

The Spanish “Santa Catalina de Alejandría”  
The Many Lives of a Saint’s Life

*Edited by*

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## Preface

THE LEGENDARY STORY OF the young virgin martyr set in Alexandria in the fourth century CE has had a long and fascinating life in Spanish literature and art, and the story of its many and diverse manifestations has not been told. As I began to investigate the Spanish versions of the story I was surprised by the paucity of editions and studies. In the course of my exploration of the story of St. Catherine of Alexandria in other European languages I discovered a rich scholarly tradition and began to document differences in the way in which the narrative was transmitted and received in Spain. Fascinated by a beautiful Jesuit *tragicomedia* that I read in manuscript at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, I searched for other examples and located two plays and a long prose and a very long verse redaction of the story of St. Catherine. At the 37<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Michigan in 2002 I presented a paper entitled “Like a Rose Among Thorns: A Spanish Jesuit Play about St. Catherine of Alexandria,” in which I analyzed the *Tragicomedia* in the context of other plays that feature the imagery of the rose, a phenomenon unique to the Spanish tradition. I concluded that in Spain there are few extant medieval accounts of St. Catherine but that the story “fairly blooms” later than in other European traditions, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In a paper entitled “Spain is Different: The Untold Story of the *Translatio* of the *Passio* of St. Catherine of Alexandria,” presented at the Arizona Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies in 2004, I described prose and verse narratives as well as plays in support of my argument for the late blooming of the Rose of Alexandria in Spain. An expanded version of that paper was published in January of 2009 in *Translatio or the Transmission of Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Modes and Messages*.

Inspired by investigators and editors of English versions of the St. Catherine legend, and particularly by the efforts of Sherry L. Reames

to make many different kinds of texts available and accessible, I have compiled an anthology of Castilian versions of the story of the saint from the late Middle Ages to the twentieth century. The General Introduction considers the development of the genre of hagiography and traces the history of the legend of St. Catherine from Greek texts to Latin redactions and the vernacular ones derived from them. An account of the history of English, French, German, and Italian redactions precedes an introduction to manifestations of the saint's story in Spanish. The Anthology of Texts includes reading editions of manuscript and early printed *santorales*; an account of the saint featured in Alvaro de Luna's fifteenth-century *Libro de las claras e virtuosas mugeres*; summaries of two long narratives produced in the sixteenth-century, with excerpts from one of them; descriptions of three seventeenth-century plays and a transcription of the prologue and selected scenes from a particularly beautiful one; a selection of anonymous *romances* and poems about St. Catherine by canonical authors; and two female-authored texts, the *villancicos* to St. Catherine of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and a *cuadro religioso* by Emilia Pardo Bazán, along with a description of the latter's use of the saint's life in the novel *Dulce dueño*.

The story of the young woman who defies a pagan emperor's order to sacrifice to his gods, defeats fifty wise men in a public debate, and converts many pagans to Christianity belongs to the category of hagiographic narrative known as the virgin martyr legend. The different versions of her story, produced over the course of several centuries, illustrate the ways in which traditional narrative can be adapted to changing circumstances and retold for various purposes. Like her image in art, which is ubiquitous, the story of St. Catherine of Alexandria is colorful, dramatic, and compelling and has appeal for different kinds of audiences.

The search for St. Catherine in Spain was an excellent adventure that led to various libraries and museums and to many memorable conversations with librarians and other investigators. Visits to the library of El Escorial, the Biblioteca Nacional, and the Biblioteca Lázaro Galdiano yielded texts, and the director of the latter, don Juan Antonio Yeves, not only made manuscripts of *santorales*

available but also generously shared ideas and insights. A sabbatical leave granted by LSU in 1999 supported the beginning of the project and interactions with colleagues at conferences were important to its development. John Moore provided the link to the digital text project of the University of Valencia, and contacts made by my colleague Juan Barroso VIII at Nuestra Señora del Recuerdo, a Jesuit school in Madrid, were invaluable for investigating Jesuit drama and the aforementioned *Tragicomedia*. After I presented a paper on the afterlife of the *passio* in works of María de Zayas and Leonor López de Córdoba at a conference of the South-Central Modern Language Association in November of 2008, John Beusterien and Carmen Pereira-Muro referred me to a novel by Emilia Pardo Bazán, an example of St. Catherine's afterlife that I had not discovered. My colleague Dorota Heneghan has shared conversation and scholarly articles about the novel.

As I prepared the Anthology of Texts I was attentive to the extensive discussion about norms of transcription and editions that took place on the electronic list Mediber in the summer of 2008. I never intended to produce critical editions of the manuscript and early printed versions of the St. Catherine legend, but the discussion of regularization and modernization gave me pause. Like Andrew M. Beresford, who recently edited the legends of Thaïs and Pelagia, I am concerned about what he terms "the spectacular neglect into which Hispano-medieval hagiography has fallen" (129) and interested in presenting texts that are accessible to a wide range of readers, including scholars of the St. Catherine story in other language traditions, who may have basic reading skills in Spanish. Following the editorial advice of Thomas Lathrop, whose much-appreciated support has made the publication of this book possible, I have followed the much less conservative model of Antonio Sánchez Jiménez, editor of *El Sansón de Extremadura: Diego García de Paredes en la literatura española del siglo XVI*, also published by Juan de la Cuesta.

The book concludes with "Reading the St. Catherine Story," a survey of scholarly studies of the ways in which the legend may be read by different audiences. A Glossary provides modern Spanish and English translations of Old Spanish words that may be problematic for readers who do not have experience with medieval and Renaissance texts.