

Classic Poetry Series

Alfonso X El Sabio
- poems -

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Alfonso X El Sabio(1221 - 1284)

Alfonso X, El Sabio, or the learned, (1221-1284, reigned 1252-1284), king of Castile and León, is perhaps the most interesting, though far from the most capable, of the Spanish kings of the Middle Ages.

He was a writer, and he had considerable scientific fame, based mainly on his encouragement of astronomy and the Ptolemaic cosmogony as known to him through the Arabs.

As a ruler he showed legislative capacity, and a very commendable wish to provide his kingdoms with a code of laws and a consistent judicial system. The Fuero Real was undoubtedly his work, and he began the code called the Siete Partidas, which, however, was only promulgated by his great-grandson. He lacked the singleness of purpose required by a ruler who would devote himself to organization, and also the combination of firmness with temper needed for dealing with his nobles. His descent from the Hohenstaufen through his mother, a daughter of the emperor Philip of Swabia, gave him claims to represent the Swabian line. The choice of the German electors, after the death of Conrad IV in 1254, misled him into wild schemes which never took effect but caused immense expense. To obtain money he debased the coinage, and then endeavoured to prevent a rise in prices by an arbitrary tariff. The little trade of his dominions was ruined, and the burghers and peasants were deeply offended. His nobles, whom he tried to cow by sporadic acts of violence, rebelled against him.

His second son, Sancho, enforced his claim to be heir, in preference to the children of Ferdinand de la Cerda, the elder brother who died in Alfonso's life. Son and nobles alike supported the Moors, when he tried to unite the nation in a crusade; and when he allied himself with the rulers of Morocco they denounced him as an enemy of the faith. A reaction in his favour was beginning in his later days, but he died defeated and deserted at Seville, leaving a will by which he endeavoured to exclude Sancho and a heritage of civil war.

In addition to his other achievements, Alfonso X commissioned numerous works during his reign, including the Cantigas de Santa Maria (400+ songs mentioning the Virgin Mary) and the Libro de los juegos, or book of games.

Cantiga

LADY, for the love of God,
Have some pity upon me!
See my eyes, a river-flood
Day and night, oh, see!
Brothers, cousins, uncles, all,
Have I lost for thee;
If thou dost not me recall,
Woe is me!

Alfonso X El Sabio

Cantiga De Escarnio:

O que foi passar a serra
e non quis servir a terra,
é ora, entrant' a guerra,
 que faroneja?
Pois el agora tan muito erra,
 maldito seja!

O que levou os dinheiros
e non troux' os cavaleiros,
é por non ir nos primeiros
 que faroneja?
Pois que ven cõnos prestumeiros,
 maldito seja!

O que filhou gran soldada
e nunca fez cavalgada,
é por non ir a Graada
 que faroneja?
Se é rie' omen ou á mesnada,
 maldito seja!

O que meteu na taleiga
pouc' aver e muita meiga,
é por non entrar na Veiga
 que faroneja?
Pois chus mol[e] é que manteiga,
 maldito seja!

English

He who passed over the mountains
And did not want to serve on the plain--
Is he the one, when war was returned,
 Who's now bragging?
Since he vacillates so much now,
 Let him be damned!

He who doled out his money

Without attracting any good knights--
Is it because he wasn't first in the fight
That he's bragging now?
Since he came at us with his rear,
Let him be damned!

He who raised a great soldiery
But never quite a good cavalry,
Since he didn't go to Granada, is he
The one who's bragging?
Whether he's rich or has a strong band,
Let him be damned!

He who loaded up his bags
With a little gold and a lot of guff,
And never quite entered the town of Vega,
Is he bragging now?
Since he's more like fat than butter,
Let him be damned!

Alfonso X El Sabio

Cantiga De Santa Maria No. 194

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,
so against evil doers it is mighty and fearful.

Concerning this, a miracle happened in the land of Catalonia to a minstrel who sang well, with grace and ease, earning a good living, he came to lodge in the house of a greedy knight

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

who gave him all that he needed that night. However, that base and avaricious knight began to covet so greatly the donkey and clothes belonging to that minstrel that he ordered one of his men, evil and cruel,

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

to go with another of his group and waylay him in a hidden place in the mountains. The man did so gladly, for it was a favorite pastime of his, and I assure you, he was always eager to do dastardly deeds.

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

He took a companion of the same ilk with him. The next morning the minstrel took leave of the knight, and, as soon as he was on his way and they saw him travelling all alone, those two caught him in a steep and rocky place.

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

They dragged him far off the road and did not leave him anything of what he was carrying. Then they decided between them to cut off his head, but neither the Virgin nor Her glorious Son would permit it.

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

While the two were arguing over which one would kill him, they cast lots to see who would go first, but Holy Mary would not allow such a deed to be carried out, for the minstrel cried out loudly: "Mother of the merciful King

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

do not let them kill me, defend me without delay." They, when they heard this, began to run away and lost all feeling in their bodies at that moment so that they could not speak. The minstrel who had been robbed

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

of all he had possessed when he saw that they were in that state, staring at each

other and not speaking between themselves, took all his belongings and went away and they remained in great fear of death

Just as the name of the Virgin is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

No one had ever heard tell of such a marvelous miracle that uttering the name of the Virgin might cause a man to feel nothing in his body. However, the prophet said long ago that Her name was as terrible as a mighty army.

Just as the name of the Virgin / is beautiful to the virtuous,

...

The minstrel went on his way, giving joyful praise to the glorious Virgin, salvation of sinners. All who heard of this, both great and small, considered it a noble and merciful miracle.

Alfonso X El Sabio

Cantiga De Santa Maria, No. 100

Portugease

Santa Maria,
Strela do dia,
mostra-nos via
era Deus e nos guia.

Ca veer faze-los errados
que perder foran per pecados
entender de que mui culpados
son; mais per ti son perdoados
da ousadia
que lles fazia
fazer folia
mais que non deveria,
Santa Maria...

Amostrar-nos debes carreira
por gãar en toda maneira
a sen par luz e verdadeira
que tu dar-nos podes senlleira;
ca Deus a ti a
outorgaria
e a querria
por ti dar e daria.
Santa Maria...

Guiar ben nos pod' o teu siso
mais ca ren pera Parayso
u Deus ten senpre goy' e riso
pora quen en el creer quiso;
e prazer-m-ia
se te prazia
que foss' a mia
alm' en tal compannia.
Santa Maria...

English

Mary, magnified be,
with Daystar beside thee;
show the way where bide we
true to God and thou our guide be.

For thou art light that lost souls driven
near perdition, e'er with sin ill striven,
know that they with guilt sore riven
stand; but through thee are forgive
and from their pride free
where they ne'er idly
let passion denied be
but did all sense defied see.
Blessed Mary...

Thou canst reveal to us wayfaring
paths to tread in grace full sharing
to peerless Light, the truth declaring,
that thou alone art graced in bearing;
for God would abide thee
and all provide He
but ne'er thee denied see
nor for thee grace e'er belied be.
Blessed Mary...

Well for us thy wisdom guiding
till in Paradise abiding
where God all joy and mirth providing
waits ever those in him confiding;
then would my joy desecured be
shouldst thou but deign provide me
that rest on high beside thee
my soul where doth abide he
Blessed Mary ...

Alfonso X El Sabio

Cantiga De Santa Maria, No. 181

Pero que seja a gente
d'outra lei [e] descreuda,
os que a Virgen mais aman,
a esses ela ajuda.

Fremosa miragre desto
fez a Virgen groriosa
na cidade de Marrocos,
que é mui gran' e fremosa,
a un rei que era ende
sennor, que perigoosa
guerra con outro avia,
per que gran mester ajuda.

Avia de quen lla dêsse:
ca assi corn' el cercado
jazia dentr' en Marrocos
ca o outro ja passado
era per un grande rio
que Morabe é chamado
con muitos de cavaleiros
e mui gran gente miuda.

E corrian pelas portas
da vila, e quant' achavan
que fosse fora dos muros
todo per força fillavan.
E porend' os de Marrocos
al Rei tal consello davan
que saisse da cidade
con bõa gent' esleuda.

D'armas e que mantene
cono outro rei lidasse
e logo fora da vila
a sina sacar mandasse
da Virgen Santa Maria,
e que per ren non dultasse
que os logo non vencesse,

pois la ouvesse tenduda.

Demais, que sair fessesse
dos crishãos o concello
conas cruces da eigreja.
E el creeu seu consello;
e poi-la sina sacaron
daquela que é espello
dos angeos e dos santos,
e dos mouros foi viuda.

Wue eran da outra parte,
atal espant' en colleron
que, pero gran poder era,
logo todos se venceron,
e as tendas que trouxeran
e o al todo perderon,
e morreu y muita gente
dessa fea e barvuda.

E per Morabe passaram
que ante passad' ouveran,
en sen que perdud' avian
todo quant' ali trouxeran,
atan gran medo da sina
e das cruces y preseran,
que fogindo non avia
niun redea teuda.

E assi Santa Maria
ajudou a seus amigos,
pero que d'outra lei eran,
a britar seus eemigos
que, macar que eran muitos,
nonos preçaron dous figos,
e assi foi ssa mercee
de todos mui connoçuda.

English

The Virgin will aid those
who most love Her,
although they may be of another faith
and disbelievers.

The Glorious Virgin
performed a beautiful miracle
illustrating this theme
in the city of Marrakech,
which is large and beautiful,
for a king who was then its ruler.
He was waging bitter war with another king
and for this reason, he was in great need

of assistance from anyone
who could give it to him.
He was besieged inside Marrakech,
for the other king had already crossed
a large river called Morabe
with many knights
and a great army of foot soldiers.

.

They ran toward the gates of the city
and all they found outside the walls
they took by force.
Therefore, those of Marrakech
advised the king to go out
of the city with a few good,
carefully chosen

.

men at arms and fight it out right there
with the other king
and to order the banner
of the Holy Virgin Mary
taken out of the city
and to doubt not that he would defeat
the enemy at once
as soon as he had unfurled it.

Furthermore, they advised him

to have the Christian congregation go out
with the crosses from the church.
He took their advice
and when they took out the banner of that One
who is mirror of angels and saints
and it was seen by the Moors

.

on the other side, they were so alarmed by it that
although it was a powerful army,
all were soon defeated.
AThey lost the tents they had brought
and everything else.
Many people of that ugly
bearded crew died there.

.

They fled back across the Morabe River
and although they had lost
all they had brought there,
such great fright of the banner
and the crosses seized them
that none of them drew back
on the reins as they fled.

.

Thus Holy Mary helped Her friends,
although they were of another faith,
to defeat their enemies,
for although they were many,
they did not give
two figs about them.
In that way was Her mercy
made manifest to all.

Alfonso X El Sabio

Cantiga No. 60,

Ca Eva nos tolleu
Parays'e Deus
Ave nos y meteu;
porend', amigos meus:
Entre Av'e Eva...

For Eva took us away
from heaven and from God,
Ave puts us back there.
That is why, my friends:
'Twixt Ave and Eva...

Eva nos foi deitar
do dem' en sa prijon,
e Ave en sacar;
e por esta razon:
Entre Av'e Eva...

Eva had us bewitched
by the devil in his prison;
and Ave brought us out from there;
and for that reason:
'Twixt Ave and Eva...

Eva nos fez perder
amor de Deus e ben,
e pos Ave aver
no lo fez; e poren:
Entre Av'e Eva...

Eva caused us to lose
the love of God and Righteousness;
Ave brought it back to us
again; and for that:
'Twixt Ave and Eva...

Eva nos ensserrou
os çeos sen chave,
e Maria britou
as portas per Ave:
Entre Av'e Eva...

Eva kept us shut in,
far from heaven, without the keys,
and Mary broke open
the doors with Ave.
'Twixt Ave and Eva...

Alfonso X El Sabio

Rose Of Roses And Flower Of Flowers,

1.

Rose of beauty and fine appearance
And flower of happiness and pleasure,
lady of most merciful bearing,
And Lord for relieving all woes and cares;
Rose of roses and flower of flowers,
Lady of ladies, Lord of lords. Rosa das rosas e Fror das frores,
Dona das donas, Sennor das sennores.

1.

Rosa de beldad' e de parecer
e Fror d'alegria e de prazer,
Dona en mui piadosa ser
Sennor en toller coitas e doores.
Rosa das rosas e Fror das frores,
Dona das donas, Sennor das sennores.

2.

Such a Mistress everybody should love,
For she can ward away any evil
And she can pardon any sinner
To create a better savor in this world.
Rose of roses and flower of flowers,
Lady of ladies, Lord of lords.

2.

Atal Sennor dev' ome muit' amar,
que de todo mal o pode guardar;
e pode-ll' os peccados perdõar,
que faz no mundo per maos sabores.
Rosa das rosas e Fror das frores,
Dona das donas, Sennor das sennores.

3.

We should love and serve her loyally,
For she can guard us from falling;
She makes us repent the errors
That we have committed as sinners:
Rose of roses and flower of flowers
Lady of ladies, Lord of lords.

3.

Devemo-la muit' amar e servir,
ca punna de nos guardar de falir;
des i dos erros nos faz repentir,
que nos fazemos come pecadores.
Rosa das rosas e Fror das frores,
Dona das donas, Sennor das sennores.

4.

This lady whom I acknowledge as my Master
And whose troubadour I'd gladly be,
If I could in any way possess her love,
I'd give up all my other lovers.
Rose of roses and flower of flowers,
Lady of ladies, Lord of lords.

4.

Esta dona que tenno por Sennore de que quero seer trobador,
se eu per ren poss' aver seu amor,
dou ao demo os outros amores.
Rosa das rosas e Fror das frores,
Dona das donas, Sennor das sennores.

Alfonso X El Sabio

The Treasury

THE strange intelligence then reached my ears
That in the land of Egypt lived a man,
Who, wise of wit, subjected to his scan
The dark occurrences of uncome years;
He judged the stars, and by the moving spheres
And aspects of the heavens unveiled the dim
Face of futurity, which then to him
Appeared, as clear to us the past appears.
A yearning towards this sage inspired my pen
And tongue, that instant, with humility
Descending from my height of majesty;
Such mastery has a strong desire o'er men;
My earnest prayers I wrote -- I sent -- with ten
My noblest envoys, loaded each apart
With gold and silver, which with all my heart
I offered him, but the request was vain.
With much politeness the wise man replied,
"You, sire, are a great king, and I should be
Most glad to serve you, but in such a fee
Of gold and silver gems I take no sort of pride;
Deign, then, yourself to use them; I abide
Content in more abundant wealth; and may
Your treasures profit you in every way
That I can wish, your servant." I complied;
But sent the stateliest of my argosies,
Which reached, and from the Alexandrian port
Brought safe this cunning master to my court,
Who greeted me with all kind courtesies;
I knowing well his great abilities,
And learning in the movement of the spheres,
Have highly honored him these many years,
For honor is the birthright of the wise.

Alfonso X El Sabio

To The Month Of May (From The Cantigas)

Welcome, O May, yet once again we greet thee!
So alway praise we her, the Holy Mother,
Who prays to God that he shall aid us ever
Against our foes, and to us ever listen.
Welcome, O May! loyally art thou welcome!
So alway praise we her, the Mother of kindness,
Mother who alway on us taketh pity,
Mother who guardeth us from woes unnumbered.
Welcome, O May! welcome, O month well favored!
So let us ever pray and offer praises
To her who ceases not for us, for sinners,
To pray to God that we from woes be guarded.
Welcome, O May! O joyous month and stainless!
So will we ever pray to her who gaineth
Grace from her Son for us, and gives each morning
Force that by us the Moors from Spain are driven.
Welcome, O May, of bread and wine the giver!
Pray then to her, for in her arms, an infant
She bore the Lord! she points us on our journey,
The journey that to her will bear us quickly!

Alfonso X El Sabio