondiol el «Sennora, por dios not
quexes . . .» (20v13-16, 46-49)

Note the regularity of apocopation in the clitic pronouns and how they automatically cliticize leftwards, i.e., in the 13th century they were normally enclitic in all positions, rather than being linked proclitically to finite verbs as in modern Spanish.

After Drimiden has gained the confidence of *la vieia*, the narrator again must pass to another, albeit related, subject:

Agora dexamos 0a Drimiden en este logar pensando por qual art podrie llegar
aaquello por que uino alli & contar uos emos dunas visiones que se mostraron en
suennos al Rey uafre . . . (20v91-95)

After the visions are described as well as their interpretation by the prophet Jeremiah, we are taken back to Drimiden and *la uieia*:

Pues que uos dixiemos delo que Jheremias dixo al rey vaffre tornaremos a
drimiden el sabio de nabucodonosor & contar uos emos las razones que ell ouo
con la uieia & lo que el fizo. (22r90-94)

When we reach the culminating point of Drimiden's intrigue, i.e., the disenchantment of the idols, Alfonso's source apparently shows a lacuna at a critical spot:

& [drimiden] tomo aquella sangre & aquellas melezinas & unto las ymagenes de los ydolos . . . & ensuzio las de guisa que les tollio tod el poder & la fuerça que auien antes . . . Mas destas melezinas quales fueron & en quales estrellationes fechas & por quales encantamientos Non uos lo diremos ca lo non fallamos en los libros de los sabios don estas razones tomamos & fallamos que mingua en este logar de la razon desto enel libro de alguaziph una foia . . . (22v42-57)

Accustomed as we are to extremely vague references to sources in medieval works, the apparently straight-forward allusion to a codocoligical problem strikes me as rather unusual. However, I do admit that the context requires that we exercise great caution in accepting this statement literally.

In the heat of the narrative action, when Drimiden has succeeded in persuading *la uieia* to prevent his discovery by the Etyptian necromancers, Alfonso is not above apostrophizing his audience:

Agora uos contaremos como fizo la uieia contra [drimiden] & ueredes quan sabia & quam maestra fue de lo que uos dixiemos de mugieres de Egipto que eran muy sabias. (23v79-82)

La uieia's ruse to throw the Etyptian astrologers and seers off Drimiden's trail was to disguise him so that when they conjured up his image from their charts they would receive entirely wrong notions of his appearance, or to place him in staged indoor scenes, riding a cow or rowing a boat, with the result that the king's men were sent racing all over Egypt trying to find the person that corresponded to these fabricated images. Finally, after becoming aware that both the astrologers and the King are wearying of so many wild goose chases, she represents Drimiden as though being eaten alive by a crocodile in the Nile:

fizo una grand laguna de agua en su casa & mando a Drimiden que se echasse en ella & se tendiesse de la cara arriba & fizo una figura de cocadriz que estaua boca abierta & puso gela sobre el vientre & la boca de la cocadriz en la garganta de Drimiden & fizol assi estar tod el dia. Los sabios cataron el ascendent & uiron le en aquella figura & fizieron lo saber al Rey & enuiaron le dezir «Sabet que uengado uos a dios auos & atod el pueblo del traydor que los ydolos danno». (24r58-69)

This episode is narrated with real gusto, but breaks off with a relatively abrupt transition:

& [drimiden] fizo toda uia en esto & en al como [la uieia] mandaua ca ueye que leuaua bien el fecho. Del Rey uaffre fallamos otrossi . . . (24r95-98)

It is not until f. 26v20 that we return again to Drimiden, who makes his way back to Babilonia, and, after numerous difficulties, manages to gain an interview with Nabuchadnezzar, who is at length persuaded that his agent has indeed carried out his mission. The story is finally wound up on f. 36v7 when, after the conquest of Etypt, Drimiden and *la uieia* receive their rewards.

Alfonso's difficulties with his sources are not limited to lacunae; on some occasions they provide contradictory accounts. Accordingly, with regard to the invasion of Etypt, rather than attempting to conciliate the witnesses, Alfonso gives each in succession:

Agora dezir uos emos de la uenida de Nabuchodonosor & contar uos emos della duna manera segund fallamos en unos libros & despues aun dotra manera segund fallamos en otros libros. (30r23-28)

Finally, major discrepancies must sometimes be sorted out by the reader; Alfonso for his part is willing to learn from any potential source, since he desires above all to give as complete an account of events as possible:

& esto que uos auemos contado de Jheremias fasta aqui dizen lo maestre pedro & don lucas obispo de tuy & otros, mas fallamos en la estoria de alguaziph que uiuo fallo Nabuchodonosor a Jheremias quando a egypto entro & ques le leuo consigo pora iherusalem & que despues se torno iheremias a egypto de cabo . . . E pero que lo de los nuestros es de creer & tener & assi lo otorgamos nos, tod esto uos contaremos nos adelant en sos logares o lo cuenta essa estoria por que ueades que nos non finco ninguna cosa de lo que fallamos que los sabios dixieron et de sus asmanças que dexaron escriptas. Ca en los dichos de los sabios siempre aprende omne algo por que si algunos y a aque semeien contrallas escoge omne dend lo que tiene por mejor & mas uerdadero & enque acuerdan los mas & de la cosa escollecha muchas uezes a omne mayor sabor que non dela que falla en que escoia si non a ella. (32v79-101)

So although Alfonso X respects and indeed yields to the orthodox tradition, he feels compelled to present all the evidence at hand; as María Rosa Lida de Malkiel has noted, “nunca se insistirá lo bastante en que la clave de su proceder doctrinal no es la selección valorativa, sino la colección de los saberes dispersos, con miras a la summa completa y definitiva que era la aspiración de su siglo” (1958-59:131). One always learns from the sayings of learned men, says Alfonso, and if an evaluative selection must be made from among contradictory accounts, then it is up to Alfonso's readers to choose what they hold to be the better and truer version of events. For Alfonso, there is also a final esthetic principle, i.e., that something chosen from many competing alternatives often gives greater pleasure than something found and adopted without such a process of judicious discrimination.

While it would be a absurd exaggeration to call the attitude here displayed a critical approach to source material, nevertheless it reveals an openness toward non-Christian traditions that seems

remarkable for its time. In any case, ibn Waṣīf's *Jewels of the Seas* exercised a powerful hold on the Learned King's imagination; one wonders, no doubt anachronistically, whether he can have been unaware that these Jewels are frequently the sort of "fabliellas de uanidades, que non tenien pro . . ." (Solalinde ed. 1930:753b37-38) that he scorned in another context (cf. Rico 1984:124). For my part, though these associations are completely irrelevant, it seemed to me that the story of Drimiden would have been worthy of inclusion in the *Thousand and One Nights* and I could not help recalling, as the narrative voice helped me from one transition to another ("Agora dexamos a Drimiden en este logar pensando . . ."), how in another, albeit later, major work in the Hispanic tradition, a similar role was performed by a distinguished Moorish historian bearing the name Cidi Hamete Benengeli.

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