

CULTURE AND COSMOS

A Journal of the History of Astrology and Cultural Astronomy

Vol. 22 no 1, Spring/Summer 2018

Published by Culture and Cosmos
and the Sophia Centre Press,
in partnership with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David,
in association with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology
in Culture,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David,
Faculty of Humanities and the Performing Arts
Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales, SA48 7ED, UK.

www.cultureandcosmos.org

Cite this paper as: Helena Avelar de Carvalho, 'Astrology and Sarcasm in Three Medieval Portuguese Songs of Mockery', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 22 no 1, Spring/Summer 2018, pp. 47-55.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue card for this book is available from the British Library

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ISSN 1368-6534

Printed in Great Britain by Lightning Source

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Astrology and Sarcasm in Three Medieval Portuguese Songs of Mockery

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Abstract. This article argues that the basic tenets of astrology were not restricted to astrologers but were known to, and understood by, most people. It presents two thirteenth-century Portuguese songs of mockery describing the misfortunes of a self-proclaimed astrologer and the unpleasant, but hilarious, consequences of his poor understanding of astrology. These songs were also very popular in the thirteenth century among all social groups, from the common people to the royal court. For these jokes to be understood, the public had to recognize at least a few technical terms, otherwise the joke would simply not have worked.

Medieval songs of mockery

The songs of mockery and insult (*cantigas d'escarnho e maldizer*) were a musical genre specifically created to make fun of certain subjects, habits or events. They offered a sarcastic, and often cruel, counterpart of the poetic songs of love (*cantigas de amor*) and songs of the boyfriend (*cantigas de amigo*).¹ While the latter two expressed feelings of love, joy, desire, sadness or longing, the songs of mockery explored the less acceptable fields of sexuality, heresy, social gaffes and physical deformity. No topic was too serious, too sacred or too frightening to be deemed out of bounds. The jokes were always harsh and the language, profane, and yet they were tolerated, even celebrated, because they offered a harmless release for social and personal tensions. As they were

¹ The Portuguese songs of love (*cantigas de amor*) depicted a man singing his love for a woman, while the songs of the boyfriend (*cantigas de amigo*) offered the perspective of the woman, singing her love for a man (even if it was in most cases composed and sung by male troubadours). For medieval musical genres, see B. H. Fowler, *Songs of a friend. Love lyrics of medieval Portugal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), particularly the introduction.

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not bound by social or religious taboos, anyone could be targeted: a farmer, a trader, a clergyman, a nobleman or noble lady, a count, a duke, the king or the pope. Not even the biblical figures were off limits: Adam and Eve, Moses and even Christ could well be the subject of one of these songs.² The pleasure of mocking others was not restricted to jesters and minstrels, but also enjoyed by common people, cultured courtiers, and even by some kings.³ And while the subtlety and sophistication of the jokes varied largely according to the author's culture, their intent remained the same: to isolate a person or situation and make fun of it.⁴

Astrology and humour

The songs here presented were written by Estevão da Guarda (1280-1364), a Portuguese nobleman who lived in the courts of King Dinis (1261-1325) and King Afonso IV (1291-1257). Some of da Guarda's work survived in the National Library Songbook (*Cancioneiro da Biblioteca Nacional*).⁵ It comprises six songs of love, one song of the boyfriend and twenty-eight songs of mockery, the numbers alone clearly attesting to his artistic preferences. Three of his songs of mockery and insult are about Martin Vasquez, a minstrel and self-proclaimed astrologer who aspired to becoming a clergyman; of these three, two

² Examples of biblical jokes in a Jewish context can be found in R. Mellinkoff, *The horned Moses in medieval art and thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), p. 135.

³ See for instance the song full of sexual innuendo written by King Alfonso X the Wise of Castile (1221-1284) to a *soldadeira* (female minstrel) called Maria Balteira, in G. V. Lopes (ed), *Cantigas de Escárnio e Maldizer dos Trovadores e Jograis Galego-Portugueses* (Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 2002), p. 69 (song n° 40).

⁴ For the Portuguese and Galician medieval songs, see M. R. Lapa, *Cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer dos cancioneiros medievais galego-portugueses* (Lisboa: Editorial João Sá da Costa, 1995). For the medieval concept of irony, see S. Gaunt, *Troubadours and Irony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), particularly pp. 5-39, and S. Gaunt and S. Kay (eds), *The Troubadours, an introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also J. Haines, *Medieval song in Romance languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); N. van Deusen, *The cultural context of medieval music* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011); and A. Classen (ed), *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010).

⁵ L. F. Lindley Cintra (ed.), *Cancioneiro da Biblioteca Nacional (Colocci-Brancuti) Cód. 10991* (Lisboa: INCM, 1982).

mention astrology.⁶ Da Guarda accompanied the songs with a brief and ironic explanation:

these songs here above [written] were made to a minstrel who deemed himself an astrologer, and knew nothing [of astrology], and shaved his head [to become a priest], saying that he would have a church, and made a crown,⁷ and turned out bald and without a church; but he had these songs made for him, though.⁸

Apparently, Vasquez decided he wanted to be a priest, hoping to achieve a good church by which to support himself. But to achieve this goal he had to forsake his activities as minstrel and astrologer since both practices had been forbidden to clergymen since the ban imposed by King Alfonso IV in 1352; these songs were probably written shortly after this date.

Estêvão da Guarda is not the only one to make fun of Vasquez. Count Pedro of Barcelos, a protector of the arts, also wrote a song mocking him.⁹ In the song's preface, he refers to Vasquez in derogatory terms, saying that 'he thought he knew astrology and he knew nothing of it', and that he expected large profits, but instead he earned nothing, 'not even crumbs'.¹⁰

⁶ These three songs are analysed in Lapa, *Cantigas de Escárnio e Maldizer*, pp. 517-518, song n° 449; p. 519, n° 450 (with no astrological terms); p. 520, n° 515. The episode is also mentioned in B. M. Liu, *Medieval Joke Poetry: The cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 53-55.

⁷ The term 'crown' refers to the tonsure.

⁸ Estêvão da Guarda explains: '*estas cantigas de cima foron feitas a um jograr que se prezava d'estrólogo, e el non sabia nada e foi-se cercear, dizendo que averia igreja, e fazer coroa, e a cima ficou cerceado e non ouve a igreja; e fezeram-lhe estas cantigas poren*'.

⁹ As this song is incomplete and does not use technical astrological terms, it is not included here. The complete song is registered in Cintra, *Cancioneiro da Biblioteca Nacional*, folio 298 (B 1432) and repeated in folio 298v (B 1432).

¹⁰ Count Pedro's complete preface: '*Esta cantiga suso escrita, que se começa 'Martim Vaasquez noutro dia', fez o Conde a um jograr que havia nome Martim Vaasquez e preçava-se que sabia d'estrelosia e nom sabia en nada; e colheu aí vaidade na mão ca havia d'haver igreja de mil libras ou de mil e quinhentas; e mandou fazer corõa e rossou a barva e foi-se aalém Doiro e nom houve nemigalha; e o Conde fez-lhi esta cantiga.*

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Estêvão da Guarda's songs

The first song describes the unfortunate results of Vasquez's choice.¹¹ Not being able to obtain a position in a rich church, Vasquez ended up in a rather destitute situation, with no income whatsoever, neither from astrology nor from the church. His decision to become a priest was supposedly inspired by astrology, but being a bad astrologer, he got his predictions wrong – and this is the very core of the joke: 'The planets made him silly', says the song. The supreme irony was that 'by the book from which he had learned astrology he swore that he would study it no more'. The joke rests in the paradox: he pledges that he would never study astrology again – but he uses the book on astrology to swear by, as if it were the Bible, therefore recognizing its value.

In the second song Estêvão da Guarda goes into more technical astrological details:¹²

*It is now certain to Martin Vasquez
that he got the planets wrong
Mars and Saturn, unfortunate
whose power he has hidden in himself
for by Mars he was badly wounded in a fight
and by Saturn he got a church
with no sustenance, in a desert place.*

*Other planets, of fortune
he sometimes found in his calendar
but [he found] more [power] from the contrary ones,
which lasts over him.
By one was wounded
and by the other he lost the church
and he has a problem instead of the cure.*

*He shaved the beard and [made] a big tonsure
and cut his mane short
and [cut] his hair close to his ears
hoping by this to get a good church
but Saturn arranged it in such a way*

¹¹ Lapa, *Cantigas de Escárnio e Maldizer*, pp. 517-518 (song n° 449: *Já Martim Vaásquez da estrologia*); full translation at the end of the text.

¹² Lapa, *Cantigas de Escárnio e Maldizer*, p. 520 (song n° 515, *Ora é já Martim Vaásquez certo*); full translation at the end of the text.

*that there is no bread nor wine for communion
nor in the property corn for bread.*

*And as he is the prior of such prebend
he must leave this service and move
[to] a chapel [more] adequate for his person.*

In this song the minstrel uses the astrological meanings of Mars and Saturn, ‘the unfortunate planets’, to make the joke. He states that because of Mars, the planet of war and violence, Vazquez ‘was badly wounded in a fight’ and because of Saturn, the planet of scarcity, he was awarded ‘a church in a desert place’, that is, a poor church with a small congregation, therefore not profitable. Further on, he mentions that Vasquez sometimes found the favourable planets ‘in his calendar’, but they brought him little benefit, as ‘the contrary ones’, that is, the unfortunate ones, were stronger. The allusion to the ‘calendar’ suggests that he might have had access to an almanac, from which he studied the planetary positions and configurations. If this is the case, he would have picked the best days, the days were the benefic planets were stronger, to inform his actions. But even so he obtained no beneficial results, either because he was a bad astrologer and therefore made wrong choices, or because he was so ill-fated that he could never overcome his bad luck.

The attribution of malignant natures to Saturn and Mars and beneficent ones to Venus and Jupiter can be found in the books on astrology that were widely circulated in the Iberian Peninsula in the medieval period, such as *El libro conplido en los iudicios de las estrellas* by Ali ben Ragel, *The Introduction to Astrology* by Alcabitius, and *Tetrabiblos* by Claudius Ptolemy. Ptolemy states that ‘the ancients accepted two of the planets, Jupiter and Venus, together with the Moon, as beneficent because of their tempered nature’ and mentions ‘Saturn and Mars as producing effects of opposite nature’.¹³ Alcabitius states that Mars ‘indicates bloodshed (...) haste, inconstancy, smallness of shame’,¹⁴ and that Saturn ‘indicates melancholy’.¹⁵ Ali ben Ragel, in turn, defines Saturn as ‘old, big and fatigued, a planet of disdain, sorrow, sadness and

¹³ Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, F. E. Robbins (ed) (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 35-45 (p. 39).

¹⁴ *Al-Qabisi (Alcabitius): The Introduction to Astrology*, C. Burnett; K. Yamamoto; M. Yano, (ed), (The Warburg Institute: London, 2004), pp. 63-87 (p. 69).

¹⁵ *Al-Qabisi (Alcabitius): The Introduction*, p. 63.

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long infirmities',¹⁶ and Mars as a planet 'of natural malignancy (...), fond of killing and of slaughters, battles, wars and arguments'.¹⁷ Despite the small variations, these correlations were well known, and, apparently, by both astrologers and non-astrologers.

Final thoughts

The use of technical terms in these songs confirms widespread knowledge of astrological concepts in a casual, non-scholarly, context. Estêvão da Guarda, a minstrel, seems confident that his public (probably courtiers and noblemen) is well acquainted with the topic. He trusts that the irony will not be lost because his public was acquainted with the basic meaning of the planets.

Astrology itself is not the target of the joke but its vehicle; the joke is on Martin Vasquez, his unrealistic hopes, his clumsy career choices, and above all his deficient astrological knowledge. In this case, the astrological references are used as literary devices to mock the unfortunate man. They are taken for granted by both the minstrel and the audience because astrology was a part of medieval culture. It described the world and its natural laws and was present in many aspects of medieval society, not only in important political and medical decisions, but also in more unceremonious events such as these songs.

¹⁶ Ali aben Ragel, *El libro conplido en los iudizios de las estrellas*, Gerold Hilty (ed) (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1954), Book I, p. 12: 'Saturno es la planela uieio, grant, cansado, planeta de despreciamiento e de cuydados e de tristezas e de enfermedades luengas'.

¹⁷ Ali ben Ragel, *El libro conplido*, Book I, p. 46: 'malhetria natural (...), amatar e matanças e varaias e pleytos e contrallar'.

Appendix – The songs

<i>Cantigas de Escárnio e Maldizer – Estêvão da Guarda</i> pp. 517-518 (song n° 449): ‘Já Martin Vaásquez da estrologia...’	
<i>Martin Vasquez of astrology lost faith, for the great mistake of the planets, which brought him damage, in that he was much bold and they ordained him with no benefit, because they do not want to give him a church, and it is [now] forbidden to him to be a minstrel.</i>	<i>Já Martin Vaásquez da estrologia perdeu fiúza, polo grand’engano dos planetas, per que veo a dano, em que tan muito ante s’atrevia; ca o fezeron sen prol ordinar por igreja que lhe non queren dar e per que lh’ é defes’ a jograria</i>
<i>And because this [astrology], off which he once lived is forbidden since he was ordained now he is desperate because of both his practice and the post of clergy and the planets made him silly with no church, no chapel, no money and without the practice [of astrology] from which he used to get nourishment.</i>	<i>E por [que] esto, per que ant’el vivia, llh’ é defeso, des que foi ordinhado, ôi-mais se ten el por desasperado da prol do mester e da clerezia; e as planetas o tornaron fol, sen igreja nen capela de prol e sen o mester per que guarecia</i>
<i>And now he would gladly renounce his ordination, as I got to know because his practice was now forbidden and he is now much worse for he is now a dreamer with a tonsure, and what is worse, to lose his livelihood.</i>	<i>E já de grado el renunçaria sas ordiies, per quant’eu ei apreso, por lhe non seer seu mester defeso nen er ficar en tanta peioria, como ficar como devaneador coroadado, e — o que é peor perder a prol do mester que avia</i>
<i>And in the tonsure, which he wanted to shave</i>	<i>Ena coroa, que rapar queria, leixa crecer a cient’o cabelo</i>

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<p><i>he now lets his hair grow and sometimes he covers it with the cap (which before he would do only in ill will) and what's more: when he lost hope of the planets, he readily understood that tonsure would not give him sustenance.</i></p>	<p><i>e a vezes a cobre con capelo, o que ante'el mui d'anvidos faria; mais d'el: quand'el a esperança perdeu das planetas, des i logu'entendeu que per coroa prol non tiraria.</i></p>
<p><i>By the book from which he had learned astrology, he swore that he would study no more.</i></p>	<p><i>E no seu livro, per que aprendeu astrologia, logu'i prometeu que nunca per ele mais estudaria.</i></p>

<i>Cantigas de Escárnio e Maldizer – Estêvão da Guarda p. 520 (song nº 515): ‘Ora é já Martin Vaásquez certo...’</i>	
<i>It is now certain to Martin Vasquez that he got the planets wrong Mars and Saturn, unfortunate whose power he has hidden in himself for by Mars he was badly wounded in a fight and by Saturn he got a church with no sustenance, in a desert place.</i>	<i>Ora é já Martin Vaásquez certo das planetas que trajia erradas, Mars e Saturno, mal aventuradas, cujo poder trax en si encoberto: ca per Mars foi mal chagade’en peleja, e per Saturno cobrou tal igreja sen prol nen ua en logar deserto.</i>
<i>Other planets, of fortune he sometimes found in his calendar but [he found] more [power] from the contrary ones, which lasts over him. By one was wounded and by the other he lost the church and he has a problem instead of the cure.</i>	<i>Outras planetas de boa ventura achou per vezes en seu calandairo; mais das outras que lh’andan en contrairo, cujo poder ainda sobr’el dura, per ua delas foi mui mal chagado e pela outra cobrou priorado, u ten lazeira en lugar de cura</i>
<i>He shaved the beard and [made] a big tonsure and cut his mane short and [cut] his hair close to his ears hoping by this to get a good church but Saturn arranged it in such a way that there is no bread nor wine for communion nor in the estate corn for bread.</i>	<i>El rapou barva e fez gran coroa e cerceou seu topete espartido e os cabelos cabo do oído, cuidand’aver per i igreja boa; mais Saturno lha guisou de tal renda, u non á pan nen vinho d’oferenda nen de erdada milho pera borõa</i>
<i>And as he is the prior of such a prebend he must leave this service and move [to] a chapel [more] adequate to his person</i>	<i>E pois el ‘e prior de tal prevenda, conven que leix’a cura e atenda a capela igual de sa pessoa.</i>