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## Actaeon in Alfonso X's General estoria (ca. 1270)

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### Alfonso X

Alfonso X was born in Toledo on November 23, 1221, the eldest son of Fernando III of Castile and Beatrice of Swabia, cousin of Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor. This was a time of rapid Christian expansion towards the south and of the consolidation of Castilian dominance over the center and south of the Iberian Peninsula. With the death of Alfonso's grandfather, Alfonso IX of Leon, his father became king of Leon, as well as Castile, in 1230. Alfonso took part in his father's military campaigns in southern Iberia, even leading the campaign to conquer Murcia between 1243 and 1245, and he was present when Fernando III entered Seville in 1248. He continued his father's program of conquest and expansion after becoming king in 1252. He captured Jerez in 1261 and Niebla in 1262. He was also elected Holy Roman Emperor by a group of German and Italian princes in 1257, but was never crowned by the Pope, and thus never held the title officially. After nearly twenty years of diplomacy and a trip to France for a papal audience with Gregory X, he was forced to renounce his claim to the title in 1275. This enterprise was very expensive because of the need to support his Italian and German allies militarily. This led him to debase his coinage which caused severe economic crises in his lands. He was faced with a *mudéjar*<sup>1</sup> rebellion in 1264 and later a rebellion of many Castilian nobles led by his own brother, Felipe, in 1272. His son and heir, Sancho IV rebelled against him and usurped the throne in the last two years of his reign. He died in Seville on April 4, 1284.

### The Alfonsine *Scriptorium*

While Alfonso's reign is generally considered a political failure, his cultural and literary projects were prolific and impactful. In some sense Alfonso's translation project is an extension of military conquest, in that it appropriated knowledge that had previously only been available in Arabic, and created a body of texts in Castilian understandable by all. Until the 1230s, important documents and literary texts in Christian lands in Iberia were written in Latin. Beginning in the time of Fernando III more and more royal documents, particularly those destined to circulate within Iberia, were written in the vernacular. Fernando III ordered the production of the *Libro de los doce sabios*, a book of advice for nobles, and, from the 1240s on, law codes of newly conquered lands were issued in Castilian rather than Latin. This change to the vernacular was happening in other parts of Europe at the same time and is due in part to the increased production of written documents on paper, which is much cheaper than parchment, and the relative ease of producing vernacular documents since their scribes do not need to be trained in Latin. In Iberia there was the additional incentive to write in vernacular rather than Latin in recently conquered territories where previously Arabic, and not Latin, had been

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<sup>1</sup> Muslims who lived in Christian lands in medieval Iberia.



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the language of religion and secular government, and few of the inhabitants would have known Latin, but many, if not most, would have spoken some form of Romance.

Alfonso built on this process and oversaw the production of a wide variety of important texts, which he had translated, compiled and composed by a large number of scribes and scholars that he recruited for these tasks. Alfonso is credited as the author of these texts because he ordered them made, financed them, oversaw their production, and corrected them, even though he likely wrote very little. Perhaps Alfonso's greatest interest was in astrology and science, translated from Arabic, which held his attention throughout his reign. These works begin with the *Judizios de las estrellas* (*Judgements of the Stars*), translated in 1254 and continue until 1279 with the *Libro de las formas y de las imágenes* (*Book of forms and talismans*) and the *Lapidario* (*Lapidary*), two works on astromagic and talismans. Other important texts on magic and astrology include the *Picatrix* (*Ghayat al-Hakim* in Arabic, literally, *The Goal of the Wise*), the *Libro de las cruces* (*The Book of Astrological Signs*) and the *Tablas de Zarquiel* (*Tables of Al-Zarqali*). Alfonso's contribution to law was also significant, his most important text being the *Siete partidas* (*Seven-Part Code*), a comprehensive law code based on Roman Law that is still the basis of law in Spain and Latin America. He oversaw the production of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (*Canticles of Holy Mary*), a collection of more than 400 poems dedicated to the Virgin Mary written in Galician-Portuguese, the conventional language of poetry at the time. These texts are preserved in several ornate manuscripts that contain elaborate miniatures representing the stories told in the poems and notation for their musical accompaniment, in addition to the texts of the poems themselves. Alfonso's other great literary endeavor is in history. He produced the *Estoria de Espanna* (*History of Spain*), the history of the rulers of the Iberian Peninsula from Noah until Alfonso's time. The biblical story of the flood is often the beginning of national histories in the Middle Ages because the descendants of Noah spread out across the world to later form distinct peoples. According to this tradition, Tubal Caín is the grandson of Noah who settles in Iberia. In addition to this national history, Alfonso also commissioned the *General estoria* (*General History*), a universal history or world history, that recounts the deeds of the principle rulers of the world starting with the creation narrative of Genesis and ending unfinished a generation before the birth of Christ. It is believed that Alfonso had this work compiled to justify his bid to become Holy Roman Emperor and that it would have ended with his own reign had he been crowned. Work on it stopped in the 1270s when he renounced his claim to the title. The narrative of Actaeon a translation and adaptation of a section of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, comes from the *General estoria*.

### The *General estoria*

The *General estoria* is divided into six parts, covering from the creation of the world and ending unfinished a generation before the birth of Christ. There are forty-one manuscripts of the *General estoria* extant, some of which were produced during Alfonso's life time and others produced as late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although the text was not printed until the 1930s and there was no complete edition until 2009, it appears to have been influential throughout the Middle Ages and into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Several important nobles and humanists owned copies, including Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marquis of Santillana, an important knight and poet from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. A century later, Antonio de Nebrija, the royal historian for the Catholic Monarchs (Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabel of Castile) and author of the first Castilian grammar, complains about the university professors in Salamanca whose only knowledge of antiquity comes from the *General estoria*, a good indication that it was still widely read.

The narrative of the *General estoria* is organized along the *Canones Chronicis*, a set of historical tables compiled in Greek by Eusebius of Caesaria in the fourth century and translated into Latin by Saint Jerome in the fifth. They concord the events of the Old Testament with the principle events of non-biblical history in Antiquity. The principle sources of the *General estoria* are the Bible and its glosses, the *Historia Scholastica* (*Scholastic History*), a university text written in Paris in the 1170s, the Latin version of the *Jewish Antiquities* of Flavius Joseph, and the *Glossa Ordinaria* (*Ordinary Gloss*), a collection of biblical glosses compiled continuously from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The events of non-biblical history are drawn from a wide variety of texts, the most important of which is the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid and the twelfth-century glosses of John of Garland and Arnulf of Orleans. Both the Bible and the *Metamorphoses* are difficult texts to adapt to history because they are often not interpreted historically, as conveying events that actually happened as the text states, but rather they are understood allegorically, saying one thing and meaning another. For this reason, the compilers refer frequently to academic glosses to elicit interpretations that fit within their historical narrative, and they omit other meanings that they consider extraneous. They are careful to cite their sources and, in this way, the *General estoria* sometimes resembles modern academic prose.

### Actaeon in the *General estoria*

The text of Actaeon in the *General estoria* comes from manuscript 10237 of the Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, a fourteenth-century copy of the second part of this history. The text is a translation and adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where it occupies verses 138 to 252 in book III of the text. The *Metamorphoses*, a narrative poem consisting of 11,995 verses divided into fifteen books, written in Latin by Publius Ovidius Naso around the year eight CE, was fascinating to late-antique and medieval Christian readers in spite of its narratives of Pagan deities and other supernatural events that went against Christian doctrine, which recognized only one transformation, the Eucharist. Christian exegetes generally recast the stories of the *Metamorphoses* as fables, which are brought in line with doctrine as moral allegories. The story of Actaeon is often treated in this way in the Middle Ages. Actaeon is the grandson of Cadmus, the brother of Europa who founded Thebes. While hunting he stumbles upon Diana bathing in a spring, surrounded by her nymph handmaidens. Since she has taken off her weapons to bathe, Diana uses magic to turn Actaeon into a stag, whereupon he is devoured by his own dogs, unable to speak and identify himself. Ovid was a dissident in Augustan Rome who was sent into exile for his immoral literature and much of the *Metamorphoses* is about the cruel and arbitrary abuse of power, including the narrative of Actaeon. The compilers of the *General estoria*, who were intent on justifying royal power and providing examples of good and bad moral conduct for courtly readers, interpret Diana's turning Actaeon into a stag allegorically and recast him as a prince who loses himself in his irresponsible obsession with the hunt, which he carries to an extreme, bankrupting himself and leaving himself vulnerable to attack from rivals. Rather than a hapless victim he is an example of excess and of negative conduct to be avoided by the noble audience of the *General estoria*. To accomplish this they embellish the text, adding additional information about the hunt, as well as glosses from the Latin text of the *Metamorphoses*, which they cite. In this way the story of Actaeon in the *General estoria* is a good example of how the practice of history is both an act of narration and of textual interpretation in the Middle Ages.

## *General estoria*

### **How Prince Actaeon went hunting and brought a lot of equipment that day and brought his companions with him.**

Among the types of hunting that Actaeon<sup>2</sup> most loved was going to the mountains for wild beasts and other large stags because he found a lot there, and they were strong, which made him very happy. And he killed them, and he watched his men kill them, which gave him great pleasure. Among all the other days that he had gone there was one in which he took knights and squires and riders and other men, on foot in great companies, more so than other days. And they were all good men for that task. And he brought many dogs of every type suitable for finding game so that nothing that they would stir up should escape. He also brought all the other things that would be necessary such as beds, and food, and drink, and loaded mules. And they entered far into some very big mountains that were full of all types of game, as well as many good springs and trout streams. And it was a good day and the right season for hunting. They found wild boars, bears, deer and all the other animals that live in the mountains, and there was a lot of game because no one had hunted there before except for Queen Diana whom they called the goddess of the hunt and of chastity.<sup>3</sup> And it was already mid-day and in the time when the sun was very high in the sky midway between the east and west, and the shadows of things are the shortest they are all day because this happens naturally when the sun is very high in the sky during the longest days of the year. Actaeon thought it best to stop activity and camp there. And he began to call happily to his knights and squires and all his companions that were spread around the mountain hunting, some for stags and some for birds. And he said to them: “Companions, we have the nets and weapons all wet with the blood of a lot of game. Today has gone by and we’ve taken a lot of birds, and stags, and all the other wild beasts. Let’s gather together now and another day we’ll come here to do the same because the sun is high and the heat is great. Cease work now, bring in the nets and the other traps, and let’s go.” And they all thought it a good idea, and did as he said. Now we will tell you what happened to Actaeon so that his dogs killed him.

### **About the home and spring of Diana and how she was bathing and what happened to Actaeon.**

In those mountains where Actaeon was hunting and exploring there was a valley that was dense with pines and cypresses, as the author recounts.<sup>4</sup> And the valley was called Gargaphie<sup>5</sup> and it was a very pleasant place. And on that mountain and in this valley roamed Diana, their goddess of the hunt, on that day and all year. And she loved that mountain and that valley so much that she had it reserved for herself and held it sacred, which means that it was prohibited to all but her, and no man had ever entered there, either hunting or exploring the mountain, nor to cut wood nor for any other reason unless some had trespassed there by some mishap, as you will hear now happened to this prince. And at the end of that valley there was a cave that the author says was surrounded by dense groves

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<sup>2</sup> Actaeon is a figure from Roman mythology who appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Book III, verses 138 to 152), among other texts.

<sup>3</sup> Diana is the Roman goddess of the moon and the hunt.

<sup>4</sup> The “author” here refers to Ovid, whose text the alfonsine compilers comment and translate at the same time.

<sup>5</sup> Gargaphie is a spring in the region of Boethia in Greece.

and fine-smelling grass. And he says that this cave was not made by the hand of humans but rather by nature that had put it there by its art and worked it subtly. There was a natural arch of pumice and tufa stone<sup>6</sup> that was much stronger and more beautiful than anything human would know how to do. And on the right side of the cave a spring bore forth a lot of clear and sweet-tasting water. And around the spring there was a flat pleasant field covered with good grass, not at all unpleasant. And when Diana went hunting or explored the mountain she would spend the afternoon there. They say she would rest there always with her virgin ladies that she brought with her since no woman ever went with her if she was not a virgin or had been very chaste for so long that she was considered a virgin. And here she and her ladies bathed and rested and ate and endured the heat of the day. And once afternoon had passed they left. And on that day that we told you about that Actaeon was hunting and exploring the mountain there, Diana had been going through the same mountains. And as we told you that Actaeon was complaining about the heat that day since it was very hot, Diana went to the spring to bathe that day because of the heat. And as soon as she arrived at the spring her ladies and damsels surrounded her to serve her as their lady whom they feared and loved. They were very obedient. And there she gave one her spear that she carried, and to another she gave her bow having first unstrung it, and to another her quiver. And another took her summer cloak which she wore. And in this way they prepared her to sit down and when they had her seated two went to take off her sandals. And one that the author calls Crocale from the land of Ismenus<sup>7</sup> and who he says was more able than the others came later with her comb and combed her and did her hair and brought her cap and put it on her, and in so doing she gathered her hair and tied it well with a ribbon. After they had prepared her in this way there were four of the minor nymphs. And the author says that they were named Nephele, Hyale, Rhanis, Psecas and Phiale. And they took pitchers of water from the spring and bathed her very well. And while Diana was bathing there, such was the luck of Actaeon that after he left the hunt and was walking around that mount from one part to another, like someone who wanders errant around a mountain that he had never walked and didn't know, he found no path, nor was there one there. He managed to come to that place where that cave and spring were. And here the author says that the fates and his nature brought him here.

### **How Diana bathed nude with her ladies and Actaeon saw her and what Diana did.**

After Actaeon arrived at the stream and descended from the spring he enjoyed the shadows of the trees and the water a lot, which he saw to be very clear and which he found to be very cold. And he was moving up stream to get to the spring from which it flowed in order to see it, which he desired. And he got to the point that he came to the field where the spring was and he saw the ladies as they were bathing. And even though he saw that they would see him, he didn't want to hide so that they wouldn't see him, nor did he stop approaching, and he arrived to where they would see him. And the women, who were bathing their lady, and serving her, and bathing themselves and each other, when they saw him they beat their chests as soon as they saw him and filled the whole mountain with their screams. And they all went to Diana and encircled her and covered her with their bodies so that Actaeon wouldn't see her naked body. And they covered her with themselves up to her shoulders because from there up she was taller than all of them, so much so that she towered over them in size from the neck up. Here the history and Ovid put a simile in the third book of his great

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<sup>6</sup> Pumice (*pumex* in Latin) is a light volcanic rock of low density. Tufa (*tofus* in Latin) is a sedimentary rock that sometimes forms around springs from lime deposits.

<sup>7</sup> In Graeco-Roman mythology Ismenus is the god of the river Ladon in Arcadia in Greece. He was father of various nymphs, among them Crocale.

work which shows how Diana looked in that moment, and he says this: “As the color that the clouds appear when the sun is against them and hits them and turns them yellow, or how the morning dawn looks sometimes red like blood, so looked Diana at that time in the color of her face, yellow and red because a man had seen her naked without any clothes.” Because even though all her ladies surrounded her, the history says that Actaeon saw her right side, which was naked. And she turned her head back and around her like someone who looks for weapons, as if she wanted to have ready the arrows and the bow or her spear. And she reached for her weapons to hurt Actaeon with them, as if she had them. And she splashed Actaeon with the water in which she was bathing in his face and head in revenge for his stubbornness in stopping in this way without any shame of seeing her. And when she had hit him with that water and made him wet, she said: “Go now and tell your people and companions that you saw Diana naked if you can say anything and brag about it. And I give you the freedom to say it if you can. And I want you to learn from this that for the woman who wants to be good and have honor, it is not enough to avoid acts with men, or even words, but also she must keep herself from being seen. Because from sight through the eye alone comes many times the act that is the worst and most damaging to the goodness of a woman. Because I don’t want you to have the power to leave here and brag about what no man has had or shall have while I can control it. Rather I will do something to you that will resound as long as the world is as it is today. And everyone who is unable to see me should be afraid, and not stubborn and obstinate like you. And everyone who hears about it should learn from you.” And she didn’t threaten him anymore, nor did she say anything else. And these words up to here are history. Now other words say that Diana used her knowledge of magic from this point. And according to what Ovid says here, after Diana was unable to reach her weapons with which to hurt him, rather than get out of the water with her ladies, because their bodies would be visible, which she refused to do, she turned the water into a weapon and enchanted it. And she took it with her hands and hurt Actaeon, and enchanted him there in that moment. And she made that whoever would see him would think he was a deer. And she confused his senses as well in such a way that he himself thought that he was a deer, and he was marveled by it. And in this figure his dogs saw him, and they took him, and tore him to pieces. Now we will say what the wise masters say about it.

### **What the wise gentiles and our holy fathers understand about the matter of Prince Actaeon.**

All the histories that talk about Actaeon agree that it happened as it was told. Now we will tell you what our wise masters interpret. The commentator<sup>8</sup> of this section says that the prince, Actaeon, was a hunter. And he took such great pleasure in it, and practiced it with such frequency that, because of the dogs he owned and the great companies of men following him—he was very generous indeed and shared with them whatever he had—he spent his patrimony, and his rights in the kingdom diminished. The authors of the gentiles sang<sup>9</sup> that he was turned into a deer because he spent all that he had on dogs and men, so that they said that his dogs ate him. And even so the authors of this story and their commentators give another interpretation in which they say that Actaeon was

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<sup>8</sup> The commentator (esponedor) is someone who writes a gloss or commentary of a text. In this case, the compilers refer to John of Garland and Arnulf of Orleans.

<sup>9</sup> The medieval text uses the verb *trobar* here, ‘to sing, to compose verses’ because Ovid’s text is written in dactylic hexameter verses, the conventional verse of Roman epic poetry.

certainly a hunter as was said. But that part of the story in which Ovid says that Actaeon saw Diana naked in the middle of the day means the following: Diana is understood as the hunt since they call her the goddess of it. And that Actaeon saw and looked upon her openly, as he saw Diana uncovered and naked, is understood to mean the damage that he was doing to himself in hunting so much, and postponing other activities by which he would be worth more. By that other matter in which Ovid says that Actaeon saw Diana in the middle of the day when the sun was highest and its heat the strongest, mid-day is understood to mean that Actaeon was at that time was in his middle age when one should work to be worth more and more able. And by what Ovid said that Actaeon told his companions to bring in the nets and the other instruments of the hunt, and to call in their dogs and go home because they had done enough that day, it is understood to mean that he gave up his great interest in the hunt. And for this Diana, his goddess, called him fearful and because she called him fearful Ovid and other authors of the gentiles put into verse that he was changed into a deer because she called him fearful. And they said more because this was about hunting, and they examined stags and their nature and didn't find any there that was naturally as fearful as the deer. And for this reason they said that Diana turned him into a deer rather than a stag. And about the fear that he had naturally to which she added by making him even more fearful through her enchantments, Ovid in his book says this in this Latin verse: *additus et pavor est fugit Anthoneius heres*. And this Latin means in the language of Castile: "And she added fear to him. Prince Autonoe flees." Which is prince Acteon, son of Queen Autonoe.<sup>10</sup> And they gave him this name Autonoe from the name of his mother whom they called Autonoe. And about that other thing that Ovid said that his dogs tore him apart, the commentators say that it means that Actaeon stopped hunting but he didn't stop having the great number of dogs that he had had earlier. And they were so many and he spent so much of what he had that they caused him to have less and to be worth less. And some commentators even say about this that Actaeon was a fearful prince and that he didn't defend his interests well. And that his dogs chewed on Actaeon means that his enemies went after what he had and robbed him and destroyed him. And to cover up his cowardice he gave himself to the hunt and other pass times to avoid use of arms, and it appeared to men that he did something and worked at something. And this is what we found written in the histories about Actaeon, grandson of King Cadmus, and here ends his history.

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<sup>10</sup> Autonoe was the mother of Actaeon and the eldest daughter of Cadmus, founder of Thebes.