With this fascinating book, Lesley K. Twomey follows her *The Serpent and the Rose: The Immaculate Conception and Hispanic Poetry in the Late Medieval Period* (Brill 2008), making another important contribution to the burgeoning field of what we might call “Iberian Marian Studies.” Iberianists have long been plagued and fascinated by the question of whether or not "Spain is different," and Twomey’s study of Sor Isabel de Villena’s *Vita Christi* makes major strides both toward establishing and nuancing that difference—through the careful close reading and contextualization of a particular text, for which we are blessed with an abundance of relevant historical information—and demonstrating the ways in which Sor Isabel engages in sophisticated and selective dialogue with the larger textual tradition of *Vitae Christi* (hereafter, VC) and related literature from other European cultural centers.

Twomey’s study is also an exemplary piece of interdisciplinary scholarship: she handles a vast array of texts, in both edited and manuscript form—from biblical commentary to courtly literature to cancionero poetry to liturgical offices, to mention only a few—as well as a glittering (in many cases, literally) array of objects of material culture—altarpieces, frontals, textiles, jewelry, enamels and shoes—to convincingly reconstruct the visual and tactile world from which Sor Isabel de Villena’s VC proceeds, and in which it was read and interpreted. This text—as is the case with so many important religious texts from the late medieval period in Iberia—is currently lacking a critical edition (19), a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

Sor Isabel’s VC is “a long, unfinished piece, which begins the life of Christ from the moment of God's visualization of the conception of his mother, Mary, and continues through to scenes of her Assumption into Heaven.” Written in Sor Isabel’s Valencian convent of Santa Trinitat, the work was immediately popular, “as shown by the variety of editions which survive from the [final years of the fifteenth century]” (19).

The introduction situates Sor Isabel within a group of better-known female Franciscan writers and recent studies concerning them. Born Isabel Elienor de Villena, Sor Isabel was the illegitimate daughter of Enrique of Aragon and Castile (1384-1434), better known to scholars as the Marqués de Villena. Orphaned at the age of 4, Sor Isabel was educated at the court of María de Castilla (1401-1458), wife of Alfons the Magnanimous (1396-1458), whose father was Fernando de Antequera (1380-1416) (2-3). Childhood and adolescent years spent at court also exposed Sor Isabel to the Valencian literary circle, which included Ausonias March and Françesc Eiximenis. She became a Clarisan nun at the age of 15, residing in the royally founded and funded convent of Santa Trinitat, a choice which Twomey signals, as in the case of other royal and noble women of Sor Isabel's day, as likely "positive rather than...negative" (11). At the age of 33, she became abbess with the support of the queen and with special papal dispensation to counterbalance her illegitimate status. She retained this position until her death 29 years later (12).

Twomey next takes up the task of situating Sor Isabel's VC within the *Vita Christi* tradition. Sor Isabel composed her text in the vernacular, for a public imagined principally as composed of her nuns, "opting to write in a genre which was beginning to
and luxury thus characterizes Sor Isabel's text which, as Twomey notes, "is in marked contrast to the emphasis on poverty in shoes, as well as a crown of twelve stars, all of which form the focus of subsequent chapters (85).

Indeed, Twomey notes that the Virgin's acts of veiling and uncovering the body of Christ as narrated in Sor Isabel's text were replicated in the gestures of the nun charged with the care of the host (83). The fourth chapter, "Reading Red: Deepening Understanding of Red in the Eucharistic veneration..." (73). Sor Isabel also presents the Virgin as a model for the contemplation of the host (74-75).

The third chapter, "Veiled Bodies," is centered on the theme of devotions to the body of Christ and the Eucharist in the particular context of Santa Trinitat. Twomey highlights the importance of motifs of light and clarity which are found in the works of contemporary writers, and which will form such a key component of the universe of Marian symbolism Sor Isabel constructs for her readers, to be examined in subsequent chapters (26-27). Finally, a woodcut preceding the copy of Sor Isabel's text printed by Costilla in 1513 (Biblioteca de l'Universitat de València, R-1/148) highlights the female religious readership imagined by the author for her work, also--through its depiction of intimate, interior spaces--laying the ground for an important category of Marian symbolism and allegory which Sor Isabel will employ to establish relationships between Mary's body and the conventual community (38-41).

The first chapter, entitled, "Reading the Vita Christi," further explores the world in which Sor Isabel lived, focusing on the relationship between her writings and the Franciscan rule (23). Here Twomey notes an important difference between Sor Isabel and contemporary female writers, such as Teresa de Cartagena: Sor Isabel never mentions from whence came her inspiration. It is in the introduction and conclusion to the text--which, as noted above, was left unfinished by the abbess upon her death--composed by another nun resident in Santa Trinitat, Sor Aldonça, that we find comparisons between the process of literary composition and those of the preparation of food or of agriculture, as well as invocations of the common topos of humility (25-26). Twomey highlights the importance of motifs of light and clarity which are found in the works of contemporary writers, and which will form such a key component of the universe of Marian symbolism Sor Isabel constructs for her readers, to be examined in subsequent chapters (26-27). Finally, a woodcut preceding the copy of Sor Isabel's text printed by Costilla in 1513 (Biblioteca de l'Universitat de València, R-1/148) highlights the female religious readership imagined by the author for her work, also--through its depiction of intimate, interior spaces--laying the ground for an important category of Marian symbolism and allegory which Sor Isabel will employ to establish relationships between Mary's body and the conventual community (38-41).

The second chapter, "Pure Bodies: Feeding the Soul in the Vita Christi," considers Sor Isabel's text in relation to the "bounds normally established for female writers" (19). Twomey signals in particular parallels with Eiximenis's twelve dignitats of the Virgin (45-46); Eiximenis' text currently lacks a usable critical edition. Sor Isabel employs the dignitats in order to distinguish the Virgin from other sons (and daughters) of Adam (and Eve). In this, Twomey notes, her approach differs significantly from Jaume Roig's Espill. Sor Isabel also makes a much greater and more studied use of the Virgin's body as a hermeneutical tool than does Eiximenis--though the seeds for her approach are arguably found in his text--thus reflecting the importance of the female body in convent ritual (48). Sor Isabel "follows Franciscan tradition in placing contemplation at the heart of the Vita Christi," providing a Marian model for her nuns to imitate. Twomey notes--following Rubin Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture, Cambridge University Press 2009)--that this process takes them "to extremes of emotional response: tears and delight," (51), which, in the majority of human beings, would be signs of weakness but in the Virgin's case "are to be celebrated, since they occur in a perfect body. [Sor Isabel thus] suggests that female bodily reactions are sanctified," (53) affirming women's "physical bodies...in relation to God" (61).

The third chapter, "Veiled Bodies," is centered on the theme of devotions to the body of Christ and the Eucharist in the particular context of Santa Trinitat. Twomey highlights original approaches to these themes in Sor Isabel's text, with a particular focus on "the ways in which the Virgin covers her Son, protecting his human body from the consequences of sin," but at the same time demonstrating how "the veiling and shrouding of Christ's body can...be shown to fit within Franciscan traditions of devotion to the Eucharist" (63). Sor Isabel's approach to these themes, however, also has strong local resonances that derive meaning both from the Valencian textile trade and dressing practices with which Sor Isabel would have been familiar. Twomey focuses particularly on cloth caps--for which Sor Isabel chooses terminology in use during her own day (drap de cap)--that were used to cover babies' heads immediately following birth, which are present in representations of the Virgin and Child in contemporary Valencian and Aragonese altarpieces (63-65). Removal of the cap, Twomey argues, "transforms the Child into a Host, so that the Adoration of the Shepherds becomes another moment of Eucharistic veneration..." (73). Sor Isabel also presents the Virgin as a model for the contemplation of the host (74-75). Indeed, Twomey notes that the Virgin's acts of veiling and uncovering the body of Christ as narrated in Sor Isabel's text were replicated in the gestures of the nun charged with the care of the host (83).

The fourth chapter, "Reading Red: Deepening Understanding of Red in the Vita Christi," examines the symbolic and allegorical importance of the colors crimson and scarlet in Sor Isabel's text, with particular focus on the "crimson colour of the tunic given to the Virgin by God. These colors acquire additional resonance for members of a Valencian audience given that they were arguably present in the more luxurious registers of the material culture with which fifteenth-century Valencians were surrounded (93-94). A crimson brocade tunic (una gonella de carmesi) was one of a series of allegorical gifts presented to the Virgin by the angel Gabriel during the Annunciation; others included a necklace of pearls, numerous pairs of gloves and shoes, as well as a crown of twelve stars, all of which form the focus of subsequent chapters (85). An atmosphere of richness and luxury thus characterizes Sor Isabel's text which, as Twomey notes, "is in marked contrast to the emphasis on poverty in
Twomey also takes issue with Albert Haufl's reading, on the basis of marked similarity between the tunic in Sor Isabel's text and that which belonged to Carmesina in *Tirant lo Blanc*, of the *Vita Christi* as essentially a *libro de caballerías para nuns* (87-88). Instead, she argues that Sor Isabel's dressing of the Virgin in the color of civic and ecclesiastical privilege is the basis for complex allegorical allusions (94-96). Indeed, in Sor Isabel's narrative, the Virgin dons the crimson tunic immediately prior to receiving the Holy Spirit, a moment reflected in many liturgical texts from Conception offices, which often use fire to symbolize the Holy Spirit (103). Sor Isabel thus re-appropriates the color crimson as a symbol of sanctity, "reversing God's attitude to the color" (106).

The purpose of the sixth chapter, "For Richer, for Poorer: Redrawing the Boundaries in the *Vita Christi*," is that of setting "Sor Isabel's interest in jeweled and embroidered decoration in the context of the adornment of medieval textiles...seek[ing] to establish how far an interest in adornment is related to women's writing" (108). Sor Isabel's descriptions of "embroidery, blazons, and jewels" are, likewise, situated "in the context of the work of Valencian broiderers and goldsmiths" (108). Of particular significance in this chapter is the importance of radience both as a visual and a literary device, which Twomey examines in connection to a wide range of other 15th-century texts and images. Using visual evidence, the author demonstrates that, as the 15th century progresses, the Virgin is dressed in an increasingly manner, which reflects both contemporary noble fashion and tastes in ecclesiastical garb. In her descriptions of the Virgin's finery, Sor Isabel flouted the norms that late medieval moralists--among them, Eiximenis--wished to impose on women's sartorial choices, particularly where jewelry was concerned, which was, at that moment, highly fashionable in Iberia (129-130). Twomey emphasizes that Sor Isabel includes these descriptions--which, incidentally, are purely visual; the attractive sounds associated with jewelry in secular literature have been eliminated--"not because she wishes to set before her nuns a display of fashionable items for their delectation and to carry them...back to their pre-convent days," but rather to provide "important information about the place of the Virgin in salvation history" (131-132).

The following chapter, "The Fabric of Society: Dressing, Undressing, and Gifting in Sor Isabel's Writing," considers the adornment of the female body--particularly that of the Virgin, and particularly in garments embellished with gold thread--as a fount of allegory and symbolism. Twomey pays particular attention to contemporary traditions and practices surrounding nuptial gifts, especially those including garments or adornments previously worn by a noble or royal personage (134). In essence, as Twomey demonstrates through the use of a wide variety of literary and visual comparanda, Sor Isabel's dressing of the Virgin would have been understood by her readers as preparation for her role as Queen of Heaven (133-135). The Virgin, moreover, remains uncorrupted by her elegant garments: "Fine fabrics also represent the garments of glory, mentioned in Urban's Rule, for which other women must wait, but which Mary is accorded on earth" (147).

Twomey notes parallels between the Virgin's fine clothes and "coronation ceremonies in the Kingdom of Aragon" (147), as well as links to contemporary commerce in textiles, given that Sor Isabel's "choice of silk fabrics" corresponds "to the rise of the industry in Valencia in her day," and "with gifted clothing and convent ritual" (149). Finally in this chapter, she echoes Bynum's rejection of the "deprivation theory" used to examine the writing of female mystics, which has also been applied by previous scholars in the assessment of Sor Isabel's *VC* (151), focusing as they have on "courtly and literary antecedents rather than...religious ones."

Chapter 7 is entitled, "Shoes, Shoes, Shoes: Stepping out in Style." In it, Twomey examines the six pairs of high-heeled silk shoes (*pallares de tapins*) gifted to the Virgin by the Angel Gabriel on the occasion of the Annunciation. Departing from Sor Isabel's association of the Virgin with female figures of the Old Testament, Twomey continues "[the] exploration of Sor Isabel's adornment of the Virgin's immaculate body and how biblical and patristic commentaries on the feet of the Shulamite have their part to play" (153). Not surprisingly, these elegant shoes bear detailed relation to shoe fashions of the day. Also not surprising is the discrepancy between the Virgin's footwear and that advised in late medieval moralistic treatises aimed at censuring and controlling women's sartorial choices. Eiximenis in particular believed that costly shoes had a deleterious effect on both household economies and women's souls (157). Twomey suggests that Sor Isabel might have wished to redress the misogynist currents coursing through the Kingdom in her day by deliberately reversing the significance of the *tapins.* Indeed, Sor Isabel asserts that the Virgin's shoes were not "[a] mark [of] her proud nature, but rather...symbolize[d] the opposite, her supreme humility" (177). Like the Shulamite, whose shoes were praised by the Lover in the Song of Songs, the Virgin's stylish and costly footwear prepared her to assume her role as Supreme Consort (177-178).

Chapter 8, "The Crown of Stars and Franciscan Rosary Devotions," examines "how the rosary influenced Sor Isabel's descriptions of the crown of the Virgin," a novel comparison, given that the two are rarely linked by scholars--the link here is the *stellarium,* and more specifically, Franciscan devotion to the Virgin's twelve-star crown (20, 180). Twomey departs from the familiar Post-Tridentine iconography of the Immaculate Virgin, in which she stands above a moon, her head encircled by twelve stars. As Twomey rightly points out, the iconography of the Immaculate Conception was far from stable in the fifteenth century, and the texts she considers in this chapter undoubtedly contributed to the creation and spread of this iconographic device. The iconographic and literary topos of the Virgin crowned with stars finds its roots in Revelation 12:1--"on her head a crown of twelve stars"--and a crown adorned with twelve stars or light-emitting jewels is presented to the Virgin by the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation in Sor Isabel's *VC* (181). Basing her interpretation on Stallybrass and Jones's theories regarding investiture as the moment when "a monarch becomes a monarch" (181; Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Cambridge University Press 2000), and drawing particular parallels with the depiction of this moment in Ludolph of Saxony's *VC*, as translated by Roís de Corella (192), Twomey also establishes connections between Sor Isabel's
The following chapter, "Literary Liturgy: Sor Isabel's Processions and Prayers," fram[es] Sor Isabel's life of Christ in the various liturgies of the Immaculate Conception, demonstrating multiple intertextualities and suggesting yet other links between Sor Isabel's text and the performative aspects of the liturgy, particularly as experienced in convent life (20). Sor Isabel's approach to meditation, exemplified in the Franciscan corona tradition discussed in the previous chapter, is also revealed to be "embedded in the routine of convent life" (204). Among the most significant moments in the life of the convent, of course, was "the liturgical sequence of the elevation of the Host, for the nuns their principal point of contact with the world outside" (204); of equal significance was the entry into the convent, another moment which engaged the entire Valencian community. Twomey examines the parallels between this latter ceremony and Ascent of the Virgin to the Temple, especially as this event is narrated by Sor Isabel. She notes, as did Hauf before her, similarities between Eiximenis' text and Sor Isabel's (209); Twomey, however, insists on the deliberate deployment of theatrical qualities in the abbess's version, which she then relates to the staging of convent ceremony.

Also interesting is Sor Isabel's treatment of the Ascension, a moment in which Eiximenis represents the Virgin as kneeling before her son. Sor Isabel reverses these roles, thus emphasizing the Virgin's role as "doctor of spirituality," a concept also highlighted in her treatment of Pentecost, which differs both from the Legenda Aurea and from Eiximenis' Vida de Jesucrist, as well as from the MVC (which finishes at the Ascension) (213-214). Noting precedents in Rupert of Deutz's commentary, on the Song of Songs, in which the Virgin is represented as magistra of the apostles (217; here she cites Mulder-Bakker, Maria doctrix: Anchoritic Women, the Mother of God, and the Transmission of Knowledge," in Mulder-Bakker, ed., Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200-1500, Brepolis 2004), Twomey proceeds to assess Sor Isabel's adaptation of the Psalms to a Marian purpose (221-222). The chapter finishes with an analysis of Sor Isabel's awareness of and responses to the Office of the Conception, particularly as composed by Juan de Segovia and Leonardo Nogarola; the Office of the Conception was a relatively recent phenomenon, dating from the middle decades of the 15th century, being "adopted after 1440 and 1476, respectively" (224). Both texts are characterized by a "heightened emphasis on Old Testament prefigurations of the Virgin" (224), and Nogarola's draws particularly heavily on the Song of Songs (225). Twomey links these offices to the ritual performativity of convent vestition ceremonies, noting that "ceremonial and liturgy [are] close to the surface in many scenes in the VC" (228). Placing especial emphasis on Sor Isabel's "construction of the role of the Virgin at the Ascension and before Pentecost," Twomey notes that the VC establishes for women "an important role in transmitting divinely received knowledge," demonstrating "a female perspective on the Franciscan debate about the respective value of academic and spiritual knowledge..." (229). Indeed, Sor Isabel claims authority for herself through the construction of an authoritative Virgin.

A concluding chapter follows, as well as an Appendix containing translated selections from the VC. Twomey's important study finishes with a thorough and useful index, and an extensive bibliography.

In conclusion to this review, I'd like to offer two sets of comments. The first I make as an Art Historian, and these represent my only two quibbles--and they are minor ones--with an otherwise magnificent book. The first concerns the quality of the images, an all-too-frequent problem and one which is beyond the control of the author and, in some cases, even of the publisher: image reproductions and rights, particularly in color, are often prohibitively costly. Nonetheless, given the importance of color and light in Twomey's analysis of the images she discusses, it is regrettable that these aspects are only appreciable in the image reproductions and rights, particularly in color, are often prohibitively costly. Nonetheless, given the importance of color and light in Twomey's analysis of the images she discusses, it is regrettable that these aspects are only appreciable in the detail of Nicolau Falco's Triptico de la Virgen de la Lechon the cover. In a perfect world, each and every image would appear in all its colorful, glittery glory, so that readers might begin to see what Sor Isabel and her nuns saw.

The second minor quibble concerns bibliography. Studies on late medieval Spanish painting have indeed been slow to climb aboard the interdisciplinary bandwagon, and were long tangled in the weeds of stylistic analysis and questions of attribution which, in the end, were often little more than speculation--small wonder that no one but Art Historians wanted to read them. The last two decades or so, however, have witnessed the publication of important monographs and articles by Francesca Spanish, Joan Molina, Felipe Pereda, Joaquin Yarza Luaces and many others, along with the edition of catalogues of significant exhibitions concerned with individual painters--Bermejo, to give just one example. Consideration of the contributions of these studies alongside bibliography concerned with the visual culture of other areas of the medieval world that the author does cite, would have helped to further highlight the significance of Twomey's notable contributions in assessing the intersections between the devotional lives of Sor Isabel and her nuns with contemporary trade, fashion, and fashionable debates for Valencian, Iberian and larger European contexts.

The second and final set of comments I offer as a Hispanist interested in dialogue with a larger community of Medievalists. Explorations of Spain's devotional culture(s) during the final centuries of the Middle Ages are only just beginning. Studies such as Twomey's, along with those mentioned in the preceding paragraph and others by scholars too numerous to list here, open the door onto fascinating questions of cultural interchange, selective reception and practice, urging us to step outside our disciplinary boundaries and consider both texts and objects of material culture from within the contexts that produced them, and within which they were conceived to function.

Twomey's study likewise opens the door for considerations of regional similarities and differences in devotional taste and practice within the Iberian peninsula itself. I will here commit the scholarly faux pas of self-citation only because my own recently published Imagining the Passion in a Multi-Confessional Castile(Pennsylvania State University Press 2013)
considers Marian questions similar to some of those raised by Twomey, but for a Castilian context, and makes heavy use of Françesc Eiximenis’s life of Christ in its Castilian translation. The obvious next step would be that readers might become interested in the primary sources examined in studies such as Twomey’s or my own (Sor Isabel; Eiximenis) and read them for themselves, asking other questions and receiving answers that further the discussion.

Scholarship will be enormously handicapped in these efforts, however, until our primary source are edited and translated. Whereas editions of texts by Ubertino da Casale, Johannes de Caulibus, and Ludolph of Saxony are relatively easy to come by, one must still consult the majority of Iberian devotional writings in manuscript form. In the current academic climate, in which metrics and other forms of institutional bean-counting (aka, 'assessment') are increasingly dictating the projects we undertake, the edition of texts is hardly encouraged. One day, perhaps, these important primary sources will be available to a larger community of medievalists and broad-reaching comparative conversations can begin. But I fear that day may be a long time in coming.
Pius XII in 1947. A Marian procession in San Cataldo, Sicily, for the Feast of the Assumption. Protestants aren't the only ones who find Catholic devotion to Mary a bit over-the-top sometimes. A lot of Catholics find other Catholics, including great Saints like Alphonsus Liguori and Louis de Montfort, to be a little “much” when talking about the Virgin Mary. I get it. Marian prayer and piety developed very early in the history of the undivided Christian Church of the first millennium. It has been kept alive in a myriad of piety practices in the both the Catholic Read More. Marian Prayer and Devotion. The Catechism of the Catholic Church instructs the faithful on just how Mary prayed. Mary still prays. Explore the Bible - Herod the Great Professor Marshall Connolly - Starts in 13 hours. Why Does Morality Matter? - Lesson 6 - Deacon Frederick Bartels - Starts in 14 hours. Andrew LeachAndrew Leach. 13k11 gold badge3737 silver badges6767 bronze badges. add a comment |. 3. The amount of evidence that is found in early Church patristic writings to support Marian veneration/devotion is so overwhelming that it must be categorized into 5 basic teachings: 1 - Mary is the New Eve and Most Blessed Among Women. 2 - Mary is our Powerful Intercessor. 3 - Mary is Ever-virgin. 4 - Mary’s Immaculate Conception. 5 - Mary is the Mother of God. Quoted here are only a handful of writings from Early Church Fathers. There are many more excerpts predating A. D. 1000, but for now we w Marian devotions are external pious practices directed to the person of Mary, mother of Jesus, by members of certain Christian traditions. They are performed in Catholicism, High Church Lutheranism, Anglo-Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Oriental Orthodoxy, but generally rejected in other Christian denominations. Such devotional prayers or acts may be accompanied by specific requests for Mary's intercession with God. There is significant diversity of form and structure in Marian devotions practiced