

# Miçer Francisco Imperial and a Dream Vision of Doubt and Faith

Mark Aquilano  
*The University of Arizona*

**M**içer Francisco Imperial, a poet and nobleman from a Genoese merchant family, was living in Seville at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He is one of the most prominent voices featured in the *Cancionero de Baena*, a major collection of 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century lyric poetry compiled in Andalusia around 1445, and is best known today for his dream vision poetry, which belongs to a Western European literary genre rooted in classical Antiquity. At the same time, he was on the vanguard of 15<sup>th</sup> century Castilian verse, as the first known imitator of Dante in the Spanish language.

Francisco Imperial's greatest known work, his *Dezir a las siete virtudes*, a work inspired by a careful reading of the *Divine Comedy* and believed to have been written about 1407,<sup>1</sup> exemplifies many aspects of dream life that would have been appreciated by a culturally aware medieval reader. I propose to show how the dream theory of Macrobius, which continued to be highly regarded in the late Middle Ages, can provide fresh perspectives on Imperial's approach to the allegorical dream vision. At the same time, I wish to demonstrate how Imperial's *Dezir* represents a tightly woven, miniature narrative that has much affinity with a genre that Robert McMahan has called the "medieval meditative ascent," which includes the literary dream vision.

The 5<sup>th</sup> century Roman Neoplatonist Macrobius used Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* as a springboard for elaborating a theory of soul and dream life and for commenting on the nature of literary allegory, in addition to its many scientific contributions. In his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* Macrobius concisely presents five basic categories of dreams: He begins by dismissing what he considers to be the two lower dream experiences as "not worth interpreting."<sup>2</sup> The first of these, the *insomnium*, or nightmare, results from physical disturbances such as overeating and drinking or from psychological distress coming from the affairs of daily life. The second type of dream, the apparition, or *visum*, is a more complex barrage of fleeting imagery, and takes place in a state of half-sleep.<sup>3</sup>

Macrobius believed that three dream types of dreams are significant for the philosophical person who wishes to follow the path of liberation of the soul. In the *oraculum* an unambiguous communication from a higher spiritual being grants the dreamer forms of knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible to his time-bound waking consciousness.<sup>4</sup> The *visio* is, by contrast, even more transcendent,

allowing the dreamer a direct glimpse of the future.<sup>5</sup>

The final category of dream, called “enigmatic” or *somnium*, has the central role in Macrobius’ classification and the greatest relevance for the study of medieval dream allegory. Where the oracular and prophetic dreams give transparent messages from higher worlds, the enigmatic type communicates by means of the symbolic language of dream imagery, in line with Macrobius’ belief that certain types of spiritual truths must be communicated indirectly.<sup>6</sup>

The great emphasis Macrobius places on the allegorical nature of dreaming provides a fruitful point of contact for enriching our understanding of the literary dream vision genre.

Robert McMahan sees the protagonist in the meditative ascent text as a roaming pilgrim in search of God.<sup>7</sup> The meditative ascent is essentially autobiographical, and the pilgrim has a special relationship to the “I” of the narrative voice. McMahan stresses that modern scholarship has rarely appreciated the protagonist in his twofold nature: on one level the as “pilgrim” making the journey in the present and, on the other, as the “poet” who narrates the journey retrospectively.<sup>8</sup> The pilgrim figure, living in the narrative present of the journey, has no sense of its ultimate destination. The poet, on the other hand, is always fully aware of each step along the way and of how these wanderings will end.<sup>9</sup> As the pilgrim advances along the path he grows in knowledge and becomes a fuller reflection of the poet.<sup>10</sup> This is part of what McMahan calls the “progressive transformation” of both the pilgrim figure and of basic, reiterated concepts that often take the form of key words.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Dezir a las siete virtudes* Imperial’s pilgrim figure begins his dream journey in a placid meadow containing a rose garden at dawn

on a clear spring day. In this semi-formalized setting, which is already removed from the confines of ordinary life, he tells us that he falls into a waking dream:

çerca la ora qu’el planeta enclara,  
al oriente, que es llamada Aurora,  
fuéme a una fuente por lavar la cara  
en un prado verde que un rosal enflora;  
e así andando, vínome a essa ora  
un grave sueño, maguer non dormía,  
mas contemplando la mi fantasía  
en lo que el alma dulce assabora.<sup>12</sup>

This level of half-awake reverie corresponds only partially with Macrobius’s classification of the *visum* or apparition: “In this drowsy condition he thinks he is still fully awake and imagines he sees specters rushing at him or wandering vaguely about, differing from natural creatures in size and shape, and hosts of diverse things, either delightful or disturbing.”<sup>13</sup> The pilgrim of Imperial’s *Dezir* although between sleep and waking, is in a state of sweet and spiritually receptive repose. The half sleep of the *visum* here is no longer the unproductive mode of consciousness described by Macrobius.

The minimalism of Imperial’s nature scene, which will later be complemented by a religiously restrained depiction of a meditative garden in the tradition of Marian poetry such as Berceo’s *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, contrasts with the complexity of the symbolic imagery the pilgrim encounters in the eastern sky:

En sueños veía en el Oriente  
quatro çercos que tres cruces fazían,  
e non puedo dezir complidamente  
cómo los quatro e las tres luzían.  
Empero atanto que a mí movían  
como movió Glauco gustar la yerva,  
porque fue fecho de una conserva  
con los dioses que las mares regían.<sup>14</sup>

Such use of visionary material in narrative poetry is central to the medieval notion and practice of allegory. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century British Hispanist C.R. Post offers the following succinct definition of this literary tradition: "I mean by allegory that literary type which crystallizes a more or less abstract idea by presenting it in the concrete form of a fictitious person, thing or event. [...] Allegory starts with an idea and creates an imaginary object as its exponent."<sup>15</sup> This fits well with Macrobius' description of the psyche's operations in what he calls the "enigmatic dream": "By an enigmatic dream we mean one that conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding."<sup>16</sup>

An interpretation of this imagery can be facilitated through an examination of its literary sources. This passage, which borrows freely from Dante's *Paradiso* I.37-42 and 67-69, refers to the sun's rising on the day of the vernal equinox, when it appears at exactly the point where the four circles of the horizon, the equator, the zodiac and the colure of the equinoxes intersect to form three crosses.<sup>17</sup> Dante scholars have traditionally interpreted these circles as representing the four cardinal virtues and the crosses the three theological virtues.<sup>18</sup> John Freccero, interpreting Dante's version, explains that "The sun at this balance point, *Sol iustitiae*, appears to the man whose appetites [...] and reason [...] are in near perfect balance."<sup>19</sup> At this juncture in the Divine Comedy, Dante stands at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory in the Earthly Paradise of Eden, and is spiritually prepared to leave the Earth and begin his cosmic journey into the nine celestial circles which will culminate in the beatific vision in the Empyrean, or realm of Heaven. The pilgrim in Imperial's *Dezir* begins

his journey in a similar, blessed garden space where it is possible to begin to acquire virtue.

Dante's reference to Glaucus, taken from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (XIII: 904-968), in which this simple fisherman eats of a holy grass and is transformed into a god of the sea, is seen by critics as a symbol of the reversal of Adam's fall from grace and a return to a state of spiritual innocence.<sup>20</sup> Imperial's reference to his passage emphasizes that his protagonist is on a journey of inner renewal.

The vision of Imperial's pilgrim has thus been widened beyond the constraints and personal cares of his earthbound personality, as we see his attention taken up fully by the astonishing heavenly signs. In this sense his dream is more specifically a "universal" enigmatic dream, which Macrobius tells us happens when the dreamer: "dreams that some change has taken place in the sun, moon, planets, sky, or regions of the earth."<sup>21</sup> In his analysis of this aspect of Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* Macrobius tells us that: "[...] by gazing up and down [Scipio] was initiated into the wonders of the heavens, the great celestial circles, and the harmony of the revolving spheres, things strange and unknown to mortals before this; in addition he witnessed the movements of the stars and planets and was able to survey the whole earth."<sup>22</sup> Our pilgrim, like Cicero, will be taken far beyond the limits of ordinary space and time.

Imperial's protagonist is met by a benevolent, elderly figure with a long white beard. The gilded script of the opening lines of the *Inferno* adorning the book he is carrying identifies him as the spirit of Dante:

Era en vista benigno e suave,  
e en color era la su vestidura  
çeniza o tierra que seca se cave,  
barva e cabello alvo sin mesura.

Traía un libro de rica escriptura,  
 escripto con oro muy fino,  
 e començava *En medio del camino*,  
 e de laurel corona e çentura.<sup>23</sup>

E la segunda el árbol abraçava  
 que de una piedra de cristal nacía  
 e en doze ramos qu'el árbol tendía  
 del Credo doze artículos mostrava.

This gives to the dream an aspect of the Macrobian category of the *oraculum*: “We call a dream oracular in which a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and what actions to take or to avoid.”<sup>24</sup>

In the *Divine Comedy* Cato plays an identical role, serving as the guardian of the Mountain of Purgatory, appearing in Cantos I.31-108 and II.118-23. He is pictured with a flowing white hair and beard and his face shines with the light of four stars representing the four cardinal virtues. Although he was a pagan who took his own life, he is assigned this worthy role of ushering souls into this realm of purification. Dante had a deep veneration for Cato, a first century B.C.E. Roman military leader and statesman, and saw his suicide as an ultimate act of defiance and unwillingness to submit to Caesar’s tyranny<sup>25</sup>

Consistent with Macrobius’ sense of the oracular dream, Dante will bring to the protagonist of Imperial’s poem a form of knowledge that would likely have been completely opaque to his waking consciousness. Dante takes him by the hand and guides him through the rose garden, where he begins to hear a chorus of angelic voices singing, and urges him to behold the spectacle of seven stars or maidens who are the visible manifestations of the seven virtues. Consistent with Macrobius’s description of the enigmatic dream, the virtues are shown with corresponding regalia that, for full comprehension, require an act of interpretation:

The tradition of the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude dates back to classical Antiquity and was Christianized by the 4<sup>th</sup> century Saints Ambrose and Augustine, yet not concretized as a Catholic doctrine until the 13<sup>th</sup> century writings of Thomas Aquinas. The three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity were introduced by St. Paul in his letter I Corinthians 13:13. St. Thomas considered the cardinal virtues to be designed for human happiness<sup>26</sup> and the theological virtues to be “quasi-divine” and not of “human nature,” designed for the benefit of mankind’s relationship with God.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the seven Virtues were seen as one of the nine angelic hierarchies. When Beatrice reveals these nine orders to Dante in *Paradiso* 28.98-126, each corresponding to one celestial sphere, she follows St. Paul’s teaching in Ephesians Chapter 1:20-21, placing the Virtues in the middle of the second triad, lower than the Dominions but higher than the Powers, and belonging to the sphere of the planet Mars.<sup>28</sup> The second star maiden depicted here represents the theological virtue of Charity. The imagery of the tree of life, planted in a bed of crystal, is clearly drawn from the Book of Revelations 22:1-2,<sup>29</sup> while the reference to its 12 branches has much in common with a description of the tree given in St. Bonaventure’s *Lignum vitae*.<sup>30</sup>

After introducing the pilgrim figure to all of the seven virtues, Dante grants him terrible visions of the seven corresponding vices, which are depicted as serpents. Critics have seen each serpent as symbolic of a corrupt political

or religious personage of Imperial's day. The narrative tension reaches its highest point as the pilgrim launches an invective against the evils of his native city of Seville.

The motif of the dawn then returns, depicted here self-referentially as a time of day when dreaming is purging the pilgrim's mind of futile anxiety:

Ca si çerca el alva la verdat se sueña  
Quando la fantasía vuestra descansa,  
a ti averná como a fèrmosa dueña  
que con dar buelta su dolor amansa;  
antes que cumpla la bestia mansa  
çiento con çiento e quarenta lunarios,  
tirando los mantos e escapularios,  
ca ya de vos sufrir la tierra cansa.

McMahon sees the recapitulation of motifs as central to the unfolding of a meditative ascent: "In its literary manifestation, the journey wends its way upward through many "levels of discourse," seen explicitly in "central themes and key words" which are reiterated as the journey progresses.<sup>31</sup> There is a developing of these themes, reaching toward "deeper principles of our human being" that are "ever more fundamental, more general, more lasting, more universal."<sup>32</sup>

At this point in the poem, however, we are back in the realm of Macrobius's enigmatic dream, and unfortunately we are the lacking substantive context, both from Imperial's life and the historical moment in which he was writing, to be able to fully decipher the enigmatic prediction Dante reveals to the dreamer. Dorothy Clotelle Clarke<sup>33</sup> and Rafael Lapesa,<sup>34</sup> however, both believe that Imperial was in fact writing in the present, evoking an atmosphere of corruption and strife choking the city of Seville, and imagining a time 20 year hence when King

Juan II would reach maturity and bring justice, the virtue who Dante mentions in the following strophe, back to his kingdom. (18:45)

The dawn, which earlier was seen as a time of inner freedom, now takes on a deeper colorization as a time of a hoped-for return of the quality of justice to human society. In contrast to the conceptual purity of a meditative ascent such as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which is oriented primarily toward an understanding of theological principles and the revelation of divine love, here a materialistic sheen covers Imperial's vision narrative, as justice, a virtue expressly created for human happiness in the earthly realm, is connected to a keenly desired turn of political events. The pilgrim is seeking a solution for deep personal anguish in a change in the affairs of the world, and Dante, while promising a brighter future, nevertheless calls him to task for his obsessive worry.

This materialistic concern will, however, be ultimately dissolved. The ending strophe of the poem brings us back yet again to the dawn motif, now striking a note of final resolution of all conflict and anxiety:

E como en mayo en prado de flores  
se mueve el aire en quebrando el alva,  
suavemente buelto con olores,  
tal se movió acabada la salva.  
Feríame en la faz e en la calva  
e fallé en mis manos a Dante abierto  
en el capítulo que la Virgen salva.

Much of the nature imagery here comes from *Purgatorio* 24.145-150, and the chapter indicated here by the pilgrim, in which Dante lauds the Virgin Mary, is *Paradiso* 33.

The endpoint of a meditative ascent, called by McMahon its "fulfillment," represents the greatest expression of the work's central

ideas, and is carefully foreshadowed in the narrative development.<sup>35</sup> On a conceptual level a fulfillment can work at the level of character development, either amplifying a protagonist's basic virtue or resolving his greatest weakness.<sup>36</sup>

We have now returned to the setting of the opening scene, here compared to a meadow of flowers in May, a month that had an ancient resonance in Western cultures as a time for celebrating the regeneration of life and that became associated with the Virgin Mary.<sup>37</sup> The pilgrim in Imperial's *Dezir* a las siete virtudes has suffered the under the burden of two basic vices that fall within Dante's categorization of moral temperaments in the *Divine Comedy*. He has fallen sway to wrath, directed against a city of Seville that falls short of his idealistic vision, and sloth in the form of doubt, in his tendency to ruminate and suffer needlessly about theological and political questions that his ordinary mind cannot resolve. Through Dante's guidance, he has now acquired the corresponding virtues of charity, in its guise of patient acceptance, and of zealous faith. His lightened heart and clarified mind have led him to the gentle yet chastening vernal breezes that both wound and awaken him, and to Dante's narration of his encounter with an intense feminine manifestation of divine wisdom and love. The dream of Imperial's *Dezir*, densely packed with an enigmatic celestial and religious symbology and with both wonderful and terrifying visions, requiring the presence of a benevolent guide from the spirit world for their proper understanding, has resolved on a translucent note of deep peace, forever changing the poet, who has now looked back and shared his transformative voyage.

## Notes

1 Rafael Lapesa, "Notas sobre Francisco Imperial," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*

7 (1953): 342. Also see Edwin B. Place, "Present Status of the Controversy over Francisco Imperial," *Speculum* 31 (1956): 481-2.

2 Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. William H. Stahl (New York: Columbia U.P. 1952) I.iii.3, p. 88

3 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.7, p. 89

4 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.8, p. 90

5 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.9, p. 90

6 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.10, p. 90

7 McMahan, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent: Augustine, Anselm, Boethius, and Dante* (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2006) 61

8 McMahan, *Understanding* 44

9 McMahan, *Understanding* 44

10 McMahan, *Understanding* 45

11 McMahan, *Understanding* 62

12 Francisco Imperial, "Dezir de Miçer Françisco Imperial a las siete virtudes," *Cancionero de Juan Alfonso de Baena*, ed. Brian Dutton and Joaquín González Cuenca (Madrid: Visor Libros, 1993): vv. 9-16, pp. 306-7

13 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.7, p. 89

14 Imperial, "Dezir a las siete virtudes" vv. 41-48, p. 307

15 Chandler Rathfon Post, *Medieval Spanish Allegory* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1971) 3-4

16 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.10, p. 90

17 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. and ed. Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007) 22

18 John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P. 1986) 84

19 John Freccero, *Dante* 84

20 Dante, *Paradiso* 23-24

21 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.10, p. 90

22 Macrobius, *Commentary* I.iii.13, p. 91

23 Imperial "Dezir a las siete virtudes" vv. 97-104, p. 309

24 Macrobius *Commentary* I.iii.8, 90

25 "Ante-Purgatory: Cantos 1-5," *Dante Worlds*, University of Texas at Austin, February 2, 2010 <<http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/purgatory/01antepurgatory.html>>.

26 Saint Thomas Aquinas, "Q 1, xi, aa. 1," *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, ed. Kevin Knight, 2008,

February 2, 2010 <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2061.htm#article1>>

27 Saint Thomas Aquinas, "Q 1, xii, aa 1" <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2062.htm>>

28 Richard Kay, *Dante's Christian Astrology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) 141-42

29 Cf. *New American Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 1991) 1297: "Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of its street. On either side of the river grew the tree of life that produces fruit twelve times a year, once each month; the leaves of the tree serve as medicine of the nations." *New American Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 1991) 1297

30 Cf. Saint Bonaventure, "Prologue to Tree of Life, Sect. 2," *Bonaventure*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 120: "Picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain that becomes a great and living river with four channels to water the garden of the entire Church. From the trunk of this tree, imagine that there are growing twelve branches that are adorned with leaves, flowers and fruit."

31 McMahan, *Understanding* 3

32 McMahan, *Understanding* 60

33 Dorothy Clotelle Clarke, "The Passage on Sins in the "Decir a las siete virtudes," *Studies in Philology* 59.1 (1962) 28

34 Rafael Lapesa, "Notas" 342

35 McMahan, *Understanding* 22

36 McMahan, *Understanding* 24-5

37 James F. Burke, "Carnival and May: The *Milagros* of Berceo," *Desire Against the Law* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1998) 119