Manly hearts in female bodies. Representing holy Dominican women in Castile in medieval times

Diana Lucía Gómez-Chacón
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Despite the scarcity of representations of medieval Dominican nuns and mulieres religiosae, these images offer valuable information about the origins and development of the cult of certain female Dominican saints, the devotions and spiritual concerns of their patrons and main promoters, and the role played by the female branch of the Order of Friars Preachers in its reform throughout the 15th century. The present paper examines the iconography of three Dominican holy women: saint Catherine of Siena, saint Margaret of Hungary, and Blessed Helen of Veszprém. New possible interpretations and lines of research will be suggested through the study of the spiritual virilization of these holy women who ended up assuming masculine virtues and bearing manly hearts.

Keywords: 15th century, Castile, Order of Friars Preachers, Gender Studies, Iconography

Des cœurs d’hommes dans des corps de femmes. Représentation des saintes et religieuses dominicaines en Castille à l’époque médiévale

Malgré la rareté des représentations de moniales dominicaines médiévales et de mulieres religiosae, ces images offrent des informations précieuses sur les origines et le développement du culte de certaines saintes dominicaines, les dévotions et les préoccupations spirituelles de leurs patrons et principaux promoteurs, et le rôle joué par la branche féminine

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de l’ordre des frères prêcheurs dans sa réforme tout au long du xve siècle.
Le présent article examine l’iconographie de trois saintes dominicaines : sainte Catherine de Sienne, sainte Marguerite de Hongrie et la bienheureuse Hélène de Veszprém. De nouvelles interprétations possibles et des lignes de recherche seront suggérées à travers l’étude de la virilisation spirituelle de ces saintes femmes qui ont fini par assumer des vertus masculines et porter des cœurs d’hommes.

**Mots-clés : xve siècle, Castille, Ordre des Frères Prêcheurs, Études de genre, Iconographie**

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Corazones de hombre en cuerpos de mujer. Representaciones de santas y religiosas dominicas en Castilla en época medieval

A pesar de la escasez de representaciones de monjas y mulieres religiosae medievales, estas imágenes ofrecen una valiosa información sobre los orígenes y el desarrollo del culto a ciertos santas dominicas, las devociones e inquietudes espirituales de sus mecenas y principales promotores, y el papel desempeñado por la rama femenina de la Orden de Predicadores en su reforma a lo largo del siglo xv. Este artículo examina la iconografía de tres santas dominicas: Santa Catalina de Siena, Santa Margarita de Hungría y la beata Elena de Vezsprém. Se sugerirán nuevas posibles interpretaciones y líneas de investigación a través del estudio de la virilización espiritual de estas santas que llegaron a asumir virtudes masculinas y a llevar corazones de hombre.

**Palabras clave: siglo xv, Castilla, Orden de Frailes Predicadores, estudios de género, iconografía**

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In 2000 Jacques Le Goff, when asked about the role played by Christia-nism in women’s liberation, declared that in medieval times, women had used mysticism and the exercise of faith as instruments of power1. Following Le Goff’s statement, in this paper I will analyse the empowerment of certain holy Dominican women, both saints and prioreses, who became role models for queens, nuns and widows, as well as the complex ideological and spiritual processes behind the creation of their cult and iconography in Castile between the 13th and 15th centuries.

New possible interpretations and lines of research will be suggested through the study of the spiritual virilization of holy women who ended up assuming manly virtues, the representations of Dominican nuns as bearers

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1 Le Goff, 2000, p. 35.
of Christ’s stigmata, and the iconographic contaminations among holy Dominican women in medieval times that have led to the misinterpretation and undervaluation of certain pieces.

**Manly and fearless hearts**

For many, the scriptural dictum (I Cor. i.xxvii) that God has chosen the weak things of the earth to shame the strong, which is often cited in female hagiographies, invalidates St Paul’s ban on female preaching and teaching. Saint Catherine of Siena, who was considered a living holy woman, a *santa viva*[^2], declared that the Lord had told her that He decided to send women, «unknowing, weak and fragile by nature» but rich in His divine wisdom, «to confound their [powerful men’s] pride and rashness»[^3]. Indeed, Saint Catherine of Siena herself would have followed Christ’s teachings. She embraced the Sienese community of the *mantellate*, associated with the Dominican Order. She attracted a group of close companions (lay men and women, nuns, monks, and priests), who became her *famiglia* and who, in turn, called her *mamma*[^4].

According to her *Legenda maior* (1385-1395) Christ himself, in one of his many conversations with Catherine, told her: «I shall give you a mouth and wisdom which none will be able to resist»[^5]. After making her vow of virginity at the age of seven, Catherine became aware that her gender would always be an obstacle to her religious career[^6]. Therefore, she thought of imitating St Euphrosyne and pretending to be a man. Blessed Raymond of Capua, leading member, and master general of the Order of Preachers between 1380 and 1399, justifies this transgression of gender boundaries by emphasizing Catherine’s desire to join the friars in their salvific mission. Finally, in an attempt to put an end to this troubling episode of cross-dressing in Catherine’s life, St Dominic appeared to her in a dream vision and offered her his own habit[^7].

When Raymond of Capua became Saint Catherine’s confessor, she gradually became more involved in ecclesiastical matters[^8]. Saint Catherine of Siena is credited with having convinced her spiritual director of the need for spiritual reform within the order[^9]. Although Raymond of Capua in his

[^2]: Kienzle, Stevens, 2016, p. 130.
[^3]: Schaus, 2006, p. 54.
[^7]: Kienzle, 2012, p. 133.
[^8]: Muessig, 2012, p. 5.
[^9]: Winston-Allen, 2004, p. 82.
Legenda maior established the terms for Catherine’s reputation, Tommaso d’Antonio da Siena (c. 1315-1434), known as Caffarini, was mainly responsible for the broad dissemination of Saint Catherine of Siena’s reputation and writings. From the late 1390s, Caffarini transformed Venice into the centre of Catherinian devotion and called for her canonization. He collected Catherinian relics and copies of her writings to build a shrine dedicated to her in the reformed Dominican nunnery of Corpus Domini, which became the centre of Catherinian devotion in the Veneto, with a professional scriptorium for the production of manuscripts of Catherinian hagiography, Catherine’s writings, and other texts on the Order of Penance. Raymond of Capua refers to Catherine as a disciple (discípula) and imitator (imitatrix) of Christ. When Catherine hesitates before accepting her mission, Jesus tells her: «Am I not the one who created humankind and fashioned both sexes? Does it not depend on my own will where I shall pour out my grace? For me there is neither male nor female, neither common people nor nobles, because I can do all things equally». He goes on to announce that God will send «women, ignorant and fragile by nature» to proud, learned men to make them humble.

Saint Catherine of Siena invited women to act manfully and to cultivate a manly heart, which did not necessarily imply renouncing their female condition. She used the word virile («manly») to describe an ideal Christian behaviour and disposition. She often told both women and men not to be «effeminate» and to bear a courageous heart. Their manly heart would result from their spiritual union with Christ’s suffering on the Cross, with His Love and Grace. The main source of this fortitude was patience, a virtue to which she dedicates many pages of her nearly 400 letters, 114 of which were addressed to women. Saint Catherine, who was Pauline in her thinking, probably engaged in letter-writing as a modelling of herself on Saint Paul.


12 As Barbara Newman has pointed out, «for medieval women, living in a world where such authoritative teachings could not be opposed head-on, these gender strategies furnished alternatives to mainstream femininity, that is, to silence. Both strategies were deeply though differently rooted in the structure of Christian thought, yet oblique enough to avoid direct and obvious threats to male dominance. The first, preferred by men of the patristic era and lingering throughout the middle ages, can take its name from the sources: it is the model of the femina virilis or virago»: Newman, 1995, p. 3.


14 According to Saint Catherine of Siena, the main female example of that fortitude is the Virgin. The saint begins many of her letters with the words «Maria dolce». And together with the Virgin, she mentions Mary Magdalene as the main holy female role model: Sesé, 1993, pp. 637 and 646-647; Lahmjoki-Gardner, 2012, p. 117.

Left alone by her *famiglia*, Catherine experiences an intense dream vision in the autumn of 1376, and she feels she will die if she cannot write it down, so God teaches her how to write. However, in the *Legenda maior*, Raymond of Capua only indicates that God taught her how to read. It is Tommaso Caffarini who insists on the saint’s complete literacy. As Jeffrey Hamburger has pointed out, in female Dominican contexts, the act of writing was seen as a mechanical, laborious process, «a gathering (collection) of voices from their several places in memory»16. For Dominican nuns, writing became a labour of obedience. However, as Suzanne Noffke has indicated, «still, no document in her [Saint Catherine of Siena] own hand has come down to us. Instead, she used various individuals as her scribes, dictating sometimes even two of three different letters simultaneously to as many persons. At first she relied most heavily on a few of her female companions for the task»17.

William Flete, a close friend of the *mantellata*, compares Saint Catherine of Siena to Saint Paul. He considers her «a disciple of Paul» due to her peripatetic ministry, her eloquent speaking, and her call to lead people to salvation. Flete even calls Catherine «Paula». She becomes the counterpart of Saint Paul due to her role as letter writer and preacher: «In her letters and writings, in her knowledge and teaching, she was not a Paul but a Paula: a teacher of teachers, a pastor of pastors, an abyss of wisdom [...] and untiring preacher of truth»18.

In Queen Beatrice of Portugal’s tomb, Saint Catherine of Siena is represented next to Saint Paul, the apostle who refused to permit women to speak in the churches of Asia Minor. However, he became one of Saint Catherine’s favourite role models, and in her letter 218, addressed to Gregory XI, she refers to him as «that sweet herald»19. After John I of Castile’s death, his widow, Queen Beatrice of Portugal retired to Toro (Zamora), spending her last days in the Dominican convent of Sancti Spiritus. Although she did not take any vows, she adopted an austere way of life, residing in a chamber especially built for her, where she lived surrounded by a small court of ladies. After her death (c. 1420), her body was placed in an alabaster sepulchre located in the nun’s choir, where it remains (Fig. 1).

The Queen’s sepulchre lies above ten voracious lions which alternate with Portuguese coats of arms. On the lid of the tomb, the queen’s effigy, which holds an open book and a rosary in her hands, is being crowned by two angels. The east and west sides of the sepulchre are ornamented with the Crucifixion and the Annunciation. On the south side we find, once again, the Queen’s effigy dressed, on this occasion, in the Dominican habit in which she was buried. At her feet, we see an interesting representation of Saint Gil

18 Muessig, 2012, pp. 204-205.
of Santarem, while the north side of the sepulchre is decorated with five male members of the Order of Preachers, flanked by Saint Peter and Saint Paul. A gallery of illustrious men to which Saint Catherine of Siena, whose iconographical and religious relevance will be further analysed, has been added. Moreover, the singular proximity of Saint Catherine of Siena to Saint Paul has not been conveniently highlighted.

Fig. 1. — Tomb of Queen Beatriz de Portugal, Sancti Spiritus, Toro (Zamora).
Photo by the author.

The earliest sermon dedicated to Saint Catherine of Siena is attributed to William Flete. This text, probably conceived to be read rather than preached, was written in 1382, two years after Catherine’s death. Flete identifies Catherine as the virginal spouse of Christ and praises her devotional practices, primarily her fasting, her bodily mortifications, and prayer. Flete portrays Catherine as a *mediatrix* who assists Christ in his salvific mission and who bears his stigmas.20

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Saint Catherine of Siena, presented in her *Legenda maior* as the Dominican model of sanctity and preaching\(^{21}\), became a spiritual reference for all those Dominican nuns who refused to be constrained by their gender. Such was the case of Sister Constance of Castile, who refers to the Sienese saint in her *Book of Devotions*\(^{22}\).

**Masculine virtues for saintly women**

Constanza de Castilla († 1478), granddaughter of the deposed king Peter I of Castile (1350-1369) and Juana de Castro, is first documented in 1416 under the protection of Queen Catherine of Lancaster († 1418), her cousin, for whose soul she prays in her *Book of Devotions* (*Devocionario*), written between 1465 and 1478\(^{23}\). Although she likely tried at first to enter the Dominican convent of Santo Domingo el Real de Toledo, she ultimately moved to Santo Domingo el Real de Madrid. This decision, which caused a thirty-year-long legal battle against the Toledan convent, was probably motivated by both a family strategy and Sister Constanza’s desire to be near Catherine of Lancaster and her cousin’s son, king John II of Castile (1406-1454)\(^{24}\).

In 1416, probably soon after her arrival in Madrid, Constanza de Castilla was already documented as prioress of Santo Domingo el Real de Madrid\(^{25}\). She remained in that position for fifty years, a long period of time during which the Chapter’s decision-making power was likely reduced to a minimum, practically disappearing\(^{26}\). In 1444 she eliminated the figure of the prior, a position held since the foundation of the female branch of the Order of Saint Dominic by a Dominican friar, whose main responsibility was the *cura monialium*, the nuns’ spiritual health. Constanza and her sisters no longer needed a prior, as the prioress had obtained for them the licence to freely appoint their own confessors, as well as the convent’s estate manager. Although a prior was again elected in Santo Domingo el Real de Madrid

\(^{21}\) *Kienzle, Stevens, 2016*, p. 130.

\(^{22}\) *Huélamo San José, 1992*, pp. 144-147; *Huélamo San José, 1993*, pp. 133-140.


\(^{24}\) *Muñoz Fernández, 1995*, p. 127.


\(^{26}\) A similar situation took place during the priorates of other powerful nuns, such as Sisters Sol (1247, 1249, 1252, 1256 and 1263), Leocadia (1266, 1272, 1273, 1283, 1284, 1285 and 1287), Urraca Díaz (1294 and 1297), and Sister Úrraca Sánchez (1363): *Romero Fernández-Pacheco, 2007*, pp. 117, 120 and 121.
in 1474, only 10 years after the end of Constanza de Castilla’s priorate, his power was likely significantly diminished.  

The tombs of several Castilian Dominican priresses in the female branch of the Order of Preachers have been preserved, and their extraordinary simplicity reveals the exceptionality of Constanza’s sepulchre. For example, the choir of the convent of Santo Domingo el Real of Toledo houses the body of Teresa de Ayala, prioress between 1403 and 1424, who chose a humble tombstone as her funerary monument. The remains of Sister Leonor de Castilla, prioress of the convent of Sancti Spiritus in Toro, also rest under a tombstone in the nuns’ choir.

Constanza de Castilla also placed her tomb in the convent’s choir; however, in an apparent break with past practices, she did not opt for a simple tombstone but instead chose a monumental alabaster tomb, which was placed under an arcosolium. This decision, which may have been motivated by the prioress’s desire to leave an idealised image of herself, would serve as a model for the other nuns over the course of centuries. At the same time, the coat of arms of the Castilla lineage and her epitaph reminded their audience of Constanza’s royal ancestry (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. — Tomb of Constanza de Castilla, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid. © Museo Arqueológico Nacional.

28 «Doña Constanza lograría conformar una verdadera capilla funeraria dinástica para los Castilla, reivindicativa incluso de su propia ascendencia regia […] al tiempo que parece retomar la tradición leonesa-castellana en cuanto al papel desempeñado por infantas-prioras en la fundación, mantenimiento y cuidado de capillas regias ubicadas en sus monasterios y conventos. Estos y otros parámetros […] tuvieron asimismo que condicionar, necesariamente, el soberbio sepulcro de la propia priora doña Constanza, sin parangón en la Castilla del momento para una mujer de su condición»: Chao Castro, p. 107.
29 García Rey, 1930, pp. 693 and 710; Morales Cano, 2011, p. 356.
The idealized, recumbent statue of Constanza with her eyes closed, slightly larger than life, is mourned and guarded by two female praying figures without veils. Constanza is dressed in the Dominican habit and wears a rosary around her neck. She also holds a closed book (19.6 x 15 x 4.5 cm) in a chemise binding, which has been identified variously as the Order’s constitution and her own book of devotions. However, it could not be the latter because, as Ángela Franco Mata has indicated, Constanza’s book (11.7 x 11.3 cm) is much smaller than the one represented on her tomb. The tomb’s base is decorated with the coat of arms of the Castilla lineage, held by two angels and flanked by the allegory of four virtues (two on each side): Prudence, identified by the inscription beneath it; Faith, which carries a cross; Hope, which shows a yearning attitude, with the palm of her right hand raised, and Temperance, represented pouring water into wine.

Manuel Núñez Rodríguez has interpreted the inclusion of four virtues in the iconographic design of Constanza’s tomb as a panegyric to Sister Constanza’s moral perfection in her battle against death and as a summary of the spiritual aspirations of the Order of Preachers. However, these sculpted allegories may in fact relate to Constanza’s gender, as I will argue below.

In Castile, during the second half of the 15th century several monuments, mainly sepulchres, were decorated with these allegories. Representations of virtues were carved on the tombs of John II of Castile and his second wife, Isabel of Portugal, in the Charterhouse of Miraflores, outside Burgos (1489-1493); on the tomb of Álvaro de Luna, in the chapel of Santiago in Toledo cathedral (1489); and on the tomb of Alfonso Carrillo de Acuña, in the Magistral of Alcalá de Henares (1482-1489).

A comparative study between these sepulchres and that of Constanza de Castilla demonstrates, once more, the singularity of the prioress’s tomb, which was probably sculpted between 1464 and 1478, before the others. This once more highlights the pioneering nature of this monument, which would perfectly match the personality of Constanza de Castilla, who seems to have been a woman before her time.

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34 Carlos Miranda García has highlighted the singularity of this image: «siguiendo un modelo poco frecuente, como es representar la Virtud con los ojos muy abiertos, anhelantes, y mostrando la palma de su mano derecha hacia abajo». We find this same iconography in the sixteenth-century tombs of Martín García and María Rodríguez: Miranda García, 1989, p. 34 and footnote 6.
38 Miranda García, 1989, p. 32.
The royal sepulchre of Miraflores was conceived to contain the remains of both king John II and his second wife. Therefore, the virtues that decorate the sepulchre refer to both sovereigns as representatives of royal power, and not specifically to queen Isabel of Portugal. Regarding the tombs of Álvaro de Luna and Alfonso Carrillo de Acuña, it should be noted that both belong to men. As mentioned above, the sepulchre of Álvaro de Luna’s second wife, Juana Pimentel, located next to that of her husband, features a similar decorative layout, but on this occasion the virtues have been replaced by eight apostles. Therefore, the sepulchre of Constanza de Castilla was possibly one of the first female Castilian tombs decorated with virtues, an iconographic and literary theme that seems originally to have been mainly masculine. However, this aspect would have not posed a major problem to Sister Constanza when designing the iconographic features of her tomb. In fact, she may have been encouraged by the discourse of certain mid-fifteenth-century Castilian courtier who defended female virtue, in contrast to those who tried to spread a misogynistic message. Two of these “proto-feminist” treatises were written by Álvaro de Luna and Diego de Valera, who were clearly influenced by Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* (c. 1361), in which women are considered virtuous when behaving as men. This should come as no surprise as Saint Catherine of Siena, who Constanza de Castilla mentions in her *Book of Devotions*, recommended in several letters that her recipients should always aspire to the same ideals of love for God and virtues as men.

In his *Libro de las claras e virtuosas mugeres* (1446) Álvaro de Luna defends equality between men and women: “as for virtue and the goal for which they are raised, men as well as women, both are equal.” The *Conde table* of Castile says that he wrote this because “it seemed inhuman that so many works of virtue and examples of kindness found in the female lineage were silenced and buried in the darkness of oblivion.” Diego de Valera,

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40 “Los denigradores del sexo femenino contaban con el respaldo del magisterio teológico; entre los Padres de la Iglesia, figuras como Ambrosio y Jerónimo habían considerado que todas las virtudes asociadas con la salvación…eran característicamente masculinas”, Pampín Barral, 2005, p. 267.
41 «En el debate que se estaba produciendo en la corte de Juan II de Castilla el concepto de la mujer incluía la virtud entre las categorías que la definían», Pampín Barral, 2005, p. 265.
44 Maier, 2002, p. 29.
46 Sesé, 1993, pp. 639 and 646.
47 «Quanto a la virtud e al fin porque son criados, así el varón como la muger, amos a dos son iguales», Álvaro de Luna, 1908, preámbulo III, p. 25; Álvaro de Luna, 2009, preámbulo III, p. 150.
48 “Inuman a cosa nos paresció de sofrir que tantas obras de virtud e enxemplos de bondad fallados en el linage de las mugeres fuesen callados e enterrados en las escuras tiniebras de
who dedicated his *Tratado en defensa de virtuosas mugeres* (c. 1444) to queen Mary of Aragon († 1445), the first wife of king John II of Castile\textsuperscript{49}, states that virtuosity is practiced «by both women and men»\textsuperscript{50}. Likewise, Brother Martín de Córdoba, in his *Jardín de nobles doncellas* (1467-1476), claims that the pain he feels because of prince Alphonse's premature death is eased when he contemplates his sister Isabel's flourishing virtues\textsuperscript{51}.

Constanza de Castilla has been compared to other late medieval-premodern religious female writers associated with the «feminine Humanism» movement who seem to have followed in Christine de Pizan’s († c. 1430) footsteps, such as Sister Teresa de Cartagena (1425-?), and particularly Sister Isabel de Villena († 1490)\textsuperscript{52}, with whom Constanza de Castilla had much in common. Both Teresa de Cartagena and Isabel de Villena shared family ties with the Trastamara dynasty, and therefore became the monarchs’ protégées. They are also considered to be two of the most important Hispanic female writers of the second half of the fifteenth century; both showed a special interest in artistic patronage and were responsible for the major building renovations at their respective convents\textsuperscript{53}.

Sister Constanza de Castilla, most likely due to a lack of space, was forced to choose just four of the seven virtues to decorate her tomb. *Faith* and *Hope* flank the Castile coat of arms, while *Prudence* and *Temperance* are relegated to the corners of the base of the tomb. In her *Book of Devotions*, Sister Constanza implores Christ: «Give me hope fulfilled in You so that I die confessing Your Faith»\textsuperscript{54}; and just a few lines later begs: «Oh, Holy Cross, for You I beg mercy from He who was crucified on You, so that He may give You to me as a shield between me and my enemies at the time of my death, when they will try to accuse my faults and take with them my soul to where there is no redemption»\textsuperscript{55}.

Due to their nature as cardinal virtues, *Prudence* and *Temperance* decorate the corners of the tomb instead of the front, which is reserved for theological virtues. In his *Doctrinal de príncipes* (1475-1476), Diego de Valera defines cardinal virtues «as the door or entrance for all the others»\textsuperscript{56}. Thus, Juan

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\item Diegode Valera, 1983, p. 49; Gómez Redondo, 2002, pp. 3220, 3222 and 3256; Bousmar, p. 33; Rodríguez Velasco, p. 28; Vargas Martínez, 2013, pp. 266 and 270-275.
\item «Por las mugeres como por los varones»: Valera, 1983, p. 53.
\item Vargas Martínez, 2016, pp. 158, 161 and 163.
\item «It was Villena in fact who transformed the Holy Trinity into the bright gem of late Gothic architecture that it is today»: Cantavella, 2011, p. 99.
\item «E me des esperança en ti cunplida por que yo muera confesando tu fe», Constanza de Castilla, 1998, p. 28.
\item «O cruz santa, por ti pido merçed a Aquel que en ti fue crucificado que te me dé a la ora de mi muerte por escudo entre mi e mis enemigos quando afincadamente acusarán mis culpas e querrán rebatar mi ánima por me levar consigo adonde no ay redempçión», Constanza de Castilla, p. 29.
\item «Porta o entrada para todas las otras», Pampín Barral, 2005, p. 267.
\end{itemize}
Rodríguez del Padrón draws on cardinal virtues when defending women. In his *Triunfo de las donas* (1439-1441), he claims that while women embody *Prudence* and *Temperance*, the two cardinal virtues that Constanza included in the decoration of her tomb, men embody capital vices such as greed and envy. Aristotle considered *Prudence* to be an intellectual virtue, obtained through study, so its presence on Sister Constanza’s sepulchre would present her as a wise and learned woman. In fact, the demand for female education was one of the main pillars of the *Querelle des femmes*. In her *Admiraçión operum Dey* (c. 1478), Teresa de Cartagena alludes to the expectations awoken among men by fifteenth-century female writers. On the other hand, during the second half of the fifteenth century, *Temperance*, fostered by mendicant orders, was intimately linked with *Observance*, as it represented the renunciation of earthly pleasures and the moderate use of speech.

Constanza de Castilla seems to have been a woman before her time, with devotional, intellectual, sociological, and political interests that had hitherto been reserved for men. Thanks to her status as a royal *protégée*, she occupied a privileged position in the convent, which allowed her to remain in her priory for fifty long years and to enjoy a freedom uncommon for a cloistered, contemplative nun. With the commission of her own tomb, originally located in the choir of the convent, a space reserved for nuns, Constanza de Castilla bequeathed an important and timeless message to her sisters in religion. Constanza is represented lying on her mortuary bed. She is shrouded in the Dominican habit in which she was probably buried, while the base of her tomb is decorated with the coat of arms of the Castilla family, to which she belonged, as well four virtues, an iconographical element generally reserved for a masculine domain. The presence of these four allegories transformed Constanza’s sepulchre into a statement of intent, as it asserted the virtue of women at a time when equality between men and women was a matter of debate in Castilian courtisan environments. Indeed, in her *Book of Devotions*, Constanza, instead of caring for the health of her sisters’ souls, shows special concern for the nuns’ virtues. She even implores Christ: «I beg you to send your grace to all of the nuns in this convent, and to increase their virtues.» After all,
virtues would equate them to men and would, therefore, make them wise, independent, and ultimately free to decide for themselves.

**Female bearers of Christ’s stigmata**

Thirteenth-century Dominican friars totally ignored female cults. Dominican nuns were not included in collective hagiographical works. The first written list that includes female Dominican saints is probably that of Laurentius Pignon, a friar from Burgundy whose *Catalogus fratum spectabilium ordinis fratum praedicatorum*, written between 1394 and 1412, comprises a *catalogus sanctarum*. Moreover, the female branch of the Order of Preachers was not included in its *arbre-ordo* or family tree until 1473. Indeed, Saint Catherine of Siena was the first woman whose canonization was clearly supported by the Order, especially by the Italian Observant movement⁶².

Catherine’s reception of her invisible stigmata in 1375 in the church of Santa Cristina in Pisa was the culmination of a life consecrated to penance and full of physical ecstasies and other mystical experiences⁶³. At the end of the Middle Ages, the *imitatio Christi* shaped the lives of men and women. The latter expressed their Christ-centred piety through ascetism and bodily mysticism. For women, ascetism became a redemptive mirror image, as penance spiritualized the physical nature of their existence⁶⁴.

In Dominican hagiography, stigmata became a specifically female religious status, whereas in the Order of Saint Francis, stigmata were reserved for their founder alone⁶⁵. It was Pius II who designed Catherine of Siena’s image of sanctity through his sermon preached at her canonization mass, and through the bull of canonization he sent to the bishops of the Church. In the third part of the sermon, Catherine’s austerity is compared to that of the Desert Fathers (whose lives would have been familiar to Catherine) and the Indian brahmins⁶⁶. Catherine liberated herself from the normal sexuality of the body, becoming an almost androgynous symbol of holiness. It is possible that in following the tradition of these desert penitents, Catherine came to be viewed, as many of them were, as an honorary man⁶⁷. However, Pius II does not mention Catherine’s stigmatization⁶⁸.

Caffarini calls stigmata the marks left on Catherine’s body by the flagella, but he also makes constant reference to Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In

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⁶² Deák, 2009, pp. 103-104.
⁶⁴ Lahmijoki-Gardner, 2012, pp. 120-121.
⁶⁷ Lacey, 1999, p. 333
chapter 6, Paul declares: «I bear the marks of Christ on my own body (\textit{Ego stigmata Christi Ihesu in corpore meo porto})». According to Caffarini, Saint Paul would have become himself a 	extit{signa et stigmata} because of his choice to suffer for Christ, just like Catherine of Siena\textsuperscript{69}. This new Paula found her own authority in this image of herself in Christ and Christ in herself\textsuperscript{70}.

In Beatrice of Portugal’s tomb, Saint Catherine of Siena appears contemplating the small crucifix sculpted next to her (Fig. 3). The scene here represented is, without doubt, the saint’s stigmatisation, narrated by her spiritual director and confessor Blessed Raymond of Capua in his \textit{Legenda maior}\textsuperscript{71}. Of special interest for this paper is the \textit{Processo castellano}, the name given to the first attempt to canonise Saint Catherine of Siena, which took place between 1411 and 1416, a period that coincides with queen Beatrice of Portugal’s spiritual retirement in Toro and Sister Leonor of Castilla’s priorate\textsuperscript{72}.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig_3.jpg}
\caption{Tomb of Queen Beatriz de Portugal, Sancti Spiritus, Toro (Zamora): Stigmatization of Saint Catherine of Siena.}
\end{figure}
\begin{flushright}
\textit{Photo by the author.}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{69} Tylus, 2013, pp. 303-304.
\textsuperscript{70} Lacey, 1999, p. 330
\textsuperscript{71} Raimundo de Capua, 2011, pp. 182-183.
Caffarini managed to institutionalise the Third Order of Penitence of Saint Dominic, to which Saint Catherine of Siena belonged, and to whose spirituality queen Beatrice of Portugal might have felt close. We must not forget that certain medieval Portuguese kings, such as Ferdinand I of Portugal, queen Beatrice’s father, did indeed profess a Third Order\textsuperscript{73}. 

Blessed Raymond of Capua’s \textit{Legenda maior} made Saint Catherine of Siena a true symbol of Dominican penitential life aimed at both widows and young ladies. The Sienese saint’s charisma and her disciplined penitential vocation permitted the transformation of the hitherto isolated communities of penitent widows, devotees of Saint Dominic, into a proper religious order, a way of life quite similar to the one chosen by Beatrice of Portugal at the end of her days\textsuperscript{74}. 

The presence of Saint Catherine of Siena in queen Beatrice of Portugal’s tomb not only proves the devotion that the Province of Spain already had for the Dominican saint at the beginning of the fifteenth century, but also indicates the knowledge that Castilian Dominican friars and nuns had of some of the major episodes in the Sienese saint’s life: her stigmatisation\textsuperscript{75}. 

César Olivera Serrano has already pointed out the support that queen Beatrice of Portugal herself had given to the observant movement. Her reformist patronage was especially evident in the villages under her jurisdiction, such as Valladolid or Toro, in which the deliberate promotion of the spiritual reform of the mendicant orders sometimes involved a clear desire to preserve the memory of the monarchs. Both these aspects are present in the iconographic programme of Beatriz of Portugal’s sepulchre and clearly show the intentionality of the ideologists behind the tomb\textsuperscript{76}.

To date, scholars such as Luis Suárez Fernández, César Olivera Serrano and Teresa Sedano Martín have claimed that the queen’s sepulchre must have been commissioned by someone close to her, such as Miguel Rodríguez de Molina, Cardinal Albornoz, king John II of Castile, bishop John Vázquez de Cepeda, or Brother García of Castromuño. However, I believe the queen might have had a more active role in the design of her own sepulchre. The queen’s tomb could have been conceived as a personal enterprise, a testament in stone. This, however, would not have enabled a member of the Order of Preachers, not necessarily a friar, to be closely involved in its design\textsuperscript{77}.

As mentioned above, Beatrice of Portugal’s stay at the Monastery of Sancti Spiritus of Toro coincided with Sister Leonor de Castilla’s priorate. In 1393, after her husband’s death, Leonor professed as a Dominican nun in the Monastery of Sancti Spiritus in Benavente and was transferred a few

\textsuperscript{73} Fernandes, 2009, pp. 23, 25-26 and 84; Gomes, 2009, pp. 118-119 and 214. 


\textsuperscript{75} Hamburger, Signori, 2013, pp. 7 and 11. 


\textsuperscript{77} Olivera Serrano, 2005, p. 392-393, footnote 98; Sedano Martín, 2013, pp. 121-122.
years later to the Monastery of Sancti Spiritus in Toro, where she was elected prioress. We also know that in 1426 she was still head of the monastery. Leonor de Castilla's transfer was motivated not only by the love that the Castilian monarchs felt for her, but also by her spiritual rigour. Sister Leonor's observance was also praised by her own stepsister, Leonor de Alburquerque. According to Ferdinand of Antequera's wife, Sister Leonor's observance together with her continuous prayers for the monarchs' souls, made the Monastery of Sancti Spiritus of Toro a religious foundation worthy of the Crown's support and protection.

The nineteenth-century Spanish writer José María Quadrado referred to Sister Leonor de Castilla as the reformer of the Monastery of Sancti Spiritus in Toro. In fact, during her priorate the Dominican convent went through a major reform process, as well as a deep spiritual revitalisation, just like the one promoted by Sister Chiara Gambacorta between 1395 and 1419 in the Dominican convent of Saint Dominic of Pisa, whose role model was, once again, Saint Catherine of Siena herself.

In the Castilian convent, the spiritual reform would have also been supported by Beatrice of Portugal, a defender of the Observance movement, who decided to leave a testimony of this flourishing spiritual movement in her own sepulchre. For the execution of its iconographic program, the queen might have counted on the orientation of her prioress, who was also buried in the nuns’ choir, under her sisters’ feet, in an absolute display of austerity.

We find another representation of Saint Catherine of Siena in the main portal of the church of the Dominican monastery of Saint Thomas of Ávila (1482-1493), opposite Saint Catherine of Alexandria. The mantellata would also have been represented in the missing altarpiece of the Holy Cave in the former Dominican monastery of Santa Cruz la Real in Segovia, which decorates the background of an anonymous early seventeenth-century painting. All that is left of this altarpiece is Berruguete’s Christ.

We find more Castilian late medieval representations of Dominican holy women in the façade of the former Dominican church of Saint Paul of Valladolid, built at the end of the fifteenth century, which includes several female saints, such as Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Margaret of Antioch that flank the main portal, and whose Dominican namesakes, the aforementioned mantellata and Saint Margaret of Hungary, would have been represented in one of the archivolts, next to two other Dominican nuns. However, their iconographic identification merits further research.

Given the early attitude of the Order towards the patronage of female cults, it seems exceptional that the Master of the Order, a distinguished

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79 Quadrado, 1861, p. 452, footnote 1; Roberts, 2008, p. 9.
80 Deák, 2009, p. 108.
theologian, would commission the *vita* of Margaret of Hungary. Around 1340, the Hungarian royal family played an important role in reviving the process, of which they were probably the main promoters.81

The Dominican Order, the Hungarian province and the royal family coordinated their efforts to achieve their ends, which included the creation of a new *vita*, since the old one was somewhat antiquated and did not contain all the new material, especially the miracles compiled in 1276. The new *vita* met the official requirements for canonisation, and adapted Margaret’s life to the current, mystical ideal of holiness, attributing to her experiences that she had never had, such as levitation. The sovereigns of Hungary tried to achieve the desired canonisation in 1340, when the royal couple commissioned the saint’s *Legenda maior*, which was unknown in Hungary until recent times, and again in 1379, under Urban VI, when queen Elisabeth asked the pontiff to retry the case. However, despite all their efforts, Margaret of Hungary was not canonised until 1943.82

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81 Deák, 2009, p. 110.

82 Deák, 2009, pp. 111-112.
Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Margaret of Hungary are also represented next to each other in an early sixteenth-century painting by Juan de Borgoña preserved in the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid (Fig. 4). On this occasion, Saint Margaret of Hungary is the one bearing the stigmas. Lilies sprout from the wounds on her feet and hands. Despite the scarce and rare late medieval representations of Saint Margaret of Hungary, whose iconography underwent further development in Castile from the early sixteenth century, surprisingly, we find a similar, and early, representation of a Dominican female saint in a diptych-reliquary preserved in the monastery of Las Huelgas.

Hungarian memories

Since 2015, a thirteenth-century diptych-reliquary previously located in the sixteenth-century altarpiece-baldachin or cabinet-reliquary of the nuns’ choir has been exhibited in the Labor Room of the monastery of Las Huelgas in Burgos (Fig. 5). The diptych-reliquary consists of two wooden panels, lined with red silk and decorated with two miniatures. It presents a clear Dominican iconography. The left panel is decorated with Saint Ursula, Saint Peter Martyr and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, and the right panel shows the images of Saint Dominic, the Virgin and Child, and a Dominican nun, identified by the inscription above her head as Saint Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine. The three saints are flanked by two anonymous kneeling figures: a Dominican friar and a Dominican nun.

Fig. 5. — Diptych-reliquary of Saint Ursula, Santa María la Real de las Huelgas, Burgos. © Patrimonio Nacional.
I would like to highlight the singularity of the Dominican nun identified as Saint Helen of Constantinople. Like Saint Catherine of Siena, she bears the stigmata, but her wounds are neither invisible nor luminous, as a white flower, probably a lily, grows out of the wound on her right hand. Between 1414 and 1418, Caffarini wrote his *Libellus de Supplemento*. In an attempt to defend the luminous nature of the stigmata of Saint Catherine of Siena, Caffarini sought to demonstrate the existence of a relatively wide variety of stigmatizations, a subject that he develops in his *Tractatus de stigmatibus*, dated around 1412 and included in his *Libellus*. To this end, he recovered not only the story of Saint Francis of Assisi, but also the lives of other saints and blessed who had been equally rewarded with the stigmas.83

Moved by the desire to obtain more information on the stigmatization of Margaret of Hungary, in 1419 Caffarini contacted the provincial prior of Hungary, Brother Gregory, who told him that it was not Margaret of Hungary who received the stigmata, but her *magistra*, Blessed Helen. According to a *vita* written at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Blessed Helen had been rewarded with the stigmata in 1237. The first wound appeared on her right hand the night before the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, and from this grew a lily: «In cicatrice manus dextrae crevit filum aureum et crines et filum aurem cum tortura extendebatur in longum», an iconography that sometimes, due to visual contamination, is assumed to be Blessed Helen’s disciple, Saint Margaret of Hungary. The lilies produced by Blessed Helen’s stigmas were carefully cut and collected by the nuns of the Hungarian convent of Veszprém.84

The first versions of Blessed Helen’s *vita* date from between 1241 and 1272. The little-known cult of the Dominican nun did not begin to spread through Hungary at the time of her death, but around the time her *vita* was written down by the religious community of the Dominican convent of Saint Catherine of Veszprém. Therefore, the presence of this Dominican nun in the diptych-reliquary of Las Huelgas, added to the fact that she is identified as «Saint Helen» despite not having been canonized, suggests that it might be an object from Hungary, more specifically, from one of the convents associated with the memory of this nun: the aforementioned convent of Saint Catherine of Veszprém or that of Our Lady of the Island of Hares in the former Buda (Budapest), which was built between 1246 and 1253 by order of king Bela IV and his wife, Maria Laskaris, for their daughter, the future Saint Margaret of Hungary and over seventy nuns who belonged to the aristocratic elite.85


But, at this point, the key question is: how did this piece arrive in Castile? In this regard, I would like to point out that the chronology of the piece, dated to the end of the thirteenth century, coincides with the reigns of Alphonse X (1252-1294), Sancho IV (1284-1295) and Ferdinand IV (1295-1312). However, these kings do not seem to have had a direct connection with Hungary, and this makes me think of Violante of Aragon, daughter of James I of Aragon and Violante of Hungary, and wife of king Alphonse X the Wise, as a possible donor of this Hungarian diptych-reliquary to the monastery of Las Huelgas. Moreover, we must not forget that her mother, Violante of Hungary, was the sister of king Bela IV, and therefore, the aunt of Saint Margaret of Hungary.

Conclusions

In conclusion, despite the few iconographic examples of late medieval saintly Dominican women preserved in Castile, these representations offer valuable information about the spread of the cult of female Dominican saints in these realms, the devotion and spiritual concerns of their patrons, and the role played by the female branch of the Order of Preachers in its reform.

Saint Catherine of Siena transgressed the gender borders of social space and moved far beyond the ordinary sphere of womankind in her world. Catherine’s emergence as a saint should be considered a consequence of the «feminized» religious culture of the late Middle Ages.

Saint Catherine of Siena’s representation in the sepulchre of queen Beatrice of Portugal, in the Dominican convent of Sancti Spiritus in Toro, one of the oldest preserved in Castile, not only proves the in-depth knowledge that the members of the Province of Spain already had of her life and charisma at the beginning of the fifteenth century, but also the reformist patronage of queen Beatrice and the convent’s prioress, Sister Leonor. Both women would have conceived the queen’s sepulchre as an ideological instrument in defence not only of the original charisma of the Order of Preachers and its important apostolic mission, but also of the importance of the order’s female branch as the true trustee and heir of Saint Dominic of Guzman’s legacy in times of spiritual crisis.

Saint Catherine of Siena quickly became a spiritual role model for all those female Dominicans that rejected gender limitations and impositions, such as Sister Constance of Castile. The iconography of her tomb shows Sister Constanza as a Dominican prioress strongly committed to the defence of female virtue, at a time when gender equality sparked debate. Constanza’s sepulchre could be defined as an artistic expression of the so-called Querelle

des femmes, which has been described as «the vehicle for most early feminist thinkings»⁸⁸. It was carried on mostly by «the female members of a distinctively modern, literate class», to which not only Constanza de Castilla, but also her noble sisters, belonged. As María del Mar Graña Cid has claimed, it is important to mention the existence of a «feminine Humanism» at the end of the Middle Ages, an intellectual and political idea promoted by privileged and literate women who were active creators. Female monasteries and convents, including Santo Domingo el Real de Madrid, would have therefore offered an ideal architectural and spiritual environment for the establishment and development of this new intellectual trend, which continued into the Renaissance.

Finally, the singular representation of Blessed Helen of Veszprém in the diptych-reliquary of the monastery of Las Huelgas proves the importance of always paying special attention to the iconographic contaminations present in some medieval representations of Dominican female saints, which may lead to misinterpretations. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the image is always needed to determine the correct identification of the saint and, consequently, an accurate assessment of the analysed object or foundation that will offer us new information and a better understanding of religious history and artistic patronage.

Regarding this diptych-reliquary, if my hypothesis is right, queen Violante of Aragon, enthroned with her Hungarian roots, may have wanted to donate such a personal devotional object to the monastery in which the remains of her dethroned first born, the infante Fernando de la Cerda, rest. In that case, as Rocío Sánchez Ameijeiras already pointed out, queen Violante of Aragon might have had a more direct and close relationship with the religious community of the monastery of Las Huelgas than scholars had hitherto thought⁸⁹.

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⁸⁸ Kelly, 1984, p. 66.


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