

**Allegory or Parody? Interpretation of the *Libro de buen amor*'s "troba cazurra" Lyric and Reader-Response and Reception Theory**

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## ABSTRACT

Kenneth Max Gorfkle: Allegory or Parody? Interpretation of the *Libro de buen amor*'s "troba cazurra" Lyric and Reader-Response and Reception Theory

(Under the direction of Dr. Frank Dominguez, Dr. Carmen Hsu, and Dr. Rosa Perelmuter)

This study applies reader-response and reception theory to the "troba cazurra" lyric of the *Libro de buen amor*. It first reviews the nature of allegory and parody in medieval literature and the existing allegorical and parodic interpretations of the lyric. The study then describes reader-response and reception theory, and justifies the validity of the application of this theory to the *Libro*. The reactions of four actual and two imaginary audiences to the lyric are hypothesized; in every case, the parodic interpretation of the lyric is preferred to the allegorical interpretation. The underlying nature of medieval parody, the difficulty of the ethical choice that the lyric asks the reader to make, and the unanimous reaction of the audiences examined all support and justify the lyric's parodic interpretation.

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## **Allegory or Parody? Interpretation of the *Libro de buen amor*'s "troba cazurra" Lyric and Reader-Response and Reception Theory**

Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* is a difficult text to analyze. The lack of any definite knowledge of either its author or his intended audience leaves only the text itself to provide clues to its meaning. The work's pseudo-autobiographical narration and its combination of lyrics with the more narrative form of *mester de clerecía* raise more questions than they answer, and the text's parodic and polysemic nature allows multiple meanings as well. In fact Juan Ruiz continually suggests that the *Libro* can mean something quite different than he himself intended, and that the text lacks meaning independent of a reader's response (De Looze, 146). The result is that the *Libro de buen amor* has defied a definitive interpretation from the moment of its creation to the present day.

During the last century in particular, a multitude of critics who believed in the objectivity of their analyses nevertheless considered the *Libro* different texts: an allegory, a didactic narrative, a pseudo-autobiography, an *ars amandi*, or a comedy on *loco amor*. This disagreement was due to the fact that virtually every one of them foregrounded those parts of the text that supported their hypotheses and ignored those parts that contradicted it. According to *Libro* critic Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez, interpretation of the work became and still is "...not the art of construing but of constructing, and critics do not decode texts, they make them" (106).

In the last three decades, however, reception and reader-response theories have opened the door to a new way of understanding this medieval masterpiece. Both of these approaches

privilege the interaction between the text and the reader, and significantly reduce the problems posed by the missing author; as a result, instead of being a bone of contention, the plurality of interpretations produced by the *Libro*'s ambiguity is now an expected outcome. These new approaches permit a more inclusive reading of the text, in contrast to previous assessments that have focused on certain aspects of the work while ignoring others (Seidenspinner-Nuñez, 105).

This paper deals with a central problem of *Libro* criticism --Is it allegory or parody?--by applying reception and reader-response theory to the examination of one lyric from the work, the “*troba cazurra*” known as “*Cruz cruzada, panadera*,” in order to arrive at a more definitive interpretation of that lyric that supersedes the antinomies of its traditional interpretations. The paper's application is broad, since its conclusions may potentially be applied to the entire *Libro*.

The paper begins with an analysis of the more prominent traditional interpretations of the “*troba cazurra*”, pointing out their similarities and contradictions, briefly describes reader-response and reception theory in order to provide a theoretical foundation for the study, reviews the work of two well-known critics that support a reader-based interpretation of this text based on philosophical and textual grounds, and, finally, defines four possible audiences that appear to be the principal receptors of the work—three medieval and one modern—and examines their probable reactions to the lyric to see if a more definitive interpretation is possible.

### **The “*troba cazurra*” lyric**

The “*troba cazurra*” called “*Cruz cruzada, panadera*”—the narrator's account of his second failed love affair—appears early in the *Libro*:<sup>1</sup>

#### **De lo que contesció al arcipreste con Ferrand Garcia, su mensajero The Archpriest and Ferrand García, his messenger**

*Mis ojos non verán luz,*

*My eyes shall see no light*

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<sup>1</sup> We cite the Spanish text from *El Libro de buen amor* edited by María Brey Mariño and its English translation from *The Book of Good Love*, translated by Rigo Magnani.

*pues perdido he a Cruz.*

Cruz cruzada, panadera,  
tome por entendedera,  
Tomé senda por carrera  
como faz el andaluz.

*Mis ojos non verán luz,  
pues perdido he a Cruz.*

Coidando que la avría,  
dixelo a Ferrand García  
que troxies' la pletesía  
e fuese pleités e duz.

*Mis ojos non verán luz,  
pues perdido he a Cruz.*

Díxom' que l' plazía de grado,  
fízos' de la Cruz privado:  
A mí dio rumiar salvado,  
él comió el pan más duz.

*Mis ojos non verán luz,  
pues perdido he a Cruz.*

Prometiól' por mi consejo  
trigo que tenía añejo  
e presentól' un conejo,  
al traidor falso, marfuz.

*Mis ojos non verán luz,  
pues perdido he a Cruz.*

¡Dios confonda mensajero  
tan presto e tan ligero!  
No medre Dios conejero  
que la caza así aduz!

*Mis ojos non verán luz,  
pues perdido he a Cruz. (80)*

*for I have lost my Cross.*

For my love I took a baker,  
she was called a crossed Cross.  
I took a path for a road  
as an Andalusian does.

*My eyes shall see no light  
for I have lost my Cross.*

Thinking that I might have her  
I told Ferrand García  
to plead my love before her,  
and be diplomatic and smooth.

*My eyes shall see no light  
for I have lost my Cross.*

He said that it pleased him greatly  
and became an intimate of the Cross.  
To me she gave some bran to chew  
while he ate the whitest bread.

*My eyes shall see no light  
for I have lost my Cross.*

On my advice he promised her  
certain seasoned wheat I had,  
and he gave her also a rabbit,  
that traitor, that false ruffian.

*My eyes shall see no light  
for I have lost my Cross.*

May God confound that messenger  
so swift and light of foot!  
May God deny the rabbit hunter  
who brings the game home thus.

*My eyes shall see no light  
for I have lost my Cross. (60-61)*

Although a dramatic monologue, the lyric is structured dialogically, contrasting the voice of a contrite and repentant individual with that of a more worldly voice that complains of his failed love affair and curses the agent of his misfortune. In the opening refrain, the speaker

laments that he is denied salvation because he has not followed the way of the Cross in this world. He then recounts his amorous misadventure, and the reader confronts ambiguity starting with the first two words of the first stanza; the object of the Archpriest's amorous intentions is a baker whose name is Cross, yet unlike the true Cross, this earthly Cross is the pathway to sin instead of salvation. The baker is also a "crossed" Cross: the words "*Cruz cruzada*," translated as "double-crossed," infer deceit, delusion and betrayal as well, again adding to the verse's ambiguity. The speaker announces that he "took a path for a road," again reinforcing the ambiguous nature of the lyric: he either (mis)took the false Cross for the true Cross, or he misjudged the reliability of his friend. Recounting the details of his betrayal in succeeding stanzas which continually alternate with the initial refrain, the speaker uses erotic and blasphemous language and imagery in an ostensibly religious text, since the words *pan*, *panadero*, *conejo*, *conejero*, and *marfuz* all had sexual connotations in the lexicon of that period (Michalski, 437). In the last stanza the Archpriest entreats God to "confound" his erstwhile messenger and deny him entrance to Heaven for his duplicity; however, the reader sees that in sending his messenger to act as a go-between and to be "pleités e duz", the Archpriest's intentions were just as dishonorable as his messenger's actions. A final repetition of the refrain concludes the lyric.

On the one hand, the lyric may be interpreted as a parody. The multiple ambiguities of the Cross imagery in the first stanza immediately indicate the parodic nature of the lyric. Then, to further emphasize the parodic nature of the lyric, the poet contrasts the speaker's failure in his amorous adventure and his failure to achieve eternal salvation in three ways: he alternates the message of the refrain with the story line of the stanzas, he contrasts the speaker's erotic and obscene lexicon with his position as Archpriest, and he has the speaker condemn his friend's

duplicity when the speaker's own intentions were just as duplicitous from the beginning. Alternatively, the lyric may be interpreted as an allegory, as Ruiz highlights the refrain at the beginning and the end as well as repeating it throughout. In fact, the lyric synecdochally represents the entire Libro, since the Archpriest announces the allegorical and didactic nature of his work at the beginning, the end, and throughout the text as a whole. Finally, the study and clarification of the lyric's ambiguities and ironic contrasts lead the reader to a deeper understanding of the allegory: the behavior of the baker and the messenger as well as the Archpriest's comportment and lexicon demonstrate the omnipresent lack of ethics, integrity and religious faith, and once this is understood, the very ironies and ambiguities of the lyric themselves serve to strengthen its allegorical message to the reader. In essence, the refrain provides a didactic structure to an otherwise ribald story, and the equilibrium that Ruiz achieves between the allegorical structure of the lyric and its parodic thematic content ultimately leaves the choice between these two interpretations squarely up to the reader.

The various critical analyses of this lyric have taken these two interpretative pathways as well. As a didactic allegory, it operates in one of two ways: either man's accommodation of his carnal desires is an obstacle to his salvation, or the earthly suffering that is related to the denial of these desires leads him to paradise.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the lyric is seen as a parodic comparison of the failed love affair with the Passion of Christ due to the absurd and comic nature of the comparison and the erotic and blasphemous character of the author's lexical choices. In

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<sup>2</sup> The didactic quality of medieval literature has been observed starting from the *Cantar de mio Cid* and the *Historia general*, through Don Juan Manuel's *El conde Lucanor*, up to and including the *Libro de buen amor*. Allegory was the principal didactic methodology of medieval literature; apart from the "tropa cazurra" lyric, the *Libro* itself contains a multitude of other allegorical passages. At the same time, medieval authors followed Horace's dictum of "dulce et utile", referred to in Spanish as "instruir deleitando"; the juglars entertained their public with the *Cantar* at the same time that the Cid became a role model for their audiences, Berceo's audiences admired his *Milagros* as much for the quality of his writing and the interest of his story lines as for the spiritual message that he wanted to present, and parody was a yet another mode of discourse which medieval authors employed to entertain their audiences.

this lyric as well as throughout the *Libro*, Juan Ruiz employs allegory with didactic intent at the same time that the text's parodic nature undermines or destroys its intended lesson.

### **Allegory, irony, and parody**

Allegory exists simultaneously on two levels - the literal and the symbolic. In medieval allegory, the symbolic element is a hidden principle or lesson, which the reader (with the author's help) should discover for himself.<sup>3</sup>

Like allegory, irony also contains literal and symbolic elements; however in allegory the literary corresponds directly with the symbolic element, while in irony the two are contrasted. The intention of allegory and irony differ as well: whereas allegory functions as a didactic strategy, irony uses paradox and incongruity to ridicule or amuse.

In order to function well, irony depends on a shared and stable perception of the world between the writer and his audience; if not, the contradictory, paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the irony confuses rather than entertains. Medieval irony is therefore based on a sense of the nature of the world that author and audience share. The ironic artist, focusing on a multiplicity of natural and/or social elements, juxtaposes these elements to create his art, yet neither he nor his audience doubts the world's underlying unity (Reiss 214-216).

As a sub-genre of irony, parody is another significant literary form in the Middle Ages. In *Parody in the Middle Ages*, Martha Bayless defines it as a sub-genre of irony characterized by an inversion that is intentionally humorous; she finds that medieval parody tends to be social rather than textual, and that it functions by "imitating, with or without distortion, literary genres,

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<sup>3</sup>There are several types of allegory; the two types of allegory with which the "troba cazurra" lyric deals are moral and anagogical: the former treats how one should act in the present, and the latter treats the spiritual or mystical as it relates to prophecies of heaven, hell, salvation or damnation.

styles, authors, or texts while in addition satirizing or focusing on nonliterary customs, events, or persons (*social parody*)” (3).

Long held conventional views of clerical culture have characterized it as solemn and pious, but this culture’s taste for amusement was as vibrant as that of their lay contemporaries. Its social parody was typically not satire, that is, a criticism or attack on a person or social theme, but instead, entertainment. The Middle Ages parodied the classic and the conventional rather than the idiosyncratic and the avant-garde; it was not a tool for social or literary reform as is common today (Bayless 7). As an inversion of the established order, parody might either indirectly exalt the “Kingdom of God” or demonstrate an implicit acceptance of societal values while at the same time providing a temporary release from them; either way, it was an essentially harmless form of medieval humor. With specific regard to clerical corruption, the overall theme of the *Libro*, Bayless observes that although “many men of religion are unequivocal in their assertions that frivolity was sinful and irreligious... clerics employed levity abundantly for both moral and frivolous ends” (212). Her overall characterization of parody and humor underscores their importance as pure entertainment and demonstrates that they were a stabilizing force within medieval society.

Accordingly, as this paper examines the various current *Libro* interpretations and audience reactions, the reader should remain cognizant of these aforementioned characteristics: allegory’s function is didactic and that within this trope the author helps the reader to find the hidden lesson; despite the distortions, ambiguities and paradoxes of their literal elements, medieval irony and parody presupposed a stable universe and acted as stabilizing forces in medieval society; and medieval audiences and authors shared identical perceptions of the world.

### **Current interpretations of the “troba cazurra” lyric**

Current interpretations of the “troba cazurra” lyric fall into three general categories: while the majority of critics view the lyric as parodic in nature, some view it as allegorical, and a few consider it a combination of parody and allegory. Summaries of the arguments of representative critics from each of these categories provide us with a basic understanding of the interpretative issues of the lyric.

In *The Art of Juan Ruiz*, prominent Libro critic Anthony Zahareas advances the parodic interpretation: he states that Ruiz exaggerates the typical complaints in love poetry in order to reduce them to absurdity, when compared to the passion of Christ (79). In addition, he believes that Ruiz refers to his lyric as “cazurra” – low, vile – to insist even more strongly on the parodic nature of the episode. Zahareas objects to the classification of this lyric as an allegory based on its lack of clarity, for him a central element of the didactic process: although Ruiz presents the reader with an allegorical framework in this passage just as he does elsewhere in the *Libro*, the literal elements are so ambiguous that they destroy any potential didactic intent (48). As a result, the reader prefers to focus on the parodic or ribald nature of the text instead of searching for the allegorical lesson. Thus, Zahareas portrays the lyric as a parody of form and content that amuses the reader. André Michalski, Louis Combet, Alan Deyermond, and Julián Bueno all agree with this interpretation, based on Zahareas’ reasoning as well as historical and religious context and textual analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Rodrigo de Molina advocates the allegorical interpretation: the lyric is an allegory of the path towards divine light due to the centrality of the image of the cross. For him, the *panadera* serves as a metaphor: suffering is the way to achieve salvation (10). Yet, at the same time, Molina notes a contradiction: how can one blinded by his sexual impulse see the light? His

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<sup>4</sup> See André Michalski (435-38), Louis Combet (14-15), Alan Deyermond (224), and Julián Bueno (268).

answer is that as a negative allegory, the story of the failed love affair reveals two hidden and possibly contradictory truths: first, if one is blinded by one's physical drives, one can never reach the kingdom of God; and second, suffering in this life is the path to salvation in the next world (11). James Burke agrees with Molina in the allegorical interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

E. Michael Gerli's analysis of the lyric combines both the parodic and allegorical interpretation; acknowledging the work of his predecessors, he sees the lyric first as a love lament, then as a parody of the Easter liturgy and a critique of the preaching of the crusades, then as a reference to cuckoldry, later, an acknowledgment of the false way – Cruz, the “*cruz cruzada*” – and finally as a didactic allegory: an invitation to the true way at the end of the lyric: “Quando la Cruz veía...” (221). He appreciates Juan Ruiz's artistry: he applauds the author's linguistic complexity, his ability to conjure up a multiplicity of images and to negatively elaborate allegories of Christian dogma while simultaneously satirizing quotidian secular and religious practices and connecting the two with “love, the thematic denominator linking all that is sacred and profane” (225-226).

Although the more recent of these opposing interpretations of the lyric have attempted to avoid the polemic by focusing more on context and being more willing to accept the ambiguity in the text, the contradictions remain. Here is where a reader-based interpretation and reader-response theory make their contribution to the understanding of this text.

### **Early reader-based interpretations of the *Libro***

Although not articulated formally as a critical approach to literary interpretation until recently, reader-based interpretations of both secular and religious texts in general and of the *Libro* in particular have existed for centuries. Américo Castro was one of the first critics to

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<sup>5</sup> See Burke (255-68).

emphasize the importance of the reader in relation to the *Libro* from a historical perspective. In his 1954 work *The Structure of Spanish History*, Castro proposed that some of the core elements of the text of the *Libro* stemmed from medieval peninsular Arabic and Hebrew cultures. Hebrew culture had a long history of active reader participation in textual analysis. Unlike Catholic exegesis which remained faithful to the original glosses of the Fathers, the exegesis of Hebrew religious texts was based on a continually changing gloss and commentary that added to and enriched the meaning of not only the Torah but glosses like the Talmud and the Midrash as well.

In addition, critics have observed the significance of Arabic culture on the *Libro*, concluding that Ruiz's text appears to be closely connected to an Arab literary genre called the "māqāmat", another genre that called for reader participation in the text. Summarizing the work of other critics, Michelle Hamilton has observed that the role and nature of exegesis were central in medieval Islam as well as in Christian Europe: like medieval scholastic texts which required the reader to actively interpret allegorical meanings, the māqāmat also engaged the reader in an active reading process. (25) Thus, reader-based interpretations were not new to the Arab and Hebrew cultures that inspired the *Libro*, but instead a fundamental part of their exegetical tradition. This is direct contrast with the majority of Castilian texts which, didactic in nature starting from Latin liturgical texts and the *Historia general* of Alfonso X, did not allow the reader to read actively but instead insisted that he/she understand the author's intention.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reader response theory**

The aforementioned reader-based interpretations to the *Libro* antedate the development of reader-response theory as a formal critical approach. That honor belongs to Wolfgang Iser, who is credited with formalizing reader-response theory as a critical approach to literature in the

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<sup>6</sup> In *El conde Lucanor*, for example, the allegorical lesson is repeated twice, in ways that are successively easier to understand, to prevent the reader from liberal interpretations. In addition, Juan Manuel insisted that the original manuscript, stored in Peñafiel, was the only real version, so as to maintain authorial control over his writings.

modern era. In prefatory comments to his 1976 seminal text, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Iser boldly asserts that “meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but an effect to be experienced” (10), contends that “the referential reduction of fictional texts to a single ‘hidden’ meaning represents a phase of interpretation that belongs to the past” (10), and concludes that “literary texts are processes of signification actualized only in the process of reading” (11).

In 1989, Dayle Seidenspinner-Nuñez was the first to specifically advocate the application of this critical approach to the *Libro*, describing the theory in general and enumerating its advantages and applicability. She observes that “the Iserian approach relieves us of the problem of ‘the lack of available data’ for Juan Ruiz” (261, n10).

### **Reception theory**

Although reader-response theory solves the problem of the absent author in the *Libro*, it creates another problem. As Iser points out, since meaning now resides in the interaction between the individual reader and the text, the meaning of the text will vary according to its given reader, thus reducing the value of any given reader’s interpretation and also rendering impossible the transmission of meaning from author to reader. Reception theory, originating in the work of Hans-Robert Jauss in the 1960’s, resolves this problem by advancing the proposition that the reader interacts with the text according to a cultural background he shares with others. As Laurence De Looze says, “‘Meaning’ therefore always means ‘meaning for’ a ... group of readers” (138).

Delimiting reader response theory and reception theory even further, Stanley Fish posits the concept of “interpretive communities,” responsible for the activities of the reader and the texts that these activities produce (1980). For Fish, the historical and cultural context of the

interpretive community controls the meaning of a text; therefore, it becomes stable and can be received, understood, and communicated throughout that community. He sees the “self” not as an individual but as a social construct whose readings or productions of texts are relevant and understandable to his community of individuals. Of course, the greater the temporal and/or cultural distance between the author and his audience, or between any two different audiences, the greater will be the difficulty in transmitting the same understanding.

### **Audience typologies**

Fish’s concept of the “interpretive community” meshes well with Peter Rabinowitz’s further work on audience typologies within reader-response theory. Rabinowitz proposes a four-fold typology of audiences:

1) The actual audience. This is composed of “the flesh-and-blood people who read the book” (20). In the case of the *Libro*, although there exist as many audiences as there are readers between the time of its creation and the present, this paper will consider only two types of actual audiences: the medieval reader who actually read the book or heard it performed orally, and the later modern reader--generally an academic or professional reader, who reads a “critical version” of the text as it has survived over the passage of time. Quite obviously, each of these readings depends on the reader’s own cultural context.<sup>7</sup>

2) The authorial audience. According to Rabinowitz, authors “design their books rhetorically for some more or less specific *hypothetical* audience which I call the *authorial audience*” (21). The authorial audience is a hypothetical audience to whom the author directs his text and who he hopes will discover his intended meaning. Rabinowitz’s authorial audience is identical to that of Fish’s social/interpretive community, where the reader is socially constituted

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<sup>7</sup> There are obviously many subcategories of readers within these two audiences.

to read and understand as the author intended (22). In the case of the *Libro*, the temporal and cultural distance that separates the modern reader from the medieval “social/interpretative community” limits Ruiz’s authorial audience to only those readers of his own historical period.

3) The narrative audience. This is an *imaginary* audience which suspends disbelief in order to accept the text’s fictional premises. For Rabinowitz, that is the joy of fiction (99): as he defines it, “the authorial audience knows it is reading a work of art, while the narrative audience believes what it is reading is real;” (21). In the *Libro*, for example, the narrative audience unhesitatingly accepts the dream of Don Amor as a real experience in order to accept his advice. To reject the passage as “only a dream” would destroy the value of the text *ab initio*. Thanks to its willing suspension of disbelief, the narrative audience enters even more fully into the parodic or didactic aspects of the text than does the authorial audience.

4) The ideal narrative audience. This audience is “ideal” since it is in full agreement with the author/narrator (De Looze, 141). Ruiz’s ideal narrative audience is not only one that believes fervently in Catholic dogma, has an inquiring mind and the desire to understand the text’s hidden meanings, the will to change its life in accord with what it has learned, but also one which appreciates and wants to experience all the richness of secular life as well (if such a dualism is indeed possible). Since many of the themes of the book are universal and transcendental – the problems of communication endemic to the human species, the nature of the human condition, the exercise of the intelligence, memory and will in the service of consciousness, to mention only three that appear at the outset of the text - the author/narrator’s ideal audience may well transcend culture, time, and space, unlike the authorial audience, which is bound to the author’s historical period.

**The relevance of reader-response theory to the *Libro***

In addition to the historical justifications already noted, critics have also identified philosophical and textual justifications for this approach. Medieval Catholic tradition contained philosophical grounds for active reader participation. Michael Gerli (1982), Marina Brownlee (1985, 1989) and Catherine Brown (1998) have all linked Augustinian hermeneutics to Ruiz's concept of the reader. Hamilton notes that

According to Gerli, the *de inveniendo* of Augustine, i.e. the continual need to look for and discover the meaning of the text in the act of reading, was the motivating force behind the exegetical tradition of the Middle Ages (72-73). The active role of the reader – a reader faced with continual choices between “good” and “bad” readings/understandings of the text – was an integral part of the conceptual model developed to explain the reading and thought process itself. (21)

For Gerli, the direct connection between Ruiz's prose prologue and Augustine's hermeneutic model as articulated in his *De Doctrina Cristiana* (Hamilton, 21) demonstrates that a hermeneutics existed within the Christian tradition that demanded the active participation of the reader in the exegesis of the text, just as in the Hebrew and Arab traditions.

Furthermore, in *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture* (1994), John Dagenais proposes a textual basis for a reader-based interpretation of the *Libro* as well: for him, the true value of the text is in the response that it elicits from the reader. As evidenced by the glosses recorded in its margins, the *scriptum* itself demonstrates that its original readers – the scribes – had their own distinctive opinions about its meaning. In contrast with classical interpretative models based on finding the author's “hidden meaning,” Dagenais proposes an “ethical reading” of the text: the reader compares or contrasts the thematic material of the text with his own ethical values and modifies his values based on his interpretation. According to Dagenais, the *Libro*

... possesses certain properties that short-circuit the reading process, that return the reader to him- or herself in a realm outside the text, send him or her scurrying off to Mass. These properties decenter and ultimately render irrelevant the elucidation and paraphrasing of

“meaning,” which for most professional readers is still, in one form or another, the central paradigm of reading. (4)

Dagenais insists that in order to understand the work we need to understand the manuscript itself and the manuscript culture that supports it: the gloss and other changes to the scriptum that have contributed to its evolution over the years. For him, since the gloss is the contribution of those active and ethical readers, the scribes who wrote in the margin of the scriptum, the scriptum itself is the textual justification for the reader-based interpretations outlined above.

In addition to the aforementioned historical, philosophical, and textual justifications for the application of reader response theory to the *Libro* in general and the lyric in particular, practical considerations suggest its application as well. The traditional critical approach based on the examination of literary and historical context is unable to advance our understanding of this text until new data is unearthed concerning its authorship, text, and/or context. A formalist approach to the text, similar to my own interpretation offered immediately after the lyric above, delineates the interpretative problem but doesn't provide a solution. Finally, other recently developed critical approaches don't appear to have relevance to this seven hundred year old text. In contrast, reader response theory has the practical advantage of eliminating authorial intention, a significant problem in conventional interpretations since the authorship of the *Libro* itself is uncertain. Furthermore, the ability to hypothesize audience reactions leads to a new appreciation of the text: instead of author or critic it is now the audience that determines its meaning.

### ***Libro* audiences**

We now examine the different audiences which the *Libro* has enjoyed, both at its moment of inception and also in the modern era: we typologize each audience, construct and examine their reaction to the lyric, and then determine the lyric's meaning from these reactions. Although much of the following analysis is necessarily hypothetical, the process of the creation and

examination of an imaginary audience is not new<sup>8</sup> and may be fruitful in ultimately achieving a more profound understanding of the lyric's meaning.

### **The medieval clergy**

Critics agree that Ruiz's most important audience was the medieval clergy. Brownlee has classified Juan Ruiz's work as a continuation and development of the thirteenth century literary genre of *mester de clerecía*, a learned and clerky vernacular poetry informed by *clerecía* (122) and later states that "The implied audience is the medieval Christian community" (130).

Seidenspinner-Núñez concurs, noting that although the archpriest-narrator addresses a many-tiered audience, both aesthetic and moral dimensions of the text were significant; thus, clerks well-versed in the *clerecía* tradition would be better able to appreciate the nuances of his parody. (101). Despite what he terms the "unspoken consensus" of a popular and unlearned public, Jeremy Lawrance also argues for a sophisticated and cultivated audience. Without denying the oral tradition, he reasons that Ruiz's audience had to be the nobility and the clergy - an audience lettered and cultivated, and above all, "sharp-witted and intelligent," - for not only is word-play and textual ambiguity present throughout the book but in addition, the Augustinian and scholastic arguments and *exempla* which the work contains and which are essential to its understanding would be wasted on a public who did not have the appropriate educational and ecclesiastical background. Finally, from a purely practical standpoint, the sheer size of the manuscript would make it impractical for a *juglar* to carry and utilize in a street performance.

Biographical and historical data also confirm the opinions of Brownlee, Seidenspinner-Núñez and Lawrance; the little that is known of Juan Ruiz, garnered through study of the text

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to Rabinowitz's audience typologies, critics have posited imaginary audiences since the inception of reader-based interpretation to analyze texts. Notable examples of these imaginary audiences are Riffaterre's "superreader", with which he analyzes Baudelaire's "Les chats" (1966), Fish's "informed reader", and Iser's "implied reader"; all are theoretical constructs used to determine meaning using reader response theories.

and context, indicates that the clergy were certainly an actual audience and his most probable authorial audience, for out of all potential audiences, they alone had the potential to understand and appreciate his work.<sup>9</sup> With its classical and religious educational background, this audience was intimately familiar with the use of allegory as a didactic method; in addition, their own life experiences could not help but bring them into close contact with the text's parodic nature.

Regardless of their responsibility to set the example of a correct life, the clergy of the Middle Ages were no more God-fearing than their flock. Inheritance patterns in Spain during that historical period had as one of their consequences the swelling of the ranks of the clergy, since the other principal "occupations" open to males of landed families other than the first-born were the undesirable alternatives of either a military or a "picaresque" life.<sup>10</sup> For these clerics, true belief was in all probability the exception rather than the rule; this premise is borne out by Bayless's conclusions regarding the use of levity by clerics. Ruiz's final nineteen verses (1690-1709) of the *Libro* itself demonstrate that clerics didn't even attempt to hide their hypocrisy: those clerics of Talavera, receiving an order that "no mantenga manceba, casada ni soltera: el que la mantuviese, excomulgado era" (237), immediately found a multitude of reasons to oppose the mandate (238-239).

The reaction of this audience to the lyric might well be the following: With respect to the literal level of the lyric, finding themselves in the same position as the narrator, they might

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<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the arguments of Lawrance et al, evidence demonstrating that the *Libro* was written at Hita would actually tend to preclude this type of audience, since there were few clerics there of this nature. It is possible that Ruiz composed his work at Toledo, where there indeed was a confluence of people with the same interests; however, to complicate matters even further, the anthological nature of the *Libro* opens up the possibility that the work represents multiple authors over an extended period of time, and not always for a high brow-audience but for *juglares* and secular poets as well. These categories will be addressed later on in this work.

<sup>10</sup> Since Spanish males other than the first-born had no rights to familial property and since business, trades and professions were scorned by Spanish Christians in that historical period as Jewish occupations, this population – if they didn't wish to join the military or the Church – found themselves forced to use their wits in order to survive; this was one of the prominent features of the protagonists of the picaresque literary genre.

inwardly sympathize with him and curse their bad luck, as he does; or, if they were more successful in their own amatory efforts, they might well feel superior to him. They would certainly publicly respect and discuss the “negative allegory” of the lyric - the two positions taken by Burke and Molina - to demonstrate their knowledge, intelligence and religious sincerity, all the while concealing their true feelings about the meaning of the work, at least in public.<sup>11</sup> Given its stance toward Catholic doctrine as exemplified by the lifestyle it depicts, this audience would have difficulty in understanding the text as anything but either a parody of their life-style or a comedy in the tradition of the *ars amandi*; thus, its significance is found in its entertainment value as an example of “*loco amor*” and/or as a parody of their own stance toward Church doctrine (for, as Juan Ruiz states in his prologue, if they were sincerely willing to accept the allegorical interpretation it would mean that they would have to mend their ways).<sup>12</sup>

### **The nobility**

Sometimes cultivated and literate, but neither bound to religious convention nor steeped in Augustinian philosophy, the nobility is another of Ruiz’s audiences; he addresses them directly in the text, with words such as “*señores*”, “*amigos*”, or “*dueñas*.” An actual audience like that of the clergy, this may have been an authorial audience for Ruiz as well; with their lesser degree of knowledge, they would have been less able to comprehend all of the nuances of his text; on the other hand, they were free from the psychological restraints of the clergy

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, unless the audience is an audience of professional readers, literary works are not discussed. However, in this case, even considering that Ruiz’s audience of clerics were the professional readers of that time – the clerics – of which Lawrance speaks, the parodic nature of the lyric might not be a particularly enjoyable discussion topic to that audience, who was in fact the object of the parody.

<sup>12</sup> Ruiz’s exposition of the contradiction between the clerics’ behavior and Church dogma could not be taken seriously by a cleric who preferred earthly pleasures; and virtually every cleric in that historical period had his concubine.

mentioned above to view the parodic nature of the text. Could it be that they were the active readers that Ruiz sought?

It appears that the *Libro* served primarily as a source of entertainment to this audience as well. This literate population could appreciate the word-play and the parody of the text, even without the ecclesiastical background necessary to understand all of its Augustinian irony; however, with neither the religious education nor the ecclesiastical upbringing necessary to search for and sustain the allegorical interpretation, this audience would naturally gravitate to the humorous, ribald and parodic aspects of the text. In addition, although unable to appreciate all of its philosophical intricacies, they were probably able to enjoy the work's parodic nature even more than the clergy since they were not the object of its parody.

### **The lay audience**

The lay audience must also be considered, since it was another actual audience. However, with its lack of literacy and sophistication, it is even less likely that Ruiz considered this audience to be his authorial audience, much less a narrative audience. We may readily assume that this audience would react to the depiction of "*loco amor*" in the lyric; it might well be amused by the lyric's parodic view of the priesthood, as was the audience of the court, but with even less understanding of the nuances of the text. Finally, since the limited access to the book that this audience enjoyed due to its lack of literacy and dependence on *juglar* recitation rendered the possibility of allegorical interpretation even more remote. For this audience as well, the significance of the lyric would lie in its parodic nature, rather than its allegorical one.

### **The modern audience**

Our last audience, the modern audience of critics and professional readers is, in certain respects, closer to the Juan Ruiz and his text than the readers of his own time. Although not his

authorial audience, this group may in certain respects lay claim to being his ideal narrative audience, since as professional readers, they are interested in achieving a profound understanding of all the nuances of the text: the quality of their work demonstrates the sincerity of their purpose.

On the other hand, a review of this audience's analyses of this lyric immediately demonstrates why this audience cannot even be included in Rabinowitz's typology: its interaction with the text is outside of the imaginable scope of its author. Detached from the comic and parodic aspects of the text and unmoved by the allegorical interpretation, this audience only seeks to understand the text "objectively." Thus, in his effort to find its "hidden meaning" within the framework of classical interpretation, the critic places himself outside reader-response theory.

Of course, this audience does have its own peculiar reaction to the text; the text represents both a puzzle to be deciphered as well as an opportunity to display erudition in research and analytical prowess to fellow critics and/or the academic world at large. This audience interprets the text according to a set of previously established rules and not according to their own personal reactions, thus it doesn't fit in a reader-based typology which demands a legitimate and direct interaction between reader and text, unmediated by external considerations.<sup>13</sup>

### **Interpretation of the lyric based on reader-response theory**

The application of reader response theory to the *Libro's* audiences so far has demonstrated that the most prevalent meaning of the "*troba cazurra*" lyric is confined to its parodic aspects. Of the four audiences examined, the clergy and the nobility preferred the

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<sup>13</sup> This review of the audience of critics suggests the creation of another typology; however that is outside of the scope of this work.

parodic interpretation, and the lay audience may not even have had the theoretical possibility of extracting the allegorical meaning from the lyric. Finally, although modern-day critics have clearly demonstrated their willingness and ability to actively interpret the text, their ability to interact with it as did its medieval audiences is highly questionable, not only given the temporal distance dividing the interpretive communities of author and reader, but also because their objectives in analyzing the text are academic in nature and thus external to the text itself. Since with the exception of a few modern-day critics, all of the audiences examined in this study either interpreted or interpret this lyric from the *Libro* only as an amusing lyric describing the hypocrisy and exaggeration of a cleric over a failed love affair, and considering that the clergy, the nobility – the two authorial audiences most capable of understanding the allegorical nature of the text - preferred its parodic interpretation, reader response theory indicates that the lyric is a parody.

### **The “ideal narrative audience” as viewed by Ruiz and Dagenais**

It may well be true that this lyric means only what its readers think it means, in which case the parodic interpretation is the only true interpretation based on reader-response theory. However, before concluding this study, let us examine two examples of Rabinowitz’s “ideal narrative audience” – completely imaginary audiences, in contrast with the actual and/or historical audiences analyzed above - to try to confirm this conclusion more substantially.

In the *Libro* itself, the Archpriest actually defines his “ideal narrative audience” in the prologue as he indicates to his reader how the text should be interpreted and reinforces his prescriptions once again in the conclusion. The Archpriest asserts:

E Dios sabe que la mi intención non fue de lo fazer por dar manera  
de pecar nin por maldezir, mas fue por reducir a toda persona a  
memoria buena de bien obrar e dar ensienplo de buenas constunbres  
e castigos de salvación; e porque sean todos apercebidos e se puedan

mejor guardar de tantas maestrías como algunos usan por el loco amor. Ca dize sant Gregorio que menos fieren al onbre los dardos que ante son vistos, e mejor nos podemos guardar de lo que ante himos visto. (64)

He states,

Las del buen amor son razones encubiertas:  
Trabaja do fallares las sus señales ciertas;  
Si la razón entiendes o en el seso aciertas,  
Non dirás mal del libro que agora refiertas. (68)

...

De todos instrumentos yo, libro só pariente: (70)

...

Fizvos pequeño libro de testo,  
mas la glosa non creo que es chica,  
ante es bien grand prosa,  
que sobre cada fabla se entiende otra cosa” (1631)

So, at the beginning of the book, the narrator states that his intention was didactic, that the text may be deceiving at times, and that the book is meant to be read allegorically; he encourages the reader to make an effort; and he assigns primacy to the text with his words “yo, libro.” Then, in case the reader has forgotten, caught up in the ambiguity, parody and ribaldry of the various passages, the Archpriest reminds him again at the end that every story has another meaning on a different level.. In addition, he suggests that the reader can even add to the book (1629). Ruiz thus gives us his own description of his “ideal narrative audience”: an imaginary audience of active readers who will search for the allegorical interpretation behind the various passages of his work.

Like Ruiz, John Dagenais also posits an imaginary audience in his work: his “ethical reader” may in fact be the concrete manifestation of Rabinowitz’s “ideal narrative audience” with respect to the *Libro*. For Dagenais, the key to the *Libro* is “a series of specific occasions of behavior...that acquire their final gloss of ethicality from the circumstances of the individual

reader at the moment of reading” (63).<sup>14</sup> As the external manifestation of virtue and vice, praise and blame were the foundations of all ecclesiastical literature for the medieval reader.

According to Dagenais, the “active reader” assumes that the texts are ethical as well as rhetorical, distinguishes the ethical elements in the text, makes his own ethical judgments about the passage, and then, ideally with a more profound understanding of the ethical orientation of the text, changes his behavior to a more virtuous way of life.

Dagenais studied the work of the scribes who copied the manuscripts, simultaneously changing, deleting, and adding to them in the process. Through an exhaustive analysis of the various registers of the manuscripts and the variances between them, he attempted to demonstrate the ethical orientation of the reader; he asserts that

...in many passages, a choice of what is right and wrong (not just grammatically, but ethically) of which activities are socially acceptable or advisable, of what works in the real world and what does not, of what is to be praised or blamed, can guide the reader in evoking sense in a given passage. The ethical system, then, is part and parcel of the act of reading the handwritten text. It is a part of the constant series of choices...that the medieval reader had to make as he confronted the medieval text. (151-52).

Thus, for Dagenais, this audience of scribes who copied the manuscripts throughout the centuries, although small, were the *Libro's* “ideal narrative audience.” However, of all of the registers which Dagenais examines in his analysis of the various glosses of the scriptum, it is only the gloss of the ideological register which infers the presence of the active reader; and Dagenais was unable to provide conclusive evidence solely from his examination of the gloss of that register that an “active reader” or “ethical reader” ever really did in fact exist. Due to the

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<sup>14</sup> If passages of the book were read independently, it seems that there would be less opportunity for an “ethical reading”; however, many of the passages in the book may in fact be studied independently. Nevertheless, the “circumstances of the individual reader at the moment of reading” would still determine the nature of the reader’s “ethical reading” of the lyric under consideration.

paltriness of their numbers one cannot extrapolate a generalized concept of the medieval reader from this audience any more than one can extrapolate a generalized concept of the *Libro*'s modern reader simply from reading one or two contemporary critical interpretations of the text; and due to the lack of sufficient data to conclusively prove Dagenais' assertions, it is impossible to assume that this audience is anything more than imaginary.

### **A hypothetical reader-response reaction to the text, coming from an “ideal” reader**

Nevertheless, following the reasoning that Dagenais outlines in his work, this hypothetical active and ethical reader might “actively” read and experience the lyric in the following manner:

- 1) Identifying himself with the speaker, he sends his friend Ferrand García to the woman in anticipation of physical pleasure.
- 2) Again as the speaker, he suffers the pangs of disappointment for being betrayed by his messenger and losing his anticipated physical relationship.
- 3) His spiritual blindness is due to his carnal desires.
- 4) He confesses his sin, in order to expiate it.
- 5) He hypothesizes that his earthly suffering might lead to his salvation in the next world.
- 6) He realizes that his confession and “earthly suffering” were hypocritical: his confession could not be valid if it were planned in advance of the sin, and his “earthly suffering” was due to failure to obtain a pleasure prohibited by his faith, hardly a reason that could be considered for his salvation.
- 7) Finally, he makes his choice: to either abandon the pleasures of the flesh, or in the alternative, accept the dominance of his physical desires, fully realizing that he was

being hypocritical as well as sinful: like St. Augustine, asking for “chastity and continence, but not yet.”

This synopsis of the “ethical” reading of the lyric underscores the fundamental problem that it presents to its reader: the reader must choose between two opposing alternatives, each of which demands a sacrifice. Christian dogma demands that the individual choose between either his corporal needs or his spiritual life, and since the latter is far less tangible than the former, the vast majority of readers ignore the allegorical reading of the text, despite the admonishments of the narrator.<sup>15</sup>

These depictions of the Archpriest’s and Dagenais’ “ideal narrative audience” and their hypothetical reading of the lyric confirm our previous findings. Dagenais’ conception of the “ideal reader” is virtually identical to Ruiz’s narrator’s theoretical construct of the “ideal narrative audience” in the *Libro* itself. Nevertheless, although these imaginary audiences might well accept the allegorical interpretation of the lyric, no significant evidence exists that in the moment that they become flesh and blood, they are able or willing to make the sacrifice that the ethical position requires of them. Regardless of the admonitions of the Archpriest – not only at the beginning and the end but throughout the book – and in spite of the wealth of allegorical material presented in the text, reader-based interpretations of Juan Ruiz’s lyric continue to privilege parody and humor as the only real aspects of the work that contain substance and meaning for the reader, primarily due to the specific nature of the ethical choice which the reader faces if he wants to confront the text in an honest way.

## **Findings and conclusion**

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<sup>15</sup>It appears almost self-evident that the didactic intention of the lyric has been so challenging to most readers that the “ideal narrative audience” has remained the imaginary construct which Juan Ruiz imagines and Rabinowitz describes.

The purpose of this paper has been to offer an interpretation of the “troba cazurra” lyric from the *Libro de buen amor* through a reader-based interpretation of the text. After examining traditional interpretations of the text and describing and justifying the use of this critical approach based on historical, philosophical and textual grounds, the paper examined the potential reactions of the four most probable Libro audiences as well as two hypothetical “ideal” audiences to determine what a reader-based interpretation would elicit. The results demonstrate that readers consistently preferred the parodic interpretation of this lyric to its allegorical one. The definition and description of medieval allegory and parody themselves tend to define the lyric as parodic in nature, due both to its lack of clarity as well as to medieval society’s willingness to accept these kinds of text as parody. Rabinowitz’s audience typologies also privilege the parodic reading of the text: of the two authorial audiences which were most capable of understanding the allegorical interpretation, the clergy and nobility, both preferred the parodic interpretation. Analysis of the reaction of the “ideal” audiences to the lyric suggests that the underlying ethical choice that the lyric forces the reader to make impels the reader toward the parodic interpretation as well. Finally and most important, despite Juan Ruiz’s overtly stated admonitions to the contrary, the reactions of all of these audiences have been remarkably consistent in their preference for the parodic and humorous aspects of the work over its allegorical and didactic aims. The few clerics who might have acted in accordance with Catholic doctrines of celibacy, the few sinners who might have repented after reading the book, and the few scribes who might have actively read and annotated the margins of the scriptum and entered into the spirit of Ruiz’s teachings must be considered as only the exceptions that prove the rule: laughter, not lessons, is the author’s aim.

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