

Scarborough, Connie L. *A Holy Alliance: Alfonso X's Political Use of Marian Poetry*. Newark: Juan de la Cuesta, 2009. 206 pp. ISBN 978-1588711489.

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Thirteenth-century Europe represented a period of profound changes, with the rise of feudalism, nationhood, and religion that modified the social and political structures of the western kingdoms. Within the Iberian Peninsula context, the cultural streams generated in Europe entered through the mendicant orders and pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela, developing a new literary movement, the *mester de clerecía* (craft of the clergy). This genre was characterized by its metrical regularity, narrative style, and didactic intent, with an emphasis on the worship of Virgin Mary. This century was also marked by the kingship of Alfonso X the Wise (1221-1282). As an educated ruler, Alfonso drew on the ideas about monarchy emerging in the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula; with the help of a large team of writers, philosophers, and Jewish and Muslim translators, he edited and compiled treatises and works of all facets of knowledge: religious and profane poetry, books on recreations and games, historical chronicles, and legal texts. Among his multiple works stand out the Castilian statutory code of *Siete Partidas*, developing the prose in this language, and the Galician-Portuguese poem-songs *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, the largest collection of Marian poetry written in any vernacular. Both pieces bear not only eloquent testimony to Alfonso's erudition but also his political agenda: the completion of the Reconquista, submission of the religious minorities - Jews and Muslims - and the consolidation of the different Christian kingdoms by one crown under the precepts of the Divine Law.

This historical-literary scenario serves in Connie Scarborough's book to introduce the reader to a revealing study on the analysis of Alfonso's politics as a subtext underlined in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. To do so, she examines how the use of this compilation of poems addressed for Marian devotion became a propagandistic tool uncovering the social and class tensions, economic problems, and perception of the "other" used by the king to achieve his ideological ambitions.

The first part of the book (chapters 1 to 4) focuses on Alfonso's aspirations to unify all the kingdoms from an administrative and legal perspective. By placing each individual in a social class based on their background and assigned duties, the king pursued his plan to "maintain the country's infrastructure, its military and economic security, and even its natural resources" (15).

Through a detailed comparison found in historical works edited by Alfonso (*General Historia* and *Primera Crónica General*) as well as the legal text of *Siete Partidas*, and *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, the author asserts to show the monarch's political pretensions:

The king envisioned a government with strong centralized authority and he sought to give his subjects a sense of citizenry as members of a unified and identifiable nation. [...] When he turned his attention to the writing of religious verse he did not abandon this ideal. In fact, the king saw in his *Cantigas* a unique vehicle for supporting his ideas about kingship, the waging of war, his quest for the crown of Emperor, as well as other facets of his political agenda. (20)

Scarborough argues that many of the *cantigas* portray Virgin Mary as an active agent of the Reconquista and a supporter of Alfonso's objectives. Through the combination of poetic language, music, visual imagery, and the role played by miracles as a narrative form of indoctrination, the *Cantigas* not only honor the Virgin, but underline a goal to promote the king's political agenda: She appears as an "ardent supporter of Alfonso's political claims such as repopulation ventures, his defender against those who would betray the king, and his personal protector in times of illness and strife" (24). The *Puerto de Santa Maria* cycle, formed by 24 *cantigas*, is analyzed to support this argument. These selected poems describe the siege and conquest of the Moorish town of Alcanate by Alfonso X in 1260, which became, after its conquest, reorganized into the Christian town of El Puerto de Santa Maria. By studying several of these *cantigas* (328, 356, 371, 379, 382 among others), Scarborough demonstrates the use of the Virgin's intervention as a pivotal character in the Christian success against the Muslim armies, consolidating El Puerto as a "recruitment tool, to attract more Christian settlers" (47). Alfonso's authorship role of the *Cantigas* is also explored; Scarborough relies on previous studies by other scholars such as Joseph T. Snow, Jesús Montoya Martínez and Joseph F. O'Callaghan to examine Alfonso's task as troubadour. She argues that the king "probably intervened most directly and most markedly, in those songs which deal with events of his own life" (41), and by the use of first person narrative voice he pursues to incorporate Mary as a new character who participates and helps the monarch in his political life and challenges against his subordinates and enemies.

The second part of the book (chapters 5 and 6) is devoted to the religious minorities and the use of Galician language in the composition of the *Cantigas*. Concurring with other scholars who have studied the representation of Moors and Jews in several *cantigas*, including Albert Bagby, Marjorie Ratcliffe, and Norman Roth, Scarborough states that the insertion of Jews and Muslims does not lead to any substantial conclusions about Alfonso's personal views towards these religious groups; however, the inclusion of Jewish and Muslim characters in some of the *cantigas* is used

to show the racial and dogmatic diversity that shaped the Iberian kingdoms under Alfonso's rule:

racial/ethnic/religious divisions were recognized by the king and his society. Given the king's ideal vision of a unified Spain under Christian control, the miraculous intervention of the Virgin to either quell Muslim military threats, both from inside and outside of the Peninsula, or to convert Jews or Muslims to the Christian faith certainly contributed to Alfonso's dream for the future. (84)

By comparing the themes of various anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim poems and the legal jurisprudence from *Siete Partidas* pertaining to laws on Jews and Muslims, Scarborough discusses the role of submissive position of these communities under Christian rule, and the use of the Virgin as a mediator, judge and intermediary in their legal affairs. This leads to her conclusion of the existence of 'micro-societies' in thirteenth-century Castile which were not compatible with Alfonso's pretensions of a Christian homogenous and cohesive society. In regards to the use of Galician-Portuguese verse in the *Cantigas*, the author studies some of the motifs that led the king to express a special affinity toward "Galicia's own rich linguistic, literary, and cultural legacy" (131). Some of the motifs discussed include the close ties he and his family had with this kingdom, Alfonso's royal upbringing and his interest for learning and desire to acquire knowledge, and the arrival of poetic tradition from southern France.

The last part of the book (chapters 7 to 10) examines the relationship between Mary as an intercessor for Alfonso's health and his family safety. Supported on previous works on the matter by Richard P. Kinkade, and Maricel E. Presilla, and taking as examples the music and imagery ornaments of several *cantigas* from the Escorial I.1 manuscript, Scarborough discusses the physical problems suffered by Alfonso and his ability to overcome the illness and other problems of legal and monetary nature. The Virgin's divine protection not only covers the king but also extends to his family members; she intervenes to cure Alfonso's mother Beatriz, his father Fernando, his sister Berenguela, and his brother Manuel. Through this active role, "Mary helps and saves Her favorites in times of illness and war" (167), establishing again a liaison between ideology and religion; he who supports the Virgin not only receives health protection but is sheltered from other vicissitudes of daily life.

Without any doubt, Scarborough's book provides a splendid study that shows the use of religion and devotion in thirteenth century Castilian politics. Mary's influence and divine intercession to help her devotees, as portrayed in the *Cantigas*, becomes an ideological tool employed by Alfonso to pursue his political endeavours. The Virgin's assistance to promote Alfonso as a model ruler leads the monarch to seek comfort and support in Her divine power. This study serves as a pillar of the king's arduous ventures,

religious goals and political legacy that determined the future of Castile and the rest of his kingdoms.