

History and Vision: The Figural Structure of the " Libro del Cavallero Zifar."



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'Alcayde Pedro de Escavias: Vien savedes que Pedro de Jaén, llevador de la presente, es mucho servidor mío; el qual a reciuido grandes daños de algunos de esa ciudad. Yo vos mando, si plazer y servicio me deseades facer, que lo ayades por encomendado en las cosas que menester ubiere como a servidor mío, lo qual vos tené [*sic: tendré*] en servicio. De Olmedo, quinze días de sessenta y seis. Yo el Rey. Juan de Oviedo.'

And Avalle-Arce's note:

Dos años después de escrita esta carta, en 1468, Pedro de Jaén se complotó para asesinar al Condestable Don Miguel Lucas de Iranzo con varios personajes de Jaén. Al fracasar estos planes, huyeron todos a Pegalajar, desde donde dieron mucha guerra a Escavias y a Iranzo, ... (p. 158).

The close personal relationship between Enrique IV and his "servidor" must have changed drastically during the final tumultuous days of Miguel Lucas. With Avalle-Arce's note we are given a "future perspective" which is a characteristic assessment of many personal and political relationships of the time. In conclusion, Avalle-Arce's book is valuable in bringing to light one kind of background material which is necessary for a complete understanding of the movement from the civil strife and confusion of the reign of Enrique IV to the expansive policies of his successors.

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James F. Burke. *History and Vision: The Figural Structure of the "Libro del Cavallero Zifar."* London: Tamesis, 1972. xiv + 155 pp. JAMES Burke is the first scholar to dedicate himself principally to the *Zifar* since Charles Philip Wagner, whose extensive investigations since his dissertation (Yale, 1902; *RHi*, 1903) remain unpublished because they were never finished to Wagner's satisfaction. But while the contribution made by unpublished research is a questionable one, Mr. Burke's contribution is also, because an essentially sound thesis—that the *Zifar* is best explained as a religious allegory—is marred by poor exposition and much extraneous erudition. A strong article has therefore become a weak book, and this is especially lamentable because Mr. Burke knows the *Zifar* thoroughly and obviously possesses the ability to do first-rate research on medieval topics, and in particular on medieval religious thought.

After reminding the reader that Justina Ruiz de Conde and Roger Walker both attempted to defend the book's unity (denied by Wagner and

María Rosa Lida) through the study of plot structure, Burke states that he intends to study a level of allegorical meaning, secondary to the action, which these critics were unaware of, apparently intending (though he does not say so) to find a unity in the work at this level. "I would suggest," he states at the end of the first chapter, "that the *Libro del Cavallero Zifar* . . . expresses the outline of creation, fall redemption, and apocalypse." This level is secondary, Burke emphasizes, because in contrast with poetical allegorical works, the surface level has a meaning in and of itself. Thus the *Zifar* is similar to theological allegory, in which meaning was found in history or in everyday events.

This is strangely at variance with Mr. Burke's apparent acceptance of a conscious creative element in the *Zifar*, which he bluntly calls "the first of the Spanish romances of chivalry" (p. 1). At the same time, according to Burke, the author creates the figural allegory, based on the theme *redde quod debes*, and sees it in events he takes as "givens" from his sources. What is the book's allegorical content? "[I] have attempted to demonstrate," he says on p. 109, "that the first major *exemplum* of the book, the 'Cavallero de Dios y Rey de Mentón' deals basically with the curing by man, with the death and Resurrection of Christ as the enabling factor, of the earthly ills resulting from the Fall of Adam . . . In the second *exemplum* [the 'Castigos del Rey de Mentón'] the author creates a static situation which probably alludes to the period when man will slowly raise himself through learning. In the third section *Zifar's* son completes the process so that man achieves a state of bliss comparable in some fashion to that of Eden. . . ."

Are Mr. Burke's allegorical interpretations only applicable "in some fashion?" The reader is put on his guard by the number of qualifications, conditionals, and subjunctives he uses, and will see many weak points in his reasoning. Chief among these is his attribution of a staggering erudition to the author of the *Zifar*, who not only knows what the unusual Arabic names he uses mean (p. 57 and ff.) and the Hebrew meaning of the Biblical name "Roboá" (p. 121), but also the sermons of Richard of St. Victor (pp. 71-75) and Augustine's commentary on Psalm 132 (p. 78). Over and over Mr. Burke finds evidence for his points in medieval church authors and philosophers, sometimes obscure ones, without ever attacking the fundamental question of the *Zifar's* author's access to these very diverse sources.

The specialist in the *Zifar* may find the values in Mr. Burke's theories and may feel the effort to follow his argument worthwhile. The average reader, however, will surely lose what he is saying; and, therefore, Mr. Burke's study will only be of limited interest.

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