



LANGUAGE, INTENTION, AND DECEPTION: A CASE FOR IRONY IN JUAN DE MENA'S *LABERINTO DE FORTUNA*

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Abstract

... Irony is a double-layered or two-story phenomenon. At the lower level is the situation either as it appears to the victim of irony (where there is a victim) or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist (where there is an ironist). At the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer ... In the second place there is always some kind of opposition between the two [layers], an opposition that may take the form of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility ... (Muecke 1970)

Through the application of ironical poetic theory; the identification and examination of the poet's purpose and tactics; the identification and analysis of the two incongruent layers, this study forewarns Juan de Mena's observer not to be deceived by appearance and be aware of the reality that the poet is intentionally hiding behind a giant smokescreen called irony in his masterly work, *Laberinto de Fortuna*, with the sole purpose of securing and strengthening his own professional relationship with King John II.

Keywords

Appearance, Incongruity, Reality

Irony has been a major textual and critical strategy in modern literature. The traditional notion of irony is stating the opposite of what one means where there is a contrast between the apparent and the intended meaning. In modern times, irony is associated with ambiguity, incongruity, and inadequacy where there is still a contrast between the apparent and the intended meaning.

In *The Compass of Irony*, Douglas Muck, defines irony as "Ways of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting in which the real or the intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with the pretended meaning". My main reason for choosing this definition of irony by Muck is the use of the two words "intentionally" and "incompatible."

It is the purpose of this study to probe and analyze one of the fundamental features of irony - namely, the existing contract, incongruity between reality and appearance in Juan de Mena's *Laberinto de Fortuna* in order to manifest that in writing this literary text, Mena intentionally used irony (reversal of the "reality") as his poetic ingredient in order to present a political ideal with the purposes of securing and strengthening his own professional relationship with King John II. In order to attain this goal, first, I shall examine the socio-political (historical) situation during Mena's time, in particular the reign of King John II. In addition, I shall direct my focus on Mena's presentation (fictional) of the political situation and, specifically, his presentation of King John II in the *Laberinto*. Moreover, I shall present to my audience the evidence (historical sources) which will support my thesis for Mena's purpose of writing an ironic text. Furthermore, I shall identify the existence of two incompatible layers: fictional versus historical and, I shall compare these two layers against one another in order to identify and examine the incongruity between these two polar layers. In the final stages of this study, I shall draw parallels between the existing incongruity (reality/historical versus appearance/fictional).

Let us proceed by examining the socio-political situation during Mena under the reign of King John II, the son of Prince Henry III, and the grandson of King John I. He was born in the monastery of Saint Alfonso in the city of Toro on March 16, 1405. He began his reign on Christmas day 1406, at the age of twenty-two months, where he reigned for forty-seven years (Didier, 1978). In addition to his strong physical appearance, he was a good poet who had a passion for literature. During his time, the first collection of the courtly lyrics *Cancionero de Baena* (a collection of six hundred poems by more than fifty authors) by Alfonso de Baena was dedicated to him in 1445 (Crow, 1985).

In contrast to his fine, strong physical appearance and his strong commitment to the literary court, John II was a weak, inept political leader who was subject to his constable's, Alvaro de Luna's guidance and advice who served him for many years in the most professional way, but, at the end, was condemned to death for treason.

The reign of John II (Crow, 1985) has been studied by critics and historians such as John A. Crow (Didier, 1978), Jean T. Didier (Pérez de Guzmán, 1924), and Fernán Pérez de Guzmán who identified the king a weak and incompetent political leader. In *John II of Castile and the Grand Master Álvaro de Luna*, Didier described the reign of King John II in the following manner:

During his times there were in Castile more revolts and submissive moments, and damaging and dangerous evil, than there ever were in the times of previous kings for a period of hundred years (from which plenty of danger came to his person and reputation and kingdom) so great was his negligence in the government, giving himself to other endeavors, more pleasant and detectable than useful and honorable, that he never wanted to deal with those problems, but left all this responsibility to his constable... For in the king's revenue and treasury, and in his household, and in the kingdom's justice, not only was everything done by order of the constable, but nothing was done without his consent (Pérez de Guzmán, 1924).

Interestingly, the same view is shared by Fernán Pérez de Guzmán in his study, *Generaciones y semblanzas* where he affirms:

... Este rey ... nunca una sola quiso entender ni trabajar regiminetto reino aunque en su tiempo fueron en Castile tantas rebueltas e mouimientos e males e peligros cuantos no uou en tiempo de reyes pasados ...

The aforementioned descriptions by the two historians, Didier and, Pérez de Guzmán reflect the true socio-political situation during the reign of John II, a disordered situation caused by an inept monarch whose real identity Mena intentionally protected and disguised in the verses of the *Laberinto de Fortuna* his masterful literary handiwork which he finished in February of 1444 (Carballo Picazo, 1952). Carballo Picazo cites the source to Mena's arrival at the royal court where he presented the *Laberinto* to the King, John II which is found in the *Próspera fortuna de don Álvaro de Luna y adversa de Rey López Dávalos* (primera parte, jornada II, escenas VIII y IX) attributed to "Tirso de Molina," where Pablillos states:

Vengo podrido
De un poeta que ha venido
De allá, de Córdoba, y trae
Un libro que ha dedicado
A Tu Majestad

Afterwards, Mena manifests to the king that he has dedicated the work to him:

Sírvase Tue Majestad
De recibille. Trescientas,
Son las coplas, Tú me alietnas,
tú eres, señor, mi caudal.
Mi voluntad manifiesta
Es de escribir tu hazañas
Siendo Rey de dos Españas (1872a).

The king promises Mena help by stating:

Mucho estimo en conoceros
Que muy inclindado soy
A los verso, y desde hor
Por maestro he de teneros,
Pues sois castellano Apolo (1872b).

At this stage, let us proceed by entering Mena's *Laberinto* in order to explore the world that the poet's verses create and, in addition, view the picture that he depicts for his observer. The opening verses of the poem: "Al muy prepotente don Juan el Segundo, aquél con quien Júpiter tuvo tal zelo..." immediately give rise to a dynamic contrast between reality/historical and appearance/fictional. Furthermore, these initial verses manifest Mena's use

of irony (reversal of the "reality") through the use of false, irrelevant or inappropriate praise. Throughout the poem, Mena ironically praises King John II by addressing him in the following manner:

muy grand señor, (81b)
 príncipe legislador, (81c)
 vuestra sacra e rea majestad, (98 a)
 señor valeroso, (114 a)
 nuestro buen Cesar, (117 f)
 poderoso grand rey, (134 a)
 magnífico príncipe, (135 a)
 muy claro príncipe rey escogido, (212 a)
 principe bueno; rey muy justo, (230 a)
 lunbre de España, (230 c)
 nuestro grand rey e fiel, (270 f)
 rey de reyes, señor de señores, (271 a)

In addition to the use of false and inappropriate praise, Mena pretends to give advice (pretended advice) to the king:

Como las telas que dan las arañas
 las leyes presentes non sean atales
 que pretenden los flacos viles animales,
 é muestran en ellos sus lánguidas sañas. (82)

The two aforementioned techniques (false praise and pretended advice) give rise to the following Question—why does Mena use these two elements in the *Laberinto*? Critics such as Gimeno Casaldueiro and Dorothy Clark consider them as a way of encouraging the politically weak king into political activities. This study respects and values the two critics' conclusions), but it deviates from them by affirming strongly that in writing the *Laberinto* Mena employed these two essential techniques in order to first, ironically praise the king, and, second, avoid any indication (to his observer) that would identify him as being ironical.

Aside from irrelevant praise and the utilization of pretended advice, Mena skillfully uses another poetic tactic—namely, astrological allusions with the purpose of presenting a political ideal through the use of the four planets: Moon, Sun, Mars and Jupiter which represent the four cardinal virtues: Chasity, Prudence, Fortitude and Justice that are essential elements of good government. At this point the opportunity should not be missed of pointing out that in addition to the presentation of the four cardinal virtues within the four planets, Mena also places the King, John II in three of these planets (Moon, Mars and Jupiter) in order to "ironically" glorify the king in the following manner:

Al nuestro rey magno bienaventurado
 vi sobre todos en muy firme silla,
 dino de reyno mayor de Castilla,
 velloso león a sus pies por estrado:
 vestido de múrice ropa de estado,
 e rica corona la mano siniestra,
 más prefulgente que el cielo estrellado. (221)

In addition to the aforementioned elements, Mena also utilizes ironic foreshadowing in order to prophesize a glorious future for the King, John II by stating:

Será rey de reyes, señor de señores,
 sobrando e venciendo los títulos todos,
 sus fechos ilustres a tu rey darán,
 que en su claro tiempo del todo serán
 con el olvidados sus antecesores (271).

Thus, we see that through the use of poetic devices: ironic foreshadowing, astrological allusions, false and inappropriate praise, Mena converts the politically weak and incompetent King John II to an ideal political figure that he never was.

According to many writers, Mena was always in good terms with King John II. He was his Companion on his trips, and he always exchanged verses with him. One of these writers, Carballo Picazo, in his study "Juan de Mena: un documento inedito y una obra atribuida," reproduced the document in which John II donated a part of Alvaro de Luna's estate after Luna's execution to Mena. In his study Picazo affirms:

Una de las decisiones inmediatas del Rey fue recuperar los bienes que tan generosamente había concedido a su privado. En el nuevo reparto de mercedes correspondieron a Mena 13.000 maravedís durante toda su vida cada año, de las rentas de la tahurerías que en Córdoba habían sido confiscados al Condestable... El Rey explica el motivo de la merced: "en alguna emienda e remuneración de los buenos e leales servicios que me auedes fecho e hacedes de cada día" ...

Furthermore, according to Picazo, Moreto refers to Mena's economic situation when Don Félix, one of the characters of the play, affirms:

El Petrarca en Francia fué
riquísimo, y laureado
del Pontífice Sagrado
de Roma; y acá se ve
que el Rey Don Juan el Segundo
hizo rico a Juan de Mena,
y estimó en su aguda vena
aquel discurso profundo. (29)

The aforementioned sources support our thesis with respect to Mena's motive, purpose of writing an ironic text by which he was able to maintain and strengthen his professional relationship with King John II, and, at the same time, raise his own reputation as well as socio-economic status. Previously, in sections two and three of this study, we have examined, separately, the sociopolitical situation (historical) during Mena's time and, also, his "ironic" presentation (fictional) of King John II throughout the poem. At this stage, let us proceed by bringing these two layers (fictional versus historical) together in order to probe and identify the existing incongruity in the poem and, at the same time, reveal the truth that Mena has been hiding within the complex verses of falsehood which he has "ironically" labeled as the *Laberinto de Fortuna*. In order to compare the two layers: fictional versus historical, let us focus on the nine-fold structural division of Mena's poem that this study proposes.

Part I-- Dedication to John II (1-8) ; Part II--Attribution to the Fortune (9-16); Part III--Encounter with Providence (17-33); Part IV--Geographical Description, Confusion of the World (34-55); Part V--Presentation of the Seven Circles and the Three wheels (56-60); Part VI--Circles I-IV--Emphasis on the Past-Providential Realm (61-137); Part VII--Circles V-VII--Emphasis on the Present-Fortune's Realm (138-268); Part VIII--Emphasis on the Future-Re-establishment of Order-Providential Order (269-295); and Part IX--John II's Triumph (269-297).

Upon referring to the parts of this schematic division, the observer notices (based on what he already knows of the socio-political situation under the reign of John II and what Mena presents in the text) a contrast, an incongruity that gives rise to the two polar layers: fictional versus historical. Upon comparing Mena's initial verses against the historical background, the observer instantly notices a drastic contrast between Part I (at the fictional layer) and Part VII (at the historical layer)—that is to say, the ironic praise of the king in the initial verses of the poem is in direct conflict, contrast with the historical reality (John II, an inept monarch). In Part II (at the fictional layer) the same observer notices that through the use of the fortune topos, Mena reverses the truth by blaming Fortune and not John II as the cause of chaos and disorder that surrounded the society of that time. Similarly, in Part III (at the fictional layer), Mena introduces the theme of Providence in order to shift his observer's focus from the disastrous present (John II's deficiencies) towards an orderly past. In Part IV (at the fictional layer), he focuses on the confusion of the world in order to distract the observer's attention from the "reality" of the state of affairs of the present (Castile under the reign of John II). In Part V (at the fictional layer) via astrological allusions, Mena attempts to present his political ideal by focusing on the four planets (Moon, Sun, Mars and Jupiter) and by placing the four cardinal virtues (Chasity, Prudence, Fortitude and Justice) which are crucial for ideal government within these four planets. In Part VI (at the fictional layer) through the use of the theme of Providence he attempts to avoid the disastrous situation of the present by focusing on the past. In Part VII (at the fictional layer), Mena once again uses the fortune topos for the irony of the events of the present. At this point, it is imperative to point out that at the historical layer, it is this particular part that is in conflict with all the parts that comprise the fictional layer. Similarly, the incongruity between the two layers continues where in Part VIII as well as Part IX (at the historical layer) the observer notices a direct contrast (based on what Mena prophesizes) with respect to the events of the future and John II's greatness in the future.

Thus, upon comparing the two incongruent layers— namely, the fictional versus the historical we can conclude by stating: "irony is not merely a matter of seeing a 'true' (fealty) meaning beneath a 10 'false' (appearance), but of seeing a double exposure... on one plate." Thus, through the analysis of the "double exposure," fictional and historical we have revealed the "true" meaning beneath the "false" of one plate, a plate on which Juan de Mena had ironically engraved the words *Laberinto de Fortuna*.

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