

The Book of Fortune and Prudence

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Volume 6

The Book of Fortune and Prudence by Bernat Metge
translated into English and Spanish with an introduction and notes
by Antonio Cortijo Ocaña and Vicent Martines

The Book of Fortune and Prudence

Bernat Metge

*translated into English and Spanish
with an introduction and notes by*

Antonio Cortijo Ocaña
Vicent Martines

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Introduction

Bernat Metge (1340/1346–1413)¹

Bernat Metge is one of the most intriguing figures in medieval Catalan letters.² He was born before 1346. His father, Guillem Metge, was probably an *especier* (pharmacist) related to the royal Catalan household. His mother, Agnès, remarried one of Guillem's colleagues, Ferrer Sayol (Saiol), who was a royal secretary working for Queen Eleonor (Elionor) de Prades and Peter IV. Saiol was the Queen's protonotary (chief secretary) since 1365. Sayol was also a translator of *De re rustica* by Palladius and exerted a large influence on Metge's intellectual formation. Probably under his guidance, Metge began his public career in 1371 as registry assistant at the service of Eleanor (Elionor) of Sicily (1371–1375), third wife of Peter IV of Aragon (Peter the Ceremonious, 1319–1387). Riquer points out that his position required a knowledge of Latin, Catalan and Aragonese, as well as basic preparation in Christian doctrine, liberal arts, and basic legal principles. His works also reflect a knowledge of Occitan, French, and Italian.³ Metge entered the royal household of Peter IV of Aragon and Catalonia and served as secretary-mentor for Prince John (the Infante, Duke of Girona and future King John I [Joan I]). He was arrested for obscure reasons in 1381 and in that year he wrote his *Llibre de Fortuna e*

1. See Badia 2010 for an assessment, in English, of the most relevant authors and works in late medieval Catalan literature, among them Metge and both his *Lo Somni* and *Llibre de Fortuna e Prudència*, among others.

2. Badia 2010 has summarized succinctly the relevance of Metge indicating that he is “the best Catalan stylist of all times, the creator of a porous, rich, cultivated prose yet one devoid of hyperbolic excesses. Metge was also the author of texts that were as brief and pleasant to read as they were incisive and intelligent”.

3. As Barnett points out, “in those pre-university days [...], the royal court was an important centre of learning. Prior to the the establishment of the royal chancery, knowledge of Latin had been the preserve of the Church. The rise of an entire army of bureaucrats who were, by profession, experts in reading and drafting documents in Latin and the vernacular is directly related to the increase in the second half of the fourteenth century of translations of secular Latin classics, commissioned by the court. Although at one remove from the principal European cultural centres of the time – Paris, Avignon, Florence, Venice – the royal family were themselves highly educated and well read, and had the means and connections to pursue their literary interests” (10). Part of these introductory pages are based on my prologue to *The Dream of Bernat Metge* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013).

Prudència, an attempt at explaining his tribulations as a divine test of his virtue, moral endurance, and innocence. He continued working for Prince John after the latter's ascension to the throne in 1387 and became secretary-procurator for John and his wife, the French Queen Violante (1390–1396). In 1388 he suffered imprisonment again and composed his *Història de Valter e Griselda* (the letter that opens this work includes his own declaration of innocence). Subsequently he became an administrator for King John I, and was in charge of the tithes that Pope Clement VII had granted this monarch for the pacification of Sardinia. In 1393 he was appointed procurator general of court affairs. Furthermore, in 1395 he was commissioned as ambassador to the papal court at Avignon where he became even more familiar with the new literary humanistic *milieu*. Upon the King's death in 1396 he suffered persecution and imprisonment, and during this time he wrote *Medicina apropiada a tot mal* and particularly *Lo Somni* (between 1398–1399).⁴ After 1399, thanks in part to this latter work, the new King Martí I reinstated him to his previous positions and Metge worked again as royal secretary. In a document from 1405 he signs again as royal secretary, fading from the public view after the king's death in 1410. He died as a private citizen in Barcelona in 1413.⁵

The circumstances of Metge's imprisonment following the death of King Joan I in 1396 remain somewhat elusive. The King's penchant for astrology and his involvement in courtly pleasures raised concerns among some of his courtiers. His adepts seem to have formed a group of innovators at the court who were deemed responsible by his detractors for the King's behavior and the introduction of new morally-reprobate activities. In addition, Metge was involved in representing the Royal Administration against an accusation of embezzlement by the Consell de Cent of Barcelona (these events are referred to in book II of *Lo Somni*). Upon the King's death, his detractors accused several of John I's courtiers of crimes, violence, and immorality making them responsible for the King's behavior and even for his death as a result of a hunting accident near Torroella in the forest of Foixà.⁶ Joan I (1350–1396, called Joan the Hunter, the Lover of Elegance, and the Abandoned) was King of Aragon from 1387–1396. He was a protector of culture in Aragon and the founder in 1393 (at Valencia) of the *jocs florals* (Consistory of Barcelona, Academy of the Gay Science) which imitated the *Consistori del Gay Saber*

4. Some critics, though, suggests an earlier date for this work.

5. Badia points out: "Metge, a Barcelona notary educated in the court of Peter the Ceremonious and Eleanor of Sicily, was the personal secretary to King John I and Queen Yolande de Bar between 1387 and 1396, and starting in 1402 he likewise served Martin I until his death in 1410. The royal letters that Metge wrote in Catalan, Latin and Aragonese are remarkable for their quality" (2010, 56).

6. "The royal court, however, was mired in accusations of corruption and the mismanagement of funds. Distrust of the king and his advisors by the elected urban councils of Barcelona and Valencia led to open hostility between the city councils and the royal chancery" (Barnett 12).

of Toulouse (1323).⁷ Joan I died in a hunting accident in 1396⁸ and was succeeded by his younger brother Martin I (1356–1410, Martin the Elder, *l'Humà*, the Ecclesiastic), who appears not to have shown any particular malevolence towards the accused. A trial of sorts followed and Metge, among others, was imprisoned (suffering either jail or house arrest). This trial ended in December of 1398 with a complete absolution of the accused. *Lo Somni* refers rather ambiguously to these historical circumstances and seems to have been devised in part as a *literary* defense.

Silleras reminds us that Metge composed his *Lo Somni* in Catalan not because of a lack of expertise in Latin but in order to obtain the favor and patronage of King Martí while attempting to regain his position at the Royal Chancery (37–48). *Lo Somni* has been traditionally understood as having been written in prison while awaiting trial. It is also accepted that the work is part of Metge's attempt to exonerate his name of the false accusations against him. On the other hand, Cingolani defends that *Lo Somni*'s intention is not political but exclusively literary. In any case, Metge appears in several documents as having worked in the Royal Chancery after being reinstated in the royal favor (Riquer 173).

Bernat Metge's works

Bernat Metge is the author of seven works whose exact chronology is still being debated by scholars.⁹ The oldest one is probably his *Sermó* (ca. 1381), an irreverent parody in verse of a religious sermon dealing with monetary and misogynistic topics:

7. The purpose of the Consistori was similar to the *joc floral* of 1338 (Lleida), which took place in the presence of Peter IV: to hold poetic competitions in order to pass judgement *super arte dictandi et faciendi pulchra carmina sive cantars*. The winning poets received a golden rose and a piece of expensive satin (*diasprell*). The *Festa de la Gaya Sciència* founded in 1393 was celebrated in honour of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary in Barcelona and was modeled after those celebrated in Toulouse or Paris. The poems submitted were judged by Jaume March II and Lluys d'Averçó, teachers and defenders of poetry. Bernat Metge, while working for Joan I, wrote a letter in 1396 on behalf of the King from Perpignan, informing the city of Barcelona of the imminent arrival of his majesty and requesting funds from the city for the celebration of the *jocs* (Riquer *Història de la literatura catalana*, Barcelona: Ariel, 1964, I, 567). 1394 and 1395 were the only occasions when the *jocs* were celebrated before the death of Joan I.

8. On May 19, 1396, while hunting in the woods near Girona, Joan I fell from his horse. Afterward, the monarch slipped into a coma and died. Joan I was interested in literature, music, hunting... Criticisms were directed towards him for his lavish spending in fashion and hunting, as well as in poets and troubadours. He was also interested in alchemy, astrology, and divination. His apparent lack of interest in administering his realm earned him the moniker of 'The Negligent' ('El Descurat').

9. In addition, he is thought to be the author of a lost *Lucidari*.

‘Seguesca el temps qui viure vol;
 si no, poria’s trobar sol
 e menys d’argent.’
 Per ço que hage bon fundament
 nostre sermó,
 digats amb gran devoció:
 Ave Maria.’

He is also the author of a satirical poem entitled *Medecina apropiada a tot mal*. The *Llibre de Fortuna e Prudencia* (1381) is Metge’s second-most famous work. It has been termed ‘a fantasy in verse’ and has been considered a philosophical treatise rather than a poetic work. It describes an imaginary journey that Bernat, the protagonist and narrator, undertook by boat from the port of Barcelona to an island where the goddess Fortune appears to him. The two characters engage in a dialogue in which Bernat blames the goddess for all his misfortunes. Prudencia and her seven maidens (the seven liberal arts) counsel him to trust in the Divine Providence and renounce his material possessions. After being deemed ‘cured,’ the protagonist is sent back to the port of Barcelona. His most recent editor, Lluís Cabré, has cited among Metge’s literary sources for this work Boethius’ *De consolacione philosophiae*, Alain de Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*, Henry of Settimello’s *Elegy*, as well as Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* and Juvenal’s XIV Satura (against avarice), together with Torroella’s *Faula* and Comes’ *Adventure*. It has long been claimed that this work was composed by Metge while in prison although his involvement in the unfortunate events surrounding the crash of the financial empire of Pere des Caus and Andreu d’Olivella (royal bankers) in 1381 remains obscure. *Història de Valter e Griselda* is a translation from Petrarch’s Latin version of Boccaccio’s famous story of Griselda. This work is dated ca. 1388. Another work composed by Metge is *Ovidi enamorat*, a free translation of an anonymous Latin poem from the 13th century entitled *De vetula*. Only the beginning of his *Apologia* (1395) has come down to us, probably because the work’s topic was later reworked by Metge in *Lo Somni*. It consists of the intimate confession of a character drawing heavily on Petrarch’s *Secretum*.

Lo Somni

Lo Somni (*The Dream of Bernat Metge*) is a dream allegory divided into four chapters or *books*. It was written ca. 1399 and is considered Bernat Metge’s best work. It is extremely innovative within the context of Catalan (and Peninsular) literature of the 1300’s. It consists of a dialogue between Metge-the-character and several participants (in fact the book is a dialogue between Metge and the Classical and Biblical tradition) on the topics of the immortality of the soul, the essence of religion and the dignity and moral essence of the human being. Critics have interpreted Metge’s use of the first person as proof of his moral

solidity and professional excellence. In addition to using many Classical and medieval literary sources, *Lo Somni* can be considered one of the first (if not the first) Humanist book to be ever written in the Iberian Peninsula. Metge wrote *Lo Somni* supposedly while in prison (or in house arrest) following a dubious accusation about his involvement in the death of King Joan I. Metge wrote this work as a personal defense to exonerate himself and as an attempt to gain the confidence of the new King Martí l'Humà and his wife Queen María de Luna. *Lo Somni* adopts the form of a dream vision. In book I, the soul of King Joan I appears to Metge-the-character while in prison and they engage in a dialogue about the immortality of the soul. In book II Tiresias and Orpheus, mythological characters, dialogue with Joan I who explains to them that the destiny of his soul is to reach Purgatory in order to be purified before reaching Heaven. Book III includes Orpheus' account about his life and a description of Hell in the style of Vergil's and Dante's works. Tiresias (using several excerpts from Boccaccio's *Il Corbaccio*) expresses his harsh criticism against women. In book IV, Metge-the-character refutes Tiresias' misogynistic arguments and defends women, including a special praise of Queen María de Luna. *Lo Somni* ends when Metge-the-character is awoken from his dream. This foundational work also touches upon political themes pertaining to the Crown of Aragon, literary fashion and reception of humanist works at the court, as well as on matters of fashion, cultural customs, taste and style.

Lo Somni is divided into four books that narrate a vision or dream by Metge-the-character. In this vision, King Joan I appears to Metge accompanied by Orpheus and Tiresias and the four of them engage in a dialogue.

1. Not long ago, while being in prison (not due to any offenses that my envious pursuers might have known against me, as has been afterwards clearly demonstrated, to their shame, but solely for the antipathy that they had towards me or, perhaps, by some secret judgment of God), a Friday, around midnight, as I studied in the room where I had the habit of spending my time, which is witness to my restless mind, I was assailed by a strong desire to sleep; but getting up I began to pace a bit around the room. However, overcome by sleep, I had to lay in bed and immediately, without undressing, I fell asleep – not in the usual way, but as the sick or famished tend to do. (Book I)

The dialogue focuses on the topic of the immortality of the soul, the destiny of men after death, and the rewards and punishments in the afterlife as a consequence of man's ethical behavior on earth. As one of the most relevant aspects of human ethical behavior, a large part of the book is devoted to the topic of love and a discussion on men's and women's virtues and vices. The book is framed by the historical circumstances of Metge-the-author. Written while in prison (real or metaphorical) and awaiting a resolution about the charges brought against him for his possible involvement in the death of King Joan I, *Lo Somni* is an attempt to clear Metge's good name. Furthermore, the book offers a praise of both King Martí l'Humà and his wife María de Luna, as well as of Joan I's wife Violant de Bar in a clear attempt to ingratiate the author with the new rulers. Finally, *Lo Somni* engages

in a literary and philosophical dialogue through a mixture of humanistic, Classical, and Christian influences. The defense of the dignity of man and the immortality of the soul (book I) is consciously framed within a discussion *de amore* that cautions against human irrationality and obsession with regard to love. Metge's real/metaphorical prison turns into the possible imprisonment of the human mind when it abandons the full exercise of man's intellectual liberty. Man's reason, the exercise of his free will and the help of God's grace are the only antidotes against a Prison of Love which would detract from the superiority (and dignity) of man's soul, which is destined to attain immortality. Metge's dialogue shows an early influence and knowledge of Italian humanist writers (namely Petrarch and Boccaccio) as well as foreshadows the great literature *de amore* of the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th century both in Catalan and in Castilian.

For some scholars, *Lo Somni* is best understood as a trenchant commentary on and criticism of one of King Joan's favourite pastimes: astrology and the occult.

Through the power behind the dream allegory, Metge had the character of the dead king suffer outright for his interest in the occult. Although Metge was under house arrest, a situation I discuss below, he was able to criticize the king via the relative safety of literary figures. In tapping into the emerging culture of humanism, Metge used the direct voices of authoritative figures from classical mythology to deliver indirectly his own withering critiques of the king's actions, and thus avoided the dangerous situation of using his own voice to denounce the late king. (Ryan 157–8)

In sum, *Lo somni* is an extraordinarily innovative work that encompasses several literary genres and reflects a notable knowledge of Latin and Italian literature as well as Theology (Archer 137).

To conclude, drawing from a variety of sources, Metge is capable of conjuring up the Classical and Christian worlds of letters to make them come to his literary and philosophical aid. Metge dialogues with Valerius Maximus as the two of them embark upon a praise of women; he engages in a reflective dialogue about men's moral fiber with Petrarch's *De remediis, Familiares, Seniles* and *Secretum*; he dreams of the immortality of the soul with Cicero, Casiodorus, Gregory, Augustine or Aquinas; he consoles himself with Boetius; he recites both the Old and New Testaments as he tries to find examples of righteous conduct; finally, he reflects with Lull about Muslim and Jewish conceptualizations of the rewards of Paradise and *de vita beata*. And above all, *Lo Somni* is a dream-allegory in which all these sources, literary and philosophical traditions, are put to good use while trying to determine men's moral essence in the midst of the author's grief and suffering. Prompted by a difficult vital situation, Metge rises in the face of adversity and *stands* – as Humanism following Bernad of Chartres and John of Salisbury was fond of saying – *on the shoulders of giants*. (Cortijo & Lagresa 28)¹⁰

10. As Badia notes, "in effect, *Lo somni* can be understood as a palinody of a heretic discredited by the 'sect of Epicurus' who, warned by the apparition of King John, puts his visionary experience into

Llibre de Fortuna e Prudència (MSS copies and Summary of Content)

The *Llibre de Fortuna e Prudència* is an allegorical narrative poem composed of 1294 verses written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets (*noves rimades*) (aabbcc). According to one of its most recent editors (Marco), “el *Llibre de Fortuna e Prudència* juntament amb el *Sermó* i la *Medecina* formen una trilogia d’obres burlesques que pretenen parodiar diversos textos característics de l’Edat Mitjana: els debats, els sermons i els lletovaris, respectivament. Aquesta és la manera d’actuar de Bernat Metge: parodia el gènere literari a partir de l’ús de l’estructura característica del propi text” [the *Book of Fortune and Prudence* together with the *Sermó* and *Medicina* are a trilogy of burlesque works that attempt to parody several types of texts typical from the Middle Ages: debates, sermons, and *electuaria*, respectively. Metge’s *modus operandi* is as follows: he parodies the literary genre by imitating the structure characteristic of the text being parodied].

The poem was (re)discovered at the end of the 19th century by Milà i Fontanals, who gave it its title. It has been preserved in two MSS: Biblioteca de Catalunya, Barcelona, MS 8 (the second volumen of the famous *Cançoners Vega-Aguiló*); and Biblioteca de Catalunya, Barcelona, MS 831, a collection of Metge’s satirical works. In this second version the poem is missing 119 lines.

Probably due to the calamitous banking crisis of the 1380’s, Metge-the-narrator tells the readers that he is in a dire situation “for the world is extraordinary in that some have plenty and others are deprived [...] and man’s will is always deceived by Fortune, who is scarcely governed by Reason.”¹¹

writing in a consolatory work in an effort to rectify his wayward peers. Yet it can also be interpreted as the nightmare of a layman alienated from his faith and an enemy of the Church’s sexual mores who is required to accept against his will the official truth on the survival of the soul after death with the consequence of eternal life in damnation or glory” (2010, 57).

11. Marco ed. points out that “aquesta extrema situació en què es troba Metge s’ha relacionat amb els possibles recels i enveges que el jove Bernadó va poder suscitar a la Cancelleria, a casua del tracte de favor dispensat pel duc de Girona i que es traduïa en la percepció de quantiosos i regulars emoluments i donacions” (Introd.). The beginning of the poem follows quite closely Boethius’ *De consolazione Philosophiae* and Settimello’s *Elegia*. This same scholar points out that “l’obra es pot considerar una justificació per refermar la innocència de l’autor, sobretot si es pren com a referència el paral·lelisme que s’estableix amb *Lo Somni* relacionant-lo amb la finalitat de l’obra. A la seva obra cabdal, Metge apareix als ulls del seu primer lector, el rei Martí I l’*Humà*, com a innocent de les acusacions patides, i així pretén ésser restituit al seu anterior càrrec de privilegi a la Cort” [his work can be considered a justification for defending his innocence, particularly if we compare it to *Lo Somni* and the intention of this latter work...] (Marco ed., Introduction).

The *Llibre de Fortuna i Prudència* [...] is a consolatory text that imitates Guillem de Torroella’s *La faula* (The Fable, 1374), a fantastical narration written by a Majorcan squire in which the main character is kidnapped by a magical whale off the coast of Sóller and led asea to an enchanted isle where King Arthur and the sorceress Morgan le Fey live. The pretext behind the abduction of the main character is to make him the bearer of a disenchanting message about the decline of the knighthood. The mythical king of the