IN THEIR OWN WORDS

King Alfonso the Wise, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, Nos. 7 and 8 (1257–1283)

The more than 400 songs and more than 1,200 manuscript paintings that constitute the *Cantigas* of King Alfonso the Wise (1221–1284) are collectively one of the great treasures of Spanish culture. The songs were composed, or at the very least assembled, at Alfonso’s court, apparently by a team of specialists. Some, including Alfonso himself, were responsible for generating the poetry and music, some for copying the material, and others for painting the manuscript illuminations.

The songs are grouped in sets of ten, the first nine of which are narrative poems that tell us about life in medieval Spain—vignettes in which a Christian sinner is rescued from a dire predicament by the intercession of the Virgin Mary—and the tenth is a lyrical song in honor of the Virgin herself. The stories are longer than the lyrical songs (often ten or more stanzas compared to three or four), but all were meant to be sung. Most have the following form: refrain and stanza in continuous alternation, which is a structure that invited group-soloist singing throughout the Middle Ages.

The narrative stories are a rich source of information about medieval society—about the customs of the people, their ideas about good and evil and especially the devil, their attitudes toward the behavior of the clergy, and their belief in miracles and notably those piously believed to have been wrought by the Virgin, who was the great mediator (mediatrix) between the Lord and the people through the Middle Ages. Every element of society, from prince to pauper, is the beneficiary of Mary’s mercy in these heartfelt yet sometimes salacious tales. The following two *cantigas* (numbers 7 and 8 in a definitive edition of 427 songs) are presented with the text of the story alone, and not with the accompanying music. The refrain is indicated in italic font at the beginning but only cued between stanzas. Again, these stories, too, were meant to be sung. For an example of a *cantiga* with music, turn to the end of Chapter 6 and to the More Music feature for *Rosa das rosas*, a lyrical *cantiga* in honor of the Virgin.

As true of many of the *cantigas*, number 7 involves a sexual scandal within the church, in this case within a convent.

**Cantiga 7**

This story tells how Holy Mary protected the pregnant abbess who, weeping, had fallen asleep before her altar.

*We must love and beg the grace of Holy Mary so that the shameless devil lead us not into sin and error.*

I shall recount a miracle that I found written in which the Mother of God the King wrought in favor of an abbess who, as I learned much later, was devoted to her. It happened that the devil trapped her, and she was impregnated by a man from Bologna [Italy], who was the steward [of the convent], and she was mortified by her indiscretion.

*We must love and beg the grace of Holy Mary...*

The other nuns were gleeful to hear of this because the abbess would not allow them the slightest transgression. They brought charges against her to the bishop of Cologne, who had charge of the place. When he heard about this, he had the abbess brought before him. She arrived quickly, cheerful and much smiling.
We must love and beg the grace of Holy Mary . . .

The bishop said: “Señora, according to what I have been told, you have done evil, and I have come here for this purpose: that you make amends before me. The abbess immediately prayed to the Mother of God and, as if in a dream, Holy Mary removed the unborn child and delivered it to Soissons [a cathedral town north of Paris] to be reared.

We must love and beg the grace of Holy Mary . . .

When the abbess awoke and found herself delivered of the child, she went to the bishop. He examined her carefully and asked her to undress. When he saw her slim belly, he commenced to praise god and vituperate the nuns, who were of the order of Oña, saying: “God protect me, I consider this woman to be free of guilt, and know no one who can rightly accuse her.”

We must love and beg the grace of Holy Mary . . .

Cantiga No. 8 involves a minstrel and his fiddle, called here a vihuela. In this period the vihuela, as the manuscript illuminations accompanying this story confirm, was a large vielle or five-string fiddle. Later, by the sixteenth century the vihuela was no longer bowed but turned sideways and plucked, becoming thereby the Spanish guitar.

Cantiga No. 8

This story tells how in Rocamador [a town in southwest France], Holy Mary made a candle descend down to rest on the vielle of a minstrel who sang before her.

To the Virgin Mary we, who hope for her mercy, should all sing with great energy.

Allow me to recount a miracle that the Holy Virgin Mary, mother of our savior, caused to occur in Rocamador, which you will be pleased to hear. Listen to the story as I retell it.

To the Virgin Mary . . .

According to what I was told, a minstrel whose name was Petro de Siglar, who knew well how to sing and play the vielle [tocar la vihuela], always sang a lai [a sequence in the vernacular tongue] to her in all the churches devoted to the Virgin.

To the Virgin Mary . . .

The lai that he sang was about the Mother of God. Standing before a statue of her with tears in his eyes he sang: “Hail, glorious one, if my song pleases you, give us a candle by which to dine.”

To the Virgin Mary . . .

Holy Mary was pleased by the manner of singing of the minstrel and made a candle descend down onto his vielle. But the monk treasurer [of the church] took it from him saying: “You are a magician, and we won’t permit you to have it.”

To the Virgin Mary . . .

However the minstrel, who held the Virgin dear to this heart, continued to sing, and the candle again came to rest on his vielle. The disagreeable monk, however, quickly snatched it away again.

To the Virgin Mary . . .

Having taken the candle off of the vielle of the minstrel and brought it back to where he had put it before, this time he anchored it more securely, saying: “Minstrel, if you make it move from there, we will consider you a sorcerer!”

To the Virgin Mary . . .

The minstrel continued to play without paying the slightest attention, and the candle came down and rested yet again on his instrument. The monk started to take it, but the people said: “We won’t permit you to do this!”

To the Virgin Mary . . .
When the obstinate monk saw the miracle, he realized his error and repented. He fell to the ground before the minstrel and begged for pardon in the name of Holy Mary, in whom we all believe.

To the Virgin Mary . . .

After the glorious Virgin had wrought this miracle that had rewarded the minstrel and converted the unenlightened monk, every year thereafter the minstrel brought a candle to her church.

To the Virgin Mary . . .