
In this book Robinson argues, forcefully, exhaustively, and magisterially, that Castilian representations of the Passion in the first half of the fifteenth century centered less on the somatic details of Jesus’ suffering and torment and more on an abstract understanding of the significance of his sacrifice. Castilians’ experience of the Passion in liturgical and devotional settings differed from that of their counterparts elsewhere in Latin Christendom because in Castile, the audience of such representations often included Jews, Muslims, and recent converts to Christianity for whom the strong emphasis on Christ’s humanity typical of Western representations of the Passion was problematic, if not offensive. According to Robinson, the culture of the Passion in Castile was very largely determined by the missionizing, polemic nature of Christianity in Castile, often engaged in religious polemics with Jews and Muslims which facilitated the exchange of ideas about revelation and the nature of the relationship between human and divine. In order to make Christianity more appealing to Jews and Muslims (or to newer Christians who required a little extra convincing), Castilian churchmen made Christianity look a bit more like Islam and Judaism.

Robinson’s thesis is very much in line with current thinking about medieval Castilian culture in general. Historians and Literary scholars have long noted Castile’s exceptionality in medieval Europe for the fact of the centuries-long military and diplomatic engagement with Andalusi Muslim polities and cultural production. Robinson’s intervention is the first major study to make similar arguments for Castilian devotional culture.

In chapter 1, “The life of Christ from polemic to devotion: text and images” (31-110), Robinson studies an (unedited) Castilian translation of a *Vita Christi* by the Valencian friar Françesc Eiximenis (ca. 1330-1409) which circulated widely in Castile in various secondary rescensions and interpretations. She argues that Eiximenis’s representation of the Passion focused far more on establishing the abstract ‘truth’ of the Passion than on the physical details of Christ’s suffering. According to her, Eiximenis’s goal was to help his audience, which included numbers of Jews, Muslims, and new converts to Christianity, to comprehend the magnitude and meaning of Christ’s suffering, rather than imagine themselves undergoing the physical tortures and emotional depredations that Christ endured. Robinson then maps the concepts in Eiximenis’s text onto specific features of Gallardo’s iconography in the *Retablo de Ciudad Rodrigo*.

Chapter 2, “Christ Crucified” (111-154), focuses on how visual representations of Christ on the cross focus on the internal state of the viewer, and attempt to lead the viewer away from meditating on Christ’s physical pain and toward a more mystical experience of Christ’s union with God. Robinson argues that Eiximenis and his predecessor Ramon Llull (ca. 1232-ca.1315) wrote texts influenced both by Andalusian
mystics and Jewish Kabbalists that focused on the ecstatic union of the devout with God. These texts, she argues, mediated through secondary formats such as sermon manuals and handbooks, would have predisposed Castilians in liturgical and devotional practice to imagine an internal Passion that, in Robinson’s words, “converts the pain experienced by both the devotee and Christ into the tears and sighs of the lovelorn” (133).

The focus shifts to representations of the Virgin Mary in chapter 3, “Virgo Triumphans” (155-240). Here Robinson explains that in Castilian sources the Virgin is portrayed as the gatekeeper to salvation in Christ, and more importantly for her argument as a mediator of conversion to Christ. She bases her observations on Eiximenis’s Vita Christi and other texts that circulated in late medieval Castile, applying these textual concepts to a visual analysis of the Chapel of Saint Jerome at the convent of La Concepción Francisca in Toledo. Robinson stresses that in Castilian devotional traditions, the Virgin is often portrayed as performing miracles of conversion, an aspect also important to reading how she is represented in the Passion. In particular, Robinson argues convincingly that the Virgin in Eiximenis and in the images in the Chapel of Saint Jerome bears “a striking resemblance to the Qur’anic Maryam” (162), which supports her overall argument that Castile’s devotional culture was deeply influenced by interreligious dialogue and polemic.

In chapter four, “Virgo Patiens” (241-316), Robinson’s analysis of the sculptures in cloister of the Marian shrine and Hieronymite convent of Santa María de Guadalupe and the broader tradition of Castilian Pietàs reveals that the late fifteenth century signaled a shift in narrations of the Passion from allegorical to descriptive, proto-realist approaches. In this narrative, the Virgin “stands between the devotee (as well as the potential convert) and the somatic particulars of her son’s gruesome death” (245). The Virgin does this by offering the devout mystical and meditative alternatives to the direct experience of Christ’s suffering: ways not “to share, but rather . . . to transcend her son’s bodily agony” (251). Robinson argues that the Pietà was central to Castilians’ experience of the Passion; so much so that it “could stand in for the entire Passion” (266), once again demonstrating the exceptional emphasis on role of the Virgin in Castilian Passions.

The fifth and final chapter, “Images and Devotions: Devotional images?” (317-72) restates the book’s central thesis that Castilian representations of the Passion in the first half of the fifteenth century centered less on the somatic details of Jesus’ suffering and torment and more on understanding of the significance of his sacrifice. In this chapter Robinson surveys several devotional texts produced in the late fifteenth century. She notes a gradual shift toward the more graphic, visual models of experiencing the Passion that prevailed in France and the Low Countries during this period. However, Robinson repeats that these more experiential approaches are still tempered by excurses and prayers that emphasized the more meditative and cerebral strategies described in the preceding chapters. Even in its most “Northern” inflections, the Castilian Passion is still one that speaks to a different religious culture, one with its roots in missionizing, polemic, and conversion.

Robinson marshals a staggering array of sources both plastic and textual. Her arguments, punctuated by creative and original insights, overturn much of the previous studies of record in art history, religious studies, and literary studies. Her study is both extensive and intensive: she marshals a staggering array of sources both plastic and textual. Her arguments, punctuated by creative and original insights, overturn much of
the previous studies of record in art history, religious studies, and literary studies. *Imagining the Passion* is a remarkable book not just for the encyclopedic collection of primary sources with which Robinson deals, or for the exhaustive and insightful analyses within it, but also for her candor in writing an ambitious and ultimately important study that rests comfortably on speculation, circumstantial evidence, and the occasional leap of faith.

The book is long, weighing in at 384 large format pages exclusive of notes and bibliography. Her arguments are extensive, intensive, and exhaustive. This is especially important, because these arguments are sometimes predicated on assumptions that push the interpretative envelope, as she herself points out. She does not hesitate to rely on concepts that are sometimes seen as risky, such as the putative oral transmission of theological concepts from Muslims to Christians. For example, she asserts, despite the lack of ‘hard evidence,’ that certain concepts characteristic of Andalusi Shadhili mysticism made their way into Castilian Christian devotional practice (152). Her insistence that common sense should trump methodological orthodoxies is refreshing. When discussing how Islamic characterizations of the Virgin in a mudéjar (Spanish Muslim living under Christian rule) text might have been transmitted to Christians, she writes, reminding the reader that speculation is not a crime, that “such a scenario . . . is perfectly possible” (165).

Elsewhere she relies on a bit of supposition to more powerfully link textual traditions to their expression in iconography. “It would almost appear that one of the ubiquitous statues of the Virgin, perhaps seated on a throne with her son on her lap or standing regally with the child in her arms (and, in either case, with a crown on her head), had literally come to life. And this is probably not far from the truth” (231). Such methodological liberties would be more problematic if her sample were smaller and her analyses less penetrating, but the evidence she presents is sufficient to overpower such objections.

It is truly refreshing to hear a scholar of Robinson’s stature take this approach, inviting the reader to continue the process and expand upon or overturn her findings. She does not claim to have the final word on the matter, but is respectful, in ways go far beyond formulaic disclaimers of academic modesty, of the fact that the academic discussion is a long, complex, collaborative process in which she plays only one part. This very authentic humility goes a long way, in my opinion, toward inoculating her against accusations of those who might take exception.

In sum, *Imagining the Passion* is an important study of the exceptionality of Castilian religious culture in the fifteenth century that teaches us important lessons about how religious traditions are mutually influential, and how religious ideas pass from text to visual representation in the context of constantly changing devotional practices and as practiced by real people.

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