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Robert K. Fritz
Murray State University, rfritz2@murraystate.edu

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BAD MOON RISING: CODED CRITIQUE OF FREDERICK II IN THE *LIBRO DE ALEXANDRE*

Robert K. Fritz ✍

MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract: This article argues that the Libro de Alexandre was likely composed in 1233 as a critique of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, whose Constitutions of Melfi (1231) challenged papal authority on natural philosophical grounds. The article interprets the poem's recurring sun-moon motif as an allusion to the sun-moon allegory whereby medieval popes asserted that their authority exceeded that of an emperor to the same degree that the size of the sun exceeded that of the moon. Key to this interpretation is an analysis of the eclipse episode in which Aristander erroneously describes the moon as larger than the sun in precise numerical terms that invert the dimensions found in a gloss on the sun-moon allegory by Laurentius Hispanus (died 1248), a canonist who calculated that a pope's authority was forty-eight times greater than an emperor's by comparing the sizes of the sun and moon. The episode thus forms part of a pattern of coded critiques of the Holy Roman Emperor that culminates in God's

condemnation of the prideful Alexander the Great as a “lunático,” a vicarious epithet for Frederick whose Constitutions contravened hierocratic ideology by positing that the lunar power of an emperor superseded the solar power of a pope.

The dyad of the sun and moon constitutes a recurring motif throughout the thirteenth-century *Libro de Alexandre (LAX)*: a lunar eclipse occurs before a battle, stirring trepidation among Alexander's troops (*coplas* 1199-1232).¹ During Alexander's campaign in India, the Trees of the Sun and Moon prognosticate Alexander's demise (2482-2494). The sun and moon appear yet again as the eyes of the human figure formed by the topographical features of the earth that Alexander beholds during his flight through the heavens (2496-2514). Weighty with symbolic meaning, the sun and moon motif in the *LAX* alludes to the sun-moon allegory that medieval popes used to articulate the hierocratic principle that the temporal power of kings derives from the superior spiritual power of the papacy, just as the light of the moon derives from the brilliance of the sun.

Though Pope Gregory VII (1015-1085) had used the allegory in the eleventh century, it attained greater significance in the thirteenth during the papacy of Innocent III (1160-1216), who revived the imagery to assert his superiority over secular rulers. Indeed, considered in light of allusions to the sun-moon allegory throughout the poem, God's condemnation of Alexander as a “lunático“ (2329c) should be read as an epithet for those who held that the lunar power of temporal rulers superseded the solar power of the pope.

During the period in which the anonymous poet composed the *LAX*, one ruler in particular stood out for this sort of lunacy: Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250). Much like the Spanish Alexander, Frederick turned his court into a hotbed of curiosity about nature where new epistemological paradigms found fertile ground for cultivation,

¹All citations are to the Casas Rigall edition of the *LAX*.



diffusion, and adaptation for use as ideological weapons in the centuries-long struggle between the Church and the Empire. His efforts produced the *Constitutions of Melfi*, a legal code promulgated in 1231 wherein the emperor premised his claims to political supremacy over the Church on natural philosophical causal principles found in twelfth- and thirteenth-century translations of Arab astrological texts. Though many date the *LAX* to the 1220s, I will argue that it was composed in the aftermath of the issuance of the *Constitutions* as an allegorical repudiation of the emperor in which the sun-moon motif reasserts a hierocratic worldview in the face of Frederick's political machinations arising from his interest in astrologized natural philosophy, a concept I define further on in a discussion of thirteenth-century epistemologies.² Key to my interpretation is an analysis of the eclipse episode in which the astrologer Aristander erroneously describes the moon as larger than both the sun and the earth in conspicuously precise numerical terms. I present evidence that this error should be read as an inversion of the celestial dimensions found in a gloss on the sun-moon allegory by canonist Laurentius Hispanus (1180-1248) who calculated that a pope's authority was forty-eight times greater than an emperor's by comparing the relative sizes of the earth, moon, and sun. Understood as an ironic inversion of Laurentius's astronomical argument for papal supremacy, Aristander's explanation of the eclipse may be read as part of a pattern of coded critiques of Frederick's imperial ideology that culminates in God's condemnation of Alexander as a lunatic.

Reading the *LAX* in these terms expands the scope of scholarship regarding the text's marked antipathy toward curiosity about nature. In the last decades, scholars such as Isabel Uría Maqua, Amaia Arizaleta, Florence Curtis, Michael Gerli, and, most recently, Fernando Riva have argued convincingly that Alexander's downfall in the *LAX* be understood as a condemnation of the curiosity about nature that emerged in the Latin West following the translation of Greek and Arab scientific texts in the twelfth century. These scholars trace the origins of

² Regarding the date of composition, see Casas Rigall (26-30).

this antipathy towards curiosity to Biblical and patristic sources, such as Old Testament injunctions against inquiring into secrets of nature as well as Augustine's condemnations of curiosity as an inordinate desire to know arising from the sin of pride.³

Given the doctrinal origins of the *LAX*'s antipathy toward curiosity, scholars have focused largely on the theological ramifications of Alexander's lust for knowledge. Considering that the narrative revolves around an emperor's temerity, however, the poet's stance regarding curiosity merits an analysis informed by an understanding of the Church's ideological conflicts with the Holy Roman Empire in the thirteenth century.⁴ Not incidentally, a specific rhetorical expression of the sun-moon allegory emerged during the same era as a figurative representation of the papacy's efforts to assert itself as the political hegemon of Europe (Ullman; Watt). The allegory first entered hierocratic discourse during the eleventh-century papacy of Gregory VII, who articulated the premises of papal supremacy and its rhetorical trappings that both Innocent III and, later, the author of the *LAX* would adapt to their own purposes in the thirteenth century. Early in his papacy, Gregory conceived of the *sacerdotium* as spiritually superior to the *imperium* yet considered emperors to be coregents of Christendom (Morrison 132-33). In a 1073 letter to Rudolph of Swabia, he compares the offices of pope and emperor to eyes that guide the Christian world with their light, just as eyes of flesh guide the human body (Carlyle 94-95). Yet Gregory's conception of the two institutions became increasingly hierocratic in response to conflicts with the Holy Roman Empire. Less than two years later, Gregory issued his *Dictatus Papae*, a decretal that, among other unprecedented hierocratic provisions, established the pope's power to depose an emperor (Fried, *The Middle Ages* 144-46). He deposed Emperor Henry IV soon thereafter for refusing to abide by a ban on lay investiture (Tierney 53-57).

³ See Riva's helpful summary of sources (33-60). On Augustine's intellectual legacy, see Eamon (59-66) and Brown.

⁴ For an alternative reading focused on the Iberian ideological context, see Arizaleta, who has suggested that the *LAX* be read as a tribute to Alfonso VIII that promotes a pro-Castilian monarchical ideology ("El clérigo"; *La translation* 255-61).



In addition to setting precedents for the assertion of hierocratic superiority, Gregory supplied subsequent popes with a rhetorical device for its figurative representation, for it was in the midst of his conflict with Henry IV that Gregory first employed the sun-moon allegory. In a 1080 letter to William the Conqueror, Gregory compares the papacy to the sun and monarchy to the moon: “As God has disposed the sun and moon, lights that outshine all others, to make the beauty of this world manifest to fleshly eyes at different seasons, . . . [h]e has provided in the apostolic and royal dignities different offices for ruling the beings whom He has created after His own image, lest they should be drawn astray into fatal errors” (qtd. in Reichel 282). Gregory argues that he is William’s superior in this dyad given that he, the pope, will answer for him, the king, on the day of judgement (Morrison 133).

Yet the sun-moon allegory would not become emblematic of papal supremacy until Innocent III resurrected the imagery to promulgate a more robust hierocratic ideology in which the pope enjoyed plenitude of power (*plenitudo potestatis*) as the Vicar of Christ (*vicarius Christi*), a mandate transferred from one pope to another according to the doctrine of apostolic succession.⁵ During his papacy, Innocent issued various decretals expanding his powers in the temporal realm in response to challenges posed to papal authority by emperors Henry VI and Otto IV (Watt; Moore). In the process, Innocent assigned a greater prominence to the sun-moon allegory as an assertion of papal supremacy. In an 1198 letter to the nobles of Tuscany, for example, the pontiff writes, “just as the moon derives its light from the sun and is indeed lower than it in quantity and quality, in position and in power, so too the royal power derives the splendor of its dignity from the pontifical authority” (Tierney 132). By stating that the moon derives its light from the sun, Innocent construed of temporal powers as both inferior to *and* dependent upon his spiritual authority. The allegory subsequently became emblematic of papal relations with the Empire. Emperor Otto IV even incorporated sun and moon imagery into the panoply of imperial insignias, perhaps as a sign of rapprochement with the papacy

⁵ See Watt regarding *plenitudo potestatis*.

following Innocent's decision to favor his candidacy for the emperorship (Bryce 522).

A year later, Innocent III ensconced the allegory in canon law in *Solitae*, a decretal addressed to Byzantine Emperor Alexius III, whose aid the pontiff hoped to enlist in mounting another crusade and in subjecting the Greek Orthodox Church to papal authority (Andrea, *Contemporary Sources* 32-35).⁶ In the decretal he writes:

God gave, therefore, to the firmament of heaven, that is the Universal Church, two great lights. That is, he instituted two dignities, which are pontifical authority and royal power. The one, however, that rules over days, that is over spiritual matters, is greater; the one that rules over nights, that is over carnal matters, is lesser. Thus it is recognized that the difference between the sun and the moon is as great as that between pontiffs and kings. (Andrea, *The Medieval Record* 320)

By equating the power differential between the *imperium* and the *sacerdotium* to the actual differences between the celestial bodies, Innocent III grounded the allegory's validity in an epistemology that understood nature to be an expression of God's will that could be rendered intelligible through the mathematical arts of the quadrivium, comprised of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The quadrivium therefore served "as a vehicle for understanding the relationship between divine unity and the multiplicity of created things" (Lindberg 203). Given the metaphysical relationship between number and creation, conclusions arising from the quadrivium possessed a demonstrative certitude (Eastwood 322; Garber 96). Furthermore, it was believed that the numerological principles accounting for the disposition and governance of the cosmos likewise disposed and

⁶ Pope Innocent's efforts to negotiate the so-called "reduction" of the Greek Church to the Holy See came to naught, for its Patriarchs, who were accustomed to centuries of de facto autonomy from Rome, considered papal claims to universal jurisdiction over the church "to be inflated, misguided, and without historical foundation" (Nicol 179).



governed human society (Wetherbee 42; Burnett 168-69). Hence, cosmological observations had ideological implications insofar as they were believed to analogically reveal principles that should govern human relations. Accordingly, Innocent III's identification of the sun and moon with the *sacerdotium* and *imperium* meant that the differences between the two celestial bodies represented the hierarchical power differential between the two human institutions.

An illustration of the epistemological dimension that *Solitae* imparted to the sun-moon allegory appears in Laurentius Hispanus's influential gloss on the *Compilationem tertiam*, a compilation of decretals issued in 1210. Laurentius composed his gloss between 1210 and 1215 during his tenure as a lecturer of canon law at Bologna and before returning to his native Spain to become Bishop of Orense in 1218, an office he held until his death in 1248 (McManus 1-30). In his gloss on *Solitae*, he provides a precise, if arithmetically erroneous, value for the power differential between popes and monarchs: "since the earth would be seven times greater than the moon and the sun eight times greater than the earth itself, it remains that the pontifical dignity would be forty-eight times greater than the royal dignity" (143). The product of seven and eight, of course, is fifty-six. Yet the discrepancy may be a misspelling rather than a miscalculation if the glossator used the figures featured in Godfrey of St. Victor's twelfth-century didactic poem *Fons philosophiae*. In a stanza about astronomy, Godfrey describes the earth as *six* times larger than the moon and *eight* times smaller than the sun.⁷ What is more, period manuscripts of *Fons philosophiae* feature marginalia by these verses indicating that the product of six and eight is *forty-eight*, suggesting the values were commonplaces of twelfth-century quadrivial astronomy (Michaud-Quantin 50). Hence, Laurentius (or a copyist) may have mistakenly substituted *sexies* with *septies* and forty-eight may be the intended value for the size differential between the sun and moon and, by analogical extension, the power differential between the *sacerdotium*

⁷ "Terre globum sexies luna grossiorum, / Sole tamen octies didici minorem" (50).

and *imperium*. Despite the error, Laurentius's demonstration of papal superiority became part of the Church's ideological response to imperial challenges to its authority at a critical moment, for Emperor Otto IV's persistent efforts to dominate Italy had soured relations with his one-time benefactor, Innocent III, who deposed the Emperor in 1215 (Tierney 139).

The question of Laurentius's error and sources may seem a trivial matter of scribal arcana, yet it bears consideration in light of periodic threats to the traditional discourses of knowledge and power that underpinned the sun-moon allegory. As is well-documented, twelfth- and thirteenth-century translations of the works of Arab astronomer-astrologers such as Abū Ma'shar (787-886), Al-Kindī (801-873), Al-Fārābī (870-950), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198), among others, introduced Latin Europe to sophisticated theories of natural causation based on the Aristotelian principle that heavenly bodies drove all terrestrial processes of growth, change, and decay.⁸ Although this "astrologized natural philosophy," as historian of science Gad Freudenthal has termed it, would eventually prove baseless, the aforementioned thinkers who developed this etiological paradigm had nevertheless achieved a significant conceptual breakthrough by positing the fundamental intelligibility of nature and elaborating a theoretical framework for its study that went well beyond the limits of the traditional quadrivium. Furthermore, the theoretical sophistication of their speculative etiologies exceeded those of Aristotle upon which they were based, for the Stagirite's own stringent thresholds for knowledge claims largely excluded the heavens from scientific inquiry.⁹ Astrologized natural philosophy inundated twelfth-century Iberia where the Castilian vernacular served as a linguistic bridge between Latin translators and their Arabic-literate counterparts (Márquez Villanueva 32). The translation activity turned Toledo into

⁸ On the introduction of Arabic astronomical knowledge to Latin Europe, see Lemay; Beaujouan; Boudet (13-87), Freudenthal; Jolivet; and Saif (9-90).

⁹ Consult Eamon (53-54) regarding demonstrability in Aristotelian science; Bolton and Feldhay (288-89) provide details about Aristotle's claims about the heavens.



an internationally renowned center of intellectual innovation where natural philosophers from across Europe came to embrace astrology as a “superior kind of physics” (Lemay 8), thereby initiating the traditional quadrivium’s inevitable descent into obsolescence (Beaujouan; Jolivet; Lemay 314-15).

Many Iberian observers of the era, however, regarded the epistemological ramifications of the new paradigm with foreboding. Riva notes that apprehensions about knowledge and learning constitute a common theme in the works of period authors such as Gonzalo de Berceo, Diego García de Campos, Juan de Limoges, and Lucas de Tuy, as well as the author of the *LAX*, the primary subject of his book-length study of the topic. The anonymous poet seems to have been particularly concerned about disruptions to the quadrivium occasioned by the introduction of astrologized natural philosophy, as evidenced by the verses in the poem about Alexander’s education (38-46). In his lament to Aristotle regarding Macedonia’s subjugation to the Persians, Alexander boastfully claims to have mastered all the arts, yet, as many scholars note, his curriculum deviates significantly from the conventional quadrivium:¹⁰

Aprís’ toda la física; só mege natural:
coñosco bien los pulsos, bien judgo orinal.
Non ha, fueras de ti, [...] mejor nin tal.--
¡Mas todo non lo preçio quanto un dinero val’!

Sé por arte de música, por natura cantar:
sé fer sabrosos puntos, las voces acordar,
los tonos cómo empieçan e cómo deven finar.
¡Mas non me puede todo un punto confortar!

Sé de todas las artes todo su argumento;
bien sé las qualidades de cada elemento;

¹⁰ See Bizzarri (“El problema” 216-17), García López (303-4), Michael (43), Willis (214), and Riva (136-53).

de los signos del Sol, siquier' del fundamento,
no's me podríe çelar quanto val un açento. (43-45)¹¹

Though scholars formerly tended to characterize Alexander's boasts as an articulation of the ideal princely education, more recent interpretations view it as an expression of the poet's misgivings about alterations to the quadrivium.¹² Notably, Alexander's education omits arithmetic and geometry, featuring instead arterial palpation (*pulsos*) and uroscopy (*judgo orinal*), the diagnostic tools of the *physici*, medical practitioners who adopted Arabized Greek medicine in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Bylebyl). Moreover, his mastery of "music by nature" concerns the aesthetic effects of performance (i.e., *juglaría*), a departure from quadrivial music (i.e., *clerecía*), which dealt with the rational comparison of magnitudes and had little to do with performance (Beaujouan 466). Finally, the implied association of Zodiacal signs with elemental properties (i.e., hot, cold, dry, and wet), reflects the subordination of quadrivial astronomy to the astrologized study of nature. Considered from a traditional quadrivialist perspective, then, Alexander's boasts create a sense of dramatic irony by revealing the epistemological errors that will lead to his demise, a fate foreshadowed by his dismissiveness of limits to his knowledge: "no's me podríe çelar quanto val un açento" (45d). This verse reveals the poet's fundamental preoccupation with curiosity, a reflection of the historical surge in new ways of studying nature arising from the introduction of astrologized natural philosophy.

As Gerli (36-37) and Riva (35-49) have observed, Alexander's attitude contravenes Augustinian characterizations of curiosity as a sin arising from humankind's prideful striving to learn secrets of nature that only God could know. The prince's astrologized quadrivium also challenged doctrinal condemnations of astrology as a superstitious form of

¹¹ Manuscript O reads, "Sé de las siete artes todo su argumento" (in Cañas' edition, *copla* 45a), heightening the dramatic irony by implying that the new learning had supplanted the traditional quadrivium rather than merely supplemented it.

¹² Compare Bizzarri ("El problema" 217) and Willis (214) with Riva (136-53).



curiosity.¹³ Yet the new paradigm reconceived of heavenly bodies as natural *causes* of terrestrial changes rather than *signs* of their coming, a distinction that served many as a justification for curious inquiry into predictive astrology as an etiological and probabilistic natural science (Boudet 205-78; Eamon 62-65). Nevertheless, traditionalists like the poet continued to regard astrology with suspicion. Alexander's astrologized quadrivium, then, serves as an indictment of the poet's contemporaries whose rejection of orthodox quadrivial studies had led them to indulge in sinful curiosity (Riva 136-53).

Regarding the real-world identities of the parties indicted, Uría Maqua, Curtis, and Gerli argue that the poet had fellow clerics and scholars in mind. For his part, Riva highlights the poem's preoccupation with the dangers of the *rex curiosus* as a major theme (58) but concludes that the *magistri* of an Iberian sect of heterodox Aristotelians were likely the specific targets of censure (141-48). The poem's princely spokesperson for the astrologized quadrivium, however, suggests the poet found curiosity among royalty particularly troubling. Indeed, astrologized natural philosophy appealed especially to monarchs as a potential means of realizing their political ambitions, thereby contributing to the popularity of esoteric works like the *Secretum Secretorum*, which applied the paradigm's etiological principles to the practical problems of statecraft (Boudet 19; Eamon 68; Williams 349-350); Lawrence-Mathers; Escobar-Vargas 4-12). Believed by thirteenth-century scholars to have been authored by Aristotle for Alexander the Great, the text became the focus of intense interest as a source of scientific knowledge when the first full Latin translation began circulating at the papal and imperial courts by the third decade of the thirteenth century (Williams 227).¹⁴ What is more, the *Secretum Secretorum* integrated astrologized natural philosophy into an ideological framework devoid of hierocratic

¹³ See Augustine's condemnation of astrologers in the *Confessions* (85) as mentioned below, as well as Isidore's *Etymologies* (99).

¹⁴ The original *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār*, as the text is known in Arabic, was probably the work of a Syrian compiler from the ninth or tenth century and accreted additional materials in the centuries prior to its translation into Latin (Williams 28-30).

considerations: Pseudo-Aristotle premises the monarch's absolute authority on the notion that God grants him exclusive "power over [His people's] lives and properties and all other matters," such that a king is, in effect, "like a god," so long as he uses reason to rule with justice, one of God's noble attributes (Baconus 224). As a quality that emanates from God, justice governs all aspects of the created world, serving as the first link in a causal chain that endows the king with his law-making powers. In a cosmogony that he describes as "the essence of this book and the key to [Alexander's] object" (226), Pseudo-Aristotle explains that "[j]ustice is the harmonizer and supporter of the world. The world is the foundation of the institution of state. State is the king who preserves the laws" (226). This cosmogonic etiology underpins his assertion that "civilization and law . . . are in accordance with nature" (183), insofar as a king's mandate to rule arises as a natural consequence of the thoroughly Arabized Aristotelian structure of the cosmos described in the *Secretum Secretorum*.

Though much scholarship about the *Secretum Secretorum* concerns its place in the history of science, I propose that we also count it among translations of the period that applied Arabized-Aristotelian epistemologies to political philosophy, a phenomenon Cary Nederman has characterized as an "'underground tradition' of Aristotelian political science" (190) predating translations of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* in the mid thirteenth century. While these natural philosophical approaches to political theory retained religious elements, they nevertheless afforded compelling alternatives to the Church's hierocratic ideology. In an era when emperors persistently challenged the temporal authority of the papacy, scientific curiosity posed threats to both the order of knowledge *and* the social order.¹⁵

The poet narrativizes these interrelated apprehensions in a key episode of the *LAX* in which the epistemological status of astrology and the sun-moon allegory each play a role: the lunar eclipse that occurs before Alexander's second battle with Darius. Perceiving the unease

¹⁵ See Shapin and Shaffer regarding knowledge production and social philosophy.



among his troops following the eclipse, Alexander consults Aristander the astrologer, who assuages their fears by expounding a naturalistic explanation of eclipses. While largely sound in terms of its basic mechanics, Aristander's discourse features conspicuously inaccurate descriptions of the relative sizes of the sun and moon:

*Es mayor que la Tierra la Luna, verament',
 onde en todas las tierras pareçe egualment';
 El Sol es siet'atanto—esto sin falliment'—
 e está de la Luna más alto luengament'. (my emphasis, 1222)*

Aristander's assertion that the moon is larger than the earth flagrantly contradicts a basic fact of thirteenth-century cosmology. Indeed, Aristander's insistence on the veracity of his information heightens the irony by drawing attention to the blatancy of his error. The astrologer's concluding remarks further muddle his explanation because he pivots from natural astronomy to judicial astrology, interpreting the eclipse as a portent of the Greeks' imminent victory:

*Aún dezirvos quiero otra absolviçión,
 por que non vos temades de nula lisiõn:
 el Sol es de los griegos—diré por quál razón—;
 la Luna, de los bárbaros que en Oriente son.*

*Quando se cambia la Luna por signo demostrar,
 a ellos amenaza que les vien' grant pesar.
 Si el Sol se turbasse, devriemos nos dubdar,
 mas por esto devemos letiçia demostrar. (1229-1230)*

The seeming paradox between Aristander's augury and his naturalistic explanation has long divided scholars and led to divergent interpretations (Riva 161; Arizaleta, "Semellan" 50). Given the obviousness of the passage's factual errors, however, I propose that Aristander's eclipse discourse ironically inverts the celestial dimensions found in Laurentius Hispanus's gloss on *Solitaë* in order to articulate a veiled critique of imperial ideologues whose adoption of astrologized

natural philosophy had led them to flawed conclusions about the nature of an emperor's temporal authority.

Firstly, the specificity of Aristander's claim that the sun is *seven* times larger than the earth suggests an allusion to Laurentius's assertion that the earth is *seven* times larger than the moon, a figure unique to his gloss. Given that this influential glossator was the Bishop of a Spanish diocese at the time of the poem's composition, the poet and his public were likely familiar with their countryman's gloss on *Solitae* and its bearing on the papacy's ongoing conflict with the Holy Roman Empire.

Secondly, when Aristander states that the sun is seven times greater, it is unclear whether he is comparing it to the earth or to the moon. This vagueness leaves open the possibility that Aristander's cosmos reassigns the relative sizes of each of the celestial bodies of the Laurentian cosmos such that the moon is the largest body of all at *forty-eight* times the size of the earth. This reading would, moreover, be congruous with Aristander's identification of the moon with the Persian horde because multiple passages of the poem characterize Darius's army as vastly larger than Alexander's (248, 791, 824). Thus, the seeming paradox between Aristander's astronomical explanation and his astrological prediction disappears because his mistaken understanding of the celestial bodies' sizes informs his divinatory interpretation of the lunar eclipse.

Finally, although Alexander's victory over Darius would seem to confirm the astrologer's prediction, such a conclusion contradicts longstanding doctrine that astrologers were incapable of divining future events.¹⁶ Instead, Aristander's prideful self-assurance recalls Augustine's condemnation of curious astrologers in *Confessions* wherein he writes that "by an impious pride . . . they foretell a failure of the sun's light [due to an eclipse] which is likely to occur so long before, but see not their own, which is now present" (85). Moreover, Aristander's remarkably specific errors invoke Laurentius's gloss on *Solitae*, suggesting to savvy readers that the eclipse foreshadows Alexander's eventual demise

¹⁶ Consider Zoroas's flawed prediction (1052-1068).



because the darkened moon represents the fading of *imperium* in general and not just Darius's defeat. Such an interpretation is consistent with other scholars' conclusions regarding the myriad ways in which the poet relies on the reader to draw implicit conclusions about Alexander's faulty interpretations of biblical passages, Classical history, and natural phenomena as representations of mistaken points of view (Bly and Deyermond 164; Agnew 161; Brownlee 266; Riva 62). Like Alexander's astrologized quadrivium, then, the eclipse episode contributes to a growing sense of dramatic irony by signaling that Alexander will meet a tragic end precisely because he fundamentally misunderstands creation and his place in it.

Although the *LAX* is generally believed to have been written in the 1220s, such a moral would have been highly topical at the beginning of the fourth decade of the thirteenth century, imbuing Alexander's fortunes with an ideological valence evocative of contemporary conflicts between the papacy and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. Before his death in 1216, Innocent III had favored Frederick of Hohenstaufen to succeed Otto IV as Holy Roman Emperor. Although Frederick swore to undertake a crusade and to relinquish the kingdom of Sicily when Pope Honorius III crowned him emperor in 1220, he did neither: instead, his subsequent actions would reveal him to be "the most dangerous enemy" the papacy had ever known (Tierney 139). Frederick's refusal to relinquish Sicily threatened the Vatican's territorial control of the Italian Peninsula, a factor that contributed to Pope Gregory IX's decision to excommunicate Frederick in 1227 (Abulafia 166-67). Another point of tension, however, concerned the Emperor's infamous curiosity about the natural world in general and astrology in particular. He commissioned works on astrologized natural philosophy and mathematics, sent questionnaires about natural philosophical problems to Arab rulers, conducted experiments, collected exotic species, and documented his own observations of the natural world in an original work on falconry, *De arte venandi cum avibus* (Haskins; Kantorowicz 334-65; Morpurgo; Schramm). He also maintained a coterie of scholars

and philosophers that included Michael Scot, a translator, philosopher, and astrologer who joined Frederick's court in the late 1220s. Having spent time in Toledo, Scot afforded the Emperor direct access to novel strains of astrologized natural philosophy from the Iberian Peninsula by means of his own translations and original works on the topic written at the Emperor's behest, such as the *Liber introductorius*. Scot was also familiar with the *Secretum Secretorum* and it was around the time he entered Frederick's service that the full translation of the text began circulating at the imperial court (Williams 129).

Frederick's curiosity formed part of his efforts to establish what Johannes Fried describes as a *Wissensgesellschaft* (knowledge-based society) ("In den Netzen" 186) in which "politics and scholarship went hand in hand" (Fried, *The Middle Ages* 280). His ambitions culminated in the *Constitutions of Melfi*, a legal code issued in 1231 intended to consolidate his control over Sicily. Much like the *Secretum Secretorum*, it elaborated an epistemological framework in which a monarch's absolute temporal authority comes directly from God as a necessary consequence of a cosmic causal chain. Thus, the *Prooemium* to the *Constitutions* recasts the *Genesis* creation story as a Christianized Aristotelian cosmogony: rather than describe the creation of the cosmos *ex nihilo*, the text states that God formed the universe from "primordial matter" and made man in his own likeness to be "the worthiest creature" (Frederick 3), Aristotelian concepts commonly found in source texts of astrologized natural philosophy such as the *Secretum Secretorum* (Shepard 157; Buyken 56; Stürner). As in *Genesis*, original sin introduced evil into the world, yet the *Prooemium* recasts human wickedness in Aristotelian terms as a "compelling necessity" (4) that required the creation of princes who could compensate for the deficiencies of a "natural law" (4) that engendered injustice and strife:

Therefore, by this compelling necessity of things and not less by the inspiration of Divine Providence, princes of nations were created through whom the license of crimes might be corrected.



And these arbiters of life and death for mankind might decide,
as executors in some way of Divine Judgements, how each man
should have fortune, estate, and status. (Frederick II 4)

To that end, the *Constitutions* subordinate the privileges of the Church, the feudal nobility, and burghers to the absolute judicial authority of the Crown (Powell xxxiv).

What is more, the *Constitutions* omit the Pope from consideration and make the prince directly answerable to God for the integrity of the Church, thereby subverting the doctrine of papal supremacy whereby the spiritual authority answers for the temporal (Powell xxiii). An oblique reference to the sun-moon allegory in the *Constitutions* suggests that Frederick fully appreciated the implications of this subversion. Title XLI of Book I stipulates that the King's regional justiciars cede authority to master justiciars because "the arrival of the greater light should enlighten the lesser light, which has been hidden" (45). This provocative allusion registers Frederick's familiarity with the sun-moon allegory and speaks to his political motivations for excluding the Pope from the new legal order. Thus, the *Constitutions* represented the ideological apotheosis of Frederick's curiosity. Predictably, the new code worsened relations with Pope Gregory, despite a tenuous rapprochement that had resulted in the Emperor's reinstatement (Kantorowicz 261; Wagner 68).

Bearing witness to this epochal clash between Emperor and Pope, the anonymous Spanish poet used the sun and moon motif to weave the era's anxieties about the threats that Frederick's curiosity posed to traditional discourses of power and knowledge into his retelling of the life of Alexander the Great. He had reason for concern since imperial politics had repercussions in Iberian kingdoms where the Emperor enjoyed close diplomatic, cultural, and familial ties through his first wife, Constance of Aragón, daughter of Afonso II of Aragon and Sancha of Castile (Oldfield 321-22; Wagner 73). The marriage of his cousin, Beatriz of Swabia, to Fernando III of Castile in 1219 also strengthened relations between the imperial and Castilian courts (Colmenero López;

Rodríguez López 615). Frederick even corresponded with Fernando's son Alfonso, the future king of Castile and imperial aspirant (Rodríguez López 630).

There is much evidence in the *LAX* linking Alexander to Frederick, leading me to conclude the poem was composed in the aftermath of the issuance of the *Constitutions*, perhaps in 1233, a date Brian Dutton extrapolates from the statement in verse 1799d that six thousand four hundred years have elapsed since the creation of the world (86). The choice of Alexander as a stand-in for Frederick would be a fitting means of indirectly leveling criticism at a powerful ally of the court because the two figures were already linked in the popular imagination and coded allusions to those associations pervade the poem. First of all, there were historical parallels between their conquests: Alexander's peaceful conquest of Jerusalem (1131-1147), for example, may be read as an allusion to the peaceful negotiated entry of Frederick's army of crusaders into the same city in 1229, where he coronated himself King of Jerusalem (Abulafia 184-87). Other more subtle references merit an article-length treatment of their own but a few choice examples will suffice for now. Frederick's mother, Constance, was rumored to have dreamt that a flame issued from her womb while she was pregnant with Frederick, a portent the apocalyptic preacher Joachim of Fiore took to mean that Frederick would be the Antichrist (Katorowicz 4). In the *LAX*, Queen Hecuba has a similar dream when she is pregnant with Paris (348c), who, the poet tells us, was also known as Alexander (360a). What is more, Alexander's connection to Trojan royalty may be read as an allusion to the *imperialis prosapia*, a genealogy of imperial succession proposed by twelfth-century Hohenstaufen chronicler Godfrey of Viterbo, who claimed that the office of emperor could be traced back to Jupiter Ammon through Charlemagne, Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and the kings of Troy and Babylon (Hering 65). The *imperialis prosapia* afforded a rationale for arguing that emperorship predated Christianity and was therefore independent of papal influence. The poet assigns Alexander the exact same ancestry



claimed by Frederick but turns Hohenstaufen genealogy on its head by linking the Babylonian origins of emperorship to Lucifer's fall and the sin of pride (Riva 204). Finally, Alexander's dream of dominating the cosmos may be interpreted as an allusion to Frederick's well-known curiosity about astrologized natural philosophy. Reflecting on his victories over Darius and Porus, Alexander deems his terrestrial conquests insufficient because he has read of seven more worlds in an unnamed treatise:

Dizen las escripturas—yo leí el tratado
que siete son los mundos que Dios ovo dado.
De los siete, el uno abés lo he domado:
¡por esto yo non conto que nada he ganado! (2289)

The treatise he refers to here may be the *Secretum Secretorum*, suggesting that Frederick's detractors believed the Emperor's interest in the astrologized study of nature to have inspired his imperial megalomania. Furthermore, given that the first complete Latin translation of the *Secretum Secretorum* reached European readers through Frederick's court, it may have constituted a material link between Alexander and Frederick in the mind of the poet.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the allusive nature of the references also suggests that the poet wanted the reader to identify Alexander with Frederick without saying so explicitly, perhaps out of fear of retribution from imperial sympathizers at court. The only overt reference to Frederick is a verse which blesses the Lord of Sicily: "El señor de Sezilia—¡que Dios lo benediga!" (2522a). If anyone suspected the poem of criticizing the Emperor, the poet could honestly claim that he literally had nothing but good things to say about him. Similar motives may also account for the poet's decision to remain anonymous.

The coded criticism of Frederick culminates in God's condemnation of Alexander as a "lunático," a polysemous epithet that conflates

¹⁷ Arizaleta ("Transmisión" 225) and Hernando (308-11) have commented on the the poet's familiarity with the *Secretum Secretorum*.

Frederick's imperialist ideology and curiosity with an irrational state of mind. As Michael Gerli observes, lunacy was so-called because it was believed to be induced by the moon (41), a celestial body that, as the foregoing analysis demonstrates, also served as a widely recognized symbol of the office of Holy Roman Emperor. Alexander's lunacy manifests itself after his descent to the bottom of the sea in a bathysphere where his observations of sea life lead him to conclude that the natural order is fundamentally unjust:

Diz'el rëy: "¡Sobervia es en todos lugares!:
 es fuerça en la tierra, e dentro en los mares;
 las aves, esso mismo non se catan por pares.
 ¡Dios confonda tal viçio que tien' tantos lugares!

...

Las aves e las bestias, los omnes, los pescados,
 todos son entre sí a bandos derramados.
 ¡De viçio e de sobervia son todos entecados!:
 ¡los flacos de los fuertes andan desafiados!" (2317, 2320)

As Riva observes, Alexander's adventure to the seafloor alludes to Augustine's unfavorable comparison of the curious-minded to the fishes of the sea in *Confessions* (Riva 42). Yet Alexander's judgement also recalls the writings of Hugh of St. Victor, who characterizes curiosity as a habit of fault-finding born of excessive pride in one's own merits. In his allegorical devotional work *Noah's Ark*, Hugh writes that once a person has learned to think highly of himself, "he disdains to bring his own actions before the bar of reason, and the less he thinks there is within himself that merits blame, the readier he is to hunt down someone else's" (109). This attitude leads to the "vice of curious inquiry . . . [that] makes a habit of chasing after other people's faults without restraint" (109) until it becomes "an evil and unwholesome curiosity" (110). The poet emphasizes Alexander's Victorine curiosity at the conclusion of the bathysphere episode, writing:

Si, como lo sabié el rëy bien asmar
 quisiesse a sí mismo a derechas judgar,



bien devié un poquillo su lengua refrenar,
que tan fieras grandías non quisiesse bafar. (2321)

Thus, Alexander's curiosity results in both epistemological transgressions and moral blindness in that he seeks out faults in nature that he fails to see in himself. Nevertheless, having conquered most of the world, Alexander is in a position to change it as he sees fit, a possibility that the allegorical figure of Nature perceives as an imminent threat: "Tovo la rica dueña que era sobjudgada, / que'l querié él toller la lëy condonada" (2326ab). Nature's fears reveal that the poet's anxieties ultimately concern curiosity's threats to the social order, for just as Alexander seeks to alter Nature's law in the poem, Frederick's *Constitutions* sought to rewrite the natural law of the created world. That God condemns Alexander for proposing to change the natural order in this way speaks to the outrage of those who regarded Frederick's efforts to shift the balance of power in Christendom as an affront to the Church and creation itself.

Given that curiosity has become a key value of modern scientific inquiry, it is tempting to deem the poet's attitude lamentably reactionary. Yet we should remember that Frederick had politicized curiosity by adapting it to his own undeniably despotic ends. Consequently, I propose we regard the poet as a brave scholar who, under threat of reprisal, drew upon his vast learning to write a scathing rebuke of a despot who sought to achieve his own narrow political objectives by promoting self-serving alternative facts about nature and history.

This, then, is the historical and ideological frame within which Alexander's fate in the poem should be understood. Mixing Augustinian and Victorine strains of curiosity, God's condemnation of Alexander's epistemological excess and moral blindness simultaneously passes allegorical judgement on Frederick II:

En las cosas secretas quiso él entender,
que nunca omne vivo non las pudo saber.—

Quísolas Alexandre por fuerça çoñocer;
 ¡nunca mayor sobervia comidió Luçifer!

Aviele Dïos dado los regnos en so poder:
 non sele podié fuerça ninguna defender.
 Querié saber los mares, los Infiernos veer,
 lo que non podié ome nunca acabeçer.

Pesó al Criador que crió la Natura;
 ovo de Alexandre saña e grant rencura.
 Dixo: “¡Este lunático, que non cata mesura
 Yo’l tornaré el gozo todo en amargura!

Él sopo la sobervia de los peçes judgar:
 la que en sí tenié non la sopo asmar.
 ¡Omne que tantos sabe judizios delivrar,
 por qual jüizio dio, por tal deve passar!” (2327-2330)

The epithet *lunático* forms the key link between Alexander and Frederick because the word implicitly invokes the moon, which represents *imperium* in the sun-moon allegory. References to the allegory punctuate the narrative in other subtle yet unmistakable ways, forming a pattern of allusions. Consider, for example, the descriptions of *solgema* and *selenites*, two stones that appear in the Babylonian lapidary:

Solgema echa rayos, faz’ lumbre sobejo:
 podrié a su lumbre çenar un grant çoñejo.
 Creo que selenites val’ menos un poquillejo,
 ca mengua cuemo la luna e creçe en parejo. (1481)

Read as allusions to the sun-moon allegory, it is unsurprising that *selenites*, whose inconstant luminance varies with the lunar phases, is less valuable than the *solgema*, which the poet’s source, Isidore of Seville, associates with the sun (*Etymologies* 324). Then there are the



Scythian ambassadors who warn Alexander against attempting to usurp the sun's sovereignty:

¡En cabo, si oviesses liçençia o vagar,
 aún querriés de to grado en las nuves pujar!
 ¡Querriés de su ofiçio el Sol desheredar!:
 ¡tú querriés de tu mano el mundo alumbrar!

Lo que a Dios pediste bien lo as acabado:
 de Dario eres quito; de Bessus, bien vengado.
 ¡Levántate del juego mientras estás honrado!:
 ¡si se camia la mano, serás bien rebidado! (1921-1922)

Read in terms of the sun-moon allegory, the admonishment against overthrowing the sun once more alludes to Frederick's attempts to displace the Pope as Christendom's supreme authority, implying the emperor should content himself with his prior victories rather than incur God's humbling wrath for his prideful excesses.

The episode of the Trees of the Sun and Moon also fits this pattern. Having conquered Porus's kingdom, Alexander visits the Trees of the Sun and Moon, mystical beings endowed with prophetic powers. When Alexander inquires of the trees whether he will return to his homeland after conquering the world, the Tree of the Sun responds:

Repúsole el un árvol müy fiera razón:
 “Rëy, yo bien entendo la tu entençion;
 señor serás del mundo a poca de sazón,
 mas nunca tornarás en la tu región.” (2490)

Perceiving Alexander's intentions as well as his fate, the tree asserts epistemological superiority over the conqueror by withholding specific details about the circumstances of his death. Although the Tree of the Moon warns Alexander that a traitor will poison him, it fearfully refrains from revealing the traitor's identity:

“Rëy—dixo’l árvol—,— si fuesses sabidor,
 fariés descabeçar luego el traedor:
 el astre del fado— non avrié nul valor;
 avría grant rancura de mí el Criador.” (2493)

The tree’s willingness to help suggests that it sympathizes with the lunatic because of the moon’s allegorical association with *imperium*. Yet by refusing to transgress an epistemological limit, the tree models the humility befitting an emperor in questions pertaining to divine providence. Like the eclipse episode, Alexander’s encounter with the Trees of the Sun and Moon highlights the sinful curiosity inherent in efforts to predict the future while simultaneously alluding to the sun-moon allegory linking Alexander to Frederick.

One of the poem’s final allusions to the sun-moon allegory poignantly recalls Gregory VII’s early conception of the relationship between Pope and Emperor as eyes guiding Christendom. When Alexander is born aloft by a pair of trained griffons, he beholds the earth as a form resembling the human figure in which the sun and moon serve as the eyes (2509b). By associating Gregory VII’s original allegory of the *sacerdotium* and *imperium* as eyes with the sun-moon allegory, the poet seems to imply that the institutions have complementary roles in defending the faith from the threats of Muslim invaders, seen as the “renegade people” who rule Africa, a continent represented by the left leg of the figure (2510). The allusive imagery suggests that, rather than resist the Pope and squander his energies on curious pursuits, Frederick should instead assume his proper role as humble deputy in the defense of Christianity.

Alas, Gregory IX and Frederick never reconciled and the Emperor continued to struggle with the papacy after Gregory’s death in 1241. That same year, a group of Iberian bishops signed a letter pledging opposition to the Emperor. Among the signatories was Laurentius Hispanus, bishop of Orense and glossator of *Solitae* (McManus 28). That these bishops collectively expressed opposition to Frederick suggests that there were others who supported the Emperor’s cause



against the papacy. Such support may have originated in the royal court, for, even after his death in 1250, Frederick's curiosity would cast a long shadow over discourses of knowledge and power at the highest levels of Castilian society: like his Hohenstaufen cousin, Alfonso X commissioned translations of works of astrologized natural philosophy such as the *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* (known in translation as the *Picatrix*) (Pingree; Saif 27-45). Alfonso's *General estoria* wove him into the Hohenstaufen *prosapia imperialis* by drawing liberally from Godfrey of Viterbo's chronicles (Foerster 74-76). The Castilian king also undertook a major legislative reform when he commissioned the *Siete partidas*, a legal code that shares a number of similarities with the *Constitutions of Melfi* (Wagner 77) and includes multiple references to the *Secretum Secretorum* (Bizzarri, "Difusión" 105-6). Finally, Alfonso styled himself as the "sun King" (García Avilés 158), suggesting that he, too, was a lunatic who shared the Hohenstaufen contempt for papal authority. If this brief survey of Alfonsine literature is any indication, the fears of the author of the *LAX* that Frederick's curiosity would have repercussions in Castile seem to have been well founded.

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