Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Twomey, Lesley (2007) Poverty and Richly Decorated Garments: a Re-evaluation of their Significance in the Vita Christi of Isabel de Villena. In: Medieval Clothing and Textiles. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, pp. 119-134. ISBN 1843832917

Published by: Boydell Press

URL: https://boydellandbrewer.com/series/medieval-cloth... <https://boydellandbrewer.com/series/medieval-clothing-and-textiles/medieval-clothing-and-textiles-3-hb.html>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link: https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/1461/

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

University Library

Medieval Clothing and Textiles

Volume 3

edited by

ROBIN NETHERTON

GALE R. OWEN-CROCKER

THE BOYDELL PRESS

Poverty and Richly Decorated Garments: A Re-Evaluation of Their Significance in the *Vita Christi* of Isabel de Villena

Lesley K. Twomey

Isabel de Villena (1430–1490) was the illegitimate daughter of Enrique de Villena, a wealthy nobleman of the kingdom of Aragon, and granddaughter of Pedro of Aragon. She joined the Poor Clares in Gandía in 1445 and became abbess of the Poor Clare convent of the Holy Trinity in Valencia at the age of thirty-three. The *Vita Christi* (*Life of Christ*) was her only attributed work. Its immediate popularity is shown by the variety of editions which survive from the period.[1] Written in the vernacular for the nuns in Villena's charge, it is a long, unfinished piece, which envisages a life of Christ that includes Mary's life, too, beginning with the moment of her conception and ending with scenes from her assumption. After Villena's death, at the instigation of Isabella of Castile, the *Vita Christi* was prepared for publication by Villena's successor, Aldonça de Montsoriu. The resulting text is one of the first books published in Spain, establishing its author as the only important female writer in Catalan in the

An initial version of this article was presented in May 2005 at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Michigan. The research in convent records in Valencia was funded by the Spanish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Becas-MAE, August 2003.

1 Isabel de Villena, *Vita Christi* (Valencia: Lope de Roqua, 1497; repr. facsimile, Valencia: Del Cènia al Segura, 1980); *Vita Christi de la Reuerent Abbadessa de la Trinitat: nouament historiat: corregit y smenat per vn mestre en sacra theologia* (Valencia: Jorge Costilla, 1513); *Vita Christi d[e] la Reuerent Abbadessa dela Trinitat corregit ab les cotacions nouame[n]t tretes en los marges* (Barcelona: Carles Amoros, 1527). The first modern, critical edition was published in 1916: Ramón Miquel y Planas, ed., *Vita Christi compost per Isabel de Villena, abadessa de la Trinitat de Valencia, ara novament publicat segons l'edició de l'any 1497*, 3 vols., Biblioteca Catalana (Barcelona: Miquel y Planas, 1916). All references to the *Vita Christi* in this article are to this edition. Since then, a digitized version of Miquel y Planas's edition has made it more accessible to the modern scholar. Selected chapters of the text have been edited by Albert-Guillem Hauf, *Vita Christi: selecció*, Millors Obres de la Literatura Catalana 115 (Barcelona: Edicions 62 i La Caixa, 1995), and by Lluïsa Parra, *Vita Christi*, Biblioteca d'Autors Valencians 12 (Valencia: Institució Alfons el Magnànim, 1986). Another selection, focusing on female characters in the text, was edited by Rosanna Cantavella and Lluïsa Parra, *Protagonistes femenines a la "Vita Christi,"* Col·lecció Clàssiques Catalanes 15 (Barcelona: LaSal, 1987).

Middle Ages.[2]

Gifts of jewels and clothing are a particular feature of the scenes described by Villena following the Annunciation by the ambassador-angel Gabriel in chapters 20–27 of the *Vita Christi*. In chapters 39–48, the archangel Michael presents the Virgin with a series of royal gifts. The chapters immediately after the ritual gifting are dedicated to the reception by the Virgin of the hierarchy of heaven and of the Virgin's forebears, Adam, Eve, and Abel. Villena returns to Gospel events only in chapter 61. The gifting scenes are intercalated between the Annunciation and the Visitation and consist of a series of court rituals in which the presentation of items of clothing to the Virgin is a central element. This analysis examines aspects of clothing in the *Vita Christi* in order to re-evaluate the synergy between earthly and heavenly queenship, as well as between poverty and riches.

FEMALE CLOTHING IN THE *VITA CHRISTI*

The robing of the Virgin in the *Vita Christi* follows her assent to Christ's Incarnation. The jewels and fine garments bestowed on her by the angelic messenger include some which are traditionally thought of as being part of her costume, such as the blue cloak and the crown of twelve stars.[3] The other items are less usual: a silk chemise, a scarlet tunic, a pearl necklace, twelve pairs of gloves, and six pairs of shoes in various colours. The author is seeking to develop an allegorical story, attractive to her readers because they recall those used in their younger days at court or in bourgeois Valencia. As Albert Hauf notes, "She takes the opportunities afforded by the idea [of allegory] to create a meditation which is full of allusions for ladies from the aristocracy and well versed in courtly display."[4]

In Villena's description of ceremonial robing, the second gift to the Virgin (after five strings of pearls) is a silk *camisa* (chemise), embellished with gold: "Veus açí una camisa molt special que tramet a vostra mercé nostre Senyor Déu omnipotent, la qual és tota de seda singular, guarnida de maravellosa obra d'or. ... lo guarniment qui per excel·lencia la embelleix és la perseverança contínua de vostres caritatives obres"

2 For discussion of the exclusion of female authors from the literary canon, see Montserrat Piera, "Writing, *Auctoritas*, and Canon Formation in Sor Isabel de Villena's *Vita Christi*," *La Corónica* 32, no. 1 (2003): 105–18, and also, for a discussion of women's writing, in the same volume, see Lesley K. Twomey, "Sor Isabel de Villena, Her *Vita Christi* and an Example of Gendered Immaculist Writing in the Fifteenth Century," 89–103.

3 Lesley K. Twomey, "El *Stellarium* franciscano: la corona de 12 estrellas" (The Franciscan Stellarium: The Crown of Twelve Stars), in *Actas del XV Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas* (Monterrey, Mexico: forthcoming). This article is one of a series of studies by this author on the garments and jewellery presented to the Virgin in the *Vita Christi*.

4 "Aprofita del tot les possibilitats d'aquesta idea [de l'al·legoria] per a crear una meditació especialmente suggestiva per a dames procedents de l'aristocràcia i avesades a les gales cortesanes." Hauf, *Vita Christi*, 51. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise noted.

(Here you behold a very special chemise, which our Lord God Almighty sends to you. It is of singular silk, decorated with marvellous gold work; the ornamentation, which most excellently embellishes it, is continuous perseverance in your good works).[5]

The Virgin is then presented with an embroidered *gonel·la* (tunic). In Byzantine art, a liturgical garment, the dalmatic, was a feature of paintings of the Virgin and of coronation ceremonial, and this was a forerunner of the tunic, normal wear for noble ladies of the court.[6] In her discussion of royal garments in manuscript and artistic sources, Marisa Astor Landete points to the use of brocades and velvets with embroideries of royal insignia.[7] The embroidery on the Virgin's tunic is not dissimilar to that described by Astor Landete. It is "sembrada de liris e de brots de agnus castus" (sprinkled with lilies and knots of *agnus castus*).[8] Embroidery was held in high esteem in fashionable, as well as liturgical, garments; as Stella Mary Newton notes, the "highest dignitaries of the Church and the state have always chosen to appear on the most important and ceremoniously solemn occasions in clothing that has depended for its magnificence on embroidery."[9] The emblems chosen in the *Vita Christi* include lilies, traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary but also with European royal families in the form of the fleur-de-lis. The embroidery with *agnus castus* is more unusual. This plant (still known as "chaste tree") has long been associated with treatment of the female reproductive system.[10] It can be used for the regulation of heavy menstrual periods or for controlling changes in the female body at the menopause. It was noted for its ability to preserve chastity; in the first century, Pliny wrote in his *Historia Naturalis* that leaves of this plant scattered on the marital bed had this effect.[11] *Agnus castus* grows in Spain and may have been one of the remedies for female ailments grown by the nuns in their convent's kitchen garden.

The *cortapisa* (decorative band) on the Virgin's tunic is decorated *ab singulars esmalts* (with extraordinary small enamelled plaques), showing the sorrows of the Virgin.[12]

5 Miquel y Planas, *Vita Christi*, 1:183.

6 Manuel Trens, *María: iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español* (Madrid: Editorial Plus-Ultra, 1947), 615.

7 Marisa Astor Landete, *Indumentaria e imagen: Valencia en los siglos XIV y XV*, Colección "Estudis" 15 (Valencia: Ajuntament de València, 1999), 100–101.

8 Miquel y Planas, *Vita Christi*, 1:183.

9 Stella Mary Newton, *Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince: A Study of the Years 1340–1365* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1980), 21.

10 One modern summary of its uses appears at http://www.pfaf.org/database/plants.php?Vitex+agnus-castus (accessed June 3, 2006).

11 "Non multum a salice vitilium usu distat vitex, foliorum quoque adspectu, nisi odore gratior esset. Graseci lygon vocant, alias agnon, quoniam matronae Thesmosphoriis atheniensium castitatem custodientes his foliis cubitus sibi sternunt." [The agnus castus is not very different from the willow, either for its use in wickerwork or in the appearance of its leaves, but it has a more pleasant smell. The Greeks call it lygos, sometimes, agnos, because the Athenian matrons, preserving their chastity at Thesmophoria, strew their beds with its leaves.] Pliny, *Natural History*, vol. 7, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 393 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), book 24, section 38.

12 Miquel y Planas, *Vita Christi*, 1:183.

Enamelling had been in use for many centuries, and the fashion for sewing enamel plaques onto garments was known from the late fourteenth century.[13] Examples of religious enamelling, such as the fifteenth-century gold Langdale rosary with each of the fifty beads enamelled in gold and black, can be found across Europe.[14] According to J. Anderson Black, the technique of enamelling *en ronde bosse*, in which the figures stand out in relief, was new in the fifteenth century, and he depicts both a rosary and a brooch using this new raised enamelling technique.[15] Parallels between royal garments and those described in the *Vita Christi* show that these small pictures have the function of insignia.[16] In the case of the Virgin, they foreshadow forthcoming sorrowful events in her life.

CLOTHING IN OTHER RELIGIOUS WRITING

Preoccupation with fine garments is not unique to the *Vita Christi*, nor is it even solely a feminine concern. For the mystics, sensitivity to emotion leads the soul to mystic union but means that, in its human form, it is all the more dangerous. Grace Jantzen recounts how Bernard of Clairvaux and his brother, Andrew, refuse to meet their sister, Humbeline. Andrew, porter of the monastery, berates her at the gate for being a "parcel of dung" because of her elegant clothes.[17] The outer self affects the inner to such an extent that temptation and sin may ensue from any contact with a richly dressed female, even a member of one's own family.

One of the principal criticisms made of mystic writers, by the medieval English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, is that "they would fashion a God according to their own fancy, dress him in rich clothes, and set him on a throne."[18] The same criticism could equally be applied to the depiction of the Virgin in the *Vita Christi*. Did Villena fashion the queen of heaven according to her own fancy?

Rejection of clothes was an important aspect of the *contemptus mundi* for those with religious beliefs, with both male and female writers expressing particular concerns about their corruptive power. The *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem* (*Book of Good Living for a Sister*), a Latin manuscript written in England between 1150 and 1220, provides an instructive insight into the importance of outer garments as a distractor for the inner self:

13 J. Anderson Black, *A History of Jewels* (London: Orbis, 1974), 128.
14 Clare Phillips, *Jewels and Jewellery* (London: V & A Publications, 2000), 29. See also Joan Evans, *A History of Jewellery 1100–1870*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1970), 77 and plate III.
15 Black, *History*, 136–37, 143.
16 Black, *History*, 139.
17 Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 132–33.
18 James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Classics of Western Spirituality (London: SPCK, 1981), 231, cited by Jantzen, *Power*, 191.

Mollia dicuntur vestimenta, quia mollem faciunt animum. Mollibus vestimentis delectatur regis curia: asperis vero et humilibus delectatur Christi Ecclesia. Talia debent esse vestimenta servorum et ancillarum Dei, in quibus nihil possit notari novitatis, nihil superfluitatis, nihil vanitatis, nihil quod pertineat ad superbiam, et ad vanam gloriam. Soror charissima, ergo ornemus nosmetipsos spiritualibus ornamentis; scilicet charitate, humilitate, mansuetudine, obedentia et patientia. Haec sunt vestimenta quibus placere poterimus Jesu Christo coelesti sponso.[19]

[Clothes are called soft because they will make the soul soft. The court is delighted with soft clothes: truly the Church of Christ is delighted with harsh and humble clothing. Such things should be the clothes of the servants and handmaids of God in which nothing can be noticed of newness, nothing of excess, nothing of vanity, nothing which belongs to pride and vainglory. Dearest sister, therefore, let us be adorned with spiritual ornaments, like charity, humility, meekness, obedience, and patience. These are the clothes with which we can please Jesus Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom.]

The *Liber*, written to assist a nun in improving her spiritual life, also provides a spiritual interpretation of clothes, rejecting soft garments for making the soul soft. The female body should rather be clothed in spiritual virtues, as these will be pleasing in a bride of Christ. The same sentiments about female clothing are found in a fifteenth-century Spanish *Pontificale* which refers to female clothes as "indumenta humilitate cordis et contemptu mundi significantia" (clothing for humility of heart and contempt for the world).[20]

Many texts written as moral guidance evince the same preoccupation with fine clothing and its detrimental effects. In the *Cancionero Capitular de la Colombina* (the Colombina Songbook, a fifteenth-century manuscript with some early-sixteenth-century additions) is a prose work titled "Epistola de Sant Bernaldo la qual enbia a Rreymundo para doctri[na] e rregimiento de la casa" ("Letter of St. Bernard sent to Raymond for the instruction and ordering of his household").[21] In it, there are several references to the moral standing of those who wear fine clothing:

La vestidura preçiosa & rrica es señal de poco seso.
La vestidura muy aparente muy ayna pare enojo.
[...] La muger que vestiduras tiene y otras demanda señal es que tiene poca firmeza en su coraçon.[22]

19 *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem*, 1214C-D, cited in Anne McGovern-Mouron, "'Listen to me, Daughter, Listen to a Faithful Counsel': The *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem*," in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 81–106.

20 Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, BN 715, 57r.

21 Dorothy Sherman Severin, ed., *Two Spanish Songbooks: The Cancionero Capitular de la Colombina (SV2) and the Cancionero de Egerton (LB3)*, Hispanic Studies Textual Research and Criticism 11 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), SV2–2, 36–40. There are at least 10 manuscript versions of the pseudo-Bernard text in Spanish manuscripts (8).

22 Severin, *Two Spanish Songbooks*, 38.

[Precious and rich clothing is a sign of lack of sense.
Showy clothing soon loses its attraction.
Women who have fine clothes and ask for more have little constancy of heart.]

In the kingdom of Aragon, too, advice for the father of a young daughter provides information on how young women should dress:

> Aparellan-se axí que no's facen guarlanda de lurs cabells engir lo cap, ne porten draps preciosos axí com draps d'aur e velut o perles o pedres precioses ca açò és massa e empatxa molt la oració de la dona que no sia hoÿda per nostre senyor Déu.[23]

> [Let them dress so that they do not wear their hair like a garland around their head, nor precious cloths like cloth of gold and velvet, or pearls or precious stones, for that is fool's clothing and prevents women's prayers from being heard by our Lord God.]

With these words, the Franciscan author, Francesc d'Eximenis, reveals the belief that clothing prevents the development of spirituality and creates a barrier between the prayers of young girls and their heavenly recipient.

THE FRANCISCANS AND CLOTHES

Unease about cloth and clothing is important within the Franciscan Order. As Kenneth Baxter Wolf explains, "The role of cloth and clothing in Francis's conversion is multilayered. For one thing, cloth, then as now, represented status. Francis's clothes marked him out as a member of the merchant class, and his softer, more flowing garments gave him status as *primus inter pares*."[24] After his conversion, Francis was content to wear a hermit's habit, until one day, inspired by the gospel, he went further. In the thirteenth century, Thomas of Celano described in his history of Francis how the saint

> made for himself a tunic in the shape of the cross, so that in it he would drive off every fantasy of the demons. He made it very rough, so that in it he might crucify the flesh with its vices and sins. He made it very poor and plain, a thing that the world would never covet.[25]

However, Wolf demonstrates how Francis applied his experience as a wool merchant to the task of designing a tunic for his new life. He knew which materials to choose in order to make the garment as uncomfortable as possible. He paid attention to the style of the garment and deliberately made it in the shape of a cross.

23 Francesc d'Eiximenis, *Dotzè Llibre del Crestià, Segona part, volum primer*, ed. Curt Wittlin et al. (Girona: Col·legi Universitari de Girona, 1986), 406. This vast tome, which discusses Christian life for girls, nuns, and widows, was written in 1396 and first published in 1485.

24 Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St Francis of Assisi Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16.

25 Cited in Wolf, *Poverty*, 16.

Just as he knew which fabrics would set him above his peers, so he knew which ones the world would reject. In this way, Francis's experience and knowledge of cloth were put to service in a new context. However, Wolf also makes the important point that, just as Francis had wanted to be *primus inter pares* through the wearing of exceptionally soft fabrics, he now wanted to apply the same criteria to his religious life, and sought to be *primus inter pares* among the poor.[26]

An examination of the instructions about the garments prescribed by the Franciscan Order shows that the same two-stage approach to clothing is embedded in each Rule. St Clare's own Rule, approved on August 9, 1253, exhorts the sisters "que se vistan de vestidos viles" (to put on rough garments).[27] The reformed Rule of Urban IV, approved in October 1263, gives more detail. A whole section of the Rule is dedicated to the clothes the nuns are to wear, indicating that "sean de paño religioso y vil, tanto en el precio como en el color" (they should be of religious cloth, lowly both in colour and price). Urban's Rule mentions the nature of the veils to be used. They are to be "de tela común" (of rough cloth) and are to be neither "preciosos ni curiosos" (they are not to be gorgeous nor should they call attention to themselves). Urban's Rule also emphasizes the shapes of the garments: "La túnica de encima sea, tanto en las mangas como en el cuerpo, de una anchura y largura convenientes, de modo que la honestidad del hábito exterior dé testimonio de la interior" (the overgarment should be of an appropriate width and length in both sleeves and body so that the honesty of the outer garment is witness to that of the inner).[28] The tunic is to be wide and completely cover the shapeliness of the wearer's body. Since the medieval belief was that the wearing of clothing was not only an external representation of the inner self but also imprinted itself on it, such attention to detail was essential.[29]

Valencian Poor Clares did not diverge from Urban's prescriptions. The abbess of the Purity convent, a sister convent to Villena's Holy Trinity, purchased cloth and had habits, cloaks, and tunics made up in bulk from traditional *pardillo* (brown drab cloth). Fifteenth-century convent records show the habits were made up by Ana Quadrado at the price of twelve pounds and six sous.[30]

Sacrifice of worldly splendour is further emphasized in a contemporary reformed Franciscan Rule, adopted by the sisters of the Order of the Conception, founded in 1502 in Toledo:

26 Wolf, *Poverty*, 17–18.

27 *Regla y constituciones generales de la orden de las hermanas pobres de Santa Clara* (Rome: Curia General de la Orden de los Frailes Menores, Oficina pro Monialibus, 1988), 21.

28 *Regla y constituciones*, 45–46.

29 Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

30 *Libro de recibos y gastos del convento siendo procuradora Sor Antonieta Ceriol y abadessas Sor Margarita Tolsa y Sor Damiata de Mompalau (1439–1499)* (Book of receipts and expenditure of the convent when Sister Antonieta Ceriol was Procuratrix and Sister Margarita Tolsa and Sister Damiata de Mompalau were Abbesses [1439–1499]), Arxiu del Regne de València, Clero 946, 134v.

> No menosprecien las vestiduras pobres y remiendan las quales como esposas de Cristo alegre mente deben traer; porque en el cielo poseerán y serán vestidas de otras de mayor riqueza y resplandor. Y aquella será mayor amiga del Rey del parayso, su esposo, y más verdadera que con mayor eficacia de coraçon es contenta con ánimo mas vil y despreçiada y con las cosas de menor valor para la necessidad del cuerpo.[31]
>
> [They should not despise poor clothes and should mend them and wear them joyfully like true spouses of Christ, because in heaven they will possess and be clothed in others of greater richness and splendour. And she will be the greatest and truest friend of the King of Paradise, her bridegroom, who with the greatest efficacy of heart is content with being the humblest and most despised soul and with the things of least value for the needs of the body.]

The Rule contrasts the poor nature of the nuns' habits, an outward sign of the poverty they have accepted, with "otras de mayor riqueza y resplandor" (others of greater richness and splendour) that they will possess in heaven. It is clear that, in Franciscanism, riches were still acceptable objects of desire, but the jewels to be desired are only those stored up in the heavenly realm.

THE VIRGIN MARY AND FINE CLOTHES

The embrace of poverty and the rejection of worldly riches did not apply to the Virgin. The relationship between medieval iconography of the Virgin and ceremonies for the coronation of queens has been demonstrated by Mary Stroll, albeit not in a Spanish context.[32] In a slightly later period, John N. King provides evidence of the symbiosis between heavenly and earthly queenship in Elizabethan representations of the Virgin Queen, showing how "late medieval iconography declared queens to be types of the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven."[33] Conversely, in a symbiotic relationship between the earthly and heavenly realms, the Virgin Mary began to be represented with all the attributes of secular queenship, since artists used the ceremonials and trappings of earthly wealth and royal power as a referent for the heavenly variety. She often holds the sceptre and crown that earthly queens are given at their coronation. Gradually, as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries progress, paintings depict her in robes ornamented with the accoutrements of wealth and privilege: ermine, jewels, and goldwork being the most common.

31 *Regla y modo de vivir de las monjas de la Santa Concepçion de la Madre de Dios* (Rule and Way of Life of the Sisters of the Order of the Holy Conception of the Mother of God), written in old Castilian, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, BN 1111, 3r.

32 Mary Stroll, "*Maria Regina*: Papal Symbol," in *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe: Proceedings of a Conference held at King's College, London, April 1995*, ed. Anne Duggan (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1997), 173–203.

33 John N. King, "The Godly Woman in Elizabethan Iconography," *Renaissance Quarterly* 38 (1985): 41–84, at 51.

Fig. 6.1: *Virgin with Child Jesus at the Breast*, Bartolomé Bermejo (Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes). Photo: Lesley Twomey, with permission from the Museo de Bellas Artes.

Artists in both the late Byzantine and Renaissance periods represented the Virgin in clothes as rich and elegant as those of any lady of the court.[34] In fourteenth-century Valencian art, the richest of fabrics and the most precious of jewels were used to adorn the Virgin. For example, in his altarpiece of the *Virgen de la Leche* (Virgin nursing),[35] Bartolomé Bermejo (active 1468–95) portrayed the Virgin attired in a rich velvet dress with broad cuffs of ermine, a rare fur that signalled a discourse about wealth to the observer (fig. 6.1).[36] The cloak, draped over the Virgin's head, has a broad edging of pearls and jewels, four pearls wide with a central row of red and black precious stones. Gold twist braid frames the jeweled band. The Virgin's headdress is adorned with a pearl string and a central jewel or jeweled decoration, in a round gold setting with two pearls above and below.

The same richness of attire is apparent in other depictions of the Virgin by Bermejo and also in a version of the *Virgen de la Leche* (c. 1465) by the Castilian artist Pedro Berruguete. Bermejo's *Virgin of Montserrat*[37] (c. 1485) is dressed in red, with a broad ermine decorative band. Her cloak is dark green brocade with a lighter green silk lining and a gold edging. Jacomart (Jaume Baço, 1411–61) portrayed his *Virgin at the Annunciation* in red velvet with ermine edging. The Virgin's hair is adorned with a red band decorated with jewels and edged by pearls. Her cloak is dark blue, and its edging includes single pearls decorating intricate goldwork. The Master of Bonastre's *Annunciation* (c. 1450) shows similar features.

The Master of Perea (active 1490–1510) also depicted the Virgin, in another *Virgen de la Leche*, dressed in the finest of fabrics adorned with jewels. The Virgin's dress is red, edged with a gold, red, and black *cortapisa*, decorated with tiny pearls at the neck and cuff. Her chemise is visible and is made of a fine white cloth, as it reveals one hint of breast with milk arcing toward the Christ child. The Virgin's hair is decorated with a red band edged with pearls; in its centre is a jewel with pearls around it. Her cloak is in dark blue with gold edging.

The Master of Perea's *Adoration of the Kings* (c. 1491) is another representation of the Virgin in splendid attire. She wears an opulent brocade cloak woven in gold and black, equivalent in value to any cloth worn by the visiting Magi. Her dress is red with a gold *cortapisa*, decorated with a pearl edging. Both Nicolás Falcó, in his triptych of the *Virgen de la Leche* (c. 1500), and Joan Reixach (1411–1482), in his *Annunciation*,[38] together with other artists from the Valencian school, depicted the Virgin wearing sumptuous cloth. Reixach showed the Virgin in a red dress and a rich cloak of dark gold brocade lined in green. Her cloak is edged with a jeweled pattern incorporating

34 Trens, *María*, 614–15. Trens points to opulent decoration of a more severe garment as typical of both periods.

35 All paintings named here are at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia, San Pío V, in Valencia, Spain, unless noted otherwise.

36 Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing and Identity during the Hundred Years' War*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 15.

37 Cathedral, Acqui Terme, Piedmont, Italy.

38 Museu Episcopal de Vic, Spain.

Fig. 6.2: *Dormition of the Virgin*, Joan Reixach (Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes). Photo: Lesley Twomey, with permission from the Museo de Bellas Artes.

pearls and single red jewels all round the edge. The same use of brocade, in a different episode from the life of the Virgin, can be seen in his *Dormition* (c. 1460; fig. 6.2).

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, all aspects of the Virgin's life, from her Annunciation through her lactation and her depiction as the Virgin of Humility to her death, are bedecked in splendour. Isabel de Villena's description of rich garments is, thus, paralleled by contemporary artistic tradition in Valencia.

Clothes make important statements about the Virgin's nature. Emphasis on the majesty of the Virgin became progressively important in Western Europe, particularly

from the eleventh century onward in Spain, and artists responded by clothing her in garments which reflected it.[39] Given that the corruptive power of finery was a commonplace, I consider that these rich fabrics provide a statement about Mary's nature: Because she is a woman whose flesh is not stirred by sin, her garments do not corrupt her as they would other women. The garments can also be associated with the garments of glory, mentioned in Urban's Rule, for which other women must wait, but which Mary is accorded on earth. It is into this triple context that the scenes dedicated to the robing of the Virgin in the *Vita Christi* fit.

CEREMONIAL ROBING AND THE CORONATION CEREMONY IN THE KINGDOM OF ARAGON

The way the Virgin is presented with ceremonial garments in the *Vita Christi* has many elements in common with the steps involved in a queen's coronation ceremony, as described in a fifteenth-century pontifical that includes the coronation ceremonies for the kings and queens of Aragon.[40] On the eve of the ceremony, the queen "yra vestida de las vestidures blanques e ornaments de cap acostumats, sols que no port garlanda ne corona en lo cap" (is attired in white clothing, and with customary headdress except that she will wear neither garland nor crown on her head). On the coronation day, the queen sets out in the same clothes, but after entering the cathedral, she is robed in the cathedral sanctuary. The garments she wears are ecclesiastical, and, on other occasions, would be worn by deacons. She is robed in a "camis de drap de seda blancha" (an alb of white silk), and, on top of this, she wears a "dalmàtica de vellut blanqua fresada e sembrada de obratges d'or, ab pedres precioses" (a dalmatic of white velvet, with gold work and precious stones). Finally, after the Church ceremony concludes, the queen returns to the king's lodgings and puts on a tunic and a cloak. The *Ordinació feta per lo molt alt e molt excel·lent princep e senyor, en Pere, terç Rey d'Aragó de la manera com los Reys d'Aragó faràn consagrar e ells mateixs se coronaràn* (Ordination for the coronation and consecration of the kings of Aragon by the most high and excellent prince and lord, Peter III, king of Aragon) mentions merely "cota e mantell de drap" (a tunic and cloak of cloth),[41] although Astor Landete indicates the material is brocade.[42]

When the garments are examined in detail, they correspond in many ways with Villena's description of the way the Virgin is prepared for her role as Mother of Christ. The queen first puts on a "camisa romana de llenç" (a linen chemise, Roman

39 For further details see Anne J. Duggan, *Queens and Queenship*, xvi–xvii; Trens, *María*, 398.

40 *Ordinació feta per lo molt alt e molt excel·lent princep e senyor, en Pere, terç Rey d'Aragó de la manera com los Reys d'Aragó faràn consagrar e ells mateixs se coronaràn* (Coronation ceremony for the kings of Aragon), written in old Catalan, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, BN959, 100v–104r. Astor Landete refers to the same ceremonials in her discussion of how queens of Aragon were robed for their coronation; see *Indumentaria*, 101–2, 142.

41 *Ordinació*, 104r.

42 Astor Landete, *Indumentaria*, 173.

style).[43] Chemises worn by the nobility were frequently made out of linen.[44] In the *Vita Christi*, the Virgin is presented with a chemise which is "molt special" (very special), for it is made of the same fabric as the coronation alb, or *camis*, worn by queens.

Immediately after presenting the Virgin with this garment, St. Michael proclaims her queen, making a connection between the presentation of the royal chemise and coronation. The proclamation is made in Latin: "Honorate reginam plenam omnium gratiarum et contemplamini cum reverentia sanctissimum vultum tuum." Villena then translates this into Catalan with her own adaptations: "Honrau, totes les gents, aquesta senyora reyna, plena de tota gràcia, e contemplau ab reverència la sua sanctissima e piadosa cara" (All people, honour that lady queen full of all graces and contemplate with reverence her holy and merciful face).[45]

The cloths described by Villena for the Virgin's mantle and tunic are silk and brocade, reflecting those used in the coronation ceremony, although the colours are different. In the coronation, the queen is dressed in white, but Villena describes a scarlet tunic, which has a long tradition in Hispanic art.[46] The use of silk, velvet, and brocade would have been important for a Valencian, as the silk industry was central to the economy in the fifteenth century.[47]

CORONATION AND FEMALE PROTAGONISM

It should not be overlooked that the queen's ritual robing was a ceremony which gave prominence to the women of the court. Both Holly S. Hurlburt and Astor Landete emphasize the three stages of the coronation of the queens of Aragon.[48] These ceremonies include three processions and three ritual entries, within each

43 *Ordinació*, 101v.

44 Astor Landete, *Indumentaria*, 101, 143.

45 Miquel y Planas, *Vita Christi*, 1:182.

46 For a discussion of the use of the colour red, see Lesley K. Twomey, "Una relectura del color rojo: la alegoría en la *Vita Christi* de Isabel de Villena," in *Las metamórfosis de la alegoría: discurso y sociedad en la Península Ibérica desde la Edad Media hasta la Edad Contemporánea*, ed. Rebeca Sanmartín Bastida and Rosa Vidal Doval (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2005), 189–202.

47 Germán Navarro Espinach describes it as "esta emblemática industria que representa ... uno de los componentes más esenciales de la economía histórica de los valencianos junto al arroz, la naranja, y algunos pocos negocios más de similar relieve para esta ciudad" (this flagship industry which represents one of the most vital elements of the historic economy of Valencia, together with rice, oranges, and one or two other significant types of trade for the city). See *Los orígenes de la sedería valenciana (siglos XV–XVI)*, Colección "Estudis" 14 (Valencia: Ajuntament de València, 1999), 15. One example of Valencian silk damask that demonstrates the high regard for Valencian silk is preserved in the Museu Episcopal de Vic. It is a lectern hanging embroidered with an image of the Virgin from the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses in Northern Catalonia.

48 Holly S. Hurlburt, "Public Exposure? Consorts and Ritual in Late Medieval Europe: The Example of the Entrance of the Dogaresse of Venice," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Ehler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 174–89, at 187–88; Astor Landete, 100–101.

of which important ladies of the court took a central role. Hurlburt contrasts this to the absence of powerful women from other medieval ceremonies. The *Vita Christi* ritual robing of the Virgin recreates the all-female dressing of the queen, since the Virgin too is attended, but by female allegorical figures, who receive the gifts on her behalf and later assist her in putting them on. In this way, Villena reappropriates ritual dressing to the Virgin.

There is a further meaning behind the evocation of the ritual of queenship. Medieval rituals for coronation ceremonies adapted the prayers for the installation of an abbess.[49] Fifteenth-century depictions of abbesses show them enthroned in postures of power, similar to those of queens or of bishops. Other elements of the ritual include the bestowal of a ring on the chosen candidate. Depictions of abbesses also show them holding a crozier.[50] The 1513 edition of the *Vita Christi* has an image of Isabel de Villena with her nuns, in which she is shown teaching authoritatively from an open book. She is seated on a throne. It is significant that, after receiving new garments, the Virgin Mary in the *Vita Christi* takes her place on the throne, just as the newly installed abbess would have done. It is more than likely that, as Villena celebrated the ritual institution of Mary as Queen of Heaven, she was evoking a ceremony which gave prominence to women that was part of her own experience: her own installation as abbess in 1462.

RITUAL UNDRESSING AND ENTRY TO THE CONVENT

Just as important as the robes accorded to the queen and to the Virgin is the ritual undressing, or *despull*, which is emphasized in the coronation ceremony.[51] When the Virgin in the *Vita Christi* is accorded garments which better reflect her future role—the shift, the red tunic, the gloves, the crown of twelve stars—she removes the garments worn at the Annunciation to put on the symbolic garments gifted to her by God. The parallels are deliberate.

For the nuns in Isabel de Villena's charge, many of them from noble families and familiar with court ceremonies, the echoes of the coronation ceremony in the *Vita* were likely to have evoked the three-stage process of entry to the Order. They could not fail to make connection between the Virgin's receipt of clothes more fitting to her new station and the presentation of the habit and the veil, which was part of the ritual entry to convent life. For these original readers of the *Vita Christi*, nothing is more certain than that the ritual dressing of Mary would have evoked their own entry to the Order. On that day of profession, they too were divested of their outer

49 Janet L. Nelson, "Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making and the Shaping of Medieval Queenship," in Duggan, *Queens and Queenship*, 301–15, at 309–10.

50 See Kate Lowe, "Elections of Abbesses and Notions of Identity in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy, with Special Reference to Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001): 389–429, at 409, 419–20. Lowe is describing a Venetian context.

51 *Ordinació*, 104v.

garments, with their sisters as attendants, putting on the rough garments which symbolized their gain of more splendid heavenly ones. The retable of St. Clare in Barcelona Cathedral shows Clare in the process of being stripped of her rich clothes. She wears a rich brocade mantle with a long train. The retable image points to the custom for rich young ladies to come to profession attired in the richest of clothes in order to be stripped of them and be gifted with their habits.

There is another connection between the *Vita Christi* ceremony and convent ceremonial. The robing of the Virgin, with its overtones of coronation, takes place to mark the mystical betrothal between humanity and heaven at the conception of Christ. The coronation of the queen also contains aspects of nuptials, since it often marked the betrothal of the queen.[52] Each nun in the convent had, also, undergone her betrothal to Christ in her profession.[53]

CONCLUSION

Commentators on the *Vita Christi* have pointed to the importance of ceremonial, as well as to courtly codes, seeing them as part of Villena's and her nuns' *enyorança* (longing or nostalgia), as Joan Fuster terms it, for their past court life. Catalan scholars have highlighted the relationship between the austerity of the cloister and Villena's imagination and memories of court life, which blend in the *Vita Christi* so that "the showiness of the worldly, aristocratic spectacle is put in, reworked on a spiritual level."[54] Albert Hauf points specifically to the courtly dress protocols observed and to the "explanation of the garments which each one of the characters is wearing in each of these protocol-filled celebrations."[55] Elsewhere, he emphasizes the "courtesies and courtly finery" which mark the spiritual nuptials of Mary in the

52 See, for example, George Conklin, "Ingeborg of Denmark, Queen of France, 1193–1223," in Duggan, *Queens and Queenship*, 40. Another link with nuptials is that Venetian abbesses were spiritually betrothed to the Doge; see Lowe, "Elections," 409.

53 As part of the present-day passage into the Order, professing sisters have a garland of flowers placed on their head, a ring placed on their finger, and the ritual dressing in the black veil and accoutrements which symbolize marriage to Christ. I have examined a number of convent rituals from the early modern period without finding any evidence of the crowning with garlands of flowers; however, veiling was significant, evidenced by the way in which relatives gifted veils as part of the dowry to family members who entered convents. I am grateful to the Mother Superior of the Santa Clara convent, Lerma, for inviting me to attend a profession ceremony. Parallels between rituals of the preparation of the Virgin in the *Vita Christi* and that of the novice were striking, even at the level of assistance provided by her attendants, the sisters who placed the veil on her head.

54 "La vistositat de l'espectacle mundà, aristocràtic s'insereix, 'contrafet a l'espiritual.'" Joan Fuster, "Realisme i fantasia en Isabel de Villena," in his *Obres completes*, vol. 1, *Llengua, literatura, història*, 2nd ed. (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1975), 153–74, at 165.

55 "Explicació del vestuari que portaren els protagonistes en cadascuna d'aquestes celebracions protocolàries." Albert Hauf, "Text i context de l'obra de sor Isabel de Villena," in *Literatura valenciana del segle XV: Joannot Martorell i Sor Isabel de Villena*, ed. G. Colón et al., Sèrie Minor (Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, Consell Valencià de Cultura, 1991), 91–124, at 123.

Vita Christi.[56] Whilst critics have been partially successful in explaining the existence of ritual robing in the *Vita Christi*, their tendency to categorize the *Vita Christi* as writing suitable for women readers has hampered their evaluation of its function.

Along with other aspects of palace life noted in the *Vita Christi*, female dress "is described with an attention to detail fitting to the court."[57] Villena's robing of the Virgin draws on artistic traditions in Valencia and the kingdom of Aragon. It also reworks elements of the coronation ceremony for queens. However, its main purpose is not to allow the nuns a few moments' respite from convent life in flights of fancy about finery, nor is it an *enyorança* for court life. It is not even a courtly spectacle given a religious interpretation. In the preparation of the Virgin's body for her role as mother of the king, important truths about her relationship with God are taught through the implications of gifted clothing, as the Virgin is brought within the lineage of heaven. The book also foregrounds clothing rituals in which female protagonists are central: coronation of queens, convent rituals, and installation of the abbess. It echoes the ritual dressing and undressing of the queens of Aragon to symbolize their union with the king, and thus to describe the nuns' own experience. Their entry to the convent and all its symbolism is placed at the heart of events in the *Vita Christi* in order to ensure that rich garments will be gained in heaven.

56 "Pleitesías y galas cortesanas"; Albert G. Hauf i Valls, "La *Vita Christi* de Sor Isabel de Villena y la tradición de las *Vitae Christi* medievales," in *Studia in honorem Prof. M. de Riquer*, ed. M. Riquer (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1987), 2:105–64, at 113.

57 "Apareix dibujat amb escrúpol palatí"; Joan Fuster, "Sor Isabel: escriptora aristocràtica," in *El món literari de sor Isabel de Villena: Conferencia pronunciada amb motiu de la clausura dels cursos de llengua i literatura valenciana de "Lo Rat-Penat" el dia 17 de juny del 1957*, ed. Joan Fuster, Publicacions dels cursos de llengua i literatura valenciana de "lo Rat-Penat" 3 (Valencia: Successor de Vives i Mora, 1957), 19–29, 22–23.