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«ROTA FORTUNE CONTINUE VOLVITUR»: THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE IN MEDIEVAL PREACHING

The nexus between the Wheel of Fortune and preaching has been well-established in sermon studies since the classical *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* by George Owst. Almost a century ago, Owst stated that among the creations of «the medieval artist none made greater appeal to the pulpit than the well-known pictorial device known as the Wheel of Fortune»[1]. His voice did not remain isolated. Scholars such as Hervé Martin, Miriam Gill, Sigfried Wenzel, and Lina Bolzoni have all noted references to the Wheel of Fortune in medieval sermons[2].

1. G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Cambridge 1933, 239. Owst refers to the entry *mundus* in the *Summa praedicantium* of John Bromyard OP (d. c. 1350), who also mentioned the Wheel of Fortune in other passages (entries: *avaritia* and *invidia*), and to some sermons that we will discuss in section 4. In reality, the influence was probably mutual: sermons contributed to popularizing this image and rendering it appealing. On the medieval representation of *fortuna,* see F. Pomarici, «Fortuna», in *Enciclopedia dell'arte medievale*, vol. 6, Roma 1995, 321-25 and P. Pisani, *L'iconografia della ruota della fortuna*, Verona 2015.

2. See H. Martin, *Le métier de prédicateur en France septentrionale à la fin du Moyen Âge (1350-1520)*, Paris 1988, 595-97; S. Wenzel, «Why the Monk?», in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. P. S. Baker, N. Ph. Howe, Toronto 1998, 261-69; M. Gill, *Preaching and Image in Later Medieval England*, in *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Muessig, Leiden 2002, 155-80; L. Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini: Predicazione in volgare dalle origini a Bernardino da Siena*, Torino 2002, 198-201. I discussed the presence of the wheel in sermons by Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg and in *Sermones thesauri novi* in P. Delcorno, *Lazzaro e il ricco epulone: Metamorfosi di una parabola fra Quattro e Cinquecento*, Bologna 2014, 126-32.

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Nonetheless, these are often only cursory references that do not examine how the wheel is presented by preachers and what function it plays within the broader communication process[3].

Therefore, a collective reflection about the medieval representation and interpretation of the downfalls and reversals of fortune appears to be the perfect context to address in a more systematic way the variety and relevance of this type of preaching material, going beyond merely listing occurrences of this imagery in sermons. I will do so by considering a vast time span (from the late eleventh to early sixteenth century) and a large part of Europe. However, since the preaching aids considered here not only mention the Wheel of Fortune, but often describe it in detail – as didactic ekphrases – it will be necessary also to look at their interplay with images of this symbolic wheel that were actually produced and visible at the time[4]. I will consider only wheels that were displayed in public spaces, since, like preaching, they aimed to shape religious and moral ideas about (social) instability: the dynamic of rising and, even more, the looming danger of a ruinous downfall.

Tracing the use of the Wheel of Fortune allows us to better understand the way this symbol was popularised and the multiple meanings it was given by those who discussed it in the public sphere. Sermons and visual discourses put an effort into shaping and guiding the gaze, the reflections, and even the emotions of the observers before a widespread image, which was a recurrent element in the medieval visualscape. As we will see, first and foremost, the Wheel of Fortune served to develop a socio-religious discourse on the fickleness of the human condition and power, the moral and social reasons of this instability, the role of both providence in governing the world and divine justice in the afterlife. Although the context of production of each sermon or

3. Emblematic is Martin, *Le métier de prédicateur*, 595-96. Discussing the Wheel of Fortune, he refers to seven sermons: however, they mention the *rota fortunae* only in two cases, while the others only present the concept of sudden reversal in this world or in the afterlife, such as in the *exemplum* of the chess pieces used by Guillaume Renard. Wenzel and Bolzoni develop a more careful analysis, albeit limited to specific sermons.

4. On this point, my reflection is indebted to Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini*.

image cannot be detailed here, it will clearly emerge that, in shimmering forms, the Wheel of Fortune became a discourse that was intrinsically as much religious as political[5].

Waning and waxing: the wheel in Gothic rose windows

Within the time span from the mid-twelfth to late thirteenth century, the Wheel of Fortune reached its highest point, so to speak, in terms of its relevance in constructing a public socio-religious discourse. Taking advantage of the diffusion of large rose windows in Gothic churches, this iconographic theme acquired a visibility that was unprecedented in urban spaces. The earliest example is that of Saint-Etienne in Beauvais (c. 1150), in the North of France[6]. A previous spectacular showcase of this visual topic confirms that this geographic area was key, since at the end of the eleventh century Baldric de Dol (d. 1130) depicts in a letter the presence of a mechanical wheel at the abbey church of Fécamp. Arguably, this device served for didactic purposes, namely, to remind viewers of the precarity of earthly goods. Baldric was at first puzzled by this novelty, but he soon came to appreciate its message by connecting it with the (Boethian) Wheel of Fortune «which casts us to the depths, promises us the heights, but turns in its circuit»[7].

5. On this point, my reflection is influenced by J. Baschet, *Le sein du père. Abraham et la paternité dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris 2000. Among more recent contributions, see A. Gamberini, *Inferni medievali. Dipingere il mondo dei morti per orientare la societá dei vivi*, Roma 2021.

6. See D. McGee, «A Wheel of Fortune? The North Rose at Saint-Etienne in Beauvais», *Grand Valley Review*, 5 (1989), 11-24 and Pisani, *L'iconografia*, 32-39.

7. «In eadem ecclesia vidi rotam quae, nescio qua arte conducta, descendebat et ascendebat, semper rotabat; quod prius vanitatem putavi, donec ad hoc intellectu me ratio avocavit. Intellexi tandem per haec veteranorum iudicia patrum, quod fortunae rota omnium saeculorum adversatrix, nos ad ima plerumque dejicit, iterum blanda deceptrix, ad cacumen altitudinis nos extollere se promittit, sed tamen in circuitu vergit, ut nos de instabili fortunae vertigine caveamus, neque arridentis, et male blandientis rotae volubilitate confidamus»; Baldric de Dol, *Itinerarium*, in PL 166, coll. 1178-79. To contextualize this passage, see F. C. Gardiner, *The Pilgrimage of Desire: A Study of Theme and Genre in Medieval Literature*, Leiden 1971, 81-85 (I take

Later monumental occurrences gravitate – so to speak – around the alpine area, and it is here that we find also an impressive mosaic, once part of the presbytery of San Salvatore in Turin (late twelfth century)[8]. As for rose windows, those of the cathedral of Basel and San Zeno in Verona both date to the turn of the thirteenth century (1190-1225), followed several decades later by the one in the cathedral of Trent[9]. «Waxing and waning», as the poet would say. This was the last time this iconographic theme was represented in such gigantic and imposing proportions[10]. However, it did not fall out of favour in public discourse, as in that arena this image continued to carry a religious, moral, and even political message.

Two of these staggering windows, namely those of Basel and Verona, deserve a closer look, as both can be considered part of well-organized sermons carved in stone. Moreover, these two cities also play a role in the preaching texts concerning the Wheel of Fortune.

In Basel, the façade of the Galluspforte forms a well-articulated visual discourse[11]. It can be divided into three parts. On

the English translation from p. 84) and A. H. Nelson, «Mechanical Wheels of Fortune, 1110-1547», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 43 (1980), 227-33, which presents a list of wheels of fortune built for different types of spectacles, with one of the earliest being the *Jeu de la feuillée*, first produced in Arras around 1275.

8. It shows a Wheel of Fortune combined with a cartographic representation of the world; see E. Kitzinger, «World Map and Fortune's Wheel: A Medieval Mosaic Floor in Turin», *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 117 (1975), 344-73 and L. Donkin, «*Usque ad ultimum terrae*: Mapping the Ends of the Earth in Two Medieval Floor Mosaics», in *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Fresh Perspectives, New Methods*, ed. R. Talbert, R. Unger, Leiden 2008, 189-217.

9. See Pomarici, «Fortuna», 321-25. According to Pisani, *L'iconografia*, 42-43, the rose window of Amiens (thirteenth century) also includes elements similar to those of the Wheel of Fortune.

10. An exception is the wheel on the floor of the cathedral of Siena (c. 1375), see note 78.

11. The cathedral was rebuilt after a fire in 1185; the iconographic program of the north façade was arguably conceived as a whole, although it was developed in two phases: the door sculptures date to the end of the twelfth century, while the window to 1220-1225. The original window structure was in oak (part of it is conserved in the Museum Kleines Klingental); the sculptures of the ten human figures on the wheel on display

Fig. 1. Wheel of Fortune, Galluspforte (c. 1200); Cathedral of Basel. Picture by P. Delcorno.

top, the rose window depicts the ever-changing condition of humankind (fig. 1), also as an image of social instability. Beside the possibilities offered by the new architecture, the triumph of this iconography in urban spaces of that time also speaks of the perception of – and a sort of alarm regarding – the new dynamism and social mobility that allowed for rapid growth and equally rapid, tragic fall[12]. At the centre of the façade, above the

now are copies (many of the originals are held in the same museum, although some of them were lost in the eighteenth century). See Pisani, *L'iconografia*, 58-59 and D. Schwinn Schürmann, H.-R. Meier, E. Schmidt, *Das Basler Münster*, Basel 2006.

12. See G. Guest, «The Prodigal's Journey: Ideologies of Self and City in the Gothic Cathedral», *Speculum*, 81 (2006), 35-75, which underlines that this type of image was also an attempt by ecclesiastical authorities to reassert their centrality in a changing urban society. Partially similar is the interpretation proposed for Beauvais in McGee, «A Wheel of Fortune?», 17. Concerning social mobility at the time, see *Social Mobility in Medieval Italy (1100-1500)*, ed. S. Carocci, I. Lazzarini, Roma 2018.

door, the eternal judgment is represented: the angelic trumpeters summon everyone before the supreme judge, seated on the throne, where the inescapable ascent to heaven or descent to hell play out. The logic behind the judgement is illustrated by a frieze on the architrave depicting the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25, 1-12). On the left, five women present their lighted lamps to Christ, the bridegroom, who welcomes them at the door leading to the eternal banquet. On the right (just below the descending side of the Wheel of Fortune), another five girls hold their lamps, yet without any oil; they instead remain outside the house, in front of a closed door (fig. 2). What was this oil that made the difference between salvation and damnation? Generally speaking, since the patristic era there were two dominant interpretations. The lamp represents either faith, which needs to be kindled and kept alive through good works (the oil), or the good works themselves, which must be accompanied by the right intentions, i.e. love (the oil) rather than vainglory[13]. Those who planned the Basel façade arguably had the first interpretation in mind, since the proper way of acquiring 'oil' – and thus being ready to cross the perilous threshold at the moment of death – is depicted on the pillars of the door, where we see the six works of corporal mercy listed by Matthew 25, 31-35 as decisive on doomsday, with an equal distribution of activities between men and women, so as to remind viewers that this message was meant for everyone[14].

We can therefore consider this entire façade a 'visual sermon', set in stone, in which the different elements are combined to form a discourse that aims to mark urban space (as a permanent billboard advertising the faithful to invest in works of mercy) and to grant a symbolic meaning to the door of the church, the threshold of which anticipates the decisive transition from the

13. See S. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables*, Berkeley 1987, 179.

14. Regarding the representation of the works of mercy, see F. Botana, *The Works of Mercy in Italian Medieval Art (c. 1050 - c. 1400)*, Turnhout 2012. For a discussion of the theological and ecclesiological discourses connected to them, see E. Bain, «Politiques des oeuvres de miséricorde dans le discours scolastique (XII^{e}-XIII^{e} siècles)», in *Politiche di misericordia tra teoria e prassi*, a cura di P. Delcorno, Bologna 2018, 21-48.

Fig. 2. Parable of the ten virgins, Galluspforte (c. 1200); Cathedral of Basel. Picture by P. Delcorno.

instability of this world to eternity[15]. It was conceived as a *dispositif*, structuring and imposing a specific discourse. Each time someone entered through that door in Basel, they were silently invited to consider once again the key rules governing salvation and damnation, with an admonishment about the futility of worldly success and the necessity of investing in charitable acts.

Moving our attention to Verona, the San Zeno façade likewise presents a visual discourse, although now only partially intelligible. The Wheel of Fortune is fully visible (fig. 3) and its creator, Brioloto, is celebrated in an inscription inside the church. On the wheel hub, four Leonine hexameters allow *Fortuna* to speak. She admonishes viewers by asserting her power over worldly events and her own unreliability: «En ego fortuna moderor mortalibus una. | Elevo, depono, bona cunctis vel mala dono. ||

15. On the idea of a structured visual sermon in connection with the liminal space of a church entrance, see P. Delcorno, «A Fifteenth-Century Painted Sermon at the Door of the Cathedral of Bressanone», *Medieval Sermon Studies*, 55 (2011), 55-83.

Fig. 3. Wheel of Fortune (c. 1200); San Zeno, Verona. Picture by P. Delcorno.

Induo nudatos, denudo veste paratos. | In me confidit, si quis derisus abibit»[16]. Clearly, the writing was wholly unreadable for viewers; it rather served to fix and transmit the interpretation asserted by those who planned the window. Instead, a key element dominating the medieval façade of San Zeno now remains invisible to our eyes. Shortly after the construction of the window, the façade was finished with the tympanum on which an imposing final judgement was represented, in this case as well

16. See S. Musetti, «Il rosone di Brioloto», in *San Zeno Maggiore a Verona. Il campanile e la facciata*, a cura di F. Butturini, F. Pachera, Verona 2015, 391-401, in part. 394-98. She underlines the absence of references to earthly power (usually a characteristic element of the *rota fortunae*) in this text and in the wheel. See also F. Coden, T. Franco, *San Zeno*, Verona 2023.

meant to be a complementary element to the *rota fortunae*[17]. Only faint traces of the engraved borders of the bas-relief remain (arguably the mastic incrustation sculptures technique was used), as discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century[18]. They show: Christ seated on his throne with the *arma Christi* beside him, the angels playing the trumpets and the people rising from death to be either welcomed into the bosom of Abraham, symbol of heaven, or dragged down to hell by devils[19]. In this case as well, the wheel turns and its descending side (on the left of the eternal judge) corresponds with the descent into hell, a fall from which no one can rise again (fig. 4).

Two rulers look at the wheel: Mastino della Scala and Louis XI

There is also another reason the window of Verona is particularly interesting for us. Verona is the city mentioned in the only preaching aid referring to a localised image of the Wheel of Fortune that I know, although not the one at San Zeno. It is an *exemplum* that Filippo di Ferrara, a Dominican active in the early fourteenth century, includes in his *Liber de introductione loquendi*, a manual to teach his fellow friars how to speak and instruct people in every situation of their mission and daily life[20]. Among

17. The tympanum dates to the early thirteenth century. It is impossible to say whether its final judgment was planned together with the *rota* or at a later stage; Musetti, «Il rosone», 399. In any case, once finished, the façade combined the two elements.

18. Its discovery was announced in G. Gerola, «Il Giudizio Universale scoperto a S. Zeno di Verona», *Bollettino d'arte*, 2 (1908), 470-73. See C. Pachera, «Il giudizio universale sul timpano», in *San Zeno Maggiore a Verona*, 417-29, also for the debate around its dating. Regarding this technique, see F. Coden, «Nuove considerazioni sulla scultura ad incrostazione di mastice», in *Il colore nel Medioevo. Arte, simbolo, tecnica*, a cura di P. A. Andreuccetti, D. Bindani, Lucca 2016, 233-60. I am grateful to prof. Mariaclara Rossi and prof. Fabio Coden for their help in enabling me to gain access to these materials.

19. This paradisiac image derived from Luke 16, 19-31. On its dissemination and meaning, see Baschet, *Le sein du père*.

20. Regarding this friar and this unusual text, see S. Vecchio, «Il *Liber de introductione loquendi* di Filippo da Ferrara», *I castelli di Yale*, 3 (1998), 131-65. The list of its *exempla* is available in *Thesaurus Exemplorum Medii Aevi*; it is nr. 310 of collection TC0137 (https://thema.huma-num.fr/; last accessed 26 July 2023).

Fig. 4. Falling Man, Wheel of Fortune (c. 1200); San Zeno, Verona. Picture P. Delcorno.

his tales, Filippo recounts how Mastino della Scala (d. 1277), lord of Verona, one day seeing a fresco in the main church of the city (arguably the cathedral), asked what it represented. In a personalized explanation and admonition, he was told that the fresco depicts the Wheel of Fortune turning. On the top sits a king with a sceptre and crown who says: *Regno*, «therefore you, lord Mastino, would be this one who rules now». And yet the figure of a falling man who once was in power announces what would happen to Mastino if the wheel turns, while the other two figures – the ascending one and the man at the bottom – symbolize those who currently flourish and, on the contrary, those totally ruined by the adversities of Fortune. Hearing this explanation,

Mastino boldly announced that he would have a thick nail (*clavus fortis*) put to block the wheel so as to remain forever at its top, as lord of Verona. However, the very next day he was murdered (Appendix 1).

It is unlikely that a figure such as Mastino would fail to understand this type of image, even more so in a city that hosted a monumental representation of it. Still, his sudden fall, from lordship to death, was an excellent *exemplum* to admonish those who proudly wished to last in human glory and earthly power. To convey this teaching, friar Filippo suggested his fellow preachers to evoke for their listeners (or, given the text, interlocutors) the image of the Wheel of Fortune, assuming everyone would be able to visualize it with their mind's eye.

Filippo's *exemplum* is similar to one used by Michel Menot (d. 1518), which shares three key elements: a powerful lay ruler, the image of the Wheel of Fortune, and the (im)possibility of using something to block its turning. Menot was a flamboyant Franciscan preacher and this *exemplum* is included in the *reportatio* of his last preaching cycle, held in Paris during the Lent of 1518[21]. Taking the cue from the biblical episode in which the people of Nazareth reject Jesus and try to throw him down a cliff (Luke 4, 29), the friar says that – on a spiritual level – this is the way proud people kill Jesus inside themselves. Menot introduces two figures to prove that, however much someone tries to go up, they fall down just as quickly: one was a coeval event, the sudden death of Pope Julius II in 1513, and the other the classical reference to Icarus. Next, he turns to another recent story with King Louis XI (d. 1483) as its protagonist. A clerk of humble origins had become responsible for the king's house and, to celebrate his social ascent, he commissioned a rich tapestry depicting himself on top of the Wheel of Fortune. When Louis XI saw it, he addressed the man sharply and wisely by saying that the clerk would also have to depict/put in (*figere* has a double meaning) a sturdy stake along the course of the wheel to avoid returning to his former state, as actually then happened in that the man died miserably (Appendix 2)[22].

21. This tale is briefly discussed in Martin, *Le métier de prédicateur*, 596.

22. Indeed, this fanciful idea of blocking the wheel with a nail remained rhetorically attractive since, well after the timeframe considered here,

What is remarkable in Menot's *exemplum* is that the moral lesson is delivered by the king, who uses an image of the wheel to admonish his arrogant subordinate. The wheel serves for a lay discourse about power. Although his words resemble those allegedly used by Mastino della Scala, their meaning is the opposite, because the king is well aware that the wheel is unstoppable. In a similar fashion and most famously, in 1236 King Henry III had the Wheel of Fortune depicted in the great hall of Winchester Castle, where it arguably served as moral/political warning for anyone at court. And yet he had it represented for himself as well, since in 1247 he ordered that a *rota fortunae* be painted on the mantel of the fireplace of his personal room in Clarendon Palace[23].

In the sermon, Menot undoubtedly presents the idea of someone depicting himself on the Wheel of Fortune in an utterly negative light, so much so that it sounds grotesque. However, it could be related to the overlapping (and at times competing) idea of *Kairos/Occasio*, as a propitious moment, an opportunity to seize without hesitation. This concept does not appear in the sermons considered here but was present in medieval textual and visual culture, where it was depicted as a figure standing on a sphere. A fascinating (and somewhat enigmatic) case is an eleventh- twelfth-century Venetian relief visualizing an epigram by Ausonius that depicts *Occasio* and *Penitentia*. It shows *Kairos* with a positive Christian connotation, as part of a representation of prudence, underlining that one «who acts at the propitious moment will receive the palm of victory», avoiding the fatal regret deriving from procrastination and leading to penance. When someone decided (between the thirteenth and fifteenth century) to put this relief in the basis of the pulpit of the Cathedral of Torcello, they evidently considered it a positive didactic

Lodovico Sesti OP preached a sermon on the nail of the cross that stops the Wheel of Fortune, on Good Friday 1656, in the cathedral of Colle Val d'Elsa, during the ostension of the relic of the holy nail; Lodovico Sesti, *Panegirici sacri*, Venezia 1679, 286-93.

23. Regarding these two wheels see N. R. Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought. The Hereford Paradigm*, Woodbridge 2001, 79-81 and T. Borenius, «The Cycle of Images in the Palaces and Castles of Henry III», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 6 (1943), 40-50.

message to connect with preaching[24]. The exact way it was done, however, escapes us. Getting closer to Menot, during the fifteenth century the re-evaluation of the concept/image of *Kairos* was surely gaining momentum in a new cultural context, acquiring more «secular and politically oriented interpretations», related to self-affirmation as well[25]. This made the desire to be represented in connection with *Fortuna/Kairos* less implausible, as in the *exemplum* by Menot. And indeed, in the same period there are descriptions of spectacles welcoming Maximilian I in Nuremberg (1491) and Charles V in Bruges (1515) by depicting them as able to 'control', even 'govern' the Wheel of Fortune[26].

Mercy beside Fortune: the Good Samaritan in the Postilla

Close to the period the great rose windows were constructed and well before the *exempla* of Filippo da Ferrara and Michel Menot, sermons and preachers' aids contained references to the Wheel of Fortune, once again – as in Basel and Verona – connecting it with Gospel parables.

A sermon by Honorius Augustodunensis (d. c. 1140) deserves specific mention as the earliest instance of the *rota fortunae* in preaching. Commenting on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18, 9-14), he explains that Christians can usefully appropriate elements from 'pagan' culture (*gentilium litterae*). His

24. On this image and the overlapping of the idea of *Kairos* with *Fortuna* see S. Cohen, «*Kairos/occasio*: Vicissitudes of Propitious Time from Antiquity to the Renaissance», in Ead., *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art*, Leiden 2014, 199-243: 217-22.

25. *Ibid*., 222.

26. In Nuremberg, a play put Maximilian I on top of the Wheel of Fortune and – this was the surprise – able to remain there, winning over the Antichrist and his Jewish false prophet. In Bruges, the pageant to welcome Charles V represented the wheel twice. The Spanish community staged Charles V on a throne, with the wheel at his feet, and the virtues that blocked fortune: thanks to (his) virtues Charles's throne would be safe. Also, the show sponsored by the citizens of Bruges represented a Wheel of Fortune: the actor impersonating Charles was not on the wheel, yet he governed it – together with Merchandise – so to bring the city on its top. Basically, Charles was an expression of God, ruling the world through fortune. See Nelson, «Mechanical Wheels», 231-33.

first example is what the philosophers' idea of «a woman tied on a wheel that spins continuously, so that her head first rises up, and then is thrown down», interpreting the wheel as worldly glory and the woman as *Fortuna*. This torment on the wheel allows Honorius to present the punishments of mythological figures (arguably Ixion, Sisyphus, and Titius) connected with a circular movement or repetition, in which such tortures symbolize the punishments for capital vices. Special attention is given to lust, which is discussed by allegorically interpreting the myth of Perseus and Medusa before returning to more traditional *exempla* drawn from the stories of the hermits of the desert (Appendix 3)[27]. The Wheel of Fortune, a parable, and the eternal judgment are combined in a sermon, in a way comparable to the cathedral façades of Basel or Verona, although in this case the imagery differs from that which later became dominant: *Fortuna* does not turn the wheel but is herself turned by it.

Among the earliest preaching aids produced by the mendicant orders, we can look at the *Postilla* that circulated under the name of Hugh of Saint-Cher, but was actually written by a team of Dominicans in early thirteenth-century Paris[28]. When this biblical commentary reaches the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10, 30-37), alongside well-established interpretations applied to the whole of salvation history, it offers a sort of 'sociological' (and therefore ecclesiologic) interpretation of the story (Appendix 4)[29]. In a polemical way, the Samaritan symbolizes the laypeople who concretely engage in works of corporal mercy, while the priest and the Levite who did not help the man in need represent the greedy and ineffective clerics[30].

27. Honorius did not provide the names of these mythological figures (the third one may be also Prometheus) nor did he indicate the source he uses, although arguably he had in mind Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV 445-63. Pisani, *L'iconografia*, 15 considers them to be Ixion, Titius and Tantalus, but the last identification is not convincing.

28. The best introduction is *Hugues de Saint-Cher († 1263), bibliste et théologien*, éd. L.-J. Bataillon, G. Dahan, P.-M. Gy, Turnhout 2004.

29. On this text, see P. Delcorno, «Predicatori e predicazione nella Postilla detta di Hugues de Saint-Cher», in *Domenico di Caleruega, il suo ordine e la sua memoria da Bologna all'Occidente*, a cura di V. S. Doci e R. Parmeggiani, Roma 2025, 239-72.

30. On the novelty of this interpretation, see Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 214.

Within this quite innovative reading, the man attacked by robbers while descending from Jerusalem to Jericho symbolizes anyone who passes from wealth to poverty, from prosperity to adversity, something that occurs continuously because «the Wheel of Fortune continually turns». In this case as well, the *rota fortunae* is not merely an abstract concept: the Dominican exegete approves of the fact that this image is often painted («satis bene depingitur rota fortune»), praising its cautionary value. Using a scholastic *distinctio*, the *Postilla* offers multiple interpretations of the robbers: on a spiritual level, they embody the wicked prelates, bad theologians, and heretics. On a social level, the *latrones* are those who take advantage of people in need instead of helping them. They are the rich who profit from the difficulties of the poor to further oppress them; the doctors who make money by exploiting the goods of the sick without really benefiting them; the lawyers who strip the weak of their assets instead of assisting them against the powerful.

Predictably, the indifferent priest and Levite represent the «avarice of all clerics and priests» who do nothing to meet the material needs of the poor and sick. The Samaritan, instead, is the virtuous layman who observes the divine precepts and comes to the aid of the sick. He loads the wounded person on his beast, that is, he carries the burden of the poor not only by feeling compassion but also by helping them. The biblical saying «Ask the beasts and they will teach you» (Job 12, 7) highlights the paradox of this story, where the silent example set by the laity is better than the clerics' empty words. Finally, the home is the place where the lay people take care of the poor steadfastly, thus entrusting them to Christ and receiving their reward in due course, according to the logic set forth in Matthew 25, a text punctually quoted in this context, as it was present in the visual sermons of the churches of Verona and, even more vividly, Basel.

What is noteworthy for my purposes here is not only that the *Postilla* acknowledges and praises the dissemination of images of the Wheel of Fortune, but that the dynamic of descent is not attributed to fortune alone. There are actually people – or rather, categories of men in power – who either push those already in fragile conditions further down or simply do not help them.

Whereas, on the other side, lay people obeying the commandment of mercy are a force that can help those who have been overwhelmed by difficulties. That is to say, according to the *Postilla*, human actions and the contrasting forces exerted by mercy and indifference (or worse) contribute significantly to the social outcomes of the wheel's perennial movement.

The *Postilla* refers to the Wheel of Fortune in other passages as well, including its commentary on the famous vision of the tetramorphic wheel in the book of Ezekiel: «apparuit rota una super terram iuxta animalia habens quattuor facies» (Ezekiel 1, 15). This line serves to introduce the multiple symbolic meanings of the wheel, including the *rota fortunae*. Significantly, the *Postilla* underlines here the importance of preaching about this wheel so as to admonish those who, by trusting in *fortuna*, are either disheartened or boastful[31]. Immediately after, the wheel's movement is compared to that of the sea («et aspectus rotarum et opus earum quasi visio maris»; Ezekiel 1, 16), a simile that preachers exploited at length[32].

The *Postilla*'s exhortation to preach about the Wheel of Fortune is quite relevant, since it attests to the idea (perhaps, even the practice) of mentioning it in sermons. Contrary to what one would expect looking at the imposing visualizations in rose windows, thirteenth-century sermons do not discuss the Wheel of Fortune at length. There is a sort of temporal gap between the peak of the Wheel of Fortune in monumental visual representations and the moment it became pervasive in sermons, namely

31. «Nota quod multiplex est rota. Est rota temporis, rota fortune, rota etatis, rota culpe, rota gratie, rota scripture. […] Item est rota fortune, de qua Psalmus: *Vox tonitrui tui in rota* (Psalm 76,19), quia predicatio dura debet fieri contra illos qui sequuntur rotam fortune, secundum eam depressi vel elati. […] Hec rota habet quattuor facies: dexteram prosperitatis, sinistram adversitatis, ascensum honorum et dignitatum, descensum vilitatum et ignominiarum. Hec rota super terram est, quia terrena amantes opprimit»: *Biblia cum postilla domini Hugonis Cardinalis de Sancto Caro*, Basel 1504, vol. 4, fol. 139r (henceforth: Hugh of Saint-Cher, *Postilla*).

32. In the *Postilla*'s allegorical reading, the simile is developed only for the interpretation of *rota* as the Scripture. Regarding the key role of Ezekeil's opening vision of the wheels in patristic and medieval exegesis, see P. Bori, *L'interpretazione infinita: l'ermeneutica cristiana antica e le sue trasformazioni*, Bologna 1987.

the late fourteenth and, even more, the fifteenth century. Within the thirteenth century, I was able to find only one occurrence, in a sermon attributed to the Franciscan Servasanto da Faenza (d. c. 1290)[33]. As part of a discussion of avarice and power, the sermon underlines a specific visual element, namely the crown that is «painted» on the head of a man in the Wheel of Fortune. Next, having predictably mentioned the incessant movement of the *rota*, Servasanto also recalls the verses that were depicted on it as if spoken by the main characters on the wheel: «Glorior elatus, | descendo mortificatus. […] Infirmus ecce premor, | rursus ad astra vehor» (Appendix 5)[34]. His attention to visual details and writings reminds us that many preachers were attentive observers of images of the wheel (or readers of their ekphrases).

Just a few decades later, we find another early occurrence of this theme in a sermon by the Franciscan theologian and later cardinal Bertrand de La Tour (d. 1332/3), who also speaks of avarice and the unreliability of richness, comparing them to bitter seawater. On that basis, the relentless movement of the sea caused by the moon's power symbolizes «the continuous movement of the Wheel of Fortune that causes richness to flow in and back, take in and throw up»[35]. For us, the *fortuna*, *luna*, *rota* series is quite evocative: it is impossible not to think of the

33. See N. Maldina, «Servasanto da Faenza», *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 92 (2020), s.v.

34. The verses presented by Servasanto are found in manuscript images of the Wheel of Fortune, where they are – more appropriately – divided among the four characters on the wheel; e.g. see a manuscript of *De rota verae religionis* in C. De Clercq, «Hugues de Fouilloy, imagier de ses propres œuvres ?», *Revue du Nord*, 45/177 (1963), 30-42: 39.

35. «Per istas aquas maris in quas deo permittente adducitur sepe et submergitur avarus sunt prefigurate divicie huius seculi. Aque enim maris ad litteram sunt amare, sunt fluibiles, sunt tempestuose, ac per hoc periculose. […]. Quid eciam est fluibilius diviciis mundi? Sicut enim aque maris virtute lune continue fluunt et refluunt, continue absorbentur et evomuntur, sic divicie secundum quod currit rota fortune continue fluunt et refluunt, absorbentur et evomuntur. *Divicias quas devoravit homo cupidus evomet et de ventre eius extrahet eas deus*, dicitur Iob 20 (20, 15)»: Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat 1240, fol. 137v (sermon 2 for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany; nr. 425 in J. B. Schneyer, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters*, Münster 1969-1990, vol. 1, 536). I check the text against Bertrand de La Tour, *Sermones de tempore. Pars hiemalis*, [Strasbourg c. 1500], fol. 48r.

opening page of the *Carmina burana* and its iconic illumination, hearing Carl Orff's music ringing in our head[36]. Bertrand's is only a brief mention, certainly, yet it tells us that he considered such a reference perfectly clear for his readers (allegedly many, considering the circulation of his sermons) and for a general audience.

The destiny of a kingdom: preaching the wheel in England

Well into the fourteenth century and moving to England, we find quite compelling references to the Wheel of Fortune in the sermons of Thomas Brinton, bishop of Rochester (d. 1389)[37]. For instance, addressing his own monks in sermon 25, when discussing the instability of human life, Thomas connects the Wheel of Fortune and the wind, which blows in different ways and from different directions: at times it carries something up to a great height and then suddenly stops, letting it fall (Appendix 6). Indirectly, this text sheds light on a possible visual message of the mosaic of the cathedral of Turin with its representation of the winds around the Wheel of Fortune. In another sermon, the bishop discusses spiritual joy, stating that rightful people are often quite sad when looking at the misery of this world, dominated as it is by the amoral movements of the Wheel of Fortune, and yet they are comforted by divine mercy, which surrounds them in every direction[38].

36. It was not the original opening page of *Carmina Burana*; regarding this manuscript (CLM 4660), see the brilliant presentation in C. De Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, London 2016, 330-75.

37. *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1372-1389)*, ed. M. A. Devlin, London 1954, vol. 1, 10, 99 and 154. These references are mentioned in Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 239. For a profile of this prelate and preacher, see S. Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England*, Cambridge 2005, 45-49. I am grateful to Emilia Jamroziak for her help in accessing to Brinton's sermons.

38. «Aliquando dolet iustus de incolatu miserie mundialis considerans quomodo rota fortune mirabiliter se vertente […]. Sed ecce consolacio ex parte Dei […] quia ipse est in nobis per spiritualem habitacionem, ante nos per directionem, supra nos per gracie infusionem, subtus nos per supportacionem, circa nos per custodiam et defensionem»: *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton*, vol. 1, 154.

Brinton's are only brief passages composed of conventional binary oppositions and hardly inventive. They can be considered a sort of ground level of the use of this imagery. Still, its frequency suggests that Thomas's audience (comprising monks and lay people) would hear him mention this idea often, as a common building block of his actual preaching. However, what makes these sermons really appealing is that, in 1840, a mid-thirteenth-century mural depicting the Wheel of Fortune was rediscovered on a wall of the choir of Rochester cathedral (fig. 5), raising the possibility that Brinton referred implicitly to an image well known by his own monastic community[39]. Ironically for us, the fresco was discovered behind the old pulpit when it was removed to build a new one.

Arguably thinking of passages such as those by Brinton, Siegfried Wenzel notes that «warnings against Fortune and the folly to trust her wheel are [...] ubiquitous in late-medieval preaching» in the Britsch context; such ubiquity justifies the fact that, in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Monk's story is built as a string of tragic cases intended to warn people against the rule of fortune[40]. In a preaching handbook such as the Franciscan *Fasciculus morum* (early fourteenth century), the discussion about the vice of avarice dwells at length on the instability of fortune «telling relatively long and curious tales and quoting Latin and English verses about her wheel and the four kings seated on it»[41].

As with actual sermons, the Wheel of Fortune is employed in a quite similar way in two macaronic sermons written by an

39. Gill, *Preaching and Image*, p. 160 points out that this proves how images could be appealing to preachers also well after they were produced. The rediscovery of the mural was announced in «Fresco Paintings Discovered in Rochester Cathedral», *Gentleman's Magazine*, 14 (1840), 137-38, a reference I ought to E. A. Campbell, *Fortune's Wheel: Dickens and the Iconography of Women's Time*, Athens, OH 2003, 67-70.

40. Wenzel, «Why the Monk?», 261-69. Since the monk's tale took place during the visit of Rochester, scholars have underlined the possible implication: Chaucer was familiar with its cathedral and perhaps knew (at least indirectly) Brinton's sermons; on that, see also G. Olson, «Chaucer's Monk: The Rochester Connection», *The Chaucer Review*, 21/2 (1986), 246-56.

41. Wenzel, «Why the Monk?», 264, with reference to *Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. S. Wenzel, University Park, PA 1989, 328-36 and 337.

Fig. 5. Wheel of Fortune, mural (c. 1250), Rochester Cathedral. Picture reproduced with permission from Chapter of Rochester Cathedral.

anonymous Benedictine monk, arguably between 1415 and 1422[42]. The first of these explicitly refers to Boethius, i.e. the 'inventor' of this imagery, and notes that fortune is presented «in the likeness of a blind woman turning a wheel, and in this figure she is commonly depicted». Her blindness means that she distributes (and takes back) her gifts – including «realms, dukedoms and counties, bishoprics, abbacies and priories» – without any apparent reason, that is, to «the ignorant as well as the learned, the unworthy as well as the worthy, the vicious as well as the virtuous», and she does so hastily, since «this wheel she turns constantly»[43]. In both sermons, this preacher states that it is not necessary to hark back to classical stories such as Sallust, Orosius, or any other ancient author, since the truth of this teaching is confirmed by contemporary events. In the first sermon, the reference is to the collective misfortune of the English kingdom, which was brought to an exceptional height only to fall rapidly to a sorrowful condition: «You need not go any further than the woeful misfortunes, the mishaps of our kingdom which you have seen with your bodily eye. Where was any kingdom whirled so high on this wheel of honour than ours, I ask?» (Appendix 7).

The monk presents similar reasoning in a quite political sermon. Taking his cue from a maritime *thema* («Qui navigat mare enarret pericula»; Ecclesiasticus 43, 26), he compares England to a ship on a perilous voyage, combining this allegory with Ezekiel's vision of the wheel and his comparison with the ever-changing sea (Ezekiel 1, 16). The sermon was composed between April 1421 and September 1422 and is well-known for the way it discusses specific political and social events (e.g. the peasant revolt, Lollardy, and battle of Agincourt) from the pulpit[44]. In

42. On this manuscript, see S. Wenzel, *Macaronic Sermons: Bilingualism and Preaching in Late Medieval England*, Ann Arbor 1994, 49-53 and 160-65 and Id., *Latin Sermon Collections*, 84-7. Already Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 239 refers to these two sermons.

43. Translation in Wenzel, «Why the Monk?», 264-65.

44. R. M. Haines, «'Our Master Mariner, Our Sovereign Lord': A Contemporary Preacher's View of King Henry V», *Mediaeval Studies*, 38 (1976), 85-96. See also Wenzel, «Why the Monk?», 268-69. The sermon was composed between the Battle of Baugé (22 March 1421) and Henry V's death (31 August 1422). Haines suggests it might have been a valedictory address shortly before Henry's departure to France in June 1421.

this case, the changing course of fortune does not depend on her *arbitrium* but is instead a direct result of moral behaviour in the kingdom. Fortune is not a careless blind lady but a very scrupulous observer, attentive in bestowing her rewards. After an introduction that applies the imagery of the necessity to sail the dangerous and insidious seas of this world to everyone, the sermon shifts to speak of steering «the great ship of the kingdom of England», which is composed of three parts: the clergy symbolized by the bow bridgehouse, the king and barons by the main bridge on the rear, and the rest of society (merchants, artisans, workers - defined also as the *communitas*) by the body of the ship[45]. When these groups collaborated, England «was a faire vessel to loke opoun, it was a faire shippe» (such code switching between Latin and the vernacular is continuous in the sermon), and the ships of other countries fled at its appearance. As long as the English ship was full of virtues, it was prosperous in that «Fortuna was oure frend», yet as soon as vices started to rule on it, fortune changed face so drastically that England became such a weak and fragile ship it even risked being surpassed by the little fishing boat of Wales[46]! Here, the preacher lists a series of events that put the ship in danger of wrecking, namely the peasant revolt (1380), impeachment of the Earl of Suffolk (1386), rebellion of the Earl of Northumberland (1403) and – last but not least – the dangerous rebellion of Lollards (1414), which is framed as an uprising against God, the king, and the Church. Against these adversities, King Henry V demonstrated himself a master mariner, capable of steering the ship through the tempest and saving it from wrecking[47]. Through an inventive retelling of

45. «Magna navis que navigavit multis diebus in mari prosperitatis est illud copiosum regnum, regnum Anglie. […] Antecastellum huius navis est clerus: prelati, religiosi et sacerdotes; postcastallum est baronia: rex cum proceribus; corpus navis est communitas: mercatores, artifices et laborarii»: Haines, «'Our Master Mariner'», 89. The metaphor of the *navis Anglie* occurs also in a previous sermon.

46. «Sed statim ut virtus cessavit et vicia ceperunt regnare fortuna mutavit vultum, noster honor cepit decrescere. Nostra navis *was so feble, so litel oure emnys set of us* quod *þe litel fischeres bote of Walis* fuit in puncto *to overseile us*»: *ibid*., 90.

47. «Fuit in grandi periculo quando communes surrexerunt contra dominos. Fuit eciam in grandi periculo quando domini litigabant inter se.

a story of maritime battle taken from Vegetius, the preacher underlines that the religious and the clergy played the key role in this enterprise, since their prayers and liturgies are the oars that push the ship forward. Hence, the recent successes are due to the fact that «clerus remigavit manu et corde, cordialius nunquam orabatur pro Christiano principe quam pro ipso durante tempore guerre», obtaining divine mercy for king and kingdom. Here the monk recalls recent military victories achieved thanks to this invisible rowing, including the spectacular victory of Agincourt in 1415. The battle represented such a miraculous triumph that it is exalted not once but twice in the sermon. However, this is not merely an eulogy of the actual king, since the monk introduces Ezekiel's comparison of the wheel to the ever-changing movement of the insidious sea. To warn his audience about the sudden turns of fortune, he states that there is no need to recall distant stories when it suffices to think of the recent lamentable destiny of the Duke of Clarence, Thomas of Lancaster, brother of King Henry V. The duke was considered the most honoured of knights, and yet «the wheel all too soon turned in the wind» and he met with a sudden reversal, dying on the battlefield on 22 March 1421 (Appendix 8).

Here the preacher commented on very recent news, much closer than the examples of dramatic reversal used by Filippo da Ferrara or Michel Menot. Previously, the sermon presented a direct nexus between virtues/vices and fortune's ups and downs, almost a discernible logic governing the wheel; however, when it comments on the sudden fall of this powerful figure, the king's brother, the interpretation is elusive. As if the events had lost their legibility. As if the 'rational' logic had evaporated and the blind lady had taken back control. And we can only wonder what he – and his listeners – thought when, just a few months after this sermon, Henry V – the pious and masterful king exalted in this sermon – died at age 35 while away in France with his army.

Fuit in grandi periculo *at þe scharp schowre Salopie*. Fuit eciam in grandi periculo quando lollardi rebellabant et surrexerunt contra Deum et regem *to a distroyed him and holichirch*. Nostra navis fuit in tanto periculo quod nisi noster graciosus rex *set honde on þe raþer and stirid* nostram navem tempestivius, nostra navis *had schaplich to a go al to wrek*»: *ibid.*, 90.

Four preaching bestsellers in fifteenth-century Europe

The last examples brought us well into the fifteenth century, the period when the most detailed and rich references to the Wheel of Fortune occur in sermons. The first is a sermon in the *Quadragesimale* printed under the name of Johannes Gritsch, a sermon collection composed by an anonymous German Franciscan friar, arguably around the 1440s. With the advent of printing, this Lenten sermon collection enjoyed extraordinary success, with 28 editions between 1474 and 1512, which means that it was a book used by entire generations of preachers all across Europe[48]. This is not a negligible difference compared to the English sermons discussed above, which are transmitted by a single manuscript and thus represent what could be said, not what was usually said. In this section we will deal instead with actual bestsellers that shaped the religious communication of the time.

The *Quadragesimale* by Gritsch refers to the Wheel of Fortune in a key sermon, namely one for a Lenten Sunday. Commenting on the Transfiguration, the preacher exhorts us to follow the example of the three apostles who went with Jesus up the mountain, i.e. arguing that we must detach ourselves from this world and its transitory goods because they imply «frauds in acquiring, instability in holding, and anxiety in leaving»[49]. Predictably, the image of the Wheel of Fortune is used in the section about instability (Appendix 9). The preacher quotes at length the key passage of Boethius, where Fortune explains her nature and the incessant game she plays: «turning my wheel swiftly, I enjoy bringing low what is high, raising high what is down». To strengthen the concept, the preacher adds two lines from an unspecified poet (Fortune cannot stop her movement, as it defines her) and a symbolic description of *Fortuna* as a com-

48. See P. Delcorno, «Hidden in a European Bestseller: The *Quadragesimale* of Gritsch/Grütsch and the Reception of Dante's *Commedia* in Sermons», *Medieval Sermon Studies*, 65 (2021), 34-61.

49. «1) Infidelitatem in acquirendo; 2) Instabilitatem in retinendo; 3) Anxietatem in reliquendo»: Johannes Gritsch, *Quadragesimale*, Ulm 1475, X.G (sermon 12; Sunday Reminiscere).

posite monster: she has the face of a beautiful girl, smells of spices, and has a body like an eel; she has wings like an eagle and flies like a bat, and has the tail of a dragon, whose strikes are lethal[50]. Each symbol is interpreted in a moral way, creating a theriomorphic *fortuna* whose charming ladylike face should not mislead people about her real intentions: she is a killer queen.

A symbolic description of fortune occurs also in a sermon by the Hungarian Franciscan Pelbartus de Temesvár (d. 1504), included in one of the preaching bestsellers of the turn of the century, printed in 14 editions between 1498 and 1521. Fortune is the main topic of the sermon, as its rubric reads: «Sermo de varie fortune et prosperitatis eius acquisitione». Introducing it, Pelbartus states that the sermon responds to those who – whereas the Bible states that God «did everything good» (Mark 7, 37 is the *thema*) – «complain of the volatility of unstable fortune, since in this world every prosperity is mixed with adversities»[51]. Therefore, the sermon addresses the divine government of the world, as a sort of theodicy. Presenting the illusory power of fortune, Pelbartus quotes Boethius (in this case, the passage about the extreme infelicity of those who experienced happiness and lost it) and a description of *Fortuna* as blind lady who holds in her hand the Wheel of Fortune (with four people on it, including a king at the top). Remarkably, quoting Seneca, Pelbartus holds that fortune may – and therefore should – be won by virtue, or at least be rendered harmless[52].

50. The two verses were widespread in *florilegia* and in the *Gesta Romanorum* as well, yet I have not found any parallels of this description of *fortuna*.

51. «Quoniam autem mundani homines sepius murmurant de fortune instabili varietate, quia in mundo omnis prosperitas admixta est adversitati»: Pelbartus de Temesvár, *Sermones de tempore*, Hagenau 1501, fol. i3v (sermon 33, Sunday 11 after Pentecost, sermon 3). Pelbartus continues a discourse initiated in the previous sermon: «Sermo [...] de deo laudando in operibus creationis, gubernationis et salvationis huminum, contra quosdam remurmurantes».

52. «Philosophi et gentiles communiter depingebant fortunam in modum puelle, sic quod esset ceca, ad significandum quod passim in quoslibet incurrit et impingit sine differentia meritorum [...] Item pingebant quod manu teneret rotam versatilem, in qua sederet quidam in summo et quidam foret in ascendendo, quidam autem descendendo et quidam in imo iacens, et iste cum corona et vestibus ornatus depingebant ad significandum quod volubilis rota fortune quamvis adversitate depremeret hominem; tamen si est homo

The Franciscan Johannes von Werden (d. 1437) also discussed the Wheel of Fortune in his famous *Dormi secure*, an astonishingly successful book, featuring approximately fifty printed editions between 1477 and 1520[53]. The preacher introduces the symbol of fortune as a way to present one of the most admirable among divine operations, namely the way God governs the world through sudden changes. The friar states that «we read that Romans painted the change (*mutatio*) of the world as a wheel where four men sit […]», and then he depicts it by commenting on the motto: «Regnabo, regno, regnavi, sum sine regno»[54]. Contrary to Pelbratus, God's way of acting in this case is supposed to provoke admiration. Johannes' sermon may not be particularly inventive or adventurous, but the Wheel of Fortune is one of its key elements and, considering the wide dissemination this book enjoyed, we can safely assume that, among the thousands of preachers who used it to prepare their own sermons, many went on to present their congregations with similar reflections on the Wheel of Fortune.

The last text in this group belongs to the *Sermones de tempore thesauri novi*. This anonymous sermon collection, long erroneously assigned to the Dominican Petrus de Palude (d. 1342), has tentatively been attributed to Petrus de Colle (d. 1450ca), a Franciscan friar of the Upper Germany province[55]. The German

sapiens per hoc non vincitur, quia ut dicit Seneca: Sapiens vincit virtute fortunam, dum instabilitas fortune eius animum non conquassat»; *ibid*., fol. t4v. This idea that virtue can neutralize the movement and power of fortune was granted space in the entry of Charles V in Bruges (see note 26).

53. Regarding this preacher, see K. Rivers, *Preaching the Memory of Virtue and Vice. Memory, Images, and Preaching in Late Middle Ages*, Turnhout 2010, 283-320.

54. «Tercium ammirabile quod omnes homines ammirantur est status mundi mutatio dextre excelsi, et ideo comparatur rote fortune in qua quatuor sedent. Unde legimus quod romani depinxerunt mutatione mundi quasi rotam, in qua quatuor sedebant, unus in medio rote ascendendo, et iuxta illum scribebant: regnabo. Et unum in summitate rote […]»: Johannes von Werden, *Sermones Dormi secure de tempore*, Köln c. 1477, sermon 6 (Sunday infra octavam Nativitatis). See Rivers, *Preaching the Memory*, 292-93, which refers to the wheel in one of Johannes' classicizing-type *exempla* and indicates his possible sources.

55. See L. Mees, «Petrus a Colle auteur des Sermones thesauri novi?», *Archivum Franciscanum historicum*, 79 (1986), 516-18. Some of his *Sermones de*

expressions included in these sermons confirm the geographical origin[56]. Given the lack of specific studies, it is difficult to date this sermon collection precisely. It surely became a significant bestseller in the early printing market, as it was published in 12 incunabula editions. One of the sermons on Lazarus and the Rich Man begins by presenting the Wheel of Fortune as a *pictura*, i.e. a mnemonic image, following the same preaching trend as the symbolic monster depicted by Gritsch[57]. The preacher states that the ancient wise men, considering the instability of this world, decided to represent it «sub rota fortune», a wheel whose four main protagonists are: a smiling crowned man on top and a poor, needy, and naked person on the bottom, while on the two sides of the wheel there are a figure striving to climb up the social power ladder and one who is falling head-first towards the ground. The sermon recalls the well-known motto that often accompanied the representation: «Regno, regnavi, regnabo, sum sine regno» (Appendix 10), an epigraph so emblematic it provided the names of four characters in a fifteenth-century French morality play in which the actors actually turned on a real wheel[58]. The same constellation of elements (quotation of Boethius, description of the wheel, motto) also occurs in a sermon by Paul Wann (d. 1489), the cathedral preacher of Passau. Wann introduces these ideas in a sermon distinguishing between

sanctis surely date after the 1439 decrees by the Council of Basel. Moreover, the fact that some of his sermons closely resemble (if not actual draw on) those of Johannes Herolt (see note 60) suggests a date around the 1440s.

56. See S. Delmas, «Bartholomew the Englishman, 'Master of the Properties of Things': Between Exegesis and Preaching», in *Early Thirteenth-Century English Franciscan Thought*, ed. L. Schumacher, Berlin 2021, 243-60: 255.

57. On the use of *picturae* in fifteenth-century sermons composed in German lands, see Rivers, *Preaching the Memory*, 283-320.

58. The morality play *Bien-Advisé Mal-Advisé* (printed c. 1498) was performed in 1439 in Rennes; see A. Slerca, «Octovien de Saint-Gelais, la moralité de Bien advisé et Mal advisé et la roue de fortune», dans *Ensi firent li ancessor: Mélanges de philologie médiévale offerts à Marc-René Jung*, éd. L. Rossi *et al.*, Alessandria 1996, 647-55 and, for its critical edition, *La Moralité de Bien avisé Mal avisé*, éd. J. Beck, Paris 2014. The inscriptions appear already in the earliest known image of the Wheel of Fortune, i.e. an eleventh-century manuscript held in Monte Cassino (MS 189); see Kitzinger, «World Map», 362-63.

the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of Fortune (i.e. glory and richness)[59].

While in Wann we find only a brief reference, in the *Sermones thesauri novi* the Wheel of Fortune is not only depicted but structures the entire introduction of the sermon (i.e. one of its most strategic parts), since each position on the wheel is addressed by presenting a series of linked biblical and patristic quotations – first of all, again and quite appropriately, the sentence from *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, which represents the conceptual foundation of this medieval imagery. In the description of the positions on the wheel, the last one is the falling man, which is discussed using another famous quotation from Boethius: his description of the supreme unhappiness of recalling a previous state of prosperity. Here, it specifically applies to the Rich Man of the daily pericope. The restatement of the sermon's *thema* (Luke 16, 25) serves to proceed towards its main body, a discussion first of the condition of the rich man (the goods he received from God and his abuses in handling them) and then seven types of poor people, four to be condemned and three to be saved[60].

The story of Lazarus and the Rich Man is the archetype of a sudden reversal[61]. Still, we must note that, while the image of the wheel is presented as symbol of the world's instability, in the parable the change does not take place as part of the history, where the two opposite characters are presented as rather static. The sudden and dramatic reversal instead comes at the moment of death, in the transition from this world to the afterlife. Its outcome falls under the jurisdiction of the divine justice, not an erratic and capricious decision on the part of fortune.

59. Paul Wann, *Sermones de tempore*, Hagenau 1507, fol. E2r, sermon 48 (Monday after Pentecost). Also this sermon collection was quite successful, with six editions between 1491 and 1517.

60. On the same day, the preacher also presents a complementary sermon on seven categories of rich people and their eternal destiny. In terms of content, both sermons are similar to those of Johannes Herolt (d. 1468) whose sermon collection circulated from the 1430s onwards; see Delcorno, *Lazzaro*, 88-91 and 148-51.

61. See J. Hanska, «*And the rich man also died; and he was buried in hell*»: *The Social Ethos in Mendicant Sermons*, Helsinki 1997.

The wheel and the mirror

The link between the Wheel of Fortune and the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man proved to be successful. We find it, for instance, in an extraordinary cycle of sermons preached by Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (d. 1510) in the Cathedral of Strasbourg between 1498 and 1499. For more than a year, this inventive preacher built his sermons around *Das Narrenshiff* (*The Ship of Fools*), a satirical poem that his friend Sebastian Brant had published just a few years before (1494), achieving immense popularity[62]. As is well known, each chapter of this book castigates an aspect of contemporary society, combining the vernacular verses with a lavish woodcut. In his introduction, Brant states that the images serve as a «mirror of the fool» (*Narren Spiegel*) allowing those who cannot read to recognize themselves in the images, a recognition that is the first step needed to pass from folly to wisdom[63]. Geiler praises these qualities when introducing his sermon cycle on the *Ship of Fools*. He underlines that his listeners will already have at home this precious book, which not only is written in their own vernacular but also contains images for the illiterate so that it truly functions as a mirror – a *speculum fatuorum* – enabling each person to contemplate their own soul, and to correct their behaviour[64].

The relationship between the sermons and *Das Narrenshiff* is often quite loose[65]. Nonetheless, the Sunday of Lazarus and the

62. On this preacher, see R. Voltmer, *Wie der Wächter auf dem Turm. Ein Prediger und seine Stadt: Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445-1510) und Straßburg*, Trier 2005 and, on this sermon cycle, Delcorno, *Lazzaro*, 116-32.

63. Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenshiff – La nave dei folli*, trans. R. Disanto, Fasano 1989, 60. Concerning Brant and his masterpiece, see *Sebastian Brant und die Kommunikationskultur um 1500*, hrsg. K. Bergolt *et al.*, Wiesbaden 2010, and N. Henkel, *Sebastian Brant. Studien und Materialien zu einer Archäologie des Wissens um 1500*, Basel 2021.

64. Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg, *Navicula sive speculum fatuorum*, Strasbourg 1511, I.F-L (Quinquagesima Sunday 1498).

65. For instance, chapter 37 of *Narrenshiff* discusses the fall of fortune (*Von gluckes fall*), with the first occurrences of the woodcut showing the Wheel of Fortune (also mentioned in its verses; see note 73); however, Geiler does not draw on this chapter, since the corresponding sermon

Rich Man offers Geiler a 'lucky' opportunity[66]. He emphasises its benefit for addressing most effectively the chapter of that day (*Narrenschiff* 56: «Von end des gewalttes»), namely the folly of powerful people who trust in and enjoy their wealth, «for this very day we read the Gospel of the mighty rich man dishonourably overthrown from his seat», as he states echoing the *Magnificat*[67]. There are five specific signs indicating this type of folly: despising your subordinates, exalting yourself, oppressing your inferiors, rejoicing in your own power, and trusting in a long life. The sermon stresses that all people have equal dignity, since everyone is created in God's image and – among Christians – is baptized in the same water, redeemed by the same blood, and nourished by the same Eucharist[68]. With sharp irony, Geiler asks whether proud people think they have instead been baptized in fine wine and criticises those who glorify themselves by vaunting the honours and privileges associated with their roles. They become ill, incapable of acting (since they want to be served instead) and seeing, like the Rich Man who failed to see Lazarus' suffering until death opened his eyes, at which point it was already too late for him[69].

(Palm Sunday 1498) discusses the *turma tristantium* (*Leyd narren*). He had preached about the *turma fortunatorum* (*Glück narren*) on the Laetare Sunday; there, Geiler discusses good and bad fortune with a brief reference to chapter 23 of Brant (*Von uberhebung glucks*), explicitly mentioned («Et habes in speculo tuo»). However, the main reference of that sermon is Petrarca, *De remediis utriusque fortunae*; see Geiler, *Navicula*, IX.M-Q.

66. In several lectionaries, including the one used in Strasbourg, the Gospel pericope for the first Sunday after the Octave of Pentecost was Luke 16, 19-31; see *Missale Argentinense*, Basel c. 1490.

67. «Hii sunt in speciali turba, quam hodie producemus, apte nimirum, cum legitur evangelium de tali potente (turpiter de sede deposito) divite»; Geiler, *Navicula*, XIX.F.

68. «Prima nola est: subditos despicere. O fatue, quasi non sit de eadem massa luti, de eodem patre Adam, quasi non ex Deo ad suam imaginem sicut tu creatus, non tali precio quali tu redemptus, quasi tu malveseto ipse autem aqua baptizatus, et tu alia eucharistia quam ipse comunicatus, et non ipse frater tuus tecum clamans: *Pater noster qui es in celis*, ad aliud regnum tu quam ipse vocatus! Erras, o inflate stulte! Erras! Confrater tuus est, commembrum: *Unum corpus, multi sumus*, *singuli autem* [*alter alterius*] *membra*»; *ibid.*, XIX.G. The quotation merges 1 Corinthians 10, 17 and Romans 12, 5.

69. See Delcorno, *Lazzaro*, 128.

The sermon is organised as a *crescendo* of arguments, and Geiler states that the last one will definitively clarify the ideas for his listeners. He mentions several historical examples of transitory power taken from Brant's book but, instead of dwelling on them, Geiler exploits the parable proposed by the liturgy that – in his view – his listeners can visualise and relate to the well-known image of the wheel.

The last shall be first and the first last. And if you want to see this, there is no need to go far. Lift up your eyes! Before you is the spectacle, in the Gospel you have heard today, that of the rich man and the poor man. I beg you, look at the wheel, I will not say of fortune but of divine providence! Look, I say, at the state of the two during their lives[70].

In this case as in the *Sermones thesauri novi*, the wheel symbolizes not the instability of the world but rather the perfect mechanism governing remuneration in the afterlife. Moreover, according to Geiler, his words create a flow of images in the minds of his listeners, juxtaposing (and thus creating an interaction among) images that are physically absent but evidently quite familiar to them, such as those linked to the parable and the wheel, here simply evoked. From the pulpit, the preacher skilfully weaves a «web of images»: they are called to the mind's eye of the audience and used to convey his message[71].

As we have seen, the link between this biblical tale and the Wheel of Fortune was already established by the *Sermones thesauri novi*, a text Geiler was arguably familiar with since it was repeatedly printed in Strasbourg in that period[72]. However, *Ship*

70. «Putas tu quia regnum tuum durabit semper? Periit regnum Assirorum, Medorum, Persarum et Grecorum. Interiit Iulius Cesar interfectus, Nabuchodonosor depositus, et innumeri etiam nostre tempestatis. Et tu tibi fingis diuturnitatem? O quot ex regiminibus communitatum suspensi, prescripti, interfecti, et aliis infamiis *de sede depositi*. Aliud erit, frater! *Erunt novissimi primi et primi novissimi*. Et si vis videre, non opus est longius abire. Eleva oculos, ante te est spectaculum in hodierno quod audistis evangelio: dives et mendicus. Vide queso rotam, ne dixerim fortune, sed divine providentie. Vide inquam utriusque in vita statum […]»; Geiler, *Navicula*, XIX.K.

71. See Bolzoni, *La rete*, 80.

72. It is the same liturgical occasion, which further suggests that Geiler knew this sermon collection.

of Fools must have been decisive in shaping his choice, since the woodcut accompanying the chapter he commented on that day shows the Wheel of Fortune (fig. 6)[73]. This image thus supported the interpretation of the parable during the sermon, while afterwards the listeners who had the book at home (many of them, according to Geiler) could connect the woodcut of the wheel with the rich man's fate and thus, thanks to this link, be prompted to remember the contents of this sermon.

In *Das Narrenschiff's* image, the trajectory of the man on the wheel is combined with the metamorphosis of the human being into a donkey. This is perfectly reasonable and self-explanatory in a book where every fool is depicted wearing a hood with donkey ears and jangling bells. And yet Geiler's sermon does not comment on this detail; instead, we find it addressed by the last preacher I am going to consider, Bernardino da Siena.

Bernardino da Siena: God's voice in the donkey wheel

The relationship between this woodcut from *Ship of Fools* and a sermon by Bernardino da Siena was first noticed by Lina Bolzoni. She depicts it as the perfect example of how both texts «tap into the same tradition, crossing different literary genres, as well as practising the combination, and mutual translatability, of word and image»[74].

Bernardino mentioned the Wheel of Fortune more than once. The most interesting occurrence is a sermon from his famous 1427 preaching cycle in Siena. The sermon deals with the judgments (rather: punishments) that God sends in this world against the sinners and is based on a biblical line (used as a refrain) that

73. This woodcut is also used for the chapter «Von gluckes fall» (chapter 37), which refers to the Wheel of Fortune in the opening motto: «Wer sitzet uff des glückes rad | der ist ouch warten fall, mit shad | und das er ettwann naem eye bad». Still, chapter 56 also explicitly mentions the Wheel of Fortune in its text: «Ir sitzen zwor jn glückes fall | sindt witzig, und trachtend das end | das gott das radt, üch nit umb wend» (vv. 40-42); just a few lines after, Brant refers to the wheel of Ixion, eternally turned by the wind, and Sisyphus' act of rolling his boulder up the hill.

74. Bolzoni, *La rete*, 203, recalls that Geiler preached on Brant's work.

Fig. 6. Wheel of Fortune, woodcut in Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, Basel 1494, fol. f6v; München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 121. Picture in public domain (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

announces ruins in the form of a violent fall, smashing heads against the ground: «Implebit ruinas et conquassabit capita in terra multorum» (Psalm 109, 6). Speaking of «judicial equity», Bernardino recounts the fable of the fox fallen into a well who seeks help from a (quite dumb) wolf, a story that ends with a sudden reversal of the two animals' situations, sealed by the proverb: «This world is full of stairs: one goes down and one up»[75]. Next, he repeats the biblical refrain and lists the punishments God metes out on sinners: political turbulence, famine, pestilence, and disease, all in different ways. God's action overturns the world («elli fa che 'l mondo va sottosopra»), since God's voice thunders in the wheel, as Bernardino says quoting Psalm 76, 19[76]. «Did you ever see the Wheel of Fortune and its varieties?», Bernardino asks his audience, only to add: «I have seen it, and I have seen it with six elements». He depicts the wheel in its donkey version. In the ascension phases, it transforms a person into a donkey and on top it has a donkey playing a bagpipe, while during the fall the metamorphosis is reversed, from animal back to human[77]. While the description is detailed, it does not comment on the fact that the apical position bears an asinine figure nor that one can be fully human only at the bottom. It dwells instead on the way God in his rightful judgment

75. «Questo mondo è fatto a scale: chi le scende e chi le sale»; Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena Siena 1427*, a cura di C. Delcorno, Milano 1989, 400-1. Bernardino has his own version of a fable present in other preaching materials (see there, footnote 96).

76. The connection between this biblical line and the Wheel of Fortune was already made in the *Postilla* (see note 31), a possible source for Bernardino. Commenting Psalm 76, it presents two main interpretations: one is connected with the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel in the whole world («*Vox tonitrui tui*, id est vox predicationis apostolorum terribilis et aperta omnibus facta est; *in rota*, id est in circuitu totius orbis»); whereas on a moral level the thunder is the divine sentence against unrepented sinners, who are condemned to an eternal punishment, with a reference to Matthew 25, 41 («vox illa terribilis qua tonabis: "Ite maledicti in ignem eternum", erit *in rota*, id est in eternum durabit. In rota enim rotunda non est finem expedire»); Hugh of Saint-Cher, *Postilla*, vol. 2, fol. 179r.

77. Bernardino overlaps here two commonplaces. The donkey playing the lyre was proverbial, also thanks to its occurrence in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*; see W. Gibson, «Asinus ad lyram: From Boethius to Bruegel and Beyond», *Simiolus*, 33 (2007), 33-42.

sends his forms of ruin, which are many «as the wheel shows», and on how the roles of chastiser and victim are relentlessly exchanged (Appendix 11). Also this time the image of the wheel is (indirectly) connected with a story depicting the sudden reversal of a situation, although in this case drawn from a fable, that of the wolf and the fox. Despite the terminology used by Bernardino, however, his wheel depicts not Fortune but the voice of God and the rightful punishments he sends against sinners. It resembles a breaking wheel, used for torture.

Considering that Bernardino was preaching in Siena, it might be surprising that he did not mention the Wheel of Fortune represented on the floor of the Duomo's main nave[78]. We do not know its exact shape at the time, as we only have a much later version of it. It is indeed difficult to argue from silence; still, the impression is that Bernardino favoured his own memory of a specific wheel featuring donkeys over the monumental representation in his (and his audience's) hometown. Perhaps this was a sort of automatic habit of his, a routine piece of his flamboyant repertoire, because we find the same description of an asinine wheel in a sermon he preached two years earlier in Florence. It is very similar, yet with significant variations.

On Palm Sunday 1425, Bernardino spoke about the necessity of despising the world and – first and foremost – of spurning its many lures that urge people to elevate themselves and to seek riches, status, and satisfaction. In reality, however, the world «never sends you up to a point without having you then fall down», and indeed worldly greatness is nothing more than «a donkey's slavery, so that you resemble a weary, sad, oppressed, and shameless donkey»[79]. The simile was suggested by the role this animal plays in the Gospel of the day, where Jesus sits on a donkey; also elsewhere Bernardino interprets this as the demonstration

78. The image dates to after 1372, according to the Sienese chronicler Sigismondo Tizio (d. 1528); on its original appearance and transformations over time, see P. Agnorelli, «Luigi Mussini tra restauro e rifacimento: la Ruota della Fortuna del pavimento del Duomo di Siena», in *Gli uomini e le cose*, a cura di P. D'Alconzo, Napoli 2007, vol. 1, 317-29.

79. «[N]on ti manda mai in alto che tu non vadi a basso […] una schiava asineria, adonqua la poi assomigliare a uno asino affaticato, tristo, sogiogato, e svergognato»: Bernardino da Siena, *Le prediche volgari. Quaresimale del 1425*, a cura di C. Cannarozzi, Firenze 1940, vol. 3, 238.

that worldly glories must be despised[80]. In 1425, this teaching is developed in four points; in the first of them we find the wheel, obviously in its 'donkey' version. In this case as well the wheel is divided into six stages, but what is more significant for us is the way it is introduced:

> First, a man becomes a donkey as he becomes great, and especially when a poor man becomes rich. Is he rich? Oh, he is a great donkey! As a sign of this, once I saw a Wheel of Fortune: the one who began to climb up had the head of a donkey; when he was in the middle, he became half donkey [...] and when he was back on the ground, he again became fully a man[81].

The image recalled by Bernardino is evidently the same, but it is not used to describe the voice of God who punishes sinners; rather, it is evoked to stigmatise the social rise of the lower classes, the 'asininity' of the poor who become rich. In a certain sense, we return to a social analysis in which, however, the image that most evoked mobility is used to stigmatise it.

On both occasions, Bernardino insists that he saw this wheel, characterized by six people and the asinine metamorphosis. It is impossible to know what he had in mind, and yet, a late fourteenth-century fresco inside the Dominican convent of Perugia depicts a Wheel of Fortune that bears a stunning resemblance (fig. 7)[82]. At its centre is an angelic woman (*Fortuna*, as a writing

80. «Has igitur despiciendas magnificentias Dominus demonstravit cum super asina sedit [...]. In cuius mysterium quidam figurantes fortune rotam inferius statuunt hominem integrum et perfectum; in ascensu autem anteriorem partem asinum statuunt. Reliquam vero virum in sublimi gradu perfectus asinus collocatur qui fistulam pulsat. In descensu autem anteriorem partem hominem, sed asinuum ponunt posteriorem»: Bernardino da Siena, *Opera omnia*, Firenze 1950-1965, vol. 2, 134. This model sermon develops several elements already present in 1425.

81. «Prima, e' diventa l'uomo uno asino come e' doventa grande, e massimamente quando uno povero doventa ricco. È ricco? O, egli è il grand'asino. In segno di ciò io vidi, una volta, una ruota della fortuna, che v'era uno che cominciava a montare in su, e aveva il capo d'asino; come e' fu in mezzo, ed e' diventò mezzo asino [...] e quando e' fu in terra ed e' diventò tutto uomo»: Bernardino da Siena, *Quaresimale del 1425*, vol. 3, 238.

82. For the dating of the fresco to the 1380s or a few decades later, see V. Picchiarelli, «Una 'sfortunata' Ruota della Fortuna e una precoce immagine di Santa Caterina da Siena nel convento di San Domenico a Perugia», in *La storia e la critica*, a cura di L. Carletti, G. Garzella, Pisa 2016, 187-98: 193.

Fig. 7. Wheel of Fortune, fresco (c. 1380-1400), Dominican Convent, Perugia (currently: Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria). Picture reproduced with permission from Ministero della Cultura – Direzione Regionale Musei Umbria – Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria.

indicates) who turns the wheel holding in her hands a whip and a laurel or olive twig (reward and punishment), while on the wheel six creatures undergo the same transformation process from human to donkey Bernardino presented to his listeners, with the addition – for the figures on the two sides – of a fluttering red cloak, which grants visual dynamism to the image[83]. The top of the fresco is missing, so while the overall logic of the painting suggests that the figure in that position was fully a donkey, we do not know whether it held a lyre, a detail that would have constituted the proverbial smoking gun[84]. It would

83. *Ibid.*, 189 suggests a metamorphosis of the human being into a goat, which does not appear convincing considering both the image and a long-standing tradition reaching back to Apuleius.

84. Nonetheless, images with an animal at the top of the wheel date back to the thirteenth century, as in an illumination of a French translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, where a blue crowned animal (arguably a lion) is on top: Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2642, fol. 11r, reproduced in Pisani, *L'iconografia*, 126.

be tempting to think that Bernardino had seen this image and thought of it while preaching, and indeed he was familiar with Perugia. Still, better to remain cautious: if it is not the one Bernardino saw, this fresco does certainly present the exact iconography he had in mind and helps us to better understand the variety of images circulating in late medieval Italy[85].

Conclusion

Overall, we have seen how religious discourses often combined the symbol of the Wheel of Fortune with narratives about a sudden and usually irreparable fall, drawn from Gospel parables, *fabulae*, or historical *exempla* (at times, with references to recent or even contemporary events). Equally important was the comparison with natural elements, especially unpredictable winds or the sea's relentless movement. Preachers often simply evoked the Wheel of Fortune, assuming everyone knew it. In several cases, however, sermons depicted it in detail, referring to a specific type of image, sometimes with references to Boethius (its noble father) and a motto.

Within a shared framework, this imagery was used to convey different messages. The key focus was usually the fall, with the prevailing perspective of a tragic death or descent into hell. At times, however, a reflection on social dynamics comes to the fore, and the destiny of people is represented as decided (in part) by human actions. Overall, within the spectrum of these sermons, the wheel turns constantly but the force governing it varies: blind and fickle fortune, divine justice, rightful providence, and human mercy or greed.

Sermons, some of which were disseminated all over Europe, help us understand how people were taught to look at the Wheel

85. Also in Siena, arguably in 1428, Domenico di Niccolò produced an intarsia for the city's Palazzo Pubblico depicting an 'asinine' Wheel of Fortune with four figures on it, as recalled by Bolzoni, *La rete*, 200. This might have been an echo of what Bernardino had preached the previous year, or a distinct witness of the circulation of this model. In the sphere of Italian public buildings, a fourteenth-century fresco of the Wheel of Fortune is painted under the vault of the Palazzo del Podestà in Fabriano.

of Fortune/Providence, and what kind of discourses and ideas – as well as stories – were attached to this symbol of the precarity of human life. While it could be represented on a gigantic scale, such as in the main churches of Torino, Basel, Verona, Rochester, and Siena, this symbol was often to be found in more humble parishes as well, as the murals of many churches remind us. To offer just some examples, limited to Denmark, instances span from the exceptionally early case of Slaglille (XII century), to Birkerød (c. 1350, here, as in many other cases, accompanied by the sentence: «Regno, regnabo, regnavi, sum sine regno»), Udby (c. 1400), Fjälkinge and Gualöv (c. 1450), and Tuse (c. 1460), up to the mural in Tingsted (c. 1475-1500), where the writing «Regno, regnabo, regnavi, sum sine regno» is accompanied by the admonition: «Sic transit gloria mundi» (fig. 8)[86]. And the discourse could be extended to other parts of Europe, such as the parish of Ilketshall, Suffolk (c. 1330) or the little church of Beram, in Istria, where in 1474 the centuries-old image of the wheel was combined with the novelty of the *danse macabre*[87].

By that time, the image of the Wheel of Fortune was also circulating in other ways, printed on paper – via the woodcuts of a vernacular bestseller such as *The Ship of Fools* – or in *tarocchi*, a new and rapidly popular card game that included this symbol, often in its asinine version, as both material evidences and a satire by Ariosto document[88]. And it is not without irony that

86. See https://www.kalkmalerier.dk/ (key word to use: Lykkehjul; last access 7 August 2023). As a general introduction, see «Denmark, Kingdom of: 2. Painting and graphic arts», in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. C. P. Hourihane, Oxford 2012, vol. 2, 273-76.

87. See T. Curteis, «A Unique Wheel of Fortune in Suffolk», *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, 41 (2008), 427-46 and D. Costantini, «La Danse macabre de Guyot Marchant en Istrie (Beram, Hrastovlje)», *Prospéro: Rivista di culture anglo-germaniche*, 15 (2008), 47-61: 58.

88. Most notably, the card of the decks known as Tarocchi Sforza of the Pierpont-Morgan (1451) and Tarocchi Brambilla-Brera (mid-fifteenth century). In 1523, Ariosto asserts that this design became standard, saying that the donkey version is used by «every master of cards»; see Bolzoni, *La rete*, 201. The opening woodcut of the *Libro della sorte* by Lorenzo Spirito (d. 1496) also depicts an 'asinine' Wheel of Fortune in its first editions (i.e. Perugia 1482 and Brescia 1484; yet not in the 1482 autograph manuscript held at the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice).

Fig. 8. Wheel of Fortune, mural (c. 1475-1500), Tingsted. Picture by P. Delcorno.

one of the earliest descriptions of these cards is a sermon dating to 1450-1470, that rails against the «ludus triumphorum», branding it as the worst of all gambling games, a diabolic invention, since it enables the devil to triumph over innumerable souls to such an extent that its cards can be seen as «21 steps leading to hell». Among them is «*la rotta*, id est: regno, regnavi, sum sine regno»[89].

89. «De tertio ludorum genere, scilicet triumphorum. Non est res in hoc mundo quod pertineat ad ludum tantum Deo odibilis sicut ludus triumphorum. Apparet enim in eis omnis turpitudo Christiane fidei ut patebit per ipsos discurrendo. Nam dicuntur triumphi, sic, ut creditur, a dyabolo inventore intitulati, quia in nullo alio ludo ita triumphat cum animarum perditione, sic in isto. In quo non solum Deus, angeli, planete, et virtutes cardinales vituperose ponuntur et nominantur, verum et luminaria mundi, scilicet Papa et Imperator, compelluntur, quod absurdum est, cum maximo dedecore Christanorum, in ludum intrare. Sunt enim 21 triumphi qui 21 gradus alterius scale in profundum inferi mittentis. Primus dicitur *El bagatella* (et est

Preachers evidently developed a number of moral discourses exploiting the Wheel of Fortune and combining this powerful symbol with a series of stories and theological concepts. And yet at times the wheel also spun out of (their) control, becoming part of other, sometimes competing, discourses, be they grumblings about how God governs the world or a new, allegedly highly immoral and dangerous card game, in which the Wheel of Fortune is side by side with the subversive image of the *papessa*, prompting an anonymous Italian preacher to exclaim: «O miseri, quod negant Christiana fides!».

omnium inferior), 2 Imperatrix, 3 Imperator, 4 *La papessa* (O miseri quod negat Christiana fides), 5 *El papa* (O pontifex cur, etc. qui […], et isti ribaldi faciunt ipsorum capitaneum), […] 10 *La rotta* (id est: regno, regnavi, sum sine regno), […] 21 *El mondo (cioè Dio Padre)*, 0, *El matto, si è nulla* (nisi velint)»; R. Steele, «A Notice of the *Ludus Triumphorum* and some Early Italian Card Games», *Archaeologia*, 57 (1900), 185-200: 187. Regarding this sermon, see T. Depaulis, «'Breviari del diavolo so' le carte e naibi'. How Bernardine of Siena and His Franciscan Followers Saw Playing Cards and Card Game», in *Religiosus Ludens. Das Spiel als kulturelles Phänomen*, hrsg. J. Sonntag, Berlin 2021, 115-36: 124-25; it shows that this sermon is based on another sermon by Giacomo della Marca.

APPENDIX

1. Filippo da Ferrara: the *exemplum* of Mastino della Scala

Capitulum 26: Dominus Mastinus dela Scala veronensis.

Magnus dominus in Verona semel ivit ad ecclesiam maiorem et ivi in quodam loco vidit depinctam mortem[90] subitaneam in modu rote fortune[91]. Petivit quot esset. Respondit quidam: «Ista est rota fortune et ille qui est supra cum corona in capite et cum virga in manu dicit: Regno. Unde vos domine Mastine estis ille, qui regnans modo. Ille alius homo descendit de rota, cum capite deorssus aliquando regnavit et fuit ita magnus, sed rota fortune est igitur revoluta; et ita accideret vobis, domine Mastine, si rota revolveretur. Ille alius homo qui ascendit significat eos qui prosperant, sed ille qui est in infimo rote est totaliter despectus et rota est igitur contraria». Tamen dominus Mastinus dixit: «Ego libenter vellere quod poneretur unus clavus fortis in rota et quod ita firmaretur, quod non possit dare voltam, ita quod ego semper sim in summitate rote et dominus». Statim sequenti die fuit ille dominus interffectus. Unde quomodo homo desiderat semper prosperari et longo tempore et tamen subito moritur[92].

2. Michel Menot: the *exemplum* of Louis XI

Moraliter, *seigneurs et dames*, evangelium declarat nobis quomodo sunt tres modi hominum qui volunt deum occidere in suis membris in hoc mundo. Quidam precipitanto, quidam lapidando, quidam crucificendo. […]. Primi sunt superbi qui semper volunt ascendere in altum per superbiam. […] Dic de simea que quanto altius ascendit in altum tanto plus confusionem suam ostendit. Dic de fumo que quanto altius ascendit citius evanescit […] ut Iulius papa. «Icarus» nimis alte volando «Icareas nomine fecit

90. The manuscript reads: *mors*.

91. A different hand deleted «mors […] fortune» and substituted it with «rotam fortune», which is written on the page's margin.

92. Filippo da Ferrara, *Liber de introductione loquendi*, lib. 5, cap. 26 in Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, MS 1552, lib. 5, fol. 10rv.

aquas»[93]. Dic historiam de Ludovico XI, Francie rege, qui illi superbo et elevato qui *une piece riche de tapisserie* fecerat fieri, ubi pingebatur eius status, quomodo *d'ung petit plumet, d'ung clerc de finances*, venerat ad regimen domus regis, ibi in pictura super rotam fortune sedebat. Dixit ei rex: «Debebas ibi in rota clavem figere validum, ne ad primum statum redires», quod factum est in quo miser obiit[94].

3. Honorius: Fortune spinning on the wheel

Non solum, karissimi, sacri apices ad vitam aeternam nos ducunt, sed etiam gentilium litterae nos instruunt [...]. Scribunt itaque philosophi quod mulier rotae innexa iugiter circumferatur; cuius caput nunc in alta erigatur, nunc in ima demergatur. Rota haec quae volvitur est gloria huius mundi quae iugiter circumfertur. Mulier rotae innexa est fortuna gloriae intexta. Huius caput aliquando sursum, aliquando fertur deorsum, quia plerique multocies potentia et divitiis exaltantur, saepe egestate et miseriis exalliantur. Dicunt etiam quod quidam apud inferos damnatus per radios rotae sit divaricatus; quae rota sine intermissione ab alto montis in ima vallis feratur et iterum alta repetens denuo relabatur. Ferunt iterum quod quidam ibi saxum in altum montis evolvat, ac pondus saxi volventem de vertice montis praecipitem pellat, rursumque miser saxum in altum revolvat. Tradunt iterum quod cuiusdam iecur ibi vultur exedat, quod iam consumptum iterum recrudescat[95].

93. This verse is attested in medieval manuscripts as a variant to Ovid, *Tristia* I 1.90: «Icarus, aequoreis nomina fecit aquis» (see also III 4.22). It occurs in the *Ovidius moralizatus* by Pierre Bersuire (d. 1362), which presents the story as an example of disobedience and presumption; see *Editio princeps del Ovidius moralizatus de Pierre Bersuire: Estudio y nueva interpretación del texto*, ed. P. Piqueras Yagüe, Huelga 2021, 318 and 331.

94. Michel Menot, *Opus aureum Evangeliorum quadragesimalium*, in *Id.*, *Sermones quadragesimales*, Paris 1519, fol. 92v-93r.

95. Honorius Augustodunensis, *Speculum Ecclesiae*, PL 172, col. 1056-58 (sermon of Sunday 11 after Pentecost).

4. Hugh of Saint-Cher: The Good Samaritan

Moraliter: ***Homo quidam descendebat ab Hierusalem in Hiericho***, id est ad divitiis in paupertatem, a prosperitate in advertsitatem. Hoc quotidie fit, quia rota fortune continue volvitur, et quidam ascendunt et alii descendunt. Eccli. X.b: *Sedes ducunt superborum* etc. 1 Regum II.a: *Dominus mortificat et vivificat, deducit ad inferos et reducit. Dominus paupere facit et ditat, humiliat et sublevat pro diversis*. Ideo dicit Ecclesiasticus XVIII.c: *memento paupertatis in tempore abundantie, et necessitatem paupertatis in die divitiarum*. Et subdit cuasam: *A mane usque ad vesperam immutabitur tempus*, et hec omnia citate in oculis dei. Satis bene depingitur rota fortune. ***Et incidit in latrones***, id est in manum medicorum, quo ad infirmitatem, et in manum divitorum quo ad paupertatem, in manum advocatorum quo ad adversitatem. Pauper emin indiget auxilio divitum, infirmus auxilio et consilio medicorum, tertius indiget auxilio advocatorum contra adversarios suos. Sed omnes, id est divites mundi et medici et advocati, latrones sunt, quia divites pauper spoliant et opprimumt […]. Similiter medici infirmos spoliant pecunia et occidunt, quia magna salaria accipiunt et sepissime nihil prosunt, imo aliquando obsunt […]. Similiter advocati omnes quos possunt spoliant et pauperes et divites […]. ***Qui etiam despoliaverunt eum*** […] ***Semivivo relicto***, substantia enim rerum appellatur comuniter vita hominis […] ***Accidit autem ut sacerdos quidam descenderet eadem via***, quia aliquando pauper et infirmus fuit, et ideo magis deberet esse misericors, secundum illud: *Vir indigens misericors est*. ***Et viso illo proteruit***, nulla facta misericordia, cum tamen ideo inungantur manus sacerdotirum ut affluant misericordia […]. ***Similiter et levita*** […] in quo notatur avaricia omnium clericorum et sacerdotum, quia nec sacerdos nec levita motus est misericordia in pauperem et infirmum. […] Et a propheta usque ad sacerdotem cuncti faciunt dolum, quia ea que habent pauperum sunt et dolose ea retinent […]. ***Samaritanus autem quidam***, id est laicus precepta dei custodiens. ***Iter faciens***, id est legem que est via sive iter veniendi ad deum […]. ***Venit secus eum***, visitans corporaliter infirmos […]. ***Et videns eum misericordia motus est*** […]. ***Et appropians***, mente et corpore, non pertansiens sicut sacerdos et levita. ***Alligavit vulnera eius***, necessaria tribuendo. ***Infundens oleum*** compassionis, ***et***

vinum consolationis. Tria dicit: Appropiavit, alligavit vulnera, infundit oleum et vinum. In primo notatur subventio corporis, in secundo compassio cordis, in tertio consolatio oris. […] ***Et imponens illus in iumentum suum***, id est portans per compassionem et subventionem onus eius, quia certe laici ubi clerici nihil faciunt portant onera pauperum et infirmorum. […]. Ut laicus talis vere potest dicere cum Psalmum: *Ut iumentum factum sum apud te* etc. Ideo dicit Iob XII.b: *Interroga iumenta et docebunt te*, exemplo scilicet melius quam clerici verbo […] ***Duxit in stabulum***, id est in domum suam […] ***Et curam eius egit***, id est sollicite procuravit eum. […] ***Et altera die***, quia non semel, sed frequenter, imo semper faciendum est opus misericordie in pauperes qui semper indigent. Iohannis XII.b: *Pauperes semper vobiscum habebitis* […] ***Protulit duos denarios***, scilicet voluntatem et facultatem […]. ***Et dedit stabulario***, id est Christo qui est custos stabuli et natus in stabulo; cui datur quicquid pauperibus datur, Matthei XXV.b: *Quid uni ex minimis meis* etc. ***Et ait: Curam illius habe***, hoc est: oravit etiam pro paupere Christum ut eius curam haberet[96].

5. Servasanto da Faenza

Secunda corona qua coronantur a mundo est corona avaricie qua coronantur divites omnes, mundi amatores. Unde scribitur Ieremie 13: «Dic regi et dominatrici: Humiliamini et sedete, quia de capite vestro descendet corona glorie vestre» [13, 18]. Hec est illa corona qua quis pingitur coronatus in rota fortune. Nam quia rota semper volvitur nec ad momentum stare permittitur, dum ad summum pervenitur descendere cogitur. Et hec est optima ratio, quia nec in prosperis est gaudendum, nec in adversis est desperandum, quia dum rota stare non possit, sepe qui imus est ascendit et qui summus est usque ad ima descendit. Unde scribuntur hi versus in rota fortune. Nam qui in summo est dicit: «Glorior elatus, descendo mortificatus». Item alius qui in imo est dicit: «Infirmus ecce premor, rursus ad astra vehor»[97].

96. Hugh of Saint-Cher, *Postilla*, vol. 5, fol. 178vb and 179rb.

97. Bonaventure, *Sermones aurei de tempore et de sanctis*, Basel 1502, fol. 73v (second sermon for St Bartolomeus). The sermon circulated at length

6. Thomas Brinton: the wind and the wheel

Vita temporalis est instabilis. Videtis exemplariter in creatura quod ventus turbinis vel circularis rem quam agit circumducit et ad magnam distanciam quandoque exaltat, sed cito plus euanescit ventus et defluit res ad terram. Ad propositum. Vita ista similis est vento circulari, quia sicut ventus nunc est altus, nunc bassus, nunc fortis, nunc debilis, nunc ad orientem, nunc ad occidentem, et cetera. Sic vita, ista rota fortune se mirabiliter vertente, eo quod iam sumus pauperes, nunc diuites, nunc sani, nunc egri, nunc iuuenes, nunc senes, nunc viui, nunc lasciui, nunc mortui et sepulti[98].

7. England on the Wheel of Fortune

þe crafti clerk Boycius, 2° De consolacione [...] describit fortunam, prosperitatem istius mundi, in similitudine cece domine girantis rotam, et in ista figura comuniter depingitur dum ista domina fortuna est magna domina, domina omnium rerum terrestrium. In sua disposicione sunt omnia regna, ducatus et comitatus, episcopatus, abbathie et prioratus, omnia beneficia et dignitates super terram. Ista est magna domina, sed est ceca, quia cece et indiscrete confert sua dona; adeo bene promouet laicum sicut doctum, indignum sicut dignum, viciosum sicut virtuosum, ideo est ceca. Quid est ilia rota quam rotat? Certe, *þe wele and honor* istius seculi. Istam rotam semper vertit; istam rotat versa vice ad libitum. Quosdam ilia *qwirlid vp* super istam rotam et facit ex mendicis et *knauis* milites and *gret* dominos; quosdam illa *hurlid doune* de altis dignitatibus et dominio *to care and woful mischef*. Talis est gloria mundi. Iste est ludus fortune, teste Boicio in eodem processu. Si velis videre exemplum huius, nec respiceas Salustie nec Eutropium, Orosium, nec Valerium; *go no forthir* quam *to þe woful infortunys, þe mishappis* istius regni que vidisti oculo corporali. Vbi, queso, fuit aliquod regnum *qwirlid* alcius super istam rotam honoris quam istud fuit[99]?

under the name of Bonaventure. Regarding its correct attribution, see Schneyer, *Repertorium*, vol. 1, 656 and vol. 5, 387.

98. *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton*, vol. 1, 99.

99. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 649, fol. 69v, ed. in Wenzel, «Why the Monk?», 268. I have indicated in italics the vernacular expressions.

8. Up to Agincourt, down to the duke of Clarence's death

Quid sunt isti remi? Ora pro nobis letanie, *processiouns and special prayers* in missa et matutinis que fiunt pro ipso nocte et die in ecclesia. Clerus remigavit manu et corde; cordialius nunquam orabatur pro Christiano principe quam pro ipso durante tempore guerre. Deus de sua misericordia inspiret eum sic continuare suum bonum et graciosum dominium versus ecclesiam et ita diligere *and cheriche* clerum quod possint habere causam remigandi ita cordialiter pro ipso possis. […] Per vim istorum remorum magne *carrikes of Geene* lucrabantur supra mare. Per vim istorum remorum *oversailid* per conquestum *þe faire barge* Normannie. Per vim istorum remorum ad acerbum bellum de Achyncourt fere supervelificavit *þe gret cogge* Francie. Multis periculis noster *perles prince* se exposuit *for riȝt* regni. *Mani bittur stormys hath he abide, many scharp schowres* sustinuit pro nostre salvacione navis, et in omnibus periculis Deus preservavit eum per virtutem illorum remorum. Sicut confidebat in precibus, sic expediebat. Sicut *he hath qwyt* Deo, Deus sibi retribuit. Sicut suus amor crevit erga Deum et ecclesiam, sic crevit his *wele and honour*. In figuram huius processus propheta Ezechiel vidit rotam magnam circumvolvi. Aspectus rote et opus erat quasi visio maris [Ezekiel 1, 16]. Infra rotam erat spiritus vite [Ezekiel 1, 20] et quocumque ibat spiritus sursum vel deorsum, sequebatur et rota. Ista magna rota est *weele and honour* regni, qui est nunc *up*, nunc *down*; nunc *hye*, nunc *low*; et circumgiratur ut rota. Super istam rotam ascendunt plurimi tam spirituales quam temporales. *Gape upward ful fast*. Quidam *ar qwirlid up* subito super illam rotam et fiunt de *pore gentilmen grete astates and gret lordis*. Quidam *ar hurlid doun* de ista rota ab altis honoribus et dignitatibus ad extremam paupertatem, *sorooful care* et miseriam. Non est fiducia nec mundi stabilitas in mundi gloria: mundi honor est a *sliper þinge and an elvich*: nunc est, nunc non est; hodie homo, cras non homo; hodie dominus, cras a *lost man*; hodie a *dowti werrour*, cras defunctus in campo. Non indigemus extraneis historiis ad probandum hoc, ne respicias Salustium nec Eutropium, Orosium, nec magnum Valerium, *go no ferþer* quam ad lamentabilem historiam insignis principis ducis Clarenc', cuius anime propicietur Deus. Sublimiter rotabatur ipse super rotam honoris, multum honorabatur et

timebatur pro sua humanitate. Salvo dumtaxat nostro principe dignissimo rege, reputabatur *þo dowtist werriour and þo worþiest prince cristyn*. Omnes Christiani reges, ut dicitur, non habuerunt meliorem militem, sed salva Dei voluntate, si rota nimis cito vertebatur per ventum *of wilfulnes, he ware dreve fro wele into woo*, *perich* (?) hostium periit et transivit e mundo. Nemo ergo confidat in mundi honore, nemo figat nimium cor in gloria mundi, quia omnis gloria mundi est nisi vanitas [Qoelet 1, 2], ut ait Salamon, fugit velud umbra an fadis sicut flos [Job 14, 2]. Istam instabilitatem in mundi gloria propheta Ezechiel notat in discripcione rote, ubi comparat rotam mari. Aspectus, inquit, rote quasi visio maris [Ezechiel 1, 16]. Respice mare, respice rotam. Rota honoris velud mare fluit et refluit, venit et transit, surgit et cadit, et sicut mare *wexit pleyn* post transitum navis et nullum signum aut vestigium apparet semite per quam naves transiunt [cf. Wisdom 5, 10]. Sic, *be þou never so worþi a werrioure, never so wise a governour*, licet attingas suppremum punctum honoris, licet velifices altum mare *of welth and prosperite* [...]. Plures gloriosi principes *and worþi werrours* fuerunt rectores nostre navis ante conquestum et post, sed nullus cum tam parva plebe *passid so terful* bellum cum palma victorie sicut ipse ad acerbam procellam de Achyncourt, nullus vel pauci qui tot magnos et graciosos actus in tam brevi tempore[100].

9. Gritsch: the wheel and the killer

Mundus et omnia terrena habent instabilitatem in retinendo. Unde Iacobus: *Transit mundus et omnia concupiscentia eius* [1 John 2, 17]. Nam non est potentia, non gloria, nec divitie, que possint diu permanere; tristitia vertitur in leticiam, leticia in mestitiam, et quod imum est elevatur, et altum supprimitur, et figuratur in rota fortune, quare Boetius, liber secundum *De consolatione*, prosa secunda, in persona ipsius fortune sic dicit: «Nos ad constantiam nostris moribus alienam inexpleta hominum cupiditas alligabit?» – quasi diceret minime – «Nam hec nostra vis est, hunc continuum ludum ludimus; rotam volubili orbe versamus, infima summis, summa infimis mutare gaudemus». Et pauci interpositis

100. *Ibid.*, fol. 130r-32r, ed. in Haines, «'Our Master Mariner'», 91-93.

subiungit: «Opes honores ceteraque talium, scilicet rerum mei iuris sunt. Dominam famule cognoscant; mecum veniunt, me abeunte discedunt». Hec ille. Super quo passu quidam compositor metrice sic dicit: «En ergo fortuna: Si starem sorte sub una | et non mutarer, numquam fortuna vocarer». Et ideo quidam talem descriptionem fortune visus est formare: fortuna mundialis vultum habet mulieris pulcrum et apprentem odorem habet specierum cunctos allicientem, corpus habet anguillarum et alas aquilarum, caudam insuper draconis et motus vespertilionis. Illa descriptio sic potest apparere fortuna mundialis blanditur et decipt, et sic facies mulieris sentitur et attrahit, et sicut odores specierum; quia diu durare non poterit, habet corpus anguillarum; et quia a volatu non disinit, alas habet aquilarum, dum luci invidet motus habet vespertilionis, que circa candelas volitat, sed dum quemquam mors obsidet, caudam habet draconis, que morsu vitam terminat[101].

10. *Sermones thesauri novi*: an ancient image of fortune

Recordare fili quia recepisti bona in vita tua et Lazarus similiter mala, Luce 15 [16, 25]. Antiqui sapientes statum mundi considerantes et invenientes eum non habere stabilitatem in aliqua sui parte, sed quod subiacet motui et mutabilitati, ideo ipsum sub rota fortune descripserunt in hunc modum: depinxerunt enim quattuor homines in rota. Unum in parte superiori coronatum et ridentem; alium in parte inferiori miserum, nudum et egentem; tertium ex latere uno manibus et pedibus sursum conantem ascendere; quartum in alio latere capite depresso et pedibus levatis ad ima tendentem. Et scripserunt hunc versum: Regno, regnavi, regnabo, sum sine regno. Moraliter, sicut est in mundo, de quo Boetius *De consolatione philosophie*, liber 2: «Hunc ludum quotidie ludimus, hac rota mobili orbe versamur; summa infimis, infirma summis mutare gaudeamus». Videmus enim quod hi qui sunt in parte superiori, id. est in prosperitate divitiarum et dominationum rident et non perpendunt quod sunt in magno periculo […]. Secundus in inferiori parte flevit et sunt paupere in adversitate et afflictione positi non elevati in rota fortune, qui

101. Gritsch, *Quadragesimale*, X.I.

non debent tristari [...]. Tertius se ita habet in rota fortune quod nititur ascendere manibus et pedibus, sic aliqui in mundo cupiunt regnare in divitiis et dominationibus et dant munera, faciunt honorationes plures [...]. Quartus capite depresso et pedibus elevatis deorsum tendebat, sic aliqui sunt in mundo qui fuerunt magni in divitiis, honoribus et dominationibus, et humiliantur in hoc mundo et deponuntur. Unde Hyeronimus: «Letamur ad ascensum, timeamus lapsum, non enim est tanti gaudii excelsa tenuisse quanti meroris de excelsis cecidisse»[102]. Ideo Boeti liber 2, prosa 9: «In omni adversitate fortune infelicissimum genus infortunii est fuisse felicem et non esse», qualis fuit dives cui dictum est: *Recordare fili*[103].

11. Bernardino's asinine wheel

A proposito: *Implebit ruinas, et conquassabit capita in terra multorum* [Psalm 109, 6]; ché quando Idio versa i suoi giudici, elli li versa solo per li peccati che si fanno, e in molti modi li manda. Quando è in mutare di stati, quando in fame, quando in pestilenzie, quando in infermità, quando in fame, quando in uno modo e quando in un altro. E quando elli li versa, elli fa che 'l mondo va sotto sopra: *Vox tonitrui tui in rota* [Psalm 76, 19]; la voce di Dio è nella ruota. Vedesti tu mai come sta la ruota della fortuna e le varietà sue? Io l'ho veduta io, e vidila con sei varietà. Prima nel fondo è tutto uomo, e al salire suo più in su diventa il suo capo d'asino. E andando più in su diventa mezzo asino, e alla sommità della ruota elli è tutto asino, e è colla cornamusa e suona. La ruota il manda poi dall'altro lato col capo di sotto in giù, e ine ha il capo d'uomo, e l'avanzo è tutto asino. E più giù, e elli è mezzo uomo e mezzo asino, e poi in fondo e egli è tutto uomo. Idio per suo giudicio empie le sue ruine: *Implebit ruinas*, ché in questa ruota elli ci è dimolte varietà: che colui che gastiga, sarà poi gastigato, né altro ci si fa se non gastiga costui e poi quell'altro; e un'altra volta e ella va a contrario; che chi fu gastigato, gastigherà lui. E questo non è se non per sui giudizio[104].

102. Cf. Jerome, *In Ezechielem*, PL 25, col. 443-44.
103. *Sermones thesauri novi de tempore*, Nürnberg 1496, fol. t2v (sermon 105).
104. Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena*, 401-2.

ABSTRACT

Pietro Delcorno, *«Rota fortune continue volvitur»: The Wheel of Fortune in Medieval Preaching*

The article investigates the ways medieval preachers presented and discussed the Wheel of Fortune as well as the interplay between their sermons and the images of this symbol that were displayed in public spaces. Between the twelfth and the fifteenth century, when the *rota fortunae* was a recurrent element in the visualscape, sermons and visual discourses put an effort into guiding the gaze, the reflections, and even the emotions of the observers before this symbolic wheel. Images and sermons aimed to shape religious and moral ideas about (social) instability: the dynamic of rising and, even more, the looming danger of a sudden downfall. Tracing and analysing the use of the Wheel of Fortune in preaching, therefore, allows us to better understand the way this symbol was popularised and the multiple meanings it acquired in the public sphere. First and foremost, the *rota fortunae* was used to develop a socio-religious discourse on the fickleness of the human condition and power, the moral and social reasons of this instability, the role of providence in this world and divine justice in the afterlife. In shimmering forms, therefore, the Wheel of Fortune was a discourse that was as much religious as political.

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