
Isabel de Villena (Elionor Manuel de Villena before she took the veil) was born in 1430, the illegitimate daughter of the Castilian writer and nobleman Enrique de Villena. Through her father she was related to the royal houses of both Aragon and Castile. Enrique died when Elionor was four, and she was raised in the royal palace in Valencia by her cousin, Queen María of Castile, who provided her young charge with a strong female role model. In 1446 Elionor professed in the Franciscan convent of the Trinity in Valencia, a convent whose founder and patron was Queen María. Villena became abbess in 1462 and died of the plague in 1490.

Isabel de Villena is the author of the only medieval life of Christ that can be attributed with certainty to a woman. In the first study in English dedicated to the Vita, Lesley K. Twomey discusses how the text differs in content and structure from such classics of the genre as the Meditationes vitae Christi, Ludolph of Saxony’s Vita Christi, Ubertino da Casale’s Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu, and more locally and likewise in the vernacular, Francesc Eiximenis’s Vida de Jesuchrist. As critics have pointed out, in several important ways Villena’s Vita is as much a life of the Virgin as a life of Christ, and her book gives special attention to female figures from the Scriptures. The Vita Christi was published posthumously in 1497 by Villena’s successor as abbess, who added a dedication to Queen Isabel of Castile. The book thus ended up being a work that revolved extensively around biblical women and that was written by a woman for a community of women, published by a woman, and dedicated to a woman.

Twomey pays special attention to Villena’s defense of the Immaculate Conception, and indeed, that doctrine is intimately connected with the text’s choice of scriptural quotations and its incorporation of iconographic motifs. The other important focus of the text is clothing and such accessories as shoes and jewels. If the Fathers of the Church condemned female adornment as sinful, Villena in a sense “redeems” this finery; first, because the woman in question is the Blessed Virgin, and second, because the text constantly goes beyond the glittery surface of jewels and garments to
focus on the spiritual meaning of such adornments. Rather than denoting a stereotypically female interest in finery and the surface of things, the text’s attention to material culture is constantly redirected through allegorization to deeper questions of Eucharistic devotion, living the Franciscan rule, and contemplation. Thus, in light of the portrayal of the Incarnation as the clothing of Christ in human flesh, Twomey observes: “Sor Isabel’s concentration on clothing Mary’s body in fine fabrics is an outward sign of the invisible inner clothing of God the Son in flesh in her womb” (137–8).

Clothing, of course, was a significant marker of social rank, and the readers of Villena’s text had also been “readers” of clothing before joining the community. Garments—even used garments—were inherently valuable, so the gifting of clothing to the Virgin as a sign of Mary’s humility, subordination, and obedience is a constant in Villena’s Vita. It was equally a factor in the lives of the nuns, for patrons donated clothing to the convent and the gifting of clothing would have been part of the sisters’ daily experience before they professed. The sacred and the secular do not oppose one another; rather, the subordination of material culture to spiritual culture underscores the sisters’ familiarity with the accouterments of their former aristocratic lifestyle in order to enhance the text’s spiritual meaning.

Embroidery and other types of needlework were an essentially, but not exclusively, female activity. The patriarchal system viewed such handiwork as a means for women to avoid idleness and thus to keep their dangerous sexuality under control. Moreover, because this was a characteristic activity for the Blessed Virgin, the nuns themselves were expected to imitate that model and to engage in needlework. But the Vita Christi gives a rather different meaning to sewing: in the Vita, Mary is both a producer and a consumer of embroidered garments. Even as decorated clothing was a luxury item that the aristocratic nuns would have worn in their secular life, it was also an appropriate item for the Queen of Heaven to don.

The Vita Christi accords Mary very fashionable and opulent accessories, including six pairs of embroidered high platform shoes, each with its own symbolic color and decorated with such emblematic natural elements as myrtle leaves, that were all the rage in late fifteenth-century Valencia. Shoes appear in the Bible as a sign of faith in God, and in the Vita Christi, beyond the connection with contemporary fashion, shoes also denote
Mary’s humility. Significantly, the text’s focus on the Virgin’s beautiful feet is not an indication of her pride but rather yet another reference to the Immaculate Conception.

The *Vita Christi* was part of the mentoring process associated with Villena’s role as abbess and designed to instruct the sisters under her care. Twomey explains that the private nature of the book’s diffusion gave its author a certain freedom in her reworking of the Scriptures, a reworking she accomplished outside of masculine control. For the sisters who were its primary readers, the book became a means to spiritual perfection as the nuns were led to imitate both Christ and the Virgin Mary. According to Twomey, rather than a distraction, the *Vita*’s attention to clothing and accessories was part of its didacticism, and such emphasis was likewise relevant to the nuns’ daily convent existence. Thus, the fact that the sisters had worn crowns during the ceremony that marked their entry into the novitiate conditioned their reading of the episode of the Coronation of the Virgin in the *Vita Christi*. Theologically, Twomey argues, the gold used to fashion the Virgin’s crown alludes to the iconographic motif of the Immaculate Conception.

*The Fabric of Marian Devotion* is as rich in insights as the fabrics and adornments that graced the Virgin Mary in Villena’s text were rich in materials and workmanship. In addition to the persuasive nature of Twomey’s overall arguments, nearly every page has some fascinating side-light on such topics as conflicts among Valencia’s guilds or the symbolic hierarchy of colors. In short, this intellectually alluring book—along with the anthology of English translations of selected chapters from the *Vita Christi* included in an appendix—will help a significant Iberian author to become better known in the English-speaking world.

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