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Re-inventing Alexander: From Christian Warrior to Pagan Saint

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ABSTRACT:

In this essay I examine the appropriation of the Alexander legend by the Spanish author of the *Libro de Alexandre* to determine to what degree the poet's creation of a new mythic hero successfully fulfills the ideal of the Christian medieval warrior. By examining the poet's attempt at Christianizing the great warrior, I prove that Alexander retains his standing as a mythic figure: one who cannot be contained within a single ideological interpretation.

RESUMEN:

En este ensayo investigo la apropiación de la leyenda alejandrina por el autor anónimo del *Libro de Alexandre* para determinar hasta que punto esta creación poética del nuevo héroe mítico cumple el ideal del guerrero cristiano medieval. Al examinar el intento del poeta español de «cristianizar» este gran guerrero, demuestro que Alejandro mantiene su estado como figura mítica: una figura que no se puede ser contenida dentro de una interpretación ideológica.

Most discussion of the 13th-century *Libro de Alexandre* revolves around two main controversies: the identity of its author and its inclusion in the category of *speculum principum*. Although the first argument most definitely informs the second, it is the latter that I will discuss in this essay. The concept of the «mirror of princes» in the Middle Ages calls for a text that is didactic in nature and for a fully Christian hero. On the first point, the *Alexandre* acquits itself nicely. The scope of the poem's instruction ranges from moral and ethical concerns to questions of social and political responsibility. The second, however, proves to be a much more divisive concept. Scholars have argued for and against the redemption of Alexander at the end of the poem, and the poet, too, seems to be caught between his desire to redeem his prince and his inability to do so. The poet admires his subject and, therefore, conveys this regard to his audience. Alexander may not be a perfect «mirror», but he is, at the very least, an exemplary figure.

The question of Christian redemption in the *Libro de Alexandre* (hereafter known as the *Alexandre*) hinges on the portrayal of the hero. But this portrayal, like the text itself, is unstable. The poet takes the reader on a journey through the transformations of the character of Alexander: from his auspicious beginnings as a seemingly perfect prince, to his untimely demise as a tragic hero. This path perfectly parallels the generic trajectory of the poem. Through the changes in genre, the poet emphasizes the evolution of Alexander's character. Although the *Alexandre* clearly begins as an epic tale, with a «Christian» Alexander, it evolves into a romance and, finally, ends as a tragedy with the death of a pagan warrior.

The beginning of the *Alexandre* is true to epic form. The epic, according to Bakhtin, must contain three basic conditions: the heroic or absolute past, epic distance, and tradition rather than personal experience. The epic past is one of heroism and superlative events and is inaccessible to the reader as well as to the author who can neither evaluate nor opine on the feats of his hero. Tied to this inaccessible past is the epic discourse that is far removed from contemporary discourse (13). The author of the epic finds himself in a subordinate position: he must revere the past as he narrates it, making no connections to the present. By using Bakhtin's theory as a guideline it will be easy to recognize the characteristics of epic in the *Alexandre*, and also when and where the poem begins to stray from its epic path.

After the death of Alexander's father Phillip in the beginning of the poem, the young king begins to plan his quest to fulfill his father's dreams of empire:

Ya contava por suya torre de Babilón,
 India e Egipto, la tierra de Sión,
 Africa e Marruecos, quantos regnos y son,
 Quanto que Carlos ovo bien do el sol se pon. (88)

This strophe is one of many that demonstrate Alexander's youthful desire for adventure and his wish to «impose his being on the world» (Greene 16). This passage is also an example of political *imitatio*, a common characteristic of the epic. Charlemagne (*Carlos*) is one of many leaders that this medieval Alexander strives to imitate.

Alexander's aspirations for greatness consist of two main objectives, which are in keeping with epic goals. The first is his desire to put an end to the unfair tribute that the Persian king Darius demanded from Macedonia. In the beginning of the poem, Phillip had been appeasing Darius rather than doing battle with him. Alexander, however, feels that it is dishonorable to be subservient to the East. He sends this message to Darius:

Ide dezir a Dario, —esto sea aína—,
 que quand no avía fijo Philipo en la reina,
 poniále ovos d'oro siempre una gallina;
 quando nació el fijo, morióse la gallina. (143)

The second goal is Alexander's desire to free Christ's birthplace from Islamic rule. The following passage reveals an Alexander who is more Christian than pagan.

Es llamada por nombre Asia la primera;
 la segunda, Europa; Africa, la tercera.

Tiene el Christianismo a Europa señera;
 moros tiene las otras por nuestra grant dentera (279).

Alexander begins his epic quest by entering into negotiations with neighboring Thebes. The poet sets the scene with a reasonable Alexander attempting to come to an agreement with Thebes through his ambassadors:

Mandava el buen rey a los embaïdores:
 «Ferildos, non ayades dubda de traïdores;
 ellos son nuestros siervos, nos somos sus señores,
 non escapen los chicos, nin fagan los mayores.» (219)

When Thebes refuses to cooperate, the poet then emphasizes the bad deeds that Thebes has perpetrated on its neighboring cities:

Las gentes de las tierras todas al rey vinién
 maldiziendo a Tebas todas quanto podién;
 de muy malas fazañas muchas le retrayén,
 ençendido era 'l rey, mas más lo ençendién. (222)

A bloody battle ensues and Alexander is the victor. The poet makes it clear that Thebes deserves to be destroyed for its treachery and evil deeds. Since the poet finds unreasonable anger and greatness incompatible, he calls the Thebans' resistance «treason» in order to justify Alexander's actions. Alexander is still the perfect prince, «En ti son ajuntados seso e clerezía» (235a).

The first major battle of the *Alexandre* follows the conditions set forth by Bakhtin. The poet cannot influence the events; he simply reports them as he knows them to be. His depiction of Alexander, too, follows Bakhtin's description of the epic hero as one who is completely externalized. He writes, «His view of himself coincides with other's view of him» (34). It is only later in the poem that the poet loses his ability to be an «objective» observer and the character of Alexander becomes more complex.

The first indication that the *Alexandre* may not follow what David Quint calls epic linearity is the so-called Trojan digression. This re-telling of the *Iliad* comes early in the text and is reminiscent of Aeneas's theatrical recounting of the same tale. Both episodes are examples of spectacle that lure the poems' heroes from their goals. Aeneas's passion seduces Dido, thus accounting for the first major digression in the *Aeneid*. In the *Alexandre*, the digression allows Alexander to inspire his men, and to judge his own deeds in relation to Achilles's deeds (*Treatment* 261). Although this section of the text provides a necessary connection between the Alexander (the medieval Achilles) and his forefather, the digression interferes with the main narrative.

As Alexander travels eastward, the epic cedes to romance. David Quint writes that romance embodies the collapse of narrative (45). According to Eugene Vinaver, the romance relies more upon the way in which a story is narrated than upon the story itself. He sees a direct connection between the new style of biblical exegesis as practiced by Thomas Aquinas and the «interpretive nature of romance» (18). Whereas the epic is a mode that seeks not to enlighten, but to move and impress, the romance reveals a «marriage of matter and meaning, of narrative and commentary» (Vinaver 14-23 *passim*).

Bakhtin writes that the epic is closed both to evaluation by its narrator and to the poet's modernization. On the other hand, the romance not only speaks in contemporary tones, but also relies upon the art of composition to turn the epic tale of adventure into a romance (Vinaver 37).

Alexander's immoderate ambitions undermine his epic goals. The poet reports that Alexander loses interest in his homeland, and in the well being of his men, in order to be recognized not only as emperor, but also as conqueror of the supernatural world. Ironically, the epic, which calls for emperor and empire, cedes its generic definition to romance, even as Alexander builds his empire and becomes an emperor.

In the romance, the hero is lured into a world that is defined by falsehood, artifice and an evasion of reality. The spectacle of Babylon whets Alexander's appetite for further conquest. The poet ably depicts his change in character: from youthful exuberance to mature desires of power. While the poet justified Alexander's destruction of Thebes by labeling the Thebans' resistance treason, his destruction of Persepolis cannot be justified by anything other than his will to conquer. As Quint points out, the romantic hero is generally one who is interested in his individual goals, not in the building of community. Aeneas is self-effacing and willing to sacrifice himself in order to achieve the goals of empire (94). Alexander, although brave, is a self-interested hero.

Whereas the epic hero and his quest are most often associated with Fate, the romantic hero and his quest are associated with Fortune. Quint writes that the Aeneid's two great losers, Dido and Turnus, see their lives «shaped by Fortune» (93). George Cary, in his thesis on the medieval manifestations of Alexander, claims «the substitution of Christian for pagan ideas [which took place during the Middle Ages] necessarily involved the replacement of Fortune, that controlling force in the development of Alexander's character, by Divine Providence» (81). Yet it is *Fortuna* and not *Destino* that shadows Alexander. In the early part of the poem, the wheel of fortune turns in favor of Alexander:

Tovos doña Fortuna mucho por denostada,
vío que eran neçios non dio por ello nada;
fue tornando la rueda que yazié trastornada,
fue abriendo los ojos el rey una vegada. (895)

Alexander is cured of an affliction brought by ill winds (*contrario el viento* 887). *Fortuna* rules in favor of Alexander and his quest throughout most of the poem. Implicit in the idea of the wheel of fortune, however, is its inconstancy. At any moment, the wheel could easily turn against the hero.

Northrop Frye writes that in romance, there is always a battle between temperance and intemperance; the temperate world is the natural world, whereas the intemperate world is the fallen one (201). Dido is Aeneas's temptress and Armida is Rinaldo's. Generally, intemperance, in the epic and in the romance, is associated with women, sorcery and an easy life. In the *Alexandre*, Alexander's temptress is not a physical woman, but an allegorical one. *Soberbia* is the queen of the seven deadly sins («ella es la reina, ellos son sus criados» 2406c), and Alexander succumbs to her wiles. His excessive behavior manifests itself in his quest for world domination without regard for his men or for *Natura*.

It is in the «fantastic» episodes where romance finally yields to tragedy. Alexander's ascent into the sky and descent into the sea are examples of both pagan spectacle and mini morality plays. Stemming from the same tradition as the *exempla*, the goal of the morality play was to offer «the symbolic representation by means of allegory of nonhistorical events directly related to the moral lives of their audience» (Taylor 23). Dramatized before our eyes is Alexander's inability to recognize his own sins. In the course of a few lines, Alexander condemns *soberbia* in nature:

Las aves e las bestias, los omnes, los pescados,
 todos son entre sí a vandos derramados;
 de viçio e de superbia son todos entecados,
 los flacos de los fuertes andan desafiados. (2310)

Yet in the previous stanza, the poet tells us that Alexander:

Mandó que lo dexassen quinze días durar,
 las naves con tod' esto pensassen de andar;
 assaz podrié en esto saber e mesurar,
 e meter en escripto los secretos del mar. (2309)

Jesús Cañas explains that the irony of the situation makes it obvious that the poet deliberately added these digressions in order to justify Alexander's death (521n). Yet these scenes provide more than a mere justification. The goal of the morality play is to expose man's blindness to his own faults. This lesson is intended not only for Alexander, but for all who witness him as an unwitting actor in the morality play.

Ivy Corfis, in her article on the two fantastic episodes, writes:

The overreacher is brought down by God in the end: man must pay for his sin of pride, for thinking he could act as God himself. Natura, the divine agent, takes Alexander to task for his *desmesura* (2329c) and metes out his punishment and death (482).

Corfis believes that the poet used these scenes in order to critique society without making specific references to the present day (482). According to Corfis, these episodes are didactic. Ian Michael, too, claims that these episodes are examples both of the poet's didactic interests and his attempt at moralization:

Thus Christian moralization is a vital part of the Spanish poet's reinterpretation of the classical subjects in thirteenth-century terms; for him, actions and events could not be neutral or indifferent; they must represent good and evil, examples to be praised or condemned (*Treatment* 175).

These episodes act as a warning to the audience, but they are also examples of spectacle, which reveal a theatrical element that is the defining attribute of each digression in the poem. In the Trojan digression, Alexander recounts Achilles's historic battle in a juglaresque manner, to the delight of his men, «por alegrar sus gentes. . .» (332b). This theatricality is reinforced throughout the poem, and it is the spectacle of theater, including the *Deus ex machina*, that allows for the triumph of tragedy.

In the final scenes of the poem, the classical elements of tragedy are present: *hamartia*, tragic guilt, tragic vision, tragic inevitability, transcendence and catharsis. Alexander's

hamartia, that is, his inability to dominate his need for knowledge, is meant to reveal to the audience that the hero's strength is his weakness. According to Aristotle, this incontinence, unlike vice or depravity, does not stem from guile or malice (Battenhouse 213). Alexander is guilty of immoderation. To the exclusion of all other duties, he pursues his interests wildly. His end is as inevitable as that of any tragic hero. His flaws provoke supernatural forces to plot against him and he is powerless to stop them. The author, too, is helpless when faced with Alexander's imminent downfall.

This tragic inevitability is directly caused by Alexander's tragic or causal guilt. His actions, although wrong, are caused by what he believed was the right course to take. Therefore, he is not solely responsible for his actions. Aristotle wrote that tragic action is based on the neglect of reason. Since happiness is attained through moderation and prudence, tragedy occurs when good people act immoderately: when they follow their imaginations without awaiting argument (Battenhouse 213).

At the end of the *Alexandre* the ill-favored winds finally blow full force over his place of honor. The gods are against him and there is no halting the wheel of fortune. Both Antipater and Jobas are called «falso» and «traidor». They are the agents of death, but they too have no control over their actions. The life of Alexander is in more powerful hands.

It is *Natura*, the Christian God's spokeswoman, who must take charge of Alexander's death. Frightened by Alexander's hubris and greed for knowledge, she turns to Satan for help. Unwilling to sacrifice his individual will, Alexander will be sacrificed by God's will for the good of all mankind. Although *Natura* has been Alexander's champion throughout the poem, she finds herself, at the end, in an antagonistic position:

Cueita me faz prender a mí esta carrera,
cueita es general, ca non me es señera;
si fuere la menaza de *Alexandre* vera,
non vale nuestro reino un vil cañavera. (2429)

Natura is clearly aware of her duty to God and man, but is devastated by the thought of having to conspire with Satan.

It is tragic vision that allows for catharsis and the completion of the tragedy. Barbara Joan Hunt defines this vision as a direct act of seeing unfiltered by ideology or philosophy. It momentarily suspends the protagonist's point of view in the cancellation of the self. This vision, however, does not relieve the pain that is experienced equally by the author, the reader, and Alexander's men. For all of the poet's efforts, he is unable to reverse the final outcome. The poet exclaims:

¡Maldito sea cuerpo que atal cosa faze!
¡Maldita sea alma que en tal cuerpo yaze!
¡Maldito sea cuerpo que tal cosa le plaze!
¡Dios lo eche en laço que nunca se deslaçe! (2618)

Alexander, at peace with his situation, gives a final speech in which he parses out his empire and makes arrangements for his wife, his unborn child, and his burial. Alexander also makes a claim that simultaneously affirms his pagan status and his lack of repentance:

«Seré del Rey del çielo altament reçebido,
quando a mí oviere, teners' a por guarido;

seré en la su corte honrado e servido,
 todos me laudarán porque non fui vencido.» (2631)

Alexander assumes that he will be given a hero's welcome in the afterworld. But this afterworld is, most likely, a variation of the Elysian Fields, where it is not necessarily ethics, but conquests and greatness as a leader that allow free passage.

Alexander's cryptic final words have inspired various critical interpretations:

...ya lo ides veyendo,
 arrenunçio el mundo, a Dios vos acomiendo. (2645cd)

María Rosa Lida de Malkiel believed that the poet wished to redeem his hero at the end of the poem. Ian Michael, on the other hand, writes that Alexander is condemned to hell. He tells us that in stanza 2315 the author gives his reason for this condemnation: «Here, from the Christian moralist's viewpoint, Alexander yields to the sin of pride, which in the Middle Ages was the worst of the Seven Deadly Sins and from which the other sins originally sprang» (*Attitude* 208). Michael also believes that it is not the knowledge that Alexander acquires, but his attitude toward that knowledge that seals his doom (*Attitude* 209-10).

Redemption is the restoration of man to his pre-lapsarian state of sinlessness. Therefore, if we are to understand María Rosa Lida de Malkiel's redemption as a Christian redemption, then Alexander cannot be redeemed. Alexander shows no sign of contrition, which is a necessary step to redemption. He does «renounce» the world, but this statement could be an announcement that the time had come to shake off the mortal coil. He commends his family and friends to God, but this «Dios» could be Fortune, or any number of pagan gods. There is no precedent set that Alexander is, in the least, a Christian hero. The poet is keenly aware of the implications of Alexander's pagan status. He writes:

Non podría Alexandria tal tesoro ganar,
 por oro nin por plata no lo podrié comprar;
 si non fuesse pagano, de vida tan seglar,
 deviólo ir el mundo todo a adorar. (2667)

The poet does not confuse or conflate his century and religious beliefs with those of Alexander. Instead, he makes constant references to Christianity in part because of a desire to maintain a connection between himself and his audience. The discourse of Christianity would be the common language.

Seen through a rigid Christian viewpoint, the *Alexandre* teaches by bad example. The trajectory of Alexander's life leads him from *lo divino* to *lo humano*: from the rumors of his semi-divine parentage to his inability to understand his limitations as a man. In the text, however, we are also presented with a «pagan» understanding of Alexander's accomplishments. Marina Brownlee believes that the poet created a balanced presentation of both the non-Christian and Christian perspectives. She writes that the *Alexandre* is, «in effect, a hybrid text which 'dramatizes,' as it were, the tension between the two distinct value systems» (264). It is true that the two perspectives are represented in the poem. At the end, though, the poem has given way to Alexander's own mindset. In his eyes, and in

the eyes of his men, the great emperor has reached the highest point a man can reach: God, or the gods, will be awaiting him to give him a hero's welcome. This journey is the reverse of the Christian path of enlightenment. Alexander begins the poem with strict moral («Christian») and epic goals. He is single-minded in his desire to free the Greeks from their Persian overlord and free Christ's birthplace from Islamic control. As the poem becomes less focused, so too does the epic give way to the romance. The poet shows signs of his inability or his lack of desire to contain this unruly force. The digressions are more frequent and spectacle becomes more important. By the time Alexander has taken his voyages under the sea and into the heavens, the poem has made its last leap from romance to tragedy, from Christian to pagan.

The Spanish poet's medievalization, far from being an anomalous exercise in the retelling of history, is a fresh attempt at mythologizing Alexander. In lieu of copying his Latin source, the poet made Alexander into his own creation. By fashioning a new Alexander, the poet has produced a new mythic hero. Many of Alexander's character weaknesses are explained away in fits of passion against the sin of treason. By claiming the right of royal anger (*ira regia*), Alexander's greatest crimes against humanity, the destruction of both Thebes and Persepolis, are not implicit in his downfall. Alexander's death, like the tragic hero's, is directly related to one sin. The fact that Alexander is a «pagan» does not prevent his canonization. It is the consequences of being a pagan, the inability to aspire to a higher «Christian» ideal, which ultimately gets him into trouble with *Natura* and God. Alexander's perseverance makes him a good general, but not a good Christian general.

The *Alexandre's* generic transformation makes the poem difficult to define. One interpretation of the poem is that it relays both a Christian and a didactic message. But Alexander as mythic hero could not serve as a purely didactic model. Raymond Willis has noted that the author of the *Alexandre* considered himself the original compiler of a historic poem (78). Although he borrowed most of the poem from various sources, his unique manipulation of that «inherited» material classifies the poet as creator. His major innovation, aside from the elements of spectacle, was, of course, writing the poem in the vernacular. This element, along with the poet's Christianization of the text, gives the poem a nationalistic flavor. The poet reduces the scope of his poem by allowing his poem to be identified by its language and its unmistakably medieval elements. In so doing, the poet has written specifically for a medieval audience.

Antonio Gramsci wrote that the complexity of the socio-historical moment is reflected in the art product. If we examine the *Alexandre* for signs of the times, we will come away with a greater understanding of the bigger picture. The debate over the ultimate redemption of Alexander is one that goes to the core of medieval religious politics.

What is missing at the end of the *Alexandre* is any sign of Alexander's participation in salvation. His words prove that his intentions are not Christian, per se, but simply appropriate for a pagan hero of his stature. The poet proposes that to be a Christian meant to participate actively. Alexander, therefore, could never be a Christian. The poet ably medievalizes this wild, no-holds-barred, anti-establishment figure. He is a warrior-saint in pagan's clothing and an almost perfect scholar king. The poet leaves his audience in awe of this man. He is unable to influence the ultimate outcome of the hero, but he does influence how we receive that information. The poem's closure is in doubt: the audience is

to condemn Alexander's actions, yet we pity him. Instead of reviling him for his excesses, the audience hopes for his ultimate redemption. If this were a case of a strict interpretation of Christian dogma, it would seem unlikely that there would be an attempt to make Alexander a sympathetic character.

Like other works of *mester de clerecía*, the *Libro de Alexandre* reflects both Church politics and the desires of the people. Alexander's journey from epic to tragedy, from Christian to pagan, makes him more easily accessible. His desires and his untamed will are ultimately punished, but they do not make him less of a hero. In fact, it could be argued that the poet makes him more heroic by making him more flawed. The admiration that the audience and the author feel toward Alexander reflects an earlier tradition of hagiography: an *admiratio* rather than the thirteenth century's *imitatio*. Brigitte Cazelles writes that early martyrs were viewed as superlative figures distanced from their admirers (2). Although it is clear that Alexander is not a saint, the presence of *admiratio* cannot be denied. As the poet writes in stanza 2667, if Alexander were not a pagan, he would be a saint.

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