From One Wheel to Three: Diagramming History and the Making of Prophetic Authority in Juan de Mena's *Laberinto de Fortuna*

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Introduction

Medieval writers often accompanied complex texts with images that could be grasped by the reader at a glance. This practice provides a useful framework for reconsidering Juan de Mena's allegorical poem, *Laberinto de Fortuna*, in which the descriptions of a *mappamundi* floor and three wheels give imagined visual form to the poem's conception of providential history.[1] The vision begins in the narrator's own house, in a world he believes governed by arbitrary forces, and takes him to another house, where Divina Providencia teaches him to perceive an order previously hidden from him. The *mappamundi* and three wheels make that order visible by arranging human experience in space and time.

In making providential order visible, Mena transforms one of the Middle Ages' most familiar emblems, the Wheel of Fortune, into a seemingly unfamiliar three-wheeled structure.[2] That transformation has generated widely differing interpretations. Charles R. Post regarded the wheels as imposing a rigid moral universe that limits Fortune's traditional unpredictability; Florence Street famously characterized Mena's Fortuna as only "half-hearted," subordinated to a providential order that reveals a tension between classical and Christian conceptions of history;[3] and Alan Deyermond argued that Mena's three wheels and seven planetary spheres do not form a coherent allegorical structure.[4] Joaquín Gimeno Casalduero and Philip O. Gericke, by contrast, have offered more positive accounts of the poem's structural coherence.[5] Even the poem's editor, Maxim P. A. M. Kerkhof, suggests that Mena's conception of three wheels of Fortune appears to be original.[6] Yet the question of why Mena represented history through three wheels remains.

This essay approaches this problem through the narrator's education at the hands of Divina Providencia. It distinguishes the historical Juan de Mena from two of his characters: an intradiegetic narrator, who experiences the vision and receives Divina Providencia's instruction, and an extradiegetic voice, which addresses Juan II and applies to the king's circumstances the

[1] *Laberinto* unfolds with deceptive simplicity. Following a dedication to Juan II of Castile, the narrator invokes Apollo and the Muses to aid him in confronting the relentless power of Fortune (stanzas 2–12). In the vision that follows, the goddess Bellona carries him to heaven, where Divina Providencia receives him and leads him into the House of Fortune (stanzas 13–30). Its floor consists of a mappamundi (stanzas 31–55), while at its center-right stand three wheels of Fortune, together characterized as a "mundana máquina." Each wheel is divided into seven concentric planetary circles populated by mythological and historical exemplars (stanzas 56–267). Divina Providencia explains their stories to the intradiegetic narrator, while an extradiegetic voice applies the lessons to Juan II. As the poem draws to a close, the king is warned that his future greatness depends upon wisdom, justice, and a willingness to confront the moral decay threatening the kingdom (stanzas 268–297). In the final stanzas, the narrator and extradiegetic voice converge (stanzas 298–300).
[2] On the iconography of the medieval Wheel of Fortune, see Sánchez Márquez (230–253) and Gorbunova (124–151).
[3] Post (232–238); Street (1–2). Street also regards Providencia's condemnation of those who seek knowledge of the future as inconsistent with the poem's ending, which offers "various good omens which foreshadow the future greatness of Juan II."
[4] Deyermond (160–161).
[5] Gimeno Casalduero (1975a, 197–216); Gericke (514–518).
[6] Mena 1997 (30).

lessons acquired during the vision.[7] The narrator's education proceeds through increasingly complex ways of perceiving: from seeing the *mappamundi* floor, which presents the world as a visible whole, to the three wheels and their seven planetary circles, which organize historical exemplars according to time and forms of human conduct.

Mena draws on intellectual and literary resources available to a learned man of the fifteenth century.[8] Among these was a culture in which seeing and reading were complementary means of instruction. While texts conveyed interpretation discursively, images could give ideas spatial form and make complex relationships easier to grasp. Images could therefore function not merely as illustrations of knowledge already possessed but as vehicles for making relationships intelligible. Mena adapts this interaction to his own purposes and incorporates it into the structure of the vision itself. Three visual configurations mark successive stages in the narrator's education: the eagle metaphor figures his ascent, the *mappamundi* presents the world to him as a visible whole, and the three wheels in the House of Fortune organize historical time and teach him to interpret human conduct.

Fortune exists in its traditional form in the perception of the world, as witnessed by the poems's early stanzas:

Tus casos falaces, Fortuna, cantamos,
estados de gentes que giras y trocas,
tus grandes discordias, tus firmezas pocas,
y los qu'en tu rueda quejosos hallamos
hasta que al tiempo de ahora vengamos;
de hechos pasados codicia mi pluma
y de los presentes hacer breve suma,
y dé fin Apolo pues nos comenzamos.
(stanza 2)[9]

Of your ruinous cases, Fortune, we sing,
of the classes of people you turn upside down and alter,
your boundless discords, your lack of permanence,
and of those who we find muttering upon your wheel
until we come to present times;
my pen is eager to write about the deeds of the past
and tersely describe those now transpiring,
so let Apollo conclude, for we are about to begin.

Mas, bien acatada tu varia mudanza,
por ley te gobiernas, aunque discrepante,
ca tu firmeza es no ser constante,
tu temperamento es destemperanza,
tu más cierta orden es desordenanza.
Es la tu regla ser muy enorme,
tu conformidad es no ser conforme,
¡tú desesperas a toda esperanza!
(stanza 10)

But, if your incessant change is more closely examined,
we see that you do abide by a law, although inconsistent,
because your steadfastness consists in not being constant,
your temperament is distemper,
your most certain order is disorder!
Your norm is to be very unmeasurable,
your conformity is to be unconforming,
you turn all hope into despair!

Only in heaven can its true form be seen:

[7] On the narrative *yo* of *Laberinto*, see Luis Beltrán (318–332), who distinguishes between the Mena who addresses Juan II and the Mena who enters the fictional world of the vision. Luis Gómez Canseco (125–129) rejects a division into two Menas, arguing for a single *yo* who is both narrator and character, while nevertheless distinguishing between the time of the action and the later time of narration. The distinction made here is functional: an intradiegetic "I" experiences the vision and acquires understanding. This "I" will simply be called the "narrator." The other "I" is an extradiegetic voice whose purpose is to apply the lessons that the vision makes possible. Both narrative voices are fictional.

[8] On literary education in fifteenth-century Castile, see Weiss (107–164, esp. 151–157), where he treats a comparable pedagogical function in Mena's *Coronación*, in which literary interpretation trains the reader in *prudentia* and moral judgment. See also Beceiro Pita (571–590); and Alvar Nuño & Borsari (141–182).

[9] All subsequent textual citations refer to the 2025 edition and translation of Juan de Mena's *The Labyrinth of Fortune* by Domínguez and Giles.

Así fluctuosa, Fortuna aborrida,
tus casos inciertos semejan a tales,
que corren por ondas de bienes y males,
haciendo no cierta ninguna corrida.
¡Pues ya porque vea la tu sin medida,
la casa me muestra do anda tu rueda,
porque de vista decir cierto pueda
el modo en que tratas a la nuestra vida!
(stanza 12)

As unpredictable, despicable Fortune,
the uncertainty of your cases seem to be similar to theirs,
for they sail over currents of good and evil,
making uncertain the outcome of any journey.
In order for me to judge your immeasurable size,
show me the house where your wheel turns,
so that I can better bear witness by sight
to the way that you deal with our life!

The poem's Boethian framework helps explain how Fortune can operate within providential order, but the spatial and numerical organization of the wheels raises a different question: how providential order could be made visible. A comparison with some of Joachim of Fiore's *figurae* places Mena's wheels within the broader medieval practice of rendering providential history intelligible through images and diagrams. Mena's documented connections with the Trastámara court and the Curia of Eugene IV place him in environments where learned culture, papal politics, and claims to prophetic authority intersected, making the comparison particularly suggestive without implying direct knowledge of Joachim's work.

The Narrator's Education: The Eagle, the Mappamundi, and the Three Wheels[10]

At the end of his ravishment and journey to heaven, the narrator compares himself to the helpless prey of an eagle, carried aloft in its talons but released because it is too small to be worth eating:

Así me soltaron en medio d'un plano,
desque ovieron dado comigo una buelta,
como a las vezes el águila suelta
la presa que bien nol' finche la mano.
(stanza 14, lines 1–4)

Without warning, they released me in the middle of a plain
after they had once circled around with me,
like sometimes an eagle lets go
Of prey that does not quite fill its talons.

Medieval discourse used the eagle, which flies high and looks straight at the sun without blinking, as a symbol of the prophet. In the *Psalterium decem chordarum, Concordia Novi ac Veteris Testamenti*, and the *Liber figurarum* (figs. 1–3),[11] of Joachim of Fiore, for example, its use alludes metaphorically to the higher *intelligentia spiritualis* or *contemplativa* from which temporal succession can be understood:

[10] According to *Laberinto*, the contents of the House of Fortune are parts of a "mundana machina." Nevertheless, no single source accounts for Mena's term. See Baroncini (3–30). As Popplow has shown, the medieval *machina mundi* denotes the harmonious disposition of creation, without the technological associations carried by the modern term. See Popplow (45–70).

[11] The *Liber figurarum*, traditionally associated with Joachim and his school, makes relationships available to the reader through images. See Reeves & Hirsch-Reich (1954, 185–188); Reeves & Hirsch-Reich (1972), esp. their discussion of the eagle and *intelligentia contemplativa*; and Tondelli, Reeves & Hirsch-Reich (1953). For a survey of the eagle's symbolic and exegetical traditions, see Mariño Ferro (314–326).

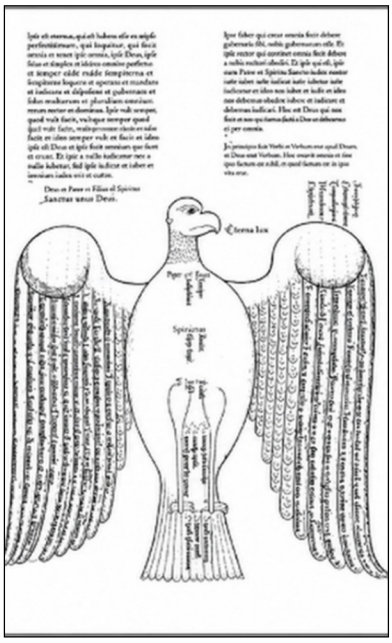


fig. 1: Joachim of Fiore, *Liber concordia Novis ac Veteris Testamenti*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 5732, f. 57.

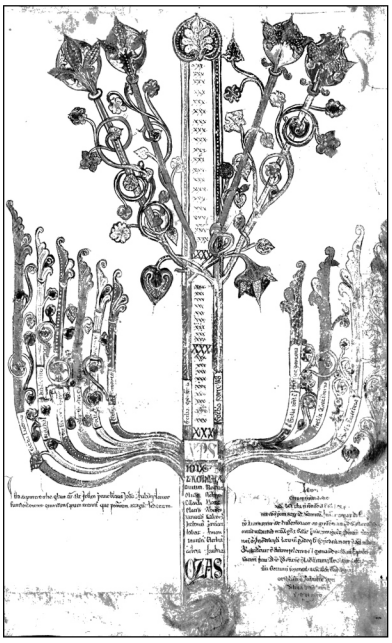


fig. 2: Joachim de Fiore, *Liber figurae*, University of Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 255A, 11r.

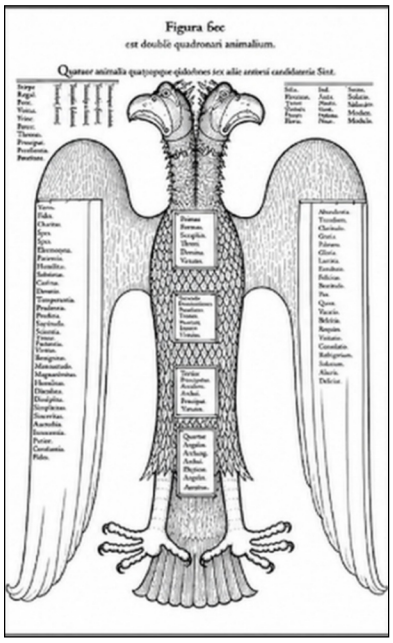


fig. 3: Joachim de Fiore, *Psalterium decem chordarum*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat, MS 4860, f. 181v.

In these cases, the images do more than illustrate the accompanying text: their spatial organization makes relationships among its textual elements visible. The tree-shaped eagle (fig. 2), for example, illustrates Joachim's concordances between the Old and New Testaments. Its branches coordinate the twelve tribes of Israel with the twelve churches, while the accompanying inscription identifies the Roman Church as another tribe of Judah, linking the promise that the sceptre will not depart from Judah to Christ's declaration to Peter that he will build his Church upon this rock.[12] The figure thereby makes Rome's ecclesiastical primacy intelligible through an earlier scriptural pattern.

Laberinto's narrator, however, is not an eagle, but a small creature carried violently to heaven and released at its gates. The ascent places him at a higher vantage point from which he can perceive the true nature of what he sees, but arrival does not yet mean understanding. After a few stanzas considering the limits of human perception (16–18), Divina Providencia guides him to the House of Fortune. Upon entering, he sees its mosaic floor, which contains "toda la parte terrestre y marina" (stanza 32, lines 4–8) (all parts of the earth and sea).

This episode draws on traditions of representing the world in texts, *mappae mundi*, and monumental pavements, but places such representations within a narrative. Works like Honorius of Autun's *Imago mundi* organized geographical knowledge textually in relation to sacred history,[13] while *mappae mundi* and monumental church pavements gave the created world visible form within a theological setting: the former could represent the world in relation to the body of

[12] Reeves & Hirsch-Reich (1972, 160–163), especially the inscription transcribed at 162.

[13] Lida de Malkiel (34) rejects direct textual dependence on Honorius, emphasizing instead the wider cosmographical tradition available to Mena. More recently, Natalia I. Petrovskaia (2023; 2025) has documented both the extraordinary diffusion of the *Imago mundi*—surviving in more than one hundred manuscripts and in numerous translations and adaptations—and the complexity of its later reception; however, France Autesserre (2009, 127–170) argues that Mena reorients the didactic purpose of Honorius's work from its original monastic audience to Juan II of Castile, using cosmographical description to remind the king of the obligations associated with his Gothic lineage.

Christ, while the latter placed images of the world beneath the viewer's feet.[14] *Laberinto*, by contrast, makes the image part of the narrator's experience. He sees the floor, contemplates its vastness, and must learn how to interpret what he sees. Providencia then tells him that his attention to the world is a distraction, because the floor is not relevant to the matter that has brought him to heaven:

"Déjate d'esto, que no hace al hecho; mas mira: veremos al lado derecho algo de aquello porque eres venido." (stanza 55, lines 6–8)	"Leave this be, for it is not pertinent; but look, we shall see on the right side a little of what you have come for."

Providencia then turns his gaze toward the center-right of the House of Fortune, where he sees the wheels:

Volviendo los ojos a do me mandava, vi más adentro muy grandes tres ruedas. Las dos eran firmes, inmotas y quedas, mas la de medio boltar no cesava; (stanza 56, lines 1–4)[15]	Turning my eyes toward the place she ordered, I saw three large wheels further inside. Two were steady, unmoving, and still, but the one in the middle ceaselessly turned

The three wheels represent the ages—past, present, and future—thereby transforming the traditional single-wheel emblem into a representation of time.[16] The two that are fixed correspond to the completed past and the unrealized future, while the moving wheel represents the unfinished present. Each wheel is divided into seven planetary circles, which arrange the exemplars according to the influences of the planet governing their characters.

While the three wheels organize human experience according to time, their relation to Fortune and Providencia raises a further question: how does temporal change relate to providential order? That relationship is best understood against the background of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*.[17]

For Boethius, Providence is God's eternal ordering of creation, while Fate is the temporal unfolding of that order; Fortune belongs to the experience of mutability within time.[18] Boethius gives that mutability visible form through the metaphor of the turning wheel, which consequently became prominent in the manuscript tradition of the *Consolation*. Some of its earliest visual representations (figs. 4–6),[19] occasionally accompanied by the inscriptions *regnabo, regno,*

[14] Ernst Kitzinger's study of the medieval mosaic floor in Turin demonstrates that such monumental images could organize movement, attention, and ceremonial experience as much as they represented the world. See Kitzinger (344–373). Marcia Kupfer has similarly shown that medieval *mappae mundi* and related visual schemes functioned as instruments of instruction, meditation, and the organization of knowledge rather than as geographical records in the modern sense. See Kupfer (1991, 540–571); Kupfer (1996, 286–310); and Kupfer, Cohen & Chajes (2020).

[15] Mena's "present" denotes the present "era" rather than the immediate present. It therefore encompasses both the living and the dead, whose destinies are part of the same historical flow of time. This explains why dead exemplars appear on the moving wheel.

[16] Providencia calls them "passadas, presentes e de por venir" (past, present, and those yet to come) (stanza 57, line 3).

[17] Boethius, *De consolatione,* bk. 4, pr. 6.21–101, pr. 7.1–55; bk. 5, pr. 1.4–57.

[18] See Marenbon, particularly 96–182; Wiitala; and Doñas Beleña. For the metaphysical structure underlying Boethius's conception of Providence, see Scarry (121); Papahagi (3–29); and Cvetković (186–201).

[19] See Montecassino, Biblioteca dell'Abbazia, MSS 189 and 99; see Orofino (126–131); and Gorbunova (124–151). Comparable cosmographical traditions appear in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Reg. lat. 123, transmitting Bede's *De natura rerum* with astronomical materials, and in the encyclopedic compilations of the abbey

regnavi, sum sine regno, reduce worldly life to a recurring cycle of ascent to power, possession, decline, and dispossession:

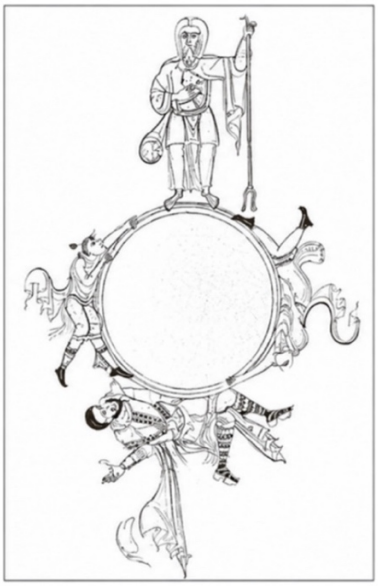


fig. 4: Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, Montecassino Library, MS 189, f. 73v.

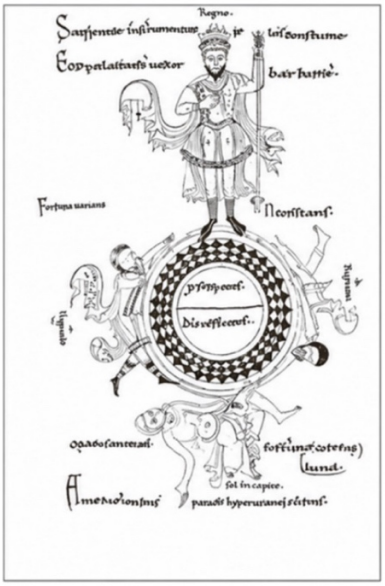


fig. 5: Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, Montecassino Library, MS 189, f. 74v.

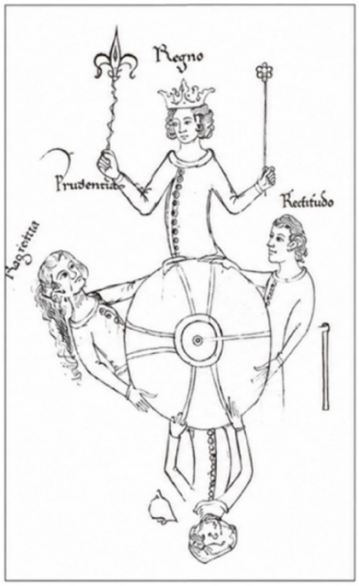


fig. 6: *Homiliarium*, Montecassino Library, MS 99, f. 502.

These images give visual form to the Boethian problem of mutability, but Mena's three wheels do something different: by multiplying the wheel and assigning each one a temporal domain, he transforms an emblem of recurrent change into a diagram of historical time.

Diagramming History: Numerical Order and Joachim of Fiore

Once the three wheels are understood as a diagram of time, their number and arrangement become integral to their function. Medieval diagrams in geometry, astronomy/astrology, and theology similarly used number and spatial arrangement to organize knowledge[20] and make complex relationships intelligible.[21] They provide a context for judging Mena's transformation of the traditional wheel.

of Santa María de Ripoll studied by Castiñeiras González (593–646). These witnesses document the extensive circulation of diagrams of cosmological and philosophical concepts. Particularly widespread after John of Sacrobosco's *De sphaera mundi* was the anonymous *Theorica planetarum*, whose manuscripts regularly employed concentric diagrams to represent the structure and motions of the heavens.

[20] On medieval diagrams as cognitive instruments rather than mere illustrations, see Chabás (29–30); Borgato (127–128); Rosińska (9–10); on the diagrammatic tradition, see Wallis (1–40), and the illustrations reproduced in Thorndike.

[21] See Carruthers 2008, esp. the chapters on memory and schematic representation; Carruthers 1998; Hamburger. See McGinn 1985; 2017 (10); 2021 and Reeves 1969b [rev. ed. 1993] on the Wheel of Fortune.



fig. 7: Labyrinth with carmina to the Virgin, Boethius, *De consolatione*, Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk.3.21, f. 103v.

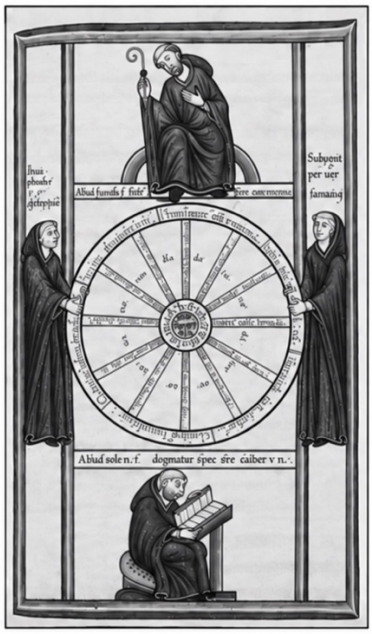


fig. 8: Hugh of Fouilloy, The Wheel of Virtues, *Liber de rota verae et falsae religionis*, MS Archief Grootseminarie Brugge 89/54, 100v.

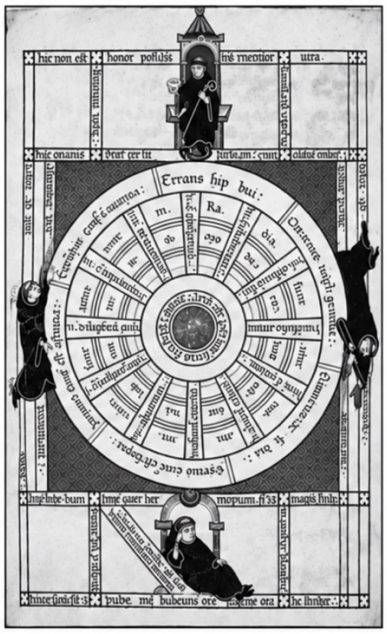


fig. 9: Hugh of Fouilloy, Wheel of Hypocrisy or False Religion, *Liber de rota verae et falsae religionis*, Bodleian, MS Lyell 71, f. 34v.

Several examples show how such diagrams could organize different kinds of knowledge through related visual forms. A labyrinthine circular image enclosing a *carmen figuratum* devoted to the Virgin accompanies a manuscript of Boethius's *De consolatione* dating from about 1000 (fig. 7);[22] Hugh of Fouilloy (ca. 1100–1172) organizes the Virtues and Vices diagrammatically in two wheels (figs. 8–9);[23] and we have seen how Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135–1202) uses images of tree-eagles to coordinate genealogical and historical information according to numerical and spatial correspondences between the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve churches (fig. 2).[24]

Number provided a means of understanding the coherence of creation. Hugh of Saint Victor associated learning with the discernment of order, proportion, and division, while Bonaventure understood sensible things as leading the mind toward divine wisdom through their correspondences.[25] In *Laberinto*, three divides historical time into past, present, and future. This triadic structure carried possible resonances with the Trinity and with the tripartite division of history into *ante legem*, *sub lege*, and *sub gratia*, although Mena invokes neither scheme. Seven derives from the planetary spheres and their moral associations.

[22] Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae cum glossa,* Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk.3.21, ca. 1000. See Binski & Zutshi (7).

[23] See Hugh of Fouilloy, *Liber de rota verae et falsae religionis*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lyell 71, fol. 34v; also Katzenellenbogen (71); Gibson (212–220).

[24] See Reeves & Hirsch-Reich 1972 (160–163); Rainini; Reeves & Hirsch-Reich (1954, 185–188); and Ambrus.

[25] On the epistemological function of order, division, and numerical proportion in medieval thought, see Hugh of Saint Victor (books 3–6), where knowledge advances through ordered classification and the discernment of relationships among the arts. See also Bonaventure (chs. 1–2), where the created world is understood as an ordered network of *vestigia* leading the intellect toward divine wisdom. Although neither author develops a theory of historical diagrams, both point to the medieval understanding of numerical and structural order as a means of apprehending the coherence of creation.

These principles of numerical and spatial organization become especially relevant to Mena in another diagram Joachim's Fiore *Liber figurarum* (figs. 10–11) that depicts the flow of history and its anticipated fulfillment. The image consists of three overlapping circles associated respectively with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and with what he called the three *status* of history. They are not, however, independent of each other. The circles represent the three *status* as successive but overlapping periods. Their shared areas show that one period does not simply end when the next begins. Instead, the diagram aligns the unfolding of history with the relations among the three persons of the Trinity and with successive ways of understanding Scripture. By showing these relationships spatially, it conveys at a glance connections that would otherwise require a lengthy verbal explanation.

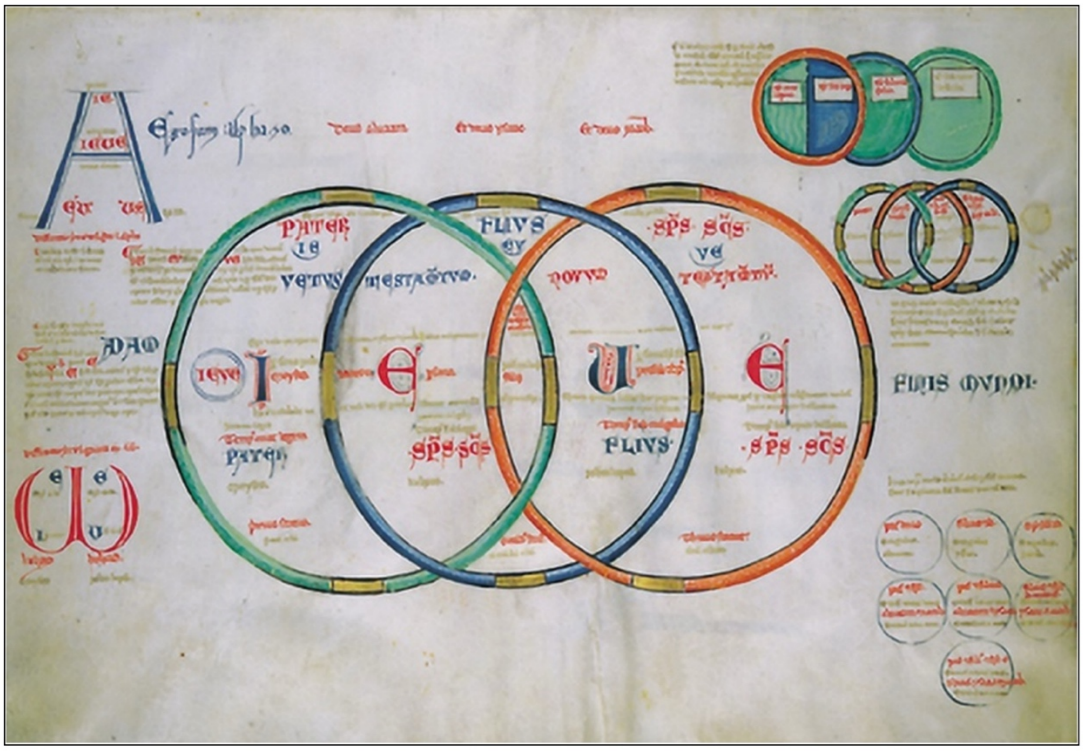


fig. 10: Joachino da Fiore, *Il libro delle figure*, vol. 2, ed. Leone Tondelli (Turin, 1940), Codex Regius pl. 11.

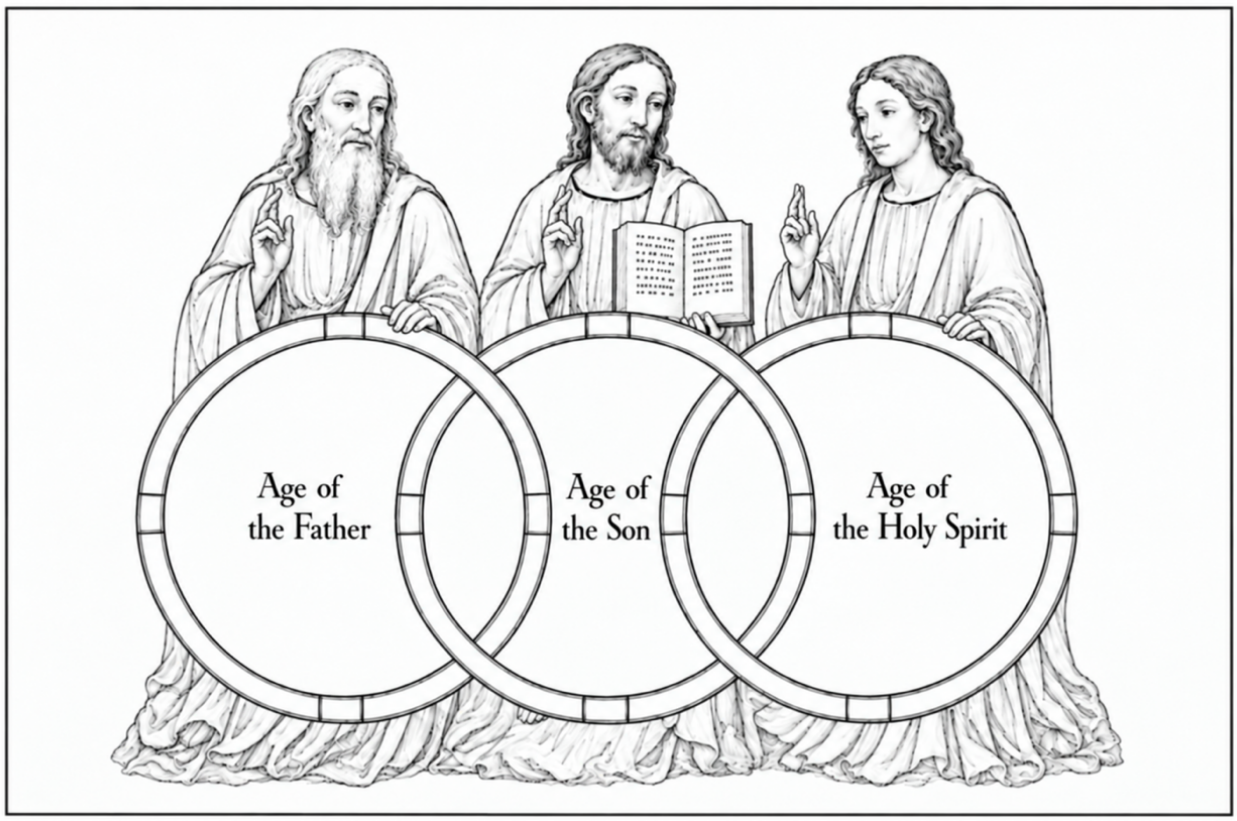


fig. 11: Schematic reconstruction of Joachim's diagram representing the Age of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and their overlap. The placement of the figures is illustrative. Diagram prepared by the author.

Persons, institutions, and events belonging to one *status* correspond with another, thereby allowing the reader to discern a design in completed history that points toward an anticipated fulfillment.[26]

The Three Wheels as a Pedagogy of Historical Vision

The comparison with Joachim clarifies what Mena's three wheels can accomplish as a diagram. Their numerical and spatial organization does more than divide history into past, present, and future: it teaches the narrator to read historical relationships and to use them in judging the present.

[26] Daniel (128–131). Daniel reproduces Joachim's definition of *concordia* and emphasizes that looking backward over completed history permitted the interpreter to discern the shape of what lay ahead, while particular future correspondents remained uncertain.

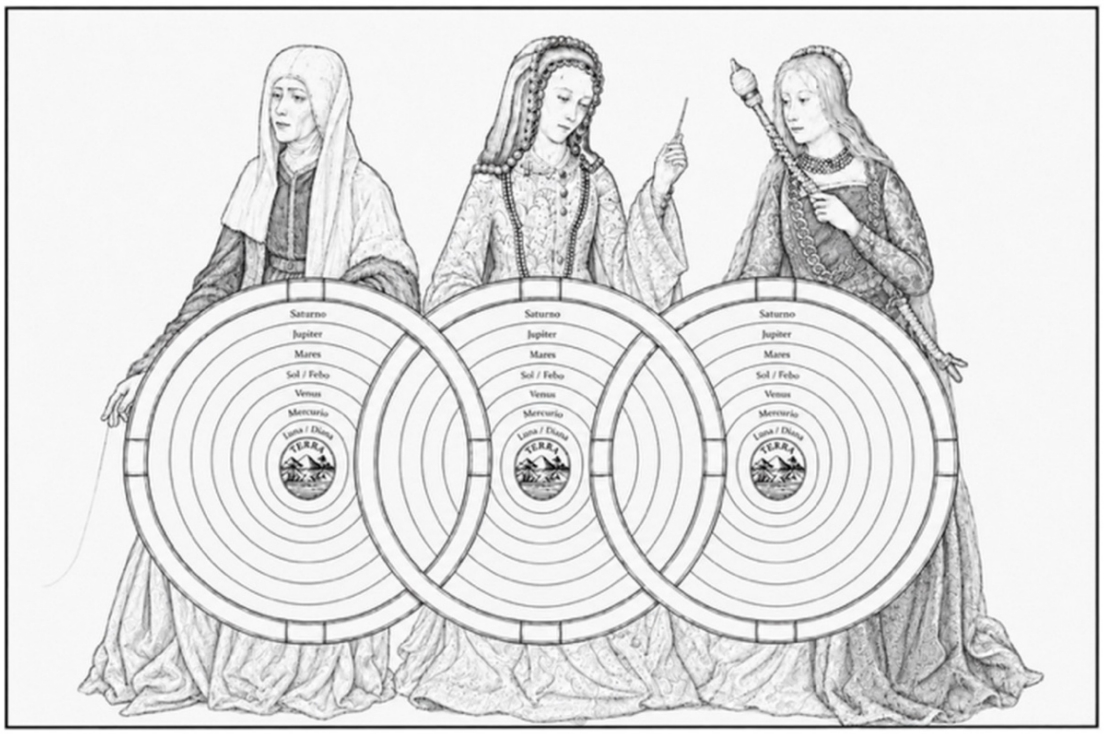


fig.12: Schematic reconstruction of Mena's wheels of the classical past, and Castilian present and future, each divided into seven circles. The overlap of the wheels and the placement of the Fates are illustrative. Diagram prepared by the author.

A schematic reconstruction of Mena's three wheels, arranged here from left to right as past, present, and future (fig. 12), shows how the seven planetary circles organize the exemplars according to the time in which they lived, while the three Fates evoke their birth, life, and death (stanza 71).[27] The placement of the Parcae above the individual wheels is illustrative: Mena merely says that they take turns moving the wheel, and only the central wheel, representing the present, turns. The overlap of the wheels is also a feature of the reconstruction, introduced to facilitate comparison with Joachim's circles. Mena does not describe his temporal divisions as physically interpenetrating, but their boundaries are not absolute: some recently dead figures appear on the wheel of the present, where completed lives coexist with unfinished ones and the living help shape the unknown future. The classical figures of this temporal structure coexist with the Castilian exemplars that connect the organization of historical time more firmly to the conduct of Juan II and his subjects.

The diagram makes these relationships visible. The past provides precedents, the present is the sphere of choice and action, and the future defines the object of counsel. The first circle (Luna/Diana) shows how this process works in *Laberinto*:

Atento, según me mandaba, mirando,	Attentively looking, according to her instructions,
vi los tres Hados, y Cloto el primero,	I saw the three Fates—Clotho the first,
Lachesis segundo, Atropos el tercero,	Lachesis second, Atropos the third—
en veces alternas la rueda girando;	taking turns at spinning the wheel;
y vi sobre todas estar imperando	and I saw holding sway over all
en el primero cerco de Diana,	on the first circle of Diana,
una tal reina que toda la humana	such a queen that all human

[27] Núñez de Toledo (388).

virtud parece tener a su mando. (stanza 71)

virtue seemed to be at her command.

After surveying past exemplars and hearing about the limitations of the human mind and an explanation of planetary influence on people (stanzas 63–70),[28] the narrator sees Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos as he enters the circle associated with chastity and its opposite. Providencia's explanation then connects the virtues of two contemporary queens to the exercise of rightful power. She identifies María of Aragon, queen of Castile, praising her prudence, truthfulness, and justice (stanzas 75–76), and then describes María of Castile, queen of Aragon, who ruled justly while her husband pursued his military campaigns (stanza 77). By calling the second María a new Penelope, however, Providencia links her marital fidelity to the classical exemplar already encountered in the past (stanza 64). The comparison teaches the narrator how the wheels are to be read: the virtues embodied by past exemplars provide standards for judging contemporary figures, while personal virtue acquires political significance through its ability to restrain vice and preserve the kingdom.

With the example of María Coronel, the narrator acknowledges the existence of many honest women who, because of their low status, have not received public recognition (stanzas 79–80). This observation introduces the extradiegetic voice, who directly addresses Juan II (stanza 81), and explains how, as legislator, he must protect virtuous conduct and punish the powerful and the weak with equal rigor. The following verses clothe the warning in a concrete image that tells him that laws must not resemble spiders' webs, catching small creatures while larger ones break them and escape. For this reason he should avoid the unequal application of justice (stanzas 82–83). The concluding stanza broadens the meaning of chastity to include the rejection of vice and the acquisition of virtue (stanza 84), and insists that the king should apply these standards to every social class.

The remaining circles extend this procedure, but Providencia's explanations increasingly connect the exemplars' virtues and vices to political judgment. Mars provides a particularly clear instance. The narrator asks at the end of that section that begins with a description of the throne of Juan II that contains images of the deeds of his worthy ancestors, their great battles, and illustrious dead, why the classical figure of Milo, renowned for his prodigious physical strength, is absent from the company of the strong (stanza 210). The question refers to the mistake of confusing physical strength with moral fortitude, which is a quality of the soul that Divina Providencia associates with constancy, fidelity, and loyalty (stanza 211). The extradiegetic voice then reminds Juan II that he should govern assisted by royal servants who value justice above gain (stanza 212).

Jupiter's circle contains successful rulers and public servants (Octavious, Codrus, Torcuatus, two Brutus and Catoes, etc.), those who failed (the three Dionisus, Ionus), and ends with the extradiegetic voice pleading for justice. Finally, Saturn's presentation of Álvaro de Luna brings the examples even closer to the political world of Juan II. The favorite of the king appears to master Fortune, yet his place on the moving wheel undermines that mastery (stanzas 235–236),[29]

[28] We are told that the human mind has serious limitations and that the names and histories of exemplars on the wheel of the future cannot "saberse por seso mortal" (be grasped by human understanding) even when using the black arts (stanzas 59–60).

[29] Álvaro de Luna appears in Saturn and Providencia describes him as he who "cavalga sobre la Fortuna" and "doma su cuello con ásperas riendas," while the narrator characterizes him as "de la Fortuna siempre vencedor." Luna's mastery of Fortune, however, is politically ambiguous. As Autesserre argues, he is simultaneously an *adjuvant* whose force Juan II must appropriate and an illegitimate rival whom the king must surpass. The poem thereby distinguishes

for his effectiveness does not convey the sovereignty reserved for the king. The arrangement thus supports both praise and qualification: figures acquire meaning through their relation to each other and Providencia's explanations. The authority to counsel grows from learning to make these distinctions.

What began with a figure carried upward by another's power ends with a narrator capable of viewing human history from a providential perspective. This transformation clarifies the function of Mena's multiplication of the Wheel of Fortune. The inherited emblem represents the instability of worldly life and the inevitability of decline; Mena's three wheels and their seven circles transform it into a cosmological framework in which human conduct can be compared across time. In Joachim, the overarching pattern of history anticipates fulfillment: the spiritual ages unfold toward a larger providential end. An interpreter may discern that general direction without knowing exactly which future people or events will fulfill particular scriptural correspondences. Uncertainty about the details therefore coexists with confidence in the larger pattern. Mena, by contrast, emphasizes what Juan II must do. This does not mean that he explicitly makes providential promises contingent. Rather, the exemplars provide standards for judging conduct and define the responsibilities that remain open to action in the present.

Juan II occupies a double position in this historical scheme: he is both the recipient of the poem's counsel and an exemplar within its vision. The dedication presents Fortune and Jupiter as favorable to his rule, but the vision places him within the changing historical order over which he presides. He appears with María of Aragon on the wheel of the present (stanza 72) and again enthroned in the circle of Mars (stanza 174). His privileged position therefore does not exempt him from the vicissitudes exemplified by some exemplars that have completed their lives. Unlike these, his own remains unfinished. The lessons drawn from the wheels consequently concern actions he can still take. The speaker's closing exhortation therefore makes the king indispensable to the fulfillment of prophecy. He commands Juan II to "haced verdaderas […] las profecías que no son perfectas" (stanza 296, lines 7–8) (make true the unrealized prophecies), and stanza 297 repeats the command—"Haced verdadera la gran Providencia" (Make true the words of great Providence) and explains that she has provided him with "fuerza, coraje, valor y prudencia" (stanza 297, line 4) (force, courage, valor, and prudence) so that he may achieve victory. These are the qualities that make great deeds possible.

Mena's Relations to Pope Eugene IV's Florentine Curia and to the Court of Juan II of Castile

By the later Middle Ages, the works of Joachim had inspired Joachite and pseudo-Joachite texts written in circumstances far removed from his times.[30] The diffusion of these works makes direct textual dependence particularly difficult to establish, but the argument advanced here does not require such knowledge. The relevant context lies in the continuing presence of these types of intellectual and prophetic traditions, rather than in Mena's access to any particular text or image.

Mena's education at Salamanca and subsequent relations with the Castilian court and Eugene IV's Curia placed him within learned environments in which historical and providential interpretation had political as well as intellectual consequences. Prophetic traditions, including Joachite and pseudo-Joachite currents, circulated widely in late medieval Europe and could

effective action from legitimate government and ultimately subordinates Luna's political effectiveness to the king's legitimate sovereignty. See Autesserre (1998, 85–112).

[30] For the European diffusion of Joachimist works, see Reeves (1969a, 76–95).

become matters of ecclesiastical and political concern. In Castile,[31] they coexisted with a revived neo-Gothic conception of the role of the Trastámaras as saviours of Christendom.[32] Together with the diagrammatic practices examined above, these traditions provide a setting for the historical vision of *Laberinto*.[33]

Mena journeyed to Florence in 1442 and entered the household of Juan de Torquemada, Cardinal of San Sisto, at a time when Pope Eugene IV's prolonged residence in the city made it a meeting place of curial and Florentine intellectual cultures. His connection with Torquemada was not casual. By July 1443 Mena was numbered among the cardinal's *familiares continuos comensales*, a status that placed him within the cardinal's household and immediate curial circle.[34] Torquemada also intervened on Mena's behalf in matters concerning his benefices, and in August of that year he sent him *ad partes Hispaniae* on the cardinal's business. The surviving documentation therefore places him not simply in Florence but within the institutional world of the papal Curia.

His most immediate point of entry into that world was a network of Castilian churchmen who moved between royal and papal service. Torquemada himself had represented Juan II at the Council of Basel before entering Eugene IV's service, while Juan de Mella, later bishop of Zamora, had already acted as an intermediary between the two courts, carrying papal business to Castile and royal letters back to the Curia in 1432. Such men did more than transmit correspondence. Their position within both political worlds enabled them to advance royal requests and intervene in decisions affecting Castilian interests. Their households and retinues also provided channels through which learned and political contacts moved between Castile and the Curia.[35]

These churchmen participated directly in the theological controversies confronting Eugene IV. Torquemada and Mella were among the six Latin members of the commission appointed in 1439 to address the question of papal primacy, and both were subsequently associated with the decree of union with the Copts promulgated in Florence in 1442.[36] In 1443, while the Curia was

[31] For the diffusion of Joachimist works in Spain, see Arcelus Ulibarrena (1996, 188–196); (1992, 49–60); and 2013. Its more expansive Iberian context can be seen in Milhou and Gimeno Casalduero (1975b, 103–141); and on over all context of millenarian movements, see Rucquoi (1996, 9–32) and (2000, 13–41).

[32] On propaganda, genealogy, and chroniclers, see Villa Prieto 2015; 2016; Carbó García (4:1769–1783); Serra Desfilis (4–5).

[33] On the intellectual and institutional environment of early fifteenth-century Salamanca, see Tavelli (469–488). Tavelli emphasizes the close relationship between the University of Salamanca and the formation of learned professionals for royal and ecclesiastical service. On the learned political culture surrounding Juan II, see Pena Búa (425–427). Búa describes Alonso de Cartagena and Juan de Mena as "consejeros" and situates Alfonso de Madrigal within the political Aristotelianism of fifteenth-century Salamanca. This provides context for the relationship between learned interpretation and royal service; Mena's documented curial connections are examined below.

[34] Beltrán de Heredia (1956, 504–506). Heredia has documented Mena's presence in Florence in the *Registra Supplicationum* 380, fols. 231v–232; 381, fol. 52v; 392, fol. 45; and 392, fol. 214, kept in the Archivio Apostolico Vaticano. On Torquemada's expectation of Mena's return to the Curia, see *Registra Supplicationum* 395, fols. 129v–130r.

[35] On royal representatives at the papal court and the opportunities for cultural exchange afforded by their households and retinues, see Villarroel González (2021, 47–48). On Torquemada's movement between royal and papal service, Juan Alfonso de Mella's mission of 1432, and the influence of Castilian curial intermediaries, see Villarroel González (2024, 262, 265, 269–270). Villarroel presents such contacts as a basis for investigating cultural transmission, rather than proof of any particular borrowing.

[36] On the presence of Spain in the general church councils of the fifteenth century, see Goñi Gaztambide (104–106); Boschetto (2012b, 177–233, 371, 422–423); and Boschetto (2012a, 297–318). Santa Maria Novella housed the pope, major organs of the Curia, and the *Studium Romanae Curiae* during Eugene IV's Florentine residence, and the decree promulgating the union of the Catholic and Coptic Church was issued there on 4 February 1442. In 1439 Juan de Mella and Juan de Torquemada, who had been among the six Latin members of the mixed commission formed to

at Siena, Alfonso de Madrigal defended a series of propositions that ecclesiastical authorities regarded as potentially heterodox.[37] Eugene IV appointed a commission of three cardinals, including Torquemada, to examine them.

Mena's position in the household of a theologian whose thought was itself organized around questions of prophecy, hierarchy, providential authority, moral conduct, and the relation between spiritual and temporal government placed him in an intellectual environment directly relevant to the concerns of *Laberinto*.[38]

That environment extended beyond Torquemada's household. Eugene IV's prolonged residence in Florence had brought the Curia into contact with the city's humanist culture, including figures such as Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini.[39] The Council of Florence (1439–1443) gathered diplomats, theologians, translators, and scholars in the city, and its aftermath continued to shape the Curia. Discussions over papal primacy made questions of authority matters of immediate political as well as theological importance, while classical learning increasingly pervaded diplomatic and ecclesiastical service. The political uses of ancient history are particularly relevant to *Laberinto*, whose Greek and Roman exemplars provide a setting through which contemporary kingship can be discussed. Most conspicuously, the poem presents Juan II as a new Caesar in the Dedication, a characterization that participates in the contemporary humanist controversy over the relative merits of Caesar and Scipio, who also appears in connection with the Cid (stanza 4).[40]

Mena's connections with the Castilian court and the papal Curia placed him in settings where interpretations of history could support royal power, defend ecclesiastical authority, or provoke accusations of heresy. Debates over prophecy made these competing uses of interpretation especially visible. They therefore provide a context for examining how *Laberinto* presents Juan II's responsibilities as king and establishes its narrator's authority to interpret history.

Claims to prophetic authority were especially revealing because they made the legitimacy of interpretation itself a matter of scrutiny. Three cases are particularly relevant: Alfonso de Mella's disputed announcement of a new spiritual age, Arnau de Vilanova's interpretation of royal dreams, and Torquemada's defense of Birgitta of Sweden. Together, they show how claims to divine knowledge could authorize political counsel, provoke condemnation, or receive ecclesiastical defense.

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address the dispute over papal primacy, also appear as signatories of the decree of union with the Copts. On Juan de Mella's curial career and his professional library, see Boschetto (2012b, 422–423); on Juan de Cervantes, see Dolz Ferrer (1–24); and on Juan de Torquemada, see Beltrán de Heredia (1960, 99, 107, 133–134); and Izbicki (310) and other studies by him.

[37] On Madrigal's dispute with Torquemada, see Morales Muñoz and Gabriel.

[38] Torquemada's later writings show how political history could be incorporated into a providential scheme. In his *Summa de ecclesia*, he situated the Roman Empire within the succession of the Danielic world empires and held that an empire originating in violence could subsequently acquire legitimacy through divine authorization or popular consent; see Jedin (247–78). He also argued that secular power promotes virtue while spiritual power supplies its higher orientation; see Hernández Martín (43–83). Izbicki's introduction to Juan de Torquemada's *Tractate against the Medianites and Ishmaelites* situates him within the theological and ecclesiastical controversies surrounding Eugene IV and emphasizes his role in the defense of papal authority and orthodoxy, see Izbicki, "Introduction," in Juan de Torquemada, *Tractate against the Medianites and Ishmaelites* (1–23).

[39] On Eugene IV's second residence in Florence from January 1439 to March 1443, see Boschetto (2012b, 177–233); and Boschetto (2012a, 297–318). Boschetto emphasizes both the effect of the prolonged presence of the Curia and Council on Florentine intellectual life and the reciprocal influence of the Florentine cultural environment upon Eugene IV's court.

[40] On the prevalence of the topic of Caesar vs. Scipio, see Domínguez (137–68).

Alfonso de Mella, the Franciscan brother of the curialist Juan de Mella, had strong Joachite affinities and had come to regard himself as a second Elijah, charged with announcing the end of the age of the Son and the advent of the age of the Holy Spirit. After traveling to Italy in the early 1430s, he was condemned for his beliefs in 1434 but rehabilitated by Eugene IV the following year. He later became associated with the heretical movement of Durango and eventually fled to Granada. An inquisitorial panel acting under apostolic authority condemned his teachings around 1441.[41]

Around the same time, Mella addressed a *Littera* to Juan II defending his conduct and beliefs.[42] The letter elicited a *Responsio* by an anonymous author connected with the royal court, who subjected Alfonso's claims to a detailed rebuttal. The controversy therefore involved Juan II's court shortly before Mena departed for Italy and continued until the burning of the heretics of Durango at the stake between 1442 and 1444.

The earlier case of Arnau de Vilanova makes the connection between prophetic interpretation and royal counsel particularly clear.[43] In his *Interpretatio de visionibus in somnis*, Arnau claimed that the true meaning of royal dreams had been disclosed to him by divine grace and converted that interpretive authority into a program of ecclesiastical reform in which Jaume II of Aragon and Frederic of Sicily were to assume leading roles. The polemic surrounding his interpretations illustrates the risks of claiming divinely authorized knowledge as a basis for political counsel.[44]

Scrutiny of prophetic claims did not, however, necessarily lead to condemnation. As mentioned, Torquemada was charged at the Council of Basel with examining 123 disputed articles in the *Revelationes* of Birgitta of Sweden, who had been accused of Joachism. At papal command he composed the *Defensio revelationum sanctae Birgitte* in response to an *Impugnatio* of her revelations.[45] His defense subjected her claims to criteria of verification that included doctrinal orthodoxy, conformity with Scripture, personal virtue, submission to ecclesiastical judgment, and recognition by the institutional Church.[46] In defending Birgitta, Torquemada also delineated the authorities and methods by which contested prophetic claims could be legitimated or condemned.

Because Birgitta asserted that knowledge had been supernaturally disclosed to her, she had to be evaluated through her conduct, the orthodoxy and fruits of her revelations, and their submission to ecclesiastical judgment. *Laberinto* avoids that problem by relocating revelation within a literary work. Its intradiegetic narrator receives privileged knowledge from Providencia, but the historical Mena does not claim that such knowledge was actually revealed to him. The poem can therefore appropriate the visionary's access to hidden order and convert it into admonitory counsel without a claim to direct revelation.

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[41] See Cabanelas Rodríguez (234, 237–239). Cabanelas documents Mella's condemnation, rehabilitation, and second papal absolution at Florence on 1 March 1435. See also Martín Baños (33–64, 65–179, 183–200); Bazán Díaz (2023, 90–93, 102); and Bazán Díaz (2025). Bazán's later study, drawing particularly on Mella's *Littera* and the *Responsio apologitica*, strengthens the identification of his teaching with the millenarian tradition of the Franciscan Spirituals.

[42] On the heretics of Durango, see Martín Baños (65–179, 183–200).

[43] Arnau de Vilanova (ca. 1240–1311) was a reformer with Joachite affinities whose theological theses were condemned posthumously at Tarragona in 1316. See Mensa i Valls (2017a, 131–163); Dezza (97–101); and Cabré Duran (109–112).

[44] Arnau's apocalyptic teaching repeatedly came under ecclesiastical scrutiny; during his lifetime some propositions were judged censurable without a general condemnation of his teaching. See Mensa i Valls (2017b, 63, 67–68).

[45] See *Defensio revelationum sanctae Birgitte,* Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 2580, fols. 116v–148r.

[46] On Torquemada's effort to make Birgitta's prophecy acceptable to its critics, see Arici (267–272); Tylus (9, n. 7); see also Richardson (40).

Conclusion: The Making of a Literary Prophetic Narrator

Taken together, these cases clarify what Mena's literary construction avoids. They show how prophetic utterances and texts could provoke controversy and ecclesiastical censure. Mella's controversy reached the king whom *Laberinto* addresses; Arnau's interpretation of royal dreams offers a comparison for its conjunction of vision and political counsel; and Birgitta's defense connects the assessment of revelation to Torquemada, whose household Mena joined. These disputes over who could legitimately interpret divine revelations shed light on the manner in which *Laberinto* establishes the authority of its narrator. Within the vision, Providencia teaches him to interpret the historical exemplars; the extradiegetic voice then applies those lessons to Juan II. The poem thereby grounds its counsel in a literary fiction in which knowledge is imparted to the narrator by Divina Providencia and conveyed to Juan II by the extradiegetic voice.

What critics have regarded as an unnecessary complication of the traditional Wheel of Fortune is therefore integral to a machine designed to instruct and counsel. Like the diagrammatic structures of Joachim of Fiore, Mena's wheels make an otherwise invisible order apprehensible and adapt it to the political circumstances of Juan II's Castile. Juan II's double position as exemplar and addressee gives the uncertainty of the future its political force: he is situated within the historical order that the poem teaches him to recognize, yet remains responsible for how he acts within it.

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