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The Canticles of Holy Mary of King Alfonso the Wise

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By the time this essay appears in print the Margaret I. King Library will have archived a remarkably authentic facsimile of one of Europe's most lavishly illuminated medieval manuscripts, Escorial T.1.I, the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* or "Canticles of Holy Mary." EDILAN, the Spanish publisher, devoted many years to the production of the facsimile and its accompanying volume of text, musical notation, studies and bibliography; but King Alfonso X, who ruled from 1252 to 1284 and was dubbed by his people Alfonso el Sabio, that is "the Wise," labored over his favorite book for a much longer time. So highly did he esteem the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* that he caused to be written into his last will and testament a codicil providing for the disposition of the *Cantigas* after his death. Today the manuscript which EDILAN has reproduced resides in the Escorial, that vast fortress-palace constructed by Philip II in the sixteenth century.

King Alfonso X was as effective as most medieval kings and did not deserve the reputation of a dreamer ascribed to him by the Spanish historian Mariana, who wrote, "While he contemplated the heavens and observed the stars, he lost the earth." Alfonso's trouble lay in the fact that he was a man in advance of his nation and his time. Therefore, his involvement in research of all kinds and in the production of books in many areas gained him the reputation of an impractical ruler who lavished money upon esoteric pursuits. And yet in his own time, and indeed into our own, his great books made their influence felt. His *Siete Partidas*, "Seven Divisions of Law," is one of the world's most widely disseminated legal codices. His *Alfonsine Tables*, his *Libros de astronomia*, and his famous *Lapidario* influenced scientific research well into the Renaissance. His *Libro de ajedrez, dados, e tablas*, "Book of Chess, Dice, and Backgammon," illuminated with beautiful colored miniatures...
showing how the games were played and by whom, is a keystone in the history of recreational pastimes. The *Crónica General* and the *Grande e General Estoria* attempted to treat the history of the world and the history of Spain. There was even an oriental novelesque "wisdom book," filled with some of the world's best stories, which he caused to be translated from the Arabic *Kalilah wa-Dimna* into Spanish as *Calila e Digna*.

It is the manuscripts of the *Cantigas de Santa María*, however, which today attract the greatest interest. Scholars in literature have found the *Cantigas* to be the most extensive anthology of lyric verse in medieval Spain, and musicologists recognize the book as the most extensive repository of medieval melody. The longest manuscript of the *Cantigas*, which contains some four hundred *cantigas*, is, however, not illuminated. EDILAN has therefore reproduced instead the manuscript which excels in illustrations. Escorial T.1.I. is certainly the most copious collection of medieval Spanish miniatures in existence.

Until this year the highly illustrated text was not available for close examination by the public, as it resided in a glass case in the library of the Escorial, open to one folio. The importance of the facsimile can be readily seen, for with two thousand copies in print and distributed in libraries, much greater exposure is possible. Scholars can now study a perfectly authentic reproduction of every illuminated page.

Apparently the *Cantigas* played a significant role in King Alfonso's not very happy life. The Virgin Mary was his patron saint: he called himself her troubadour, he carried her image into battle with him, and he believed she had done so much for him that he wanted to praise her in a very special way. So he arranged to produce a book which would be the greatest anthology of her miracles and hymns, illuminated more opulently than any other volume. This has led some to believe it to be a purely pietistic book, but it was also a worldly book. Miracles often deal with sins of the most terrible sort, usually caused by the devil, who is defeated miraculously by Our Lady. Apparently Alfonso as king, and possibly as prince, collected the Virgin's miracles from many sources—from folk tradition and from books in Latin and in the vernacular languages, especially Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, and French. There is even evidence in the *Cantigas* that he journeyed to the sites of miracles which he believed had occurred in his lifetime so as to authenticate them and add them to his collection. The
Cantigas de Santa María was what we might call today an open-ended book, an ongoing compilation which could be added to, as new miracles came to the king's attention or were, he believed, experienced by him. It is one of the most personal books surviving from the Middle Ages, Alfonso relates some of the miracles in the first person, since he says their events were directly connected with his life. This has led some scholars, and I am one of these, to believe that he actually wrote some cantigas himself, and possibly all of them. Alfonso was a talented poet, as numerous of his surviving poems attest. No doubt he was also a musician. Poets in those times, of necessity knew music, since most poems were literally lyric in the sense that they were sung or played or both on instruments. All the Cantigas de Santa María are, of course, songs with full musical notation. The king's love of music, by the way, was so great that he established the first professorship of music in Spain in that country's oldest university, that of Salamanca—a chair which has continued in unbroken tradition to this day.

Alfonso's devotion to and faith in the Virgin were two of the cornerstones of his life and of his very morality. Misunderstood by his people who could not comprehend a king who lavished good money on astronomical observations, on histories, poetry and even fiction, resented by a recalcitrant nobility, imposed upon by members of his family, especially by a shrewish queen and a son who drove him into exile, Alfonso came to rely more and more upon the Blessed Virgin and to receive great solace in assembling the remarkable songbook which would keep alive the wonders she had wrought. No expense seems to have been spared as the composition of the Cantigas progressed across the years of the king's reign. Although he seems to have finished the first volume of one hundred miracles and hymns around 1257, when he was thirty-six years old, the anthology was not completed until close to the date of his death in 1284. I believe that he began his favorite book, or at least conceived the idea of it, much earlier. At his mother's knee he had heard miracles which had been wrought for her and for other members of the royal family before his birth. Later, when he had experienced miracles accomplished in his own behalf, he came to believe that the Virgin was always nearby to help and comfort him and that on more than one occasion she had saved him from mortal illness.

In a very real sense the Cantigas de Santa María does not belong to Spanish literature, since it is written in Galician-Portuguese, a
language which through a very long tradition was considered to be more musical and therefore a better vehicle for lyric verse than Castilian, the language of epic poetry. This tradition endured well into the fifteenth century. So strong was it that from the king’s own century scarcely six lyric poems in the Spanish language have come down to us. Alfonso apparently wanted his Cantigas to be read and sung by both the erudite and the illiterate, and to that end utilized the language considered the most apt and melodious. Although this linguistic vehicle makes the Cantigas a monument of Portuguese literature, it has hindered translation, since not many today can read the language of medieval Galicia.

Alfonso was not the first to eulogize the Virgin in miracles and hymns. Before he had finished the Cantigas the first Castilian poet whose name we know, the cleric Gonzalo de Berceo, had adapted from Latin prose miracles, and rendered into verse his twenty-five well-known Milagros de Nuestra Señora, “Miracles of Our Lady,” and Gil de Zamora, another Castilian cleric, had composed a body of miracles in Latin prose. Indeed, all across Europe and in Christian lands abroad miracles of the Virgin flourished. Saint Mary, then, was loved and worshipped more than all other saints, and she became the focal point of literature and of art in all its genres.

Most of the first one hundred Cantigas de Santa Maria stem from the pan-European corpus of Marian lore. In the second one hundred a larger number of native Spanish miracles occurs so that by the fourth one hundred, local miracles of definitely Spanish vintage are as numerous as those from the known collections.

The approximately twelve hundred miniatures in the manuscript reproduced by EDILAN were finished around 1280. Four artists have been identified for Alfonsine books, but scholars cannot state definitely that any of these were Cantigas artists. At least four artistic styles have been recognized in the Cantigas by art historians. The miniatures of the Cantigas are vital to the history of art. They also possess interest of an archaeological nature for they present all aspects of daily life. They portray unusual religious beliefs, traditions of medieval Spain found nowhere else, superstitions, games, battles on a large scale as well as the jousting of individual knights. The entire human typology of the Iberian Peninsula is here—Moors, Jews, Christians, young people, old people, representatives of all social classes and occupations. For such diverse men and women, the miniaturists painted with a very
realistic technique clothing and other accoutrements, the trappings of mounts, implements, and the exteriors and interiors of houses. Ecclesiastical personages with their robes, altars, golden lamps, and rites, are vividly depicted, as is the world of the supernatural—on the one hand, the Virgin, the Lord Jesus, God the Father, saints, and a host of angels with wings and halos of vivid hues; and, on the other, the host of hell, represented by a myriad of devils of all sizes and shapes, with sundry imps, and one remarkable zombie-like creature, a human body occupied by the devil so that he can work evil until he is exorcised, leaving the body to fall into instant decay. The entire life of a century is shown in all its shadows and vivid colors, in its beautiful and uplifting aspects, as well as in its vile and hideous ones.

Earlier was mentioned the fact that the Cantigas is a secular book. This meant that it deals with the secular world and its inhabitants more than with the world of the clergy. Even very scurrilous material appears, and not only in words but in illustrations. Perhaps the most shocking is number 17 in which we see a mother in bed with her teen-age son having sexual intercourse. She was forgiven by the Virgin, when she repented, but not before she had dropped the result of her incest into a latrine. The Virgin, of course, rescued the baby and had it reared in a convent. Crime against man and God offered the most exciting background for miracles. Certainly abominable crimes, including murder, torture, and blasphemy, are frequently illustrated. In every case, if the sinner is repentant, the Virgin comes to his aid, but vigorously and even cruelly, she punishes the unrepentant.

Less heinous crimes, indeed, even misdemeanors, are represented. Some elicit smiles today and probably elicited them in the Middle Ages. Number 127 tells of a young man who kicked his mother and was miraculously prevented from entering a church until he cut off the offending foot, which, of course, the Virgin restored. A woman, who kept an inn, stole meal from pilgrims. As she tasted a fritter made from the meal, the knife she used to hold it ran through her mouth and came out the back of her head. Only after confession before the altar of the Virgin could the priest pull out the knife.

Well known as well as unusual stories appear in the Cantigas, some found in no other book. Among the former is that of the nun who eloped with a young man, lived a life of sin, bore the young man three children, repented and returned. The Virgin had taken
her place, and indeed her form, so that no one knew the nun had been away (number 104). The “Rip Van Winkle” motif is the subject of number 103 in which a monk listened to a bird singing in a garden while three hundred years passed. Unrecorded before is the miracle in number 108. Here Merlin, angered at a Jew who ridicules the Immaculate Conception, asks the Virgin to make the Jew’s child be born with his head facing backward. This is accomplished, and Merlin rears the deformed child and exhibits him as he attempts to convert Jews. The myriad stories about people in all walks of life must have fascinated Alfonso and those fortunate enough to see his books.

Alfonso’s devotion to the Virgin and his anthology in her praise may have led the reader to consider him a saintly man. He was not. His father, it is true, was beatified and became Saint Ferdinand Matamoros, that is, “Moor Killer,” but Alfonso was not so pious. He had mistresses, and he executed political prisoners, sometimes, it seems, because he hated them, as may have been the case with his ever-rebellious brother Fadrique whom he ordered strangled. Certainly he considered himself to be a sinner, albeit a repentant one. This very sense of sinfulness may have been the basis of his devotion to the Blessed Virgin, the advocate of all sinners who repent. His was a simplistic morality, and one well known and much followed throughout the Middle Ages and even later. The Virgin is mankind’s mother, and as a mother could be approached directly. It took much more courage to go directly to the Father or the Son. We believe that Alfonso rode the full current of Mariolatry, as some call the prevalence of her worship, which reached its flood tide in his century.

The music of the Cantigas must not be neglected in any study of that remarkable book. Most of it is secular in origin, although some small part seems to have developed directly from plain chant so much employed by the medieval Church in all countries. Many more cantigas appear to have a relationship to chant, but through some peculiar and unique Spanish lyricism have been greatly transformed. A few are definitely taken from popular songs, and by this is meant folksongs of the period. But the largest group is unique in form and cannot be analyzed according to the western modal system. Therefore, it is only reasonable to assume that these particular cantigas, so different from the others, were composed under the influence of Arabic models. Indeed, what was earlier termed “Spanish lyricism” may itself stem from the presence of the
Arabs in Spain for more than five hundred years before the _Cantigas de Santa Maria_ was undertaken by the Learned King. The strophic _Cantigas_, which repeat the melody in a refrain with each verse, are no doubt one of the important repertories in the history of medieval music.¹⁸

_Cantiga_ 42, one of the most fascinating in the collection, can serve to illustrate how Alfonsine artists told a story in pictorial form. Although the _cantiga_ seems to have a very pietistic theme, as do all the _cantigas_, it reveals a view of the secular world. Here is a slice of life depicted with amazing attention to detail and with the accent on realism. The plot, not original to the _Cantigas_, has literary quality which has made it stand the test of time. Even a writer as relatively modern as nineteenth-century Prosper Mérimée used this plot in his famous _La Vénus d'Ille_, although he derived it from a source other than the _Cantigas de Santa Maria_. Probably his source was that used by the Learned King for his _Cantigas_, a weird story found in a Latin manuscript of the twelfth century in France. In it a young ball player places his ring on the finger of a metal statue of Venus which comes after him at night and crushes him in her arms.⁹ If Alfonso knew the pagan tale and adapted it to the demands of a Marian miracle, he leaves us a very remarkable example of what Saint Augustine recommended to his disciples, namely, that in their missionary work they should freely use pagan myths by changing them into Christian stories.

The _cantiga_, here given in a translation by Kathleen Kulp-Hill, is straightforward and direct:

This is how the postulant placed the ring on the finger of the statue of Holy Mary and the statue curved its finger around it.

_The most glorious Virgin,  
Spiritual Queen, is solicitous  
of those she loves, for she  
does not want them to do wrong._

Concerning this, I shall tell you a beautiful miracle, agreeable to hear, which the Virgin Mother of Our Lord performed to save from great error a fickle admirer who often changed his fancies.

_It happened in the land of Germany that some people wished to renovate their church._

58
Therefore, they removed the statue of Holy Mary, which was on the altar, and put it at the entrance to the town square under the portico.

In that square there was a lush green park where the local folk went to take their ease and there they played ball, which is the favorite game of all young men.

There chanced to come there once a great troop of young men to play ball, and among them was a youth who was in love. He wore a ring which his beloved, a native of that town, had given him.

This youth, for fear that he would twist the ring when he hit the ball, looked for a place to put it. He saw the beautiful statue and went to place the ring on its finger, saying: “From this day forth that lady whom I loved means nothing to me, for I swear to God that these eyes of mine have never seen anything so beautiful. Hence from now on I shall be one of your servants and I give you this beautiful ring as pledge.”

Kneeling before the statue in reverence and saying “Ave Maria,” he promised Her then and there that from that moment on he would never love another woman and would be faithful to Her.

When he had made his promise, the youth arose and the statue closed its finger around the ring. The young man, when he saw this, was taken with such great fright that he began to shout: “Oh, Holy Mary, protect me!”

The people, when they heard this, came running up to where the youth was shouting and he told them what we have just recounted to you. They advised him to enter the order
of the monks of Claraval at once. They all believed that he had done so, but on the advice of the devil he did otherwise, for what he had promised to the Virgin of great worth melted from his thoughts as water melts salt.

He never more gave thought to the Glorious Virgin, but fell in love again with his first lady love. To please his relatives, he married her soon after and left the joys of the other world for earthly pleasures.

After the nuptials were over and day was done, the bridegroom lay down and went quickly to sleep. While sleeping, he saw Holy Mary in his dreams and She called to him angrily: "Oh, my faithless liar! Why did you forsake me and take a wife? You forgot the ring you gave me. Therefore, you must leave your wife and go with me wherever I so will. Otherwise, from now on, you will suffer mortal anguish."

The bridegroom awoke, but he did not wish to depart. The Glorious Virgin made him go to sleep again and he saw Her lying between his bride and himself to separate them. She called to him angrily: "Wicked, false, unfaithful one, do you understand? Why did you leave me and have no shame of it? If you wish my love, you will arise from here and come at once with me before daybreak. Get up in a hurry and leave this house! Go!"

Then the bridegroom awakened and was so frightened by this that he got up and went on his way without calling even two or three men to go with him. He wandered through the wilderness for more than a month and took up lodging in a hermitage
beside a pine grove.

Thenceforth, as I found written, he served Holy Mary, Mother of the King Most High, who then took him with Her, as I believe and know to be true, from this world to Paradise, the heavenly realm.

As the black-and-white reproduction will reveal, the illumination is divided into six sections or panels, each developing an incident of the story. The action moves from left to right, so that the viewer’s eye moves naturally, much in the way it would as he peruses a comic strip. Appearing above each panel is a caption which in the original alternates from panel to panel in scarlet and deep azure; and in each corner of each panel appears either the three-towered castle, symbol of Alfonso’s realm of Castile, or the lion rampant, symbol of his kingdom of León. The entire set of six miniatures—I shall call each panel a “miniature”—is framed by a frieze of brilliantly colored cruciform designs in red, yellow, green and blue, and this design, it will be noted, runs down the middle of the page dividing the bands of perpendicular panels on the left from those on the right. As they are also divided horizontally, each miniature is framed, even as the entire six-panelled illumination is. Each illuminated page follows this plan, except the third which contains eight panels. The design of the frame may vary considerably from cantiga to cantiga. Art historians see in these brilliant designs copies of certain ivory diptychs found in thirteenth-century France.

Each caption gives in briefest summary, often written in medieval abbreviations, what the panel shows. For example, in panel two in which the ball player appears, one reads, “Como iogavan a pelota os mancebos en un prado,” “How young men played ball in a meadow.” Here the caption is hardly needed, for the viewer can see perfectly clearly what is happening. But in many cases the caption helps, since the action is not always obvious.

The caption of panel one reads: “How they were working on a church and placed the image of Holy Mary under the portal.” In this miniature masons may be seen at work at the right. One is mixing mortar with a spade. To protect his head from falling mortar he wears a leather hat, of a kind that can be seen even today in Spain. A second mason is loading buckets which the mason above him will lift by means of a pulley. Still another is
laying blocks of stone. It will be noted that secular workmen and not clerics are illustrated.

The caption in panel two we have read already, to wit, that young men played ball in a meadow. Clearly depicted is a batter holding a bat of a tapering design quite similar to a modern bat. His stance is true to life as he swings the bat. In front of him stands the pitcher about to toss an underhand pitch. Obviously he is much too close to the batter, but medieval people understood the need to conserve precious parchment and would not have been disturbed or confused by this lack of proportion. After all, had the artists painted to scale they could not have included such details as the open-work shoes of the players with their colored hose showing or the myriad tiny blossoms starring the meadow. In the facsimile the batter’s hose, the pitcher’s and that of the man immediately behind the pitcher are black, while the two other men in the outfield wear bright red hose. The batter’s tunic, pinkish like that of the first player in the outfield, contrasts pleasantly with the blue tunics worn by the other men.

Panel three states that the finger of the Virgin’s statue closed upon the ring which the young man had placed upon it in token of love. We see him dressed in a blue tunic facing the image of Our Lady. He put the ring his sweetheart gave him on the stone finger, because it seemed the safest place to leave it, but a minor miracle then occurred, as he was so struck with the extreme beauty of Holy Mary that he plighted his troth to her. The artists picture his surprise and terror as the finger closes upon the ring, making his emotions evident in his outspread hands, in his body posture, and in his expression.

Color in this miniature is brilliant—in the bright blue robe of the Virgin, in her puce cape, and in the blue of her nimbus and the gold of her crown. The halo of the Christ Child sitting on her knee is red. Artists used gold beaten to paper thinness, which was then cut to the shape of the object to be covered—a crown, a lamp, an arch—and pasted on with white of an egg, one of the strongest binding agents and the most enduring. Often, to lend a deeper glow of gold, the area to be covered was coated with Armenian bole, a red clay.\(^10\)

In panel four we see the wedding feast with the bride in a golden wedding gown and wearing a golden headdress, all of which looks quite black in the reproduction we are using. At her left the groom, who in spite of his vow to the Blessed Virgin nevertheless married,
is seen gazing at his bride.

The arches in this panel and in the panel to follow deserve comment. In the original and in the facsimile the arches are purest gold, and their purpose is to spotlight the scene they enclose. Religious paintings had long used such arches, so it is not strange that Alfonso’s artists should emulate them. The arches become a part of the action of the panel and add to the flow of events, while offering a means of spatial transition from one separate point in time into another. The concept of a picture within a picture—here an arch within a panel—refines, contracts, and intensifies both the main action in the panel and the encapsulated action under the arch. The “dramatic arch” has, then, become an integral part of Cantiga 42’s illuminations. Perhaps the artist believed that such a subtle bow, as the use of arches, to sacred significance might excuse or at least gloss over the amorous elements of this cantiga. Golden arches could serve to uplift tales of rapine, murder, lust, and other sins and provide an introduction to the Virgin’s presence in illuminations. Since arches were used in contemporary plays to frame separate actions in a series, the viewer of the miniatures may have related the arches to drama and thereby may have experienced something akin to what he might feel while watching a play.

Consider the three arches in panel four, the caption of which reads: “How the young man married the other woman and deserted Holy Mary.” The largest arch, which is to the left, frames the most important characters in the panel’s scene—the bride and groom, although two other people are also present. The center arch, which is much less impressive and smaller, reveals two other guests. The third small arch focuses upon servants bearing covered dishes. To the medieval viewer this panel, divided into three arches, may have signified three separate and serial moments in space and time, and would broaden the canvas of events to a considerable extent. The simple focusing through the device of the spotlighting or dramatic arch lends sufficient pause to allow the viewer to see and interpret three separate actions. It might even be regarded as a kind of punctuation.

In panel five the two arches impart a touch of the pietistic to the bedroom scene in which the Virgin is a character. The smaller one to the left encloses the nuptial couch and the angel who accompanies the Virgin; the larger arch encapsulates the two protagonists, the Virgin and the young man, along with the sleeping bride.
Colors here are particularly bright. The four-poster bed is covered by a blue counterpane the red lining of which can be seen in a few of the folds; the canopy over the bed is white, emblazoned with figures of gold; the bolster on which the heads of the bride and groom rest is figured in many colors; the gold of the Virgin’s robe and her crown are set off by her scarlet nimbus; the nimbus of the angel is also scarlet. He has golden epaulets and his wings are of palest blue and deepest cobalt. His bright blond hair is typical of angels in the miniatures.

The artists have captured action and conflict in this miniature. The bride sleeps, or is in a trance, her face resting on one of her hands. The groom stares, eyes wide open, at the Virgin who has grasped him by the arm to drag him away from his unconsummated marriage. With his free hand he makes a gesture as though to repel her. Both he and the bride seem to be naked, but only the upper parts of their bodies can be seen. Reference to the translation of the poem will remind the reader that the Virgin lay down between bride and groom, but the artists evidently considered that it would be improper so to depict her. The caption of panel five reads: “How Holy Mary made the groom arise from beside the bride and took him away.”

The last of the six panels is captioned “How he placed himself in a hermitage and led a very pious life.” We see the former ball player seated before a small and simple structure with its roof of blue tile. He wears monastic habit and headgear and sits piously on the ground reading a book. From his beard and general hoary appearance the viewer can realize that he has spent a long time there and is, indeed, much older. A depiction of depth quite close to perspective is developed by the placement of the pine trees which surround the hermitage. Color in this panel depends upon the landscape with its bright green pine trees, their reddish trunks and limbs, and the multitude of flowers of every hue scattered about under the trees and at the foundation of the hermitage.

I believe that the artists have paralleled quite closely the words of the poem, successfully including all or most of the elements of verbalized narrative. Setting is mainly the creation of the miniaturists, since the visual representation appears far more explicit than anything the cantiga has described. Plot and conflict in visualization closely follow the verbalized account. Surely the miniatures depict the six salient features of the story and include unmistakable elements of conflict. Characterization developed by
the narrative is reflected in the visualizations. The Virgin and the

groom move, gesticulate, and posture, revealing a good deal about

themselves by their actions. The gesture of the groom, hands open

and thrown out in terror as he sees the finger close upon the ring,

and the purposefulness with which the Virgin grasps his wrist, are

but two of such devices for revealing character.

A narrative needs theme, and the cantiga developed that of the

Virgin's grace in forcing the recalcitrant devotee to keep his

promise. But there may be lesser themes: there is a human theme

depicted in the personal problem of the ball player, the pattern of

whose life is threatened and eventually changed; lastly, there may

be an allegorical theme with peripheral implications that the young

man's problem is also humanity's, that is, the eternal conflict

between this world and heaven. I believe the artists also

successfully addressed themselves to this.

Even style is reflected in the miniatures, and the omniscient point

of view of the poet is developed by the miniaturists, for the viewer

learns as much from the visualization as he does from the

verbalization. And mood or tone in the hands of the artists may

even surpass what the written word evokes.

Earlier was mentioned the fact that the cantigas were a three-way

means of reaching the audiences who were exposed to them. The

words in translation of number 42 give a good indication of the

poem's literary quality and of how the narrative would appeal to

those who read it or heard it read. The miniatures, as has been

seen, tell the story in pictures, supported by captions. The music

would increase the impact of the cantigas. I believe that there was

considerable selectivity in matching melody to content. For

instance, sad miracles were set to sad melodies, cantigas in which

battles rage could have had martial airs; and the miracles which

took place along the famous pilgrims' Way of Saint James surely

were set to the strains of Pilgrims' songs.

We must today remember that the thirteenth century was an age

of faith. The Church was there as governor and mother to guide

the sinner and to punish him. Life was well ordered in both the

secular and ecclesiastical areas. The Cantigas reflects this world. It

is not to be regarded as a set of fairy stories, though indeed some

cantigas stem from the lore of fairies and other supernatural beings.

The king believed in the miracles; his people who respected and

worshiped the Virgin Mary, believed what he believed. Strange

cults existed, and some people worshiped the devil and powers of
darkness, and the *Cantigas* depict people who traffic with the hosts of hell. Of course, the royal volumes of the *Cantigas* with all their lavish calligraphy, musical notation, and illumination were not at the disposal of the man on the street. But the miracles were sung in churches on feast days of the Virgin and were sung even after Alfonso's death, as his will attests.

We, in Kentucky, shall have, then, one of the world's great books, albeit one not well known in this country. It has been produced by EDILAN in the exact size of the original (50 x 35 centimeters), on paper called *papel pergamino*, "parchment paper," which is as thick and fine as true parchment, and causes the facsimile volume to weigh about twenty-five pounds. The accompanying volume is not quite as thick nor are its pages made of *papel pergamino*, but its contents are significant. In addition to a transcription of the text of the poem and of the musical notation, it contains an archaeological study, translations of the poems from Galician into Castilian, and a near-definitive bibliography. EDILAN exerted every effort to make exact copies of the binding chosen by Philip II and executed by the Flemish artist Pieter Bosch in the sixteenth century. The firm produced a rich, thick suede, and ordered the binding to begin. Then it was discovered that in all Spain there was not a modern binding machine which could sew such thick material. At last they turned to a binding machine of the nineteenth century found in the museum of the venerable printing house of Espasa Calpe. Once worn out parts in the machine had been replaced, two thousand volumes could be properly bound in their luxurious covers. One is reminded of the two bridges that span the river at Salamanca. Roman engineers built the older, and modern engineers the modern bridge. A sign directs trucks which weigh more than a certain tonnage to use the Roman structure.

This essay closes with that codicil to the Learned King's last will and testament, the proof of his regard for the wonderful volume he made a reality across the most important years of his turbulent life: "Likewise we order that all the books of the *Songs in Praise of Holy Mary* be in that church where our body shall be interred, and that they be sung on the feast days of Holy Mary. And if that one who inherits legally and by our will what is ours, should wish to own these books of the Songs of Holy Mary, we order that he therefore make good compensation to the church from which he removes them so that he may have grace without sin."
NOTES


2Fortunately there is a translation of all 1200 or so pages: Samuel Parsons Scott, Las Siete Partidas (New York: Commerce Clearing House, 1931).

3The manuscripts of the Cantigas are Escorial T.1.I, the lavishly illuminated volume produced in facsimile; B.1.2, also of the Escorial, which contains forty miniatures of musicians playing their instruments; Biblioteca Nacional 10069, often referred to as To, since it once belonged to the Cathedral Library of Toledo; and Banco Rari of the Biblioteca Nazionale of Florence, formerly catalogued as II.1.213, in which many miniatures are incomplete. All of these manuscripts are believed to have been commissioned by Alfonso and finished before his death in 1284.

4Evelyn S. Procter, Alfonso X of Castile, Patron of Literature and Learning (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951) treats Alfonsine works, and among these the Cantigas de Santa Maria; John E. Keller, Alfonso X el Sabio (New York: Twayne, 1967) treats for the first time in English the life of Alfonso X and offers examples, with critical treatment of the Learned King’s work.

5An interesting and informative treatment of Spanish music, including the Cantigas de Santa Maria is Gilbert Chase, The Music of Spain (New York: Norton, 1941). The well-known musicologist, Higinio Anglés has done the best of all studies of the music of the Cantigas. It includes the musical transcription of the notation of the original: Higinio Anglés, La música de las "Cantigas de Santa Maria" del rey Alfonso el Sabio (Barcelona: Diputación Provincial de Barcelona: Biblioteca Central, 1943). This transcription appears in the volume accompanying the facsimile printed by EDILAN.

6The works of Berceo, one of Spain’s most renowned poets, have not been translated into English, save for two or three which appear in translation in anthologies. Gil de Zamora has never been translated at all.

7Charles L. Nelson’s unpublished master’s thesis, "Literary and Pictorial Treatment of the Devil in the Cantigas de Santa Maria" (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1964) is illustrated by the author’s own pen drawings and is basic to this area of the Cantigas; Albert I. Bagby’s unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of Kentucky, “The Moor and the Jew in the Cantigas of Alfonso X, el Sabio” (1968) reveals much not hitherto known about these two peoples who lived under Alfonso’s reign; for treatment of the supernatural see Frank Callcott, The Supernatural in Early Spanish Literature (New York: Instituto de las Españas en los Estados Unidos, 1923); for archaeological elements see José Guerrero Lovillo, Las Cántigas, Estudio arqueológico de sus miniaturas (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1949).

8Several excellent phonographic recordings have been made of certain cantigas. Cantigas de Santa Maria del Rey Alfonso el Sabio, produced by

The noted musicologist Saville Clark discusses the types and sources of the melodies of the *Cantigas* on the reverse side of the jacket of the recording produced by Experiences Anonymes.

9 For more on this unusual motif see Paull F. Baum, "The Young Man Betrothed to a Statue," *PMLA*, 34 (1919), 523-79, and John E. Keller, "The Motif of the Statue Bride in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* of Alfonso the Learned," *Studies in Philology*, 56 (July 1959), 3. Thomas Anstey Guthrie reworked the motif in *The Tinted Venus: A Farcical Romance* (London and New York: Harper, 1898), and many other writers have used this theme.

10 John Keller has examined color in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, as well as some of the narrative aspects in *Pious Brief Narrative in Medieval Castilian and Galician Verse* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1979) and he and Richard P. Kinkade of the University of Connecticut have recently had accepted for publication by the same press their *Iconography and Narrative Art in Medieval Spanish Fiction*, in which the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* played an important part. They treat the use of arches as narrative devices at some length and trace parallels in the art of England and France.