

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Twomey, Lesley (2013) Manus mee distillaverunt mirram: The Essence of the Virgin and an Interpretation of Myrrh in the Vita Christi of Isabel de Villena. In: Medieval Hispanic Studies in Memory of Alan Deyermond. Monografías A, 315 . Tamesis Books, Woodbridge, pp. 189-214. ISBN 9781855662506, 9781782040750

Published by: Tamesis Books

URL: [https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/medieval-...<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/medieval-hispanic-studies-in-memory-of-alan-deyermond/manus-mee-distillaverunt-mirram-the-essence-of-the-virgin-and-an-interpretation-of-myrrh-in-the-vita-christi-of-isabel-de-villena/E0C748A8A6A1BC71091F3735322B3E01>](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/medieval-hispanic-studies-in-memory-of-alan-deyermond/manus-mee-distillaverunt-mirram-the-essence-of-the-virgin-and-an-interpretation-of-myrrh-in-the-vita-christi-of-isabel-de-villena/E0C748A8A6A1BC71091F3735322B3E01)

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/11171/>

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.)

Manus mee distillaverunt mirram: The Essence of the Virgin and an Interpretation of Myrrh in the Vita Christi of Isabel de Villena

Lesley Twomey
Northumbria University, Newcastle

‘Yet of all the senses, none surely is so mysterious as that of smell.’ (McKenzie 1923: 139)

Alan Deyermond’s pioneering work on medieval Hispanic women writers began in the 1970s with his *A Literary History of Spain: The Middle Ages*:

Writing in 1970, I gave half a page to (Leonor) López de Córdoba, seven lines to Florencia Pinar, and three lines of a footnote to Teresa of Cartagena. Yet this inadequate coverage is a good deal more than these authors receive in any other recent history of literature (most do not mention them at all), and it was indeed condemned as excessive by a Spanish reviewer.¹

This article combines study of one woman writer with another of Deyermond’s areas of expertise, his many studies of biblical allusions in Hispano-medieval literature (1989; 1996; 1999b). That I here address, without apology, one of the major women writers of the Iberian Peninsula, Sor Isabel de Villena, is a fitting tribute to Deyermond’s work.² Interest in female religious authors has been growing since the 1970s and there is no need to justify examining the work of Sor Isabel de Villena, a noblewoman and religious writer, the illegitimate daughter of Enrique de Villena, who was related to Isabel la Católica through her father’s family. She was cousin to both María of Castile (1401-58), wife of Alfons the Magnanimous (1396-1458), King

¹ 1983: 28. His *Literary History of Spain: The Middle Ages* was translated into Spanish and was published in 1973.

² Sections of this chapter was presented as a paper, ‘*Manus mee distillaverunt mirram: la esencia de la Virgen y una interpretación de la mirra en la Vita Christi de Isabel de Villena*’ at the thirteenth conference of the Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval, held in Valladolid, 15-19 September 2009.

of Aragon, and also to King Alfons. She was also cousin to the next King of Aragon, Joan (1398-1479), who took the throne after Alfons's death. Queen María was patron of the Santa Trinitat convent which was converted to its new Poor Clare use in 1445 and she supported and encouraged the vocation of her young cousin, Elionor de Villena. Alfons and María were on the throne in the kingdom during Elionor's formative years and she lived at court under the protection of María. Elionor entered the Santa Trinitat convent in Valencia at the age of 15 in 1445, taking the name sister, or Sor, Isabel. Because of her noble lineage, Sor Isabel was elected abbess in 1462 and remained in charge of the Santa Trinitat until her death in 1490. It is generally thought that she wrote her *Vita Christi* (VC) during those years (Fuster 1975: 10; Parra [Villena] 1986: 9; Hauf i Valls 1987: 105, 1990: 324).³

I shall examine Villena's references to myrrh from the Old and New Testaments and assess them in the light of patristic commentaries on verses from the Bible, comparing their use with those in other *Vitae Christi*, with fifteenth-century Marian liturgies, with medical handbooks, and with bestiaries.⁴ These sources will deepen understanding of what myrrh's properties were thought to be in medieval times. Villena's approach to myrrh will provide an example of how she goes beyond the purely biblical and will provide further examples of how she worked in crafting her VC, contributing to understanding the way in which she drew on previous lives of

³ Dominique de Courcelles (2000: 107) assumes that Sor Isabel was writing as a woman of royal blood, but also with the authority of being abbess.

⁴ Courcelles refers to the donation to the convent of the first volume of Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi* as well as of a two-volume copy of the *Vida de Jesucrist* by Francesc Eiximenis, in 1479. Sor Isabel used them in the compilation of her *Vita Christ*, with Ludolph's volume contributing to the early chapters. I became interested in the use of myrrh in the VC when researching the use of veiling and shrouding the body of Christ for *The Fabric of Marian Devotion in Isabel de Villena's 'Vita Christi'*. In the same way as the texts which contain elements of wrapping and veiling of the sacred body link the Incarnation and the death of Christ, texts about myrrh link Incarnation and burial.

Christ in the Franciscan and monastic traditions (see Hauf i Valls 1987; Hauf 2006: 41-97).

The verse ‘manus mee distillaverunt mirram’ is from the Song of Songs (5.5) and in Villena’s VC is recalled by the Virgin immediately after the offering of myrrh by the Magi. The scene of the Adoration of the Magi occurs only in St Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew does not ostensibly interpret myrrh with reference to the Old Testament or qualify the gifts by any attributes: ‘Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh’ (NJB 1985: 1611). They merely represent the wealth of the East (NJB 1985: 1611, n.f).⁵

In Villena’s version, however, there is an interpretative commentary on myrrh: ‘O! que aquella oferta de myrrha fon a la Senyora molt amarguosa, car conegué significava lo seu fill ésser passible e mortal e sots més a infinides dolors’ (Villena 1916: I, 295).⁶ The offering of myrrh is said to be ‘amarguosa’ for the Virgin which fits well with the fact that myrrh is an embalming agent and could point to Christ’s forthcoming death. Because of his humanity, Villena adds that Christ is ‘passible e mortal’ (I, 295).

Previous versions of the life of Christ provided Villena with differing interpretations of the meaning of myrrh. Jacobus de Voragine in his *Legenda aurea* offers several interpretations of the Magi’s gifts. He says that they corresponded to the type of tribute offered by the Persians or Chaldeans to a god or a king (1896: 93). He

⁵ The three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, as the Jews among Matthew’s readers would have known, were each connected to the Ark of the Covenant. The doors to the inner sanctum in the Temple were panelled with gold (1 Kings 7.50) and the Debir to contain the Ark was lined with gold (1 Kings 6.20). The altar before the Ark was also overlaid with gold (1 Kings 6.21). Incense was burnt before the Ark (Ex. 30.1-10). Myrrh is used to anoint the ark of the Testimony (Ex. 30.22-30). It is likely that Matthew used the Magi’s gifts to recall the Ark as the New Covenant came into being forged in the person of Christ.

⁶ Miquel i Planas’s edition was digitized by Alemany et al (1996) and it is the digitized text and concordance which I have used for all references to the VC.

interprets them similarly to St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153): ‘beatae virgini aurum obtulerunt propter inopiae sublevationem, thus propter stabuli foetorum, myrrham propter membrorum pueri consolidationem et malorum vermium expulsionem’ (1896: 93) [gold is to alleviate the Virgin’s poverty, frankincense to dispel the bad odors of the stable, and myrrh to strengthen the child’s limbs and drive out harmful worms] (1993: I, 83). In his second sermon on the epiphany, St Bernard discusses the gifts differently. Gold is the most excellent of types of wealth, whereas incense represents the prayers of the faithful (Apoc. 5.8), and myrrh prevents the corruption of the flesh or sin (1844-64: 183, 151 A-B).

Voragine’s third interpretation is that the gifts symbolize the royalty, divinity, and forthcoming Passion of the child: ‘tertia, quoniam aurum ad tributum, thus ad sacrificium, myrrha ad sepulturam pertinet’ (1896: 93) [gold was offered for tribute, the incense for sacrifice, and the myrrh for burial of the dead] (1993: I, 83). Villena’s interpretation may take account of this one, although she includes reference to Christ’s suffering as well as to his death. A fourth interpretation given by Voragine is that ‘aurum significant dilectionem, thus orationem, myrrha carnis mortificationem’ (1896: 93) [gold symbolizes love, incense prayer, and myrrh the mortification of the flesh] (1993: I, 83). The final interpretation offered by Voragine is that the gifts symbolize Christ’s attributes: ‘divinitas pretiosissima, anima devotissima et caro integra et incorrupta’ (1896: 93) [‘his most precious divinity, his most devout soul, and his intact and uncorrupted flesh’] (1993: I, 83). Voragine does not specifically mention myrrh’s bitterness.

Umbertinus di Casali, or Ubertino da Casale, in his *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu Christi* (*Arbor*) repeats some of Voragine’s interpretations:

Aurum in pauperitatis subsidium

Thus in stabularis fetoris remedium

Myrrha in teneritudinis puerilis osequium. (1961: 101)

[gold is a reserve for their poverty,

Incense dispels the stench of the stable

Myrrh is a gift for the softness of his flesh.]

Ubertino then classifies the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical meanings for each of the gifts. Allegorically, gold shows Christ's kingly power, incense reveals God's majesty, and myrrh indicates that Christ's flesh is mortal. Villena adds that Christ's flesh is 'passible e mortal' and might draw on Ubertino's.

Tropologically, gold means wealth, incense represents the most sublime of honours, but also signifying sacrifice, and myrrh prevents the sins of the flesh. He adds another tropological meaning, which is that gold represents perfect knowledge or the love of charity, incense, ardent devotion, and myrrh, the mortification of the flesh. Gold, anagogically, is the splendour of the vision, incense is the sweetness or dropping of fruit, and myrrh is Christ's steadfastness in never being corrupted (1961: 100). Most of Ubertino's interpretations follow Voragine's but they are presented in a more structured manner.

When Francesc Eiximenis, the Franciscan confessor to the house of Aragon, interprets the Magi's gifts in the three chapters dedicated to gold, frankincense, and myrrh in his *Vida de Jesucrist*, he does not include any of Ubertino's or Voragine's interpretations but rather allies myrrh to how rulers should behave for the good of the realm, one of the themes with which he also deals in his *Dotzè llibre del crestià* (1986 & 1988). Eiximenis was author of several guides for princes and courtiers and the *Dotzè* was one of them. He interprets gold as wisdom: 'segons Sencit Gregori significava saviesa la qual es sobiranament necessaria a cascun hom qui ha regiment

en subdits' [according to St Gregory it signified wisdom which is chiefly necessary to any man who has dominion over subjects] (Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 299, fol. 215^v).⁷ It is the type of wisdom which is suited to a ruler needing to keep charge of court and county or kingdom. In the Kingdom of Aragon rulers, additionally, had to make sure they kept jurisdiction over the wealthy burghers on town councils. Incense is interpreted as devotion and good conscience, both attributes being necessary in princes who have to rule over their subjects:

Deu encara offerir lo princep a Déu incens que segons aquest mateix doctor diu significa deuoció et bona consciencia. Et com diu quel mateix no és hom al mon que deia ésser ab deu més auisat que lo princep et tots aquels qui han a regir les ànimes. (Eiximenis, *Vida de Jesucrist*, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 299, fol. 215^v)

[The prince then is to offer incense to God, which according to that same doctor, means devotion and good conscience. And he says there is no man in the world who should be wiser than the prince and all those who have to rule over people.]

For Eiximenis, myrrh, with its anti-corruptive properties, is a gift containing a vital message for princes:

Per la qual mirra, diu Poretanus, és significada gran diligència qui no permet lo príncep ignorar ne oblidar ço a què és tengut et que tantost pos la cosa que fer se deu en execució, car si lo príncep és diligent et bon execudor d'açò a què és tengut, aquest diu que aquest és ver príncep et ver vicari de Jhesu Crist. Aquest és vida del poble, corona de son principat, pare de la cosa pública, ànima de les gents, vida

⁷ I have used the Barcelona Biblioteca de Catalunya MS 299 as the principal source for transcription of the first part of Eiximenis's *Vida de Jesucrist* because its script is clear. The text is, however, incomplete and ends at the sixth treatise. For the Passion story, which is recounted in the ninth treatise, I have opted to transcribe MS 460, also held in the Biblioteca de Catalunya. MS 460 was copied in 1401-10 and together with MS 459, is one of the few complete early versions of the *Vida de Jesucrist*. MS 459 was copied between 1401 and 1500 (see BITECA).

dels simples, goig dels pobres òrffens et dels miserables, protecció dels maiors, corona et glòria del regne, deffensió dels bons, coltell et mort dels mals, per les quals coses mereix ésser sobre tot altre après Déu ser amat et servit, honrrat et ésser ajudat, et consolat, et agut axí com lo propri cor et ànima de cascun. (*Vida de Jesucrist*, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 459, fol 171^v)

[Whence myrrh, as Poretanus says, means great diligence, which does not allow the Prince to fail to know or forget what he holds true and which he sets out to do. For if a Prince is diligent and good at carrying out what he holds true then he says that he is a true Prince and true Vicar of Christ. That Prince is life of the people, crown of his principality, father of the commonwealth, soul of the gentle, life of the lowly, joy of the poor orphans and of the poverty-stricken, protection of the great, crown and glory of the kingdom, defence of the good, hammer and death of the wicked. For these things he should be loved and served above all men after God. He should be honoured, assisted, and consoled, and considered the heart and soul of each person.]

Eiximenis allies his commentary in the *Vida de Jesucrist* to advice for princes.

Villena, whose aims are very different to Eiximenis's, does not make any reference to his interpretation of the gifts.

John of Caulibus wrote another life of Christ, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (*MVC*), which, because it was long believed to be by St Bonaventure, was widely copied and read in the Middle Ages. John mentions the gifts of the Magi, he is keen to stress that neither the Virgin nor Christ paid any attention to the gold, which was given in great quantities. According to John, the Virgin was quick to give all the gold away to the poor within a couple of days. John pays no attention to the other costly items, the frankincense and the myrrh:

Quid autem de isto auro factum putas quod erat sic magni valoris? Numquam Domina reseruauit sibi et depositum fecit? Vel nunquid emit domos, agros, et uineas. Absit. (1997: 42)

[And what do you think became of that gold, which was of such great value? Did our Lady keep it for herself and set up a trust fund? Or did she buy homes, fields and vineyards? Perish the thought!] (2000: 35)

John's emphasis, as a Friar Minor, is on the poverty of the Virgin and Christ. He wishes to show that the Virgin, a good model for Franciscans with their emphasis on poverty, was able to handle wealth and dispose of it without storing it up.

Villena is very selective about using Voragine's, Ubertino's, Eiximenis's, or John of Caulibus's interpretations in her version. Villena's commentary on myrrh's properties echoes St Isidore of Seville's well-known *Etymologiae*. St Isidore notes that myrrh is greenish but also bitter:

Myrra arbor Arabiae altitudinis quinque cubitorum, similis spinae quam ἄκανθον dicunt: cuius gutta viridis atque amara; unde et nomen accepit myrra. Gutta eius sponte manans pretiosior est, elicita corticis vulnere vilior iudicatur. [...] Myrrha autem Trogodyte ab insula Arabiae dicta, ubi melior colligitur et purior. (1993: 178)

[Myrrh is a tree from Arabia reaching a height of five cubits, similar in its thorns to the ἄκανθον: its sap is green and bitter; and for that reason it took the name myrrh.

When its sap is flowing freely, it is more precious and it is thought to be poorer when it is released by cutting the bark. [...] Trogodyte myrrh from the island of Arabia is where the best and purest myrrh is collected.]

The gift of myrrh is 'amarguosa' (I, 295) in the VC. Interpreting myrrh as bitter was, however, common in medieval writers and Villena did not necessarily go direct

to St Isidore. For example, William of St Thierry in his commentary on the Song of Songs regards myrrh as bitter tasting: ‘Myrrha quippe mortuorum corpora coniuntur et amari saporis est secundum amaritudinem passionis [...]’ [myrrh is to embalm the bodies of the dead. Its bitter taste suggests the bitterness of the Passion (...)] (1962: 198). Similarly, St Bernard in his sermon 43 on the Song of Songs linked Christ’s suffering to the bundle of myrrh: ‘Myrrha, amara res, dura et aspera tribulationum significat’ (1844-64: 183, 994D) [Because myrrh is a bitter herb it symbolizes the burden and harshness of afflictions] (1983: 220). In his third sermon on the Epiphany, ‘*Ubi est qui natus est Rex Judaeorum?*’ (Matth. II, 1-11), St Bernard again mentions the bitterness of myrrh: ‘quae, licet amara sit, tamen perutilis est, et conservat corpus quod mortuum est propter peccatum, ne defluens in vitium putrefiat’ (1844-64: 183, 151D) [for it may be bitter but it is also useful and preserves the bodies of the dead because of sin lest they putrify in wrongdoing].

Villena repeats ‘amargor’ when she glosses a Marian antiphon: ‘quasi mirra electa dedi suavitatis odorem’ [like chosen myrrh I have given forth my fragrance] (I, 295) a few lines later. Ubertino describes the anointment of Christ’s body with spices and had also associated myrrh with bitterness: ‘Sed nec myrrha & aloes compassionis amare: & aromata fragantis amoris’ [for myrrh and aloes are of bitter compassion and spiced with the fragrance of love] (1961: 337). Ubertino contrasts ‘amare’ [bitter] with ‘amoris’ [with love] in a play on words as part of an address to the Virgin who is embracing Christ’s tomb, as those present prepare to place him in it. Villena considers the words about myrrh’s bitterness suitable to be put in the mouth of the Virgin, but, unlike Ubertino, she introduces an antiphon about myrrh where she narrates the events of the first Epiphany and then glosses the antiphon to emphasize myrrh’s bitterness:

Car sa senyoria sola pot dir: '*Quasi mirra electa dedi suavitatem odoris*' car la grandíssima olor de la virtuosa paciència de sa senyoria ha fet conéixer a les gents quanta dolçor stà amagada dins el amargor de les tribulacions e quant suau olor lança de si qui ab vera paciència les porta [...]. (I, 296)

[for her Ladyship alone could say 'Like chosen myrrh I have given forth fragrance', for the great scent of her Ladyship's virtuous patience has made known to the people how much sweetness is steeped in the bitterness of the tribulations and how much sweet perfume is spread abroad by those who bear them with true patience.]

Villena interprets myrrh's sweetness in the antiphon as patience to endure bitter tribulations. Embedded within her commentary is a possible allusion to St Bernard's sermon 43 on the Song of Songs, where he too comments on myrrh's bitterness, associating it with tribulation. Her choice of 'el amargor de les tribulacions' seems to suggest that Villena knew the sermon either in its original form or through another source.

The antiphon Villena quotes, rooted in Ecclesiasticus 24.20, is part of a panegyric to Wisdom: 'like choice myrrh I have breathed out a scent'. It appears in many Marian liturgies and was an adaptation of an antiphon from the Little Office of the Virgin: 'sicut myrra electa odorem dedisti suavitatis, santa Dei Genitrix' [like chosen myrrh you have given forth a perfume of sweetness, O holy Mother of God]. The antiphon passed into the Conception office of Juan de Segovia, becoming the second antiphon at first night prayer (Ricossa 1994: 58). Using 'electa' with myrrh in this context fixes it as one of the prefigurations of the Immaculate Virgin, selected before time to be Mother of God (see Boss 2007: 207-35; Twomey 2008: 203-10). Mary's

recollection of the words of Solomon, ‘manus mee’, thus, enables her to express her collaboration, as his Mother, in her Son’s future suffering and sacrifice.

Myrrh is not only one of the three gifts offered by the Magi but it appears elsewhere in the Gospel, as well as in other parts of Villena’s version of Christ’s life. It is used to perfume the body of Christ to prepare it for burial in St John’s Gospel (19.39), where Joseph of Arimathea requests the body and Nicodemus anoints it with myrrh and aloes. Voragine’s association of myrrh with suffering and mortification of the flesh noted earlier seems to take its allusion from the preparation of Christ’s body in John. In St Mark’s Gospel the women come to the tomb with perfumed oils and balsam (16.1). Myrrh is not mentioned specifically.

In Villena’s *Vita Christi*, myrrh is used for preparing the body for burial, following John’s Gospel. Villena narrates how Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea set out together to buy precious ointments to embalm Christ’s body:

Anaren abduys e compraren una peça de olanda molt singular per a embolicar e embenar lo preciós cors de Jesús segons la costuma judayca, e hagueren gran quantitat de ungüens preciosos de moltes mescles, quasi unes cent liures, per untar e embalsemar aquell sanctissim cors. (III, 81)

[Both went to buy a piece of very fine cotton to wrap and bandage the body of Jesus in accordance with the Jewish tradition and they took a great quantity of precious unguents of many sorts mixed together, almost one hundred pounds worth, to anoint and embalm that most precious body.]

Villena includes the anointing by the women with ‘engüents preciosos’ [precious unguents] (III, 182), She also adds a preparatory scene in which Mary Magdalene declares her intention to find the best unguents money can buy in order to embalm Christ’s body: ‘delibere, esta nit, puix la festa és passada, anar yo mateixa a comprar

ungüents, los més singulars que trobar poré' [since the feast is over, I am thinking of setting out to buy the most precious unguents which money can buy] (III, 147). In Ubertino da Casale's *Arbor*, Joseph and Nicodemus buy some clean cotton and many perfumed spices, 'aromatibus', although these are not specified (1961: 337). In John of Caulibus's *MVC*, there is no mention of myrrh nor of the anointment of the body: 'rogat Ioseph Dominam ut permittat eum inuolui lintheaminibus et sepeliri' (1997: 280) [Joseph asked our Lady to allow him to shroud the body] (2000: 261). They merely shroud the body prior to placing it in the tomb and there is no mention of the purchase of spices. In fact Mary Magdalene is despairing because she has no time to wash and anoint the body (2000: 262). Later, on the Sabbath evening, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary purchase spices but the mix they buy is not mentioned. Their care over the purchase is however described (2000: 267).

The mix of perfumes and spices used for embalming remained similar from the time of the Egyptians to the early twentieth century, according to Robert G. Mayer and they would have been the same in New Testament times. He cites Ambroise Pare's early-sixteenth-century instructions for embalming a body using spices, which 'grossely powdered' are to be inserted into the 'open places'. The mix includes balsam, sage, lavender, marjoram, thyme, gentian, iris, nutmeg, cinnamon, storax, myrrh, and aloes (1990: 33). Anointing with perfume, and specifically with myrrh, recalls how in the Old Testament anointing an altar prepared it for sacrifice (Jiménez Hernández 1997: 176).⁸ Altars are anointed with myrrh in Leviticus 8.30 and in Exodus 30.22-25: 'Take the finest spices: five hundred shekels of fresh myrrh, half as much (250 shekels) of fragrant cinnamon, five hundred shekels [...] of cassia, and one *hin* of oil'. Anointing of Christ's body prior to death thus signifies his readiness for

⁸ Voragine's third interpretation is the only one given in *The New Jerusalem Bible*, standard edn (1985: 1167, n. f).

sacrifice. Villena's pricing of the precious ointments to be purchased by Mary Magdalene at 'unes cent liures' (III, 81) may echo the pricing of myrrh and the other ointments from Exodus.⁹

In many parts of the Old Testament, however, myrrh does not evoke death but sensuality. It is used to prepare a lover's bed (Proverbs 7.17; Gabelein 1991: 1220) and to make young girls ready for the king's bed. Six months' application of myrrh was required to ensure that the girls were suitably perfumed (Pope 1977: 350). Myrrh was used at weddings to scent the body of the bride for union with her bridegroom, with an example to be found in Psalm 45 (see the commentary in Twomey 2006: 341), and was highly valued as an exotic substance in the Middle East (Bergant 1998: 33). The princess is being readied for her entry to the king's chamber and her clothing drips with myrrh like the hands of the lovesick young woman awaiting her lover in the Song of Songs. The two sources are even more closely linked for this section of the Song of Songs belongs to the epithalamium, or royal wedding, tradition (Gordis 1944: 268; Matter 1992: 142). Villena uses the anointing of David's bride to prefigure the Virgin elsewhere in the VC.¹⁰ When she glosses the verse, the joyful expectancy of the Psalm is gone:

e per ço contemplant David aquesta Senyora en sperit, mirant les sues grans dolors,
diu a sa senyoria ab molta pietat: "*Mirra et gutta et casia a vestimentis tuis.*"

Volent dir: 'O, senyora filla mia! Que vestida sereu de dolors e penes en la vida e mort del vostre gloriós fill, e la vostra paciència sera un singular exemplar a tot lo món'. (I, 295)

⁹ The anointment of Christ as a precursor to burial takes place at the supper in Simon the Leper's house, an event which immediately precedes the Passion in Mark (14.3-11). Although it is nard which is used for that anointing (14.3), the use of perfume links the scene to the other prophecies of suffering and death (Holst 1976: 438).

¹⁰ See my forthcoming study of Villena's VC in which I examine nuptial adornment of the Virgin.

[and, for that reason, David, contemplating the Lady in spirit, seeing her great sorrows, said to her Ladyship with great piety: 'Myrrh is dripping from your robes. Meaning 'O my Lady and daughter. For you will be dressed in sorrows and suffering in the life and death of your glorious Son, and your patience will be a singular example for the whole world.]

In Villena's gloss the opulent scene of the young woman dripping expensive perfume as she prepares for her wedding night becomes an image of the pain and sorrow which will clothe the Virgin as she goes through life because of the death of Christ.

Modern biblical commentary, such as that of J. Cheryl Exum suggests the arrival of the lover at the door and the response of the young woman in 'manus mee distillaverunt mirram' is one of the most erotic scenes in the Song of Songs, since entrance (in some translations, hole), door, and dripping liquid all symbolize the sexual act (2005: 195-96). The dripping myrrh suggests the perfumed liquefaction of her body in the Song of Songs. However, like other medieval commentators, Villena finds a spiritual rather than a sexual interpretation for this verse. For her, the myrrh signifies the deeds Christ is to perform and the words of comfort he is to offer to those suffering tribulation:

Car recordava's sa senyoria que Salamó havia dit, en persona del seu fill: '*Manus mee distillaverunt mirram: digiti mei pleni mirra probatissima*'. Volent dir: que les mans del gloriós Senyor, ço és, les sues sanctíssimes obres, tostemps distil·larien mirra de contínues penes e dolors e amargoses persecucions; e los seus dits, qui són entesos per los exemples virtuosos de sa clemència, seran tots plens de aquella perfeta mirra e molt provada, ço és, la singular paciència sua, qui sera confort e ajuda de tots los tribulats. (I, 295)

[For her Ladyship recalled that Solomon had said of her Son: ‘My hands are dripping with myrrh: my fingers are covered in purest myrrh’. Meaning that the hands of the glorious Lord, which is his holy works, are constantly dripping the myrrh of continuous suffering, sorrow, and bitter persecutions; and his words, which are informed by the virtuous examples of his mercy, will be covered in that perfect and pure myrrh, that is his singular patience, which will be a comfort and aid to all those in tribulation.]

In fifteenth-century liturgies the young woman dripping with myrrh from the Song of Songs is regularly equated to the Virgin. In Leonardo de Nogarolis’s Conception office, for example, the myrrh is on her hands: ‘o Maria, manus tue stillauerunt mirram’ (Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 1043, fol. 22^v). Liturgists thought it appropriate that the Virgin should be prefigured by myrrh’s nuptial connotations, since she is the Bride of Christ. The interpretation of the name Maria or Miriam provides another strong reason why myrrh was often associated with her. Eiximenis gives ‘mar amargosa’ [bitter sea] as the third interpretation in his commentary on the name Maria:

Et los dits misteris pots veure si atens a tres interpretacions que ha aquest sant nom Maria car el vol dir il·luminada, il·luminant, et mar amargosa. Et totes aquestes interpretacions convenen fort altament a la Gloriosa. (*Vida de Jesucrist*, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 299, fol. 55^v)

[and those mysteries we have mentioned can be seen to link to three interpretations which the holy name Maria has, for it means illuminated, illuminating, and bitter sea. And all these interpretations are highly suitable for the Glorious Virgin.]

Eiximenis follows Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*, where the same three interpretations of the Virgin's name are given.¹¹ In Villena's gloss, Christ is the bride dripping with myrrh, the victim set to suffer.

The Song of Songs image of the bundle of myrrh between the breasts of the bride, suggests the intimacy of the lover and beloved as they rest on his couch after love-making (Murphy 1990: 135; Longman 2001: 105). Villena interprets the bundle of myrrh as a symbol of the deep compassion of the Virgin for the suffering of Christ: 'car axí com un fexet de myrra molt amargosa les dolors del seu amat fill tenia empremtades dins los pits e ànima sua' [for just as a very bitter bundle of myrrh, she held the sufferings of her Son imprinted on her breast and in her soul] (III, 131). The bundle of myrrh had been interpreted in various ways by early Christian theologians. Origen, for example, considered that it represented the mystery of the Word's corporeal birth (1957: 165; see Norris 2003: 72). Because of its position on the Virgin's breast, it points to how her womb enclosed divinity. For William of St Thierry (c.1085-1148?), the nosegay of myrrh is linked to memory 'additur quasi olfactoriculum, pectori affigendum ad afficiendam jugis suavitate odoris devotam sponsae memoriae' (1962: 198) ['in her memory the remembrance of all the delights she has experienced'] (1970: 65). Villena, as noted above, uses the bundle of myrrh to signify the Virgin's memory, and she may be echoing St Thierry's commentary. The Virgin's memory of the events of her Son's life is an important aspect of Luke's Gospel but also of the VC. In the Gospel, the Virgin remembered the events of the Christ's birth and 'treasured them in her heart' (Luke 2.52). In Villena's interpretation of the 'fexet de myrra', the sorrow her Son suffered on the cross was also imprinted on her breast and in her memory through her compassion, the suffering she endured

¹¹ St Isidore of Seville includes 'Illuminatrix' as the first of his explanations of the Virgin's name

with her Son because of her motherhood. Both events, birth and death with its connotations of rebirth, are linked through her maternal enclosure of Christ in her womb or between her breasts. She also encircled his life from birth to death in her memory.

In Leonardo de Nogarolis's Conception office, the bundle of myrrh (Song of Songs 1.13) belongs to the readings from the octave: 'ex fascisculo myrrhe reservata est' [from the bundle of myrrh she is preserved], where 'reservata' suggests the Virgin's separation from sin from all time. Origen also refers to the bundle or sachet of myrrh and the soul free from any impurity but for him that soul is Christ's. For, Christ 'in whom was never any impurity, is called a sachet of myrrh' (1957: 164). Villena is likely to have been familiar with the office and its antiphons.

Myrrh would have had other characteristics apparent to Villena because of the world in which she lived. Myrrh was included in most medical handbooks until long after the Middle Ages. According to Alain Touwaide (2008), of 380 plants mentioned in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, myrrh takes first place and was used to cure a wide range of maladies. In *De materia medica* by Pedanius Dioscorides de Anazarbus (2005), myrrh was still one of the substances most often used. It was considered suitable for treating twenty-nine maladies but it was not used quite so often, dropping to eleventh position (Touwaide 2008: 77, 78).

Myrrh was found in many medical handbooks in the medieval kingdom of Aragon. An early example is the *Recull factici de textos mèdics en català* (Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 850). It is a short manuscript containing several pieces with a short discourse on anatomy, some expenses notes, some recipes for plasters, unguents, and other cures. It also has a short section with advice on practical medicine. In this section there is a recipe for a plaster 'bon a tota nafra sanar e a leuar

dolor’ [good to cure wounds and alleviate pain] (Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 850, fol. 15v) which contains among other ingredients incense, myrrh, frankincense, terebinth, and aristolochia. In Arnau de Vilanova’s *Opera medica omnia*, myrrh is a regular ingredient (see, for example, 1975: XI, 294) and in his *Antidotarium* myrrh is frequently used in unguents. For example in the ‘Unguentum apostolorum’, used to soothe difficult fistulae and to cure scrofulous ulcers, red myrrh is included along with bdellium, a myrrh-like substance, incense, and aristolochia (1495: ch. 208, n. p.). He notes that the unguent is particularly efficacious: ‘cui non est par in auferenda carne mala’ [it is without equal in curing rotting flesh]. In the collection of medical remedies written down by Galcerandus Marqueti in 1392, myrrh is used as a heat-inducing cure. To make an unguent, it is mixed with virgin wax, incense, lily root, and seed of sea mallow (Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 864, fol. 42^v). In another unguent, which is a cure for wounds, myrrh is mixed with terebinth, smearwort, and oil of rose (fol. 47^v). Marjorie Jenkins notes that myrrh was a familiar substance, although a luxurious one, in medieval communities. Myrrh was gifted to Pope Benedict, together with gold, silk and jewels, although the precious consignment never reached him (1976: 47). A thirteenth-century French commentary on the Song of Songs relates myrrh to medicine in the stanza dedicated to the ‘fasciculus mirre’:

Mirre porte teil medicine
 Et a teil force et teil nature
 Elle garde la morticine
 Et de vers et de pourreture,
 N’i laisse venir nul vermine,
 Ne corruption ni ordure;

Bien est gardee sans termine

Li ame tant com mirre dure. (Hunt 2006: 134, ll. 864-72)

Myrrh contains such powerful medicine

And has such characteristics

It keeps dead flesh from worms and from rotting

It does not allow any maggots

Corruption or rot;

The soul endures like myrrh

Is kept forever without end.]

The commentary, which may have originated in a Beguine community, according to Tony Hunt, may of course not imply any knowledge of real myrrh and its uses. Nevertheless, its properties were sufficiently well known in another female community for them to be written down as the only comment on that verse of the Song of Songs. It is possible that similar thinking could have occurred in a Franciscan community.

Records show that exotic scented substances were being used in Valencia in the fifteenth century, although I have not found any record of purchase of myrrh. For example in 1492, Francesch Coves had permission to sell them in his shop (Arxiu del Regne de València, Real Cancilleria, libro 393, fol. 99^r). Household accounts show that perfumes were used for medicinal purposes. In the accounts of the Marchioness of Villena is a list of items purchased entitled ‘medicines del mes d’agost’ (Arxiu del Regne de València, Maestre Racional, Libro 12538, *Marquesat de Villena, comptes del comprador*, loose folio). Perfumed unguents were purchased as remedies for members of the household: ‘un quart d’enguent rosat sandalat per Pineda’. The spices

found most regularly in the accounts are ginger and cinnamon.¹² Both were thought to have curative purposes and are listed among the most common spices to be used to perfume syrups and fragrant liquids in an unpublished fifteenth-century household hints manual, the *Vergel de Señores*. The *Vergel* is a collection of recipes for foods, and for perfumes to be prepared for a range of purposes, including fumigation and freshening of clothes, unguents, and healing remedies:

las especias con que comunmente se suelen aromaticar los xarabes y almibar son estas: canela, olíbano, gengibre, nuez moscada, galangal, pimienta, y macias, y cardamomo que es nuez de especia o granos de parayso. (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, MS 8565, fol. 3^v)

[The spices with which syrups and sweet liquids are flavoured are the following: cinnamon, incense, ginger, nutmeg, blue ginger, pepper, mace, and cardamom, which is spiced walnut or seeds of paradise.]

Myrrh was still considered to have curative properties in the eighteenth century and, even today, essential oil of myrrh is thought to have therapeutic properties and to be of value in curing a range of infirmities, such as healing wounds, having antimicrobial properties, and being a treatment for amenorrhoea (Cook 1770). A Vich pharmacist records use of myrrh as a tincture for toothache in 1835 (Barcelona Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 1263, fol. 48r; for modern therapeutic uses of myrrh, see Ghani, Loutfy, & Hassa 2009).

Scents are recommended as medicines in Book II of the *Vergel de Señores*, which begins: ‘comença el Segundo libro que trata de todos los azeites asi de los que se hazen para olores como de los que se hazen para medecinas’ [the second book which

¹² *Marquesat de Villena, comptes del comprador*, Arxiu del Regne de València, Maestre Racional, Libros, 12539, fol. 33^v. I have not found any record of purchase of myrrh in records of household accounts nor in import and export records from the Bailiwick of Valencia.

deals with all the oils both those which are made for fragrances and those made for medicinal purposes] (MS 8565, fol. 81^v). In the seventeenth century, an Englishman, John Floyer (1687), wrote a treatise on the therapeutic properties of scents, including myrrh, and the value of breathing them in. Villena demonstrates her knowledge of the healing effect of scents when she describes the effect of breathing in Christ's unguents. Although she writes in a spiritual context, for she is dealing with the salvific effect of Christ's resurrection, she shows her awareness of curative effects of scent: 'la olor dels vostres ungüents, e delits sens mesura que són en paradís, tiren la mia ànima e ençenen aquella en desig insaciable de veure la vostra divinal cara!' [the scent of your unguents, and limitless delights in paradise draw my soul and inflame it with the insatiable desire to see your divine face] (III, 310). The sweet-smelling unguents of Christ's suffering, his hands dripping with myrrh, engage the soul, drawing it towards God.

For Villena, the mountain of myrrh is where plants to cure all spiritual ills are growing. In her commentary on the verse 'Iré al monte de mirra' (Song of Songs 4.6), Villena describes the homely practice of picking herbs to prepare remedies:

los servents verdaders de sa senyoria e real magestat, trobant-se en alguna angústia o dolor, diran ab gran confiança: '*Vadam ad montem mirre.*' Car en aquesta muntanya de mirra, qui és lo fill de Déu, se trobaran les herbes virtuoses e medicinals a guarir tota natura de tribulacions, per grans ne forts que sien. E la senyora mare sua fon la primera e principal qui cullí e conegué les herbes d'aquesta divinal muntanya, car sentí vivament dins les entràmenes sues totes les dolors e amargors del seu dolorat fill [...].(I, 296)

[True servants of her Ladyship and Royal Majesty when they are suffering any trouble or sorrow, will say with great confidence, 'I will go to the mountain of

myrrh.’ For on that mountain of myrrh, that is the Son of God, are found herbs with many virtues and ones with medicinal powers to cure all manner of tribulations, even though they be great or deep-rooted. And the Lady, his Mother was the first and the chief person who picked and recognized the herbs growing on that divine mountain, for she deeply felt all the pain and bitter grief of her Son who was so grievously wounded (...)].

Both the mountain of myrrh in Song of Songs 4.6 and its reprise in the final stanza, where the lover is described as a young stag on the ‘mountain of spices’ (8.14), are erotic in the original. Marina Warner considers that the emotions in the final verse leave it ‘hanging in the air, pregnant with joy’ (1985: 126) but she does not acknowledge the shift between bride and bridegroom which occurs in most commentaries on the verse. Dianne Bergant interprets the mountain of spices as the woman’s charms, although she does not explicitly link them to the woman’s sexual organs in the way Exum does (1998: 153; 2001: 105). The young woman’s body is the site of both the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense (Exum 2005: 262), a highly erotic image of coitus. St Bernard retains a flavour of the eroticism in his commentary on Song of Songs 1.13: ‘draw me after you; we shall run in the odour of your ointments’. He alludes to Song of Songs 8.14, interpreting the mountain of spices as Christ’s body:

[...] ex his quattuor praemissis, tanquam ungentis pretiosissimis super montes aromatum de coelestibus speciebus confectis, tanta Ecclesiae naris odoris suavitas replevit ut mox a quatuor mundi partibus excitata illa dulcedine [...]. (1844-64: 183, col. 879)

[from these four as from priceless perfumes blended from heavenly ingredients
‘upon the spicy mountains’ so sweet an odor fills the nostrils of the Church, that
she is roused even to the four corners of the earth by its delightfulness.] (1983: 17)

St Bernard’s interpretation is different from that of other commentators on the Song of Songs. St Bernard makes Christ the mountain of spices and the Church the Bridegroom, aroused by the perfumes. For Hugh of St Victor (1096-1141), it is the soul which is the Bride. In his view, the mountain signifies that the soul ‘per abstinentiam concupiscentiam carnis occidit deinde per munditiam cordis ignorantiam mentis abstergit’ (1844-64: 177, col. 988) [‘kills the desires of the flesh by abstinence and then by purity of heart drives out the mind’s unknowing’] (trans. Norris 2003: 168).

Like St Bernard and Hugh of St Victor, Villena uses the mountain as an allegory to symbolize the relationship between Christ and the Church. Villena, like Bernard, reverses the personae of the Song of Songs, with Christ taking the female role of the mountain of myrrh and the Virgin representing the Church.

St Bernard creates an allegory of human life and good works by distinguishing between two types of fragrance. First there is the preparation of home-made recipes with local herbs and then there is perfume with its exotic ingredients:

Sed est unguentum tanto isto pretiosus, quanto de melioribus compositum speciebus. Huius siquidem species ne longe quaerantur, penes nos et absque difficultate reperimus, ac de nostris hortulis talium per facile copiam tollimus, quotiescumque necessitas poscit. Quis enim non satis de proprio, cum vult, ad manum habet iniquitates et peccata, si non dissimulat? Hae autem sunt, sicut recognoscitis, species unguenti primi, quod iam descripsimus. At vero secundi huius aromata terra nostra nequaquam profert, sed *procul et de ultimis finibus* ea

nobis conquirimus. Fit enim unguentum istud de divinis collatis humano generi beneficiis. Felix quia ipsa sibi studiose colligere, et arte mentis suae oculos digna cum gratiarum actione reducere curat! Profecto cum fuerint in vasculo pectoris pistillo crebrae meditationis contusa atque contrita, deindeque igne sancti desiderii simul decocta omnia, et demum *impinguata oleo laetitiae* est unctio longe pretiosior excellentiorque priore. (1996: 226-28)

[yet there is a perfume much more precious than this, as the materials of which it is composed are of more excellent kinds. For the materials of the former do not require to be sought from far; we find them without difficulty within ourselves, and in our own little garden-plots gather them easily in great plenty, as often as necessity requires. But these are, as you recognise, the materials of the former ointment, which I have described. But as for the sweet spices that compose the second, our earth does not produce them at all; we must seek them in a land very far off. (...) For this perfume is compounded of the benefits which Divine goodness has bestowed upon the human race. Happy is he who with care and pain collects them for himself, and sets them before the eyes of his mind with acts of thanksgiving proportioned to their greatness. Assuredly when these have been bruised and pounded in the mortar of our breast, with the pestle of frequent meditation, then boiled together on the fire of holy desire, and finally enriched with the oil of joy, there will be as a result a perfume far more precious and more excellent than the former.] (1889-96: IV, 51-52)

Villena indicates that the Virgin was the first to recognize the herbs on the mountain and to pick them. The Virgin was the first to be granted the benefits of the Resurrection, being the first to be saved, a model for the Church, in her Immaculate Conception. She was the first to be taken up into heaven body and soul in her

Assumption. This is why the myrrh lies between her breasts: *'Fasciculus mirre dilectus meus mihi inter ubera mea commorabitur'* [A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night between my breasts] (I, 295). This beautiful image of the Virgin picking herbs to make remedies to cure the tribulations of the world suggests that Villena knew the commentary of St Bernard on the mountain of myrrh.

Myrrh has another series of connotations in the Middle Ages because of its presence in versions of the bestiary.¹³ Because Villena would have been familiar with myrrh's association with the phoenix, even when she refers to its bitterness and associates it with sacrifice or with death, she cannot have thought of Christ's death as the final event. The phoenix was the bestiary creature thought to symbolize Christ's resurrection through its revival from the ashes. Its chrysalis of myrrh signifies rebirth through suffering (see Grant 1948). Christ's anointing with myrrh most probably had these connotations for Villena, although many of the versions of the story of the phoenix known to medieval readers do not specifically mention myrrh. St Isidore of Seville, for example, refers only to gathering of aromatic twigs by the phoenix:

Phoenix Arabiae avis, dicta quod colorem phoeniceum habeat, vel quod sit in toto orbe singularis et unica. Nam Arabes singularem 'phoenicem' vocant. Haec quingentis ultra annis vivens, dum se viderit senuisse, collectis aromatum virgulis, rogam sibi instruit, et conversa ad radium solis alarum plausu voluntarium sibi incendium nutrit, sicque iterum de cineribus suis resurgit.

[The phoenix is a bird from Arabia, so called for it is of Phoenician colour and because it is unique and there is only one in the whole world. For the Arabs call the phoenix unique. It lives over 500 years, and when it sees it has grown old, it

¹³ Full bibliographies on the bestiary can be found in the Aberdeen bestiary project, <http://abdn.ac.uk:8080/bestiary/bibliography.hti#texts> [consulted 12.12.2011].

collects aromatic twigs, and builds a funeral pyre for itself. Converting the rays of the sun into fire by beating its wings it is consumed and then rises again from its ashes. (12.8)

Some of the best-known medieval bestiaries do not mention myrrh either. In the bestiary *De bestiis et aliis rebus* by Hugh de Fouilloy (1110?-1174), prior of St Laurent-au-Bois, previously believed to be by Hugh of St Victor, the phoenix makes its nest on a mound of aromatic herbs. These herbs are interpreted as good works: ‘cum vero morti phoenici appropinquat, tunc diversas species aromatum parat. Aromata sunt bona opera, diversae species diversae animae virtutes. Congeriem aromatum construit, et se in mediis aromatum speciebus componit’ [for in truth when the death of the phoenix approaches, it prepares different types of spices. The good works are perfumed and the different spices are different virtues of the soul. It builds a perfumed heap and sets itself in the midst perfumed with spices.] (1844-64: 177, col. 48). Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco cites from Pliny in his entry in the 1610 edition of the *Tesoro de la lengua castellana* mentioning ‘replere odoribus’, although not specifically that myrrh was the scented matter the phoenix used (2006: 889).

Deyermond notes that the phoenix appears twice in poems by Villena’s contemporary, Joan Roís de Corella (1993: 104-06). In his love poem *La mort per amor*, there is allusion to the scented bier it prepares and to its death: ‘lit ple d’odors’, Roís de Corella does not mention that the scent is of myrrh nor does he mention setting the bed on fire:

Mas, si voleu que davall vostra manta
muyra prop vós, hauran fi mes dolors:
seré l’ocell qu’en lit ple d’odors

mor, ja content de sa vida ser tanta. (1913: 427, ll. 5-8; cited in Deyermund 1993: 98, 104 [2007: 129])

[But if you were to wish that I should die beside you, under your mantle,

My sorrows would be at an end:

I will be the bird which dies content that its life has been so long

in a bed filled with scent.]

Roís de Corella's poem does, however, reveal that the fragrance of the phoenix's funeral pyre is a concept which was well known in late-medieval Valencia.

The story of the phoenix is present in Catalan versions of the bestiary, such as the *Libre apelat Spill d'exemples de naturaleses de alguns animals*, where it is said to represent the creative power of God. However, even this fuller version of the bestiary does not make any reference to the fragrant twigs or to the myrrh the phoenix gathered:

Lo fenix és un hocell que ha un cresta que li toca fins al coll, e ha plomes de color de çera e de roses, e viu bé ccc fins a v sents anys. E com ve que és fort envelit, ell ajusta de la pus sequa lenya que ell pot trobar, e fa'n un gran munt halà hon él coneix que lo sol fir més ab més fervor, e met-se dejús la lenya, e bat les ales ntro que a ·quella lenya se pren foch per la gran calor del sol; e axí ·s crema ell matex, ab la lenya ensemps. E de la çendra que fa, de nit cau-hi lo rós, e fa's un verme, e aquell verme crex tant, que fa un poch, lo qual per tostemps torn axí com lo fènix e viu tro al demundit temps. E axí no n'és sinó hu, null temps, qui ·s crema, axí com demunt és dit; [e·s diu 'semper vivens']. Aquest fènix, qu en aquesta manera mor e nex, nos demostra lo poder de Déu com ha fetes les creatures de diverses semblances, e creades naturalment, sens acostament de çement natural, per ço que conega hom que ell és Déu totpoderós e creador, [e no li és posible a ffer totes

coses que Déu ha creades dejús lo cell]. Mostren e manifesten en Déu a conèxer, per què nostre Senyor nos mostre que axí ho poguere haver fet d'ome e de totes altres creatures, les quals ha ordenat que's fassen naturalment, ab ajustament de mascle e de fembra, ab la çemensa que ix del mascle, a mostrar a nós com és poderós de fer creatió naturalment e sens natura. (Panunzio 1964: 102-04)¹⁴

[The phoenix is a bird which has a crest which comes down to its neck, it has feathers of waxy white and pink and it lives 300-600 years. And when it see it is very old, it takes the driest firewood it can find, and makes a great mound of it where it knows that the sun shines most brightly, and gets under the wood and beats its wings until the firewood catches fire under the heat of the sun; and in this way it burns itself and the wood. And over the ashes, dew falls by night and it turns into a worm and that worm grows and in a short time becomes a phoenix and another phoenix lives for a long time. And so there has only ever been one which

¹⁴ Another fragment of a Catalan bestiary relates the story without mentioning the mound on which the phoenix settles nor its death, nor does it mention the fragrant bier on which it settled, nor its resurrection from the ashes:

Fènix se fa en Síria, e és fort gran e bell aucell. E no és sinó un. E quant ha molt viscut, munte se'n en una gran muntanya e aqui fa son niu. De aquest aucell fa gran disputa los lògichs. (Panunzio 1964: 120)

[The phoenix is found in Syria, and is a very big and beautiful bird. And there is no more than one. And when it has lived a long time, it goes up to a high mountain and there builds its nest. The schoolmen dispute a great deal about this bird.]

This version has details about the age of the phoenix but not how it dies nor its rebirth which associate it with the resurrection.

burns itself, as recounted above; [and it is called ‘semper vivens’]. That phoenix, which is born and dies in this way, reveals the power of God to us in the way he made all the creatures in different shapes, and made them naturally, without any joining of natural cement, and in this man knows he is the Almighty Creator, [and it is not possible for man to make all the things which God has created under the heavens]. They reveal and make God known, because our Lord shows us that in this way he could make man and all the creatures. For he ordained that they be made naturally, with difference between male and female, with the seed from the male, to show us how he has the power to make creation working with nature and without nature.]

The *Spill* phoenix story which mentions the worm but not the building of a nest from myrrh shortens the Bestiary story which is found in full in other parts of Europe such as in the Bodleian Library manuscript (White 1999: 141). It is not unlikely that various versions of the Catalan bestiary including one which contained the chrysalis of frankincense and myrrh was copied in Valencia. Its association with the resurrection of Christ (Deyermund 1993: 98) was certainly known to Villena from Roís de Corella’s poetry.

Examining myrrh and how it is used in the VC provides evidence about Villena’s methods. The characteristics she associates with myrrh have no exact precedents in previous *Vitae Christi*, although on one occasion she may transfer attributes of myrrh, its bitterness, from the scene of the burial of Christ to that of the Magi.¹⁵ She may even have taken Eiximenis’s *Vida de Jesucrist* and its commentary that the name

¹⁵ It is not certain that Villena knew Ubertino’s *Arbor* and Villena’s association of bitter myrrh with Christ’s body neither proves nor disproves that she used it. She could have found similar associations in any number of sources.

Mary means bitter sea as a point of departure for how she links the Virgin to myrrh at various points in her *VC*.

She uses myrrh to develop various intersecting contexts, such as sacred anointing, death, and memory. She also shows she is aware of myrrh's alternative biblical contexts, in its association with marriage, which she, like other theologians before her, interprets as union with Christ, and the preparation of the perfect body of the Virgin for the Incarnation. Underpinning the intersecting allusions is the presence of myrrh as a medicine in the medieval kingdom of Aragon, where it is present in healing ointments to cure wounds, prevent putrefaction, and to address overly cold humours, restoring the body to equilibrium. Its usage in medieval cures underpins its theological contexts, for myrrh is a salve which provides salvation, and, in preventing the running sores of sin, it restores humanity to its rightful nature.

Myrrh is both associated with Christ and with the Virgin in the *VC*. Association of myrrh with suffering and death allows her to draw together the prophetic gift of the Magi and its completion in the death of Christ in which the Virgin Mary participated in her own bitter compassion. In the case of Christ, myrrh drips from his hands, symbolizing the suffering he will undergo and the salvation he will bring to others. The hands of Christ symbolize suffering, because they are pierced by the nails at Crucifixion, and salvation, because they are shown to the disciples to assuage doubts after his Resurrection. In the case of the Virgin, myrrh clothes her in suffering and pain for Villena depicts the Virgin being readied to be united in sorrow with her Son. The Virgin prepares herself for her compassion through all time for she is 'chosen myrrh'. The bundle of myrrh, freshly picked, lies on her breast, or between her breasts, which encircle it. The bundle of myrrh becomes a symbol of her motherhood,

for it was her breast, or rather her womb, which encircled Christ at the Incarnation.

Myrrh represents Christ's fragrant body, anointed for union with humanity.

For Villena, Christ is also the mountain of myrrh, where herbs to cure all ills can be picked. Because myrrh and the memory associated with it imprints itself on the breast of the Virgin, Villena's aim is to unite mother and Son in suffering through its symbolism, since their flesh is one. My study ends with a phrase taken from the conclusion of one of Deyermond's articles which seems appropriate to the varied and allusive interpretations of myrrh I have sought to establish here: 'No hay ciencia cierta en estas cosas. Sólo hay hipótesis, sugerencias. Espero sin embargo que las ideas que acabo de plantear merezcan la atención de los lectores' (1999a: 99).

Works Cited

Manuscript sources

'Autorización a Francesc de les Coves, boticario de Valencia, para vender especias en su tienda' (1424), Valencia, Arxiu del Regne de València, Real Cancilleria, Libros, 393.

EIXIMENIS, Francesc. *Vida de Jesucrist*, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 299.

-----, *Vida de Jesucrist*, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 268.

-----, *Vida de Jesucrist*, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 459 and MS 460.

Formulario o dispensatorio para uso de la botica de Dr Antonio Pascual, farmacéutico de Vich, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 1263.

GALCERANDUS MARQUETI, *Miscel·lània de textos medics en català, castellà, i llatí*, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 864.

Marquesat de Villena, comptes del comprador, Valencia, Arxiu del Regne de València, Maestre Racional, Libros, 12538.

Marquesat de Villena, comptes del comprador, Valencia, Arxiu del Regne de València, Maestre Racional, Libros, 12539.

NOGAROLIS, Leonardo de, *Officium Immaculate Conceptionis uirginis marie editum per reverendum presbiterem Leonardum Nogarolum prothonotarium apostolicum Artium et Sanctae Theologiae doctorem famosissimum*, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 1043.

Recull factici de textos mèdics en català, Barcelona, Biblioteca de Catalunya, MS 850.

Vergel de Señores, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, MS 8565.

Primary sources

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, ST (1983). *On the Song of Songs*, II, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series, 7 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications).

— (1996). *Sermons sur le cantique, 1-15: Texte latin de J. Leclercq, H. Rochais, & Ch. H. Talbot*, trans. Paul Verdeyen & Raffaele Fassetta, Sources Chrétiennes, 414 (Paris: Editions du Cerf).

— (1844-64). *Sermo III: De lectione evangelica, 'Ubi est qui natus est Rex Judaeorum?' (Matth. II, 1-11)*, ed. J.-P. Migne, PL 183, cols 149-52.

— (1844-64). *Sermones in Cantica Canticorum*, ed. J.-P. Migne, PL 183, cols 785-1198.

— (1889-96). *The Life and Works of St Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux*, ed. John Mabillon, trans. Samuel J. Eales, 4 vols (London: John Hodges).

- COOK, John (1770). *The Natural History of Lac, Amber, and Myrrh, with a Plain Account of the Many Excellent Virtues These Three Medicinal Substances are Naturally Possessed of* (London: Mr Woodfall).
- DIOSCORIDES OF ANARZARBUS, Pedanius (2005). *De materia medica*, trans. Lily Y. Beck, *Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien*, 38 (Olms: Weidmann).
- EIXIMENIS, Francesc (1986-88). *Dotzè llibre del crestià, segona part*, ed. Curt Wittlin, Arseni Pacheco, Jill Webster, Josep Maria Pujol, Josefina Fíguls, Bernat Joan, & August Bover, 2 vols, *Col·lecció Obres de Francesc Eiximenis*, 3 & 4 (Girona: Col·legi Universitari de Girona & Diputació de Girona).
- FLOYER, John (1687). *ΦΑΡΜΑΚΟ-ΒΑΣΑΝΟΣ or the Touch-Stone of Medicines. Discovering the Vertues of Vegetables, Minerals, and Animals by their Tastes and Smells*, 2 vols (London: Mr Johnson).
- ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, ST (1993). *Etimologías: edición bilingüe*, ed. José Oroz Reta & Manuel-A. Marcos Casquero, with introduction by Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, 2nd edn, *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos*, 647 (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos).
- JOHN OF CAULIBUS (1997). *Meditationes vite Christi olim S. Bonauenturo attributae*, ed. Mary Stallings-Taney, *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis*, 153 (Turnholt: Brepols).
- (2000). *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. & ed. Francis X. Taney, Anne Miller, & C. Mary Stallings-Taney (Asheville, N.C.: Pegasus Press).
- NJB (1985). *The New Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Henry Wansbrough (London: Darton, Longman & Todd).
- ORIGEN (1957). *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, *Ancient Christian Writers*, 26, trans. R. P. Lawson (Westminster, MD: Newman Press).

- ROÍS DE CORELLA, Joan (1913). *Obres completes*, ed. R. Miquel i Planas (Barcelona: Biblioteca Catalana).
- ST THIERRY, William of (1970). *The Works of William of St Thierry, II: Exposition on the Song of Songs*, trans. Columba Hart, Cistercian Fathers Series, 6 (Shannon: Irish University Press).
- (1962). *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum*, ed. J-M Duchanet, trans. M. Dumontier, Sources Chrétiennes, 82 (Paris: Editions du Cerf).
- ST VICTOR, Hugh of (1844-64). *De amore sponsi ad sponsam*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris), PL 176, cols 987B-992B.
- (1844-66). *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris), PL 177, cols 15-164.
- VILANOVA, Arnau de (1994). *Antidotario*, ed. Pedro Vernia, 2 vols (Valencia: Ayuntamiento de Valencia).
- (1495). *Antidotarium* (Valencia: Nicolas Spindler; ed. facsimile 1985, Burriana: Ediciones Históricas Farmacéuticas).
- (1975). *Opera medica omnia*, ed. Michael R. McVaugh, 20 vols (Granada: Seminarium Historiae Medicae Granatensis).
- VILLENA, Sor Isabel de (1916). *Vita Christi, compost per Isabel de Villena, abadessa de la Trinitat de Valencia, ara novament publicat segons l'edició de l'any 1497* [VC], ed. Ramón Miquel i Planas, 3 vols, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Casa Miquel-Rius).
- (1986). *Vita Christi*, ed. Lluïsa Parra, Biblioteca d'Autors Valencians, 12 (València: Institució Alfons el Magnànim).
- VORAGINE, Jacobus de (1896). *Legenda aurea vulgo historia lombardica dicta ad optimorum librorum fidem*, ed. Th. Graesse (Dresden: Impensis Librariae Arnoldianae).

— (1993). *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Grainger Ryan, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

UMBERTINUS DE CASALI (1961). *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu*, ed. Charles T. Davis (Turin: Bottega D'Erasmus).

Secondary Sources

ABERDEEN BESTIARY PROJECT, <http://abdn.ac.uk:8080/bestiary/bibliography.hti#texts> [consulted 12.12.2011].

ALEMANY, Rafael, et al. (1996). *Concordança de la Vita Christi de Isabel de Villena*, Concordances dels Clàssics Valencians, I (Alicante: Institut Interuniversitari de Filologia Valenciana, & Conselleria de Cultura).

BERGANT, Dianne (1998). *Song of Songs: The Love Poetry of Scripture; Spiritual Commentaries* (New York: New City Press).

— (2001). *The Song of Songs*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press).

BITECA, http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/philobiblon/searchwork_en.html [consulted 1.10.2011].

BOSS, Sarah Jane (2007). 'The Development of the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception', in her *Mary: The Complete Resource* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 207-35.

COVARRUBIAS HOROZCO, Sebastián de (2006). *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, ed. Ignacio Arellano & Rafael Zafra, Biblioteca Aurea Hispánica, 21 (Madrid: Iberoamericana-Vervuert).

- COURCELLES, Dominique de (2000). 'En mémoire d'elle et en mémoire du sang: la *Vita Christi* de Sor Isabel de Villena, abbesse des clarisses de Valence au XV^e siècle', *Journal de la Renaissance*, I: 103-20.
- DEYERMOND, Alan (1999a). 'El tejido en el texto, el texto tejido: las *chansons de toile* y poemas análogos', *Estudios Románicos*, 11: 71-104.
- (2003). *Historia de la literatura española*, I: *La Edad Media*, trans. Luis Alonso López, Letras e Ideas, 1, 20th edn (Barcelona: Ariel).
- (1996). 'La Biblia como elemento unificador y divisorio en la literatura medieval de Castilla', in *La religión como factor de integración y conflicto en el Mediterráneo*, ed. Aurelio Pérez Jiménez & Gonzalo Cruz Andreotti, Mediterránea, 2 (Madrid: Clásicas), pp. 127-56.
- (1999b). 'La Biblia en la poesía de Juan del Encina', in *Humanismo y literatura en tiempos de Juan del Encina*, ed. Javier Guijarro Ceballos, Acta Salmaticensia, Estudios Filológicos, 271 (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1999), pp. 8-68.
- (1993). 'Las imágenes del bestiario en la poesía de Joan Roís de Corella', in *Homenaje al profesor José Fradejas Lebrero*, 2 vols (Madrid: Universidad de Educación a Distancia, Departamento de Literatura Española y Teoría de la Literatura), I, pp. 95-106; repr. (2007) in *Poesía de Cancionero del siglo XV*, ed. Rafael Beltrán, Col·lecció Honoris Causa, 24 (Valencia: Universitat de València), 119-31.
- (1983). 'Spain's First Women Writers', in *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols*, ed. Beth Miller (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), pp. 27-52.
- (1989). 'Unas alusiones al Antiguo Testamento en la poesía de cancioneros', in *Homenaje al profesor Antonio Vilanova*, ed. Marta Cristina Carbonell & Adolfo

- Sotelo Vázquez, 2 vols (Barcelona: Departamento de Filología Hispánica, Universidad de Barcelona), I: *Estudios de Literatura Española (Edad Media y Edad de Oro)*, pp. 189-202.
- EXUM, J. Cheryl (2005). *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press).
- FUSTER, Joan (1975). 'El món literari de sor Isabel de Villena', in his *Obres completes*, 7 vols, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Edicions 62), I: *Llengua, literatura, història* (Barcelona: Edicions 62), pp. 153–74.
- GABELEIN, Frank E. (1991). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with The New International Version of The Holy Bible*, V: *Psalms — Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).
- GHANI, Rashad B. Abdul, Naguiba LOUTFY, & Azza HASSA (2009). 'Myrrh and Trematodoses in Egypt: An Overview of Safety, Efficacy, and Effectiveness Profiles', *Parasitology International*, 58: 214-18.
- GORDIS, Robert (1944). 'A Wedding Song for Solomon', *Journal for Biblical Literature*, 63: 263-70.
- GRANT, Robert M. (1948). 'The Resurrection of the Body', *Journal of Religion*, 28: 188-208.
- HAUF I VALLS, Albert G. (2006). *La Vita Christi de Sor Isabel de Villena (S. XV) como arte de meditar: introducción a una lectura contextualizada* (València: Biblioteca Valenciana, Generalitat Valenciana, Conselleria de Cultura, Educació i Esport).
- (1987). '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. Dámaso Alonso, 4 vols (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema [1987-91]), II, pp. 105-64.

- (1990). *D'Eiximenis a Sor Isabel de Villena: aportació a l'estudi de la nostra cultura medieval*, Biblioteca Sanchis Guarner, 19 (València: Institut de Filologia Valenciana; Barcelona: Abadia de Montserrat).
- HOLST, Robert (1976). 'The One Anointing of Jesus: Another Application of the Form Critical Method', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 95: 435-46.
- HUNT, Tony (2006). *Les Cantiques Salemon: The Song of Songs in MS Paris BNF fr. 14966*, Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 16 (Turnhout: Brepols).
- JENKINS, Marjorie (1976). 'Medicines and Spices, with Special Reference to Medieval Monastic Accounts', *The Garden History Society*, 4: 47-49.
- JIMÉNEZ HERNÁNDEZ, Emiliano (1997). *Cantar de los Cantares: resonancias bíblicas*, Colección Trípode, 14 (Bilbao: EGA).
- LONGMAN, Tremper (2001). *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans).
- MCKENZIE, Dan (1923). *Aromatics and the Soul: A Study of Smell* (London: William Heinemann).
- MATTER, E. Ann (1992). *The Voice of my Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- MAYER, Robert G. (1990). *Embalming: History, Theory, and Practice* (Norwalk, CT: Appleton & Lange).
- MURPHY, Roland E. (1990). *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress).
- NORRIS, Richard A. (2003). *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans).
- PANUNZIO, Saverio (1964). *Bestiariis*, 2 vols, Colecció A, 92 (Barcelona: Barcino).

- POPE, Marvin J. (1977). *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday).
- RICOSSA, Luca Basilio (1994). *Jean de Ségovie: son office de la Conception, 1439; étude historique, théologique, littéraire et musicale*, Série 26, Musicologie, 113 (Bern: Publications Universitaires Européennes).
- TOUWAIDE, Alain (2008). 'The Jujube Tree in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Case Study in the Methodology of Textual Archeobotany', in *Health and Healing from the Medieval Garden*, ed. Peter Dendle & Alain Touwaide (Woodbridge: Boydell Press), pp. 72-100.
- TWOMEY, Lesley K. (2006). 'On the Scent of Mary: The Power of Perfume in the *Espill*', *Catalan Review*, 20: 337-46.
- , (forthcoming). *The Fabric of Marian Devotion in Sor Isabel de Villena's 'Vita Christi'* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer).
- , (2008). *The Serpent and the Rose: The Immaculate Conception and Hispanic Poetry in the Late Medieval Period*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions, 132 (Leiden: Brill).
- WARNER, Marina (1985). *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador).
- WHITE, T. H., ed. (1999). *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century Made and Edited by T. H. White* (London: Jonathan Cape).