

“No hay quien vele a Alonso”: *Imitatio Mariae* and the Problem of Conversion in Leonor López de Córdoba’s *Memorias*

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The early fifteenth-century *Memorias* of Leonor López de Córdoba are often considered to be the first autobiography written in Spanish, and have also attracted the interest of critics as one of the earliest Peninsular texts to be authored by a woman (c. 1400–1415). In recent decades the text has been edited, translated, and repeatedly anthologized after coming to the attention of feminist historians as well as a wider audience of literary scholars. Dictated to a notary, the narrative describes how Leonor’s father, the nobleman Martín López, was executed by order of Enrique II for his unwavering allegiance to Pedro I of Castile, having made a last stand at a fortress in the town of Carmona.¹ Leonor then recounts how she and surviving family members, once so closely connected to the royal court, suffered for years as prisoners in the

1 Leonor’s narrative changes aspects of the history of the usurper Enrique of Trastámara’s siege of Carmona following the death of Pedro I. A less fanciful account can be found in Pero López de Ayala’s *Crónica de Enrique II*, Año sexto, Caps 1–2, in Cayetano Rosell (ed.), *Crónicas de los reyes de Castilla desde don Alfonso el Sabio, hasta los Católicos don Fernando y doña Isabel*, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 66, 68, 70, 3 vols (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, 1875–78), II, 8–9. Notably, she places the former king’s daughters at the fortress being protected by her father, although they had to take refuge in England and were not there at the siege. She also describes a dramatic encounter between her father and a French traitor named du Guesclin, who had infamously changed sides in the war. Here again the inclusion of the scene emphasizes her father’s loyalty to his king, but scholars have shown that du Guesclin was not in Seville when Martín López de Córdoba was being executed. For detailed discussion of such inconsistencies see P.E. Russell, *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal in the Time of Edward III and Richard II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 163–64. Leonor’s manipulation of historical facts has led to speculation over her intentions by numerous critics; a consensus has emerged that, at least in part, she recorded her *Memorias* as a means of promoting the material and political interests and prospects of her family. It remains unclear, however, whether they were written before or after 1408, when Leonor became a favourite at Catherine of Lancaster’s court; there is no mention of this period of her life in the text, which ends abruptly with the death of her eldest son Juan Fernández in 1400 (from the plague, as we will see). The granddaughter of Pedro I, Catherine was widowed in 1406 when Enrique III died unexpectedly. His brother, Fernando I of Aragon, seems to have become a powerful enemy of Leonor. For an overview of the author’s life see Gregory S. Hutcheson, “Leonor López de Córdoba (1362 or 1363–1412?/1430?)”, in *Castilian Writers 1200–1400*, ed. George D. Greenia and

shipyards of Seville, where her brother Lope and other siblings contracted the plague and died in chains. Leonor was released following the death of Enrique II (1379), and made her way to Córdoba. Thereafter she lived under the auspices of an aunt, María García Carrillo, who owned properties connected to an important convent and church that had been founded in honour of Leonor's great uncle, Alfonso XI.² The narrator recounts how she was joined by her impoverished husband, their children, and an adopted orphan who had survived an anti-Jewish uprising in Córdoba and been converted to Christianity, taking the name Alonso. Praying incessantly to the Virgin Mary in hopes of improving her lot, Leonor later experienced a miraculous vision, before another outbreak of plague drove her family out of the city.

A growing body of scholarship has shed considerable light on this previously little-known document. To date, most studies have centered on the historical context of the *Memorias* and the female perspective of their narrator. Reinaldo Ayerbe-Chaux, in his groundbreaking work, examines how López de Córdoba fictionalizes events surrounding the disastrous end of Pedro I's reign and its aftermath.³ Margarita Cabrera Sánchez analyses Leonor López de Córdoba's narrative more specifically in the context of her family's role in the history of late medieval Castile.⁴ At the same time, a number of feminist interpretations have pointed to the importance of this text in the history of women. Alan Deyermond was among the first to include López de Córdoba in his literary history, not only as one of Spain's earliest female authors—often ignored by other scholars of the day—but also as a writer of critical merit in her own right.⁵ María-Milagros Rivera Garretas has delved deeper, examining

Frank A. Domínguez, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 337 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), pp. 179–84.

2 Alfonso XI was born on the feast of Hipólito and the church in Córdoba was named after this saint, who the king believed also had favoured him in battle against the Moors; see A. de Castro (ed.), "Memorias de una dama del siglo XIV y XV (de 1363 á 1412). Doña Leonor López de Córdoba: comentadas ahora y proseguidas", *La España Moderna* 14.163 (julio 1902), 120–46 (141–42).

3 Reinaldo Ayerbe-Chaux, "Leonor López de Córdoba y sus ficciones históricas", in *Historias y ficciones: Coloquio sobre la literatura del siglo XV. Actas del Coloquio Internacional celebrado en Valencia los días 29, 30 y 31 de octubre de 1990*, ed. R. Beltrán, J.L. Canet, and J.L. Sirera (València: Universitat, 1990), pp. 17–23. A detailed historical study can be found in Kathleen Amanda Curry, "Las *Memorias* de Leonor López de Córdoba" (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 1988) <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/303670160?accountid=13042>>.

4 Margarita Cabrera Sánchez, "El destino de la nobleza petrista: La familia del maestre Martín López de Córdoba", *En la España Medieval* 24 (2001), 195–238.

5 Alan Deyermond, *A Literary History of Spain, 1: The Middle Ages* (London: Benn, 1971), pp. 154–55; "Spain's First Women Writers", in *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols*, ed. Beth Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 27–52.

the manner in which the *Memorias* represent domestic spheres in relation to public, political arenas, traditionally set apart as feminine versus masculine spaces.⁶ In anticipation of later work by critics like Amy Suelzer and Esther Gómez Sierra, Rivera Garretas shows how private experiences are politicized in ways that enable female agency and history-making in Leonor’s narrative.⁷ Louise Mirrer builds on these and other studies, suggesting that López de Córdoba fashions her own authoritative voice within the typically male realm of writing and employs feminine strategies of resistance against masculine ideologies, to the extent that the world of men is minimized or can even be seen as absent in the *Memorias*.⁸

Other scholars have related this feminist perspective to negative or in some cases hostile accounts of López de Córdoba’s influence on the queen of Castile. Following the events related in the narrative, it is clear that the author of the *Memorias* dramatically ascended and fell from power as a favourite or *privada* in the court of Catherine of Lancaster, who had married Enrique III in 1388. Significant allusions to and accounts of her rise and subsequent downfall can be found in three works composed during the first half of the fifteenth century: poems by Gómez Pérez Patiño compiled in the *Cancionero* (“Songbook”) of Juan Alfonso de Baena, the *Crónica del rey don Juan II* (“Chronicle of King Juan II”), and Fernán Pérez de Guzmán’s *Generaciones y semblanzas* (“Lineages and Sketches”).⁹ Drawing on these sources, Carmen Marimón Llorca and

6 María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, “Leonor López de Córdoba: la autorrepresentación”, in her *Textos y espacios de mujeres (Europa siglos IV–XV)* (Barcelona: Icaria, 1990), pp. 159–78.

7 Amy Suelzer, “The Intersection of Public and Private Life in Leonor López de Córdoba’s Autobiography”, *Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica* 9 (1993 = *Hispanic Literary Autobiography*), 36–46; Esther Gómez Sierra, “La experiencia femenina de la amargura como sustento de un discurso histórico alternativo: Leonor López de Córdoba y sus memorias”, in *La voz del silencio*, 1: *Fuentes directas para la historia de las mujeres (siglos VIII–XVIII)*, ed. Cristina Segura Graíño, Laya 9 (Madrid: Al-Mudayna, 1992), pp. 111–30.

8 Louise Mirrer, *Women, Jews, and Muslims in the Texts of Reconquest Castile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 147.

9 José María Azáqueta (ed.), *Cancionero de Juan Alfonso de Baena*, Clásicos Hispánicos 11.10, 3 vols (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1966), 111, 799–803; Juan de Mata Carriazo y Arroquia (ed.), *Crónica de Juan II de Castilla* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1982), p. 56; Fernán Pérez de Guzmán, *Generaciones y semblanzas*, ed. José Antonio Barrio Sánchez, Letras hispánicas 456 (Madrid: Cátedra, 1998), p. 156. Both poems from the *Cancionero* deal with Leonor’s banishment from the court after her fortunes and Catherine’s loyalties changed, as made clear in the rubrics; for a discussion of them see María Morrás, “La ambivalencia en la poesía de cancionero: algunos poemas en clave política”, in *Iberia cantat: estudios sobre poesía hispánica medieval*, ed. Juan Casas Rigall and Eva M^a Díaz Martínez, Lalia Series maior 15 (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade, 2002), pp. 335–70. The chronicle describes Leonor’s intimate relationship with the Queen prior to her fall: “hera muy

María del Pilar Rábade Obradó contextualize the *Memorias* as part of a growing feminine presence in Castilian politics—and backlash among contemporary male critics—that would culminate during the reign of Isabel I.¹⁰ The studies of Clara Estow and Gregory Hutcheson discuss Leonor's relationship to the queen, suggesting that this intimate friendship was viewed as scandalously inappropriate.¹¹

Apart from Leonor López de Córdoba's role in women's studies, scholars have illuminated other aspects of the cultural context in which the *Memorias* were written. Marcelino Amasuno, for example, considers what her story can tell us about the experience and consequences of the plague that spread through Castile at the close of the fourteenth century.¹² More recently, Frank Domínguez has focused on the centrality of popular spirituality in Leonor's reflections, and demonstrates how the *Memorias* evoke cultic practices at shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary.¹³ His study expands on the work of critics like Rivera Garretas, who argued that devotion to Mary is central to the autobiographical, female voice that emerges in the text. My purpose here is to consider a crucial element of the author's devotion to the Virgin that has yet to be fully explored. In particular, I shall explore Leonor's Marian religiosity in relation to her adoption of a boy named Alonso, whose infection by the plague is described towards the end of the *Memorias*.

privada de la Reyna, en tal manera que cosa en el mundo non fazia sin su consejo [...], tanto hera el amor que con ella tenía" ("she was a very close confidante of the Queen, so much that she did nothing in the world without her counsel [...], such was the love she had for her"). Pérez de Guzmán condemned Leonor as a "liviana e pobre muger" ("flighty and wretched woman").

- 10 Carmen Marimón Llorca, *Prosistas castellanas medievales* (Alicante: Caja de Ahorros Provincial de Alicante, 1990), pp. 81–102; María del Pilar Rábade Obradó, "Leonor López de Córdoba y Beatriz de Bobadilla: dos consejeras para dos reinas. Una aproximación comparativa", *e-Spania. Revue interdisciplinaire d'études hispaniques médiévales et modernes* 12 (décembre 2011 = *Conseil, conseillers et conseillères*, ed. Georges Martin), DOI: 10.4000/e-spania.20705.
- 11 Clara Estow, "Leonor López de Córdoba: Portrait of a Medieval Courtier", *Fifteenth Century Studies* 5 (1982), 23–46; Gregory S. Hutcheson "Leonor López de Córdoba and the Configuration of Female-Female Desire", in *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorm (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 251–75.
- 12 Marcelino V. Amasuno, "Apuntaciones histórico-médicas al escrito autobiográfico de Leonor López de Córdoba (1362–1430)", *Revista de Literatura Medieval* 8 (1996), 29–71.
- 13 Frank A. Domínguez, "Chains of Iron, Gold, and Devotion: Images of Earthly and Divine Justice in the *Memorias* of Doña Leonor López de Córdoba", *Medieval Iberia: Changing Societies and Cultures in Contact and Transition*, ed. Ivy A. Corfis and Ray Harris-Northall, Colección Tàmesis A247 (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2007), pp. 30–44.

The text begins with an invocation of the Saviour, and then claims to offer a record of miracles that the Virgin brought about in the life of Leonor to strengthen her audience’s faith in the Blessed Mother’s powers of intercession:

a honra y alabanza de mi Señor Jesucristo e de la Virgen Santa María su madre que lo parió, por que todas las criaturas que estuvieren en tribulación sean ciertas [...] que si se encomiendan de corazón a la Virgen Santa María, que ella las consolará y acorrerá como consoló a mí; y por que quien lo oyere sepa la relación de todos mis hechos e milagros que la Virgen Santa María me mostró.¹⁴

[for the honour and glory of my Lord Jesus Christ and of the Virgin St Mary, his mother who gave birth to Him, so that all creatures who are in tribulation may be certain [...] that, if they commend themselves with all their hearts to the Virgin St Mary, she will console and succour them, as she consoled me; and so whoever hears it may know the story of all my deeds and the miracles the Virgin St Mary showed me.]¹⁵

Leonor later reveals that the patron saint of her family was the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura.¹⁶ There her brothers had received chivalric gold neck-chains that they vowed not to remove until their burial at the shrine, but these were stolen by friars during their imprisonment in the shipyards, presumably angering the Virgin—in keeping with Spanish tales of clerical avarice dating back to Berceo’s thirteenth-century *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*. As Domínguez has shown, the chains would have been left there as *ex-votos*, and were in this sense linked to the iron chains that jailers refused to remove from her brothers’ bodies prior to their deaths.¹⁷ Following William Christian Jr., Domínguez demonstrates how Leonor’s text relates to records of miracles accomplished

14 Reinaldo Ayerbe-Chaux (ed.), “Las *Memorias* de doña Leonor López de Córdoba”, *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 2 (1977), 11–33 (16). All quotations are from this edition (henceforth *Memorias*).

15 Translations of *Memorias* are based on Kathleen Lacey (trans.), “Memoirs of a Castilian Noblewoman: Leonor López de Córdoba, *Memorias*” [1986], in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources* [1997], ed. Olivia Remie Constable, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 427–34 (427), with corrections. All other translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

16 Alfonso XI founded a monastery at the shrine in 1340 to thank the Virgin for his victory over Muslim forces at Río Salado. An intriguing recent study of the cult that developed in Extremadura by Marie-Theresa Hernández, *The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Conversos: Uncovering Hidden Influences from Spain to Mexico* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2014) relates it to the Christianity of converted Jews.

17 Domínguez, “Chains of Iron”, pp. 30–37.

through particular cults to the Virgin, often preserved at shrines or other places of worship.¹⁸ The removal of chains, as he points out, would have symbolized the soul's liberation; such irons were also commonly offered to the Virgin of Guadalupe, to whom visitors attributed their freedom. A contemporary example occurs in the *Rimado de Palacio* (c. 1403) by the imprisoned Chancellor of Castile Pero López de Ayala, who included lyrics devoted to images of the Virgin at Guadalupe and elsewhere, promising to visit their shrines in exchange for his liberation and repeatedly evoking the real chains of his imprisonment together with metaphorical fetters of sin.¹⁹

After arriving in Córdoba, Leonor describes her appeals for Marian intervention in detail, as she dedicates herself to the prayerful veneration of “la Virgen Santa María de Belén” and “Santa María el Amortecida” (“of Bethlehem”, “the Fainting”, *Memorias*, p. 21). She is devoted to a maternal image of the Nativity, symbolic of the new Eve spared from the biblical curse of Eve's labor pains (Gen 3:16), and also venerates a representation of Mary sharing in her dying son's pain. The Blessed Mother was traditionally believed to have experienced the Passion as birth pangs and, according to the Gospel, a sword piercing her heart (Lk 2:35). For thirty days Leonor petitions the Fainting Virgin to improve her living quarters, reciting a prayer that recalls the sorrows of Mary at the Cross, and adds an Ave Maria for every year of the Blessed Mother's life.²⁰ She similarly prays to the Virgin of Bethlehem for thirty days, nightly reciting three hundred Ave Marías on her knees, for a side-gate to the house to be constructed to spare her the humiliation of entering from the street. As Domínguez notes, to carry out these efficacious prayer vigils she would have needed chains of beads. In this way, the recurring image of chains conveys a figurative vindication of Leonor's family, who lost their ex-voto “collares de oro” (collars of gold) and died as fettered prisoners, as she puts it, “por mis pecados” (“for my sins”, *Memorias*, p. 22). Her hoped-for private side-gate is initially thwarted by

18 Domínguez, “Chains of Iron”, pp. 33–44; see William A. Christian, Jr., *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), p. 84.

19 Pero López de Ayala, *Rimado de Palacio*, ed. Germán Orduna, Clásicos Castalia 156 (Madrid: Castalia, 1987), stanzas 757–892. On the other hand, irremovable chains often represented the sinner's enslavement to the demonic Enemy; this image can be seen, for example, in Gonzalo de Berceo, *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, ed. Michael Gerli, Letras hispánicas 224 (Madrid: Cátedra, 1985), stanzas 277d, 374d.

20 *Memorias*, p. 22: “Madre Santa María, | de vós gran dolor había: | vuestro fijo bien criado | vístelo atormentado. | Con tu gran tribulación | amorteciósevos el corazón; | después de tu tribulación | púsovos consolación. | Ponedle vós a mí, Señora, | que sabéis mi dolor” (“Holy Mother Mary, I had great sorrow for you: your son, so well cared for, you saw tortured. With your great tribulation your heart grew faint; after your tribulation, he gave you consolation. You, Lady, give it to me, for you know my sorrow”).

a servant woman who convinces Leonor’s aunt to reject the request, but is soon after strangled by Leonor, a death that once again hearkens back to the Virgin’s storied punishment of her devotees’ enemies recorded in earlier miracle traditions.²¹

Leonor is rewarded with a vision of a new chapel that will be built in the monastery adjacent to the property. In a dream she touches an alb or blessed liturgical vestment, and then walks beneath a high arch where the vindicated sinner enters into a heavenly, Marian space in which wild flowers blossom under a deep blue sky. This vision, which soon after comes to pass, is closely connected to her adoption and Christianization of the boy Alonso:

En esto desperté e obe esperanza en la Virgen Santa María que me daría casa. En esso vino un robo de la judería, e tomé un niño huérfano que tenía para que fuese instruido en la fé. Hízole baptizar por que fuese instruido en la fé. Y un día viniendo con mi señora tía de misa [...] ví reparar a los clérigos de Sant Hipólito aquellos corrales donde soñé yo que había el arco grande; y le supliqué a mi señora mi tía [...] que fuese servida de comprar aquel sitio para mí [...]; y me lo compró, dándolos con la condición que señalava, que se hiciese una capellanía [...]. Entozes, hecha esta merced, alzé los ojos a Dios y a la Virgen María, dándole gracias por ello [...]. E dádame la poseción, abrí una puerta en el sitio y lugar que había visto el arco que la Virgen María me mostró. [...] E tengo que por aquella caridad que hize en criar aquel huérfano en la fé de Jesu Christo, Dios me ayudó a darme aquel comienzo de casa. (*Memorias*, pp. 21–22)

[At this I awoke, and I was hopeful that the Virgin St Mary would give me a home. At this time there was a plundering of the Jewish quarter, and I took an orphan boy whom I kept so that he could be instructed in the faith. I had him baptized so that he would be instructed in the faith. And one day, coming with my lady aunt from mass, [...] I saw being distributed among the clerics of San Ipólito those grounds where I had dreamed there was the great arch. I implored my lady aunt [...] to please purchase that site for me [...]; and she bought it for me, giving it on the condition, which she stipulated, that I build a chaplaincy [...]. Then, when this

21 Perhaps the best-known instance of Mary suffocating an enemy is the tale collected by Berceo, *Milagros*, stanzas 67–73, in which the unworthy bishop of Toledo Siagrius dares to wear a miraculous chasuble given to St Ildelfonsus by the Virgin, who causes the divine vestment to constrict around his throat. The same tale is told in Alfonso x’s collection of Marian miracles, though without the detail of the tightening fabric: Alfonso x el Sabio, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, ed. Walter Mettmann, Clásicos Castalia 134, 172, 178, 3 vols (Madrid: Castalia, 1986–89), 1, 59, Cantiga 2 “Muito devemos varões”.

favour was made, I raised my eyes to God and to the Virgin Mary, giving them thanks for it [...] Once possession had been granted to me, I opened a door in the very place where I had seen the arch which the Virgin Mary showed me. [...] And I believe that it was because of that charity I performed by raising the orphan in the faith of Jesus Christ that God helped to give me that beginning of a house.]

It is not insignificant that this miracle revolves around entrances and gateways, ultimately enabling Leonor to open up a courtyard leading to a garden; it accords with earlier writers like Gonzalo de Berceo, who called Mary the “Puerta en sí bien cerrada, | pora nos es abierta pora dar nos entrada” (“herself the ‘well Closed Gate’, | for us it is open to provide us entrance”, *Milagros*, stanza 36ab). These spaces in the narrative, as María Rivera Garretas and Louise Mirrer have shown, are not only occupied almost entirely by female concerns and initiatives, but offer a discursive opening for Leonor to derive pious authority through her maternal yet self-interested identification with the Virgin. As Hutcheson concludes in his review of feminist readings of the *Memorias*:

López de Córdoba modeled herself at least in part on *exempla* and hagiographic accounts. [...] Her identification with Mary represents a powerful strategy through which to expand the boundaries of her own identity and find sanction. (“Leonor López de Córdoba”, p. 183)

What has yet to be sufficiently explained is how these kinds of Marian strategies might relate to her adoption and protection of the Jewish convert. Curry, who has considered the meaning of the figure of Alonso, finds that Leonor’s actions can be characterized as political, insofar as they recalled Pedro I of Castile’s favourable policies toward Jews and defied the anti-Semitism of the Trastamaran camp that imprisoned her and sought to completely ruin her family.²² A similar approach has been taken by Mirrer, who finds a “sympathy with the plight of Jews” in a “climate of intense anti-Semitism” that “may account for some of the hostility contemporaries felt toward her”.²³ While the possibility of such sympathies cannot be ruled out, we will see how the narrator’s account of the convert, like other elements in the narrative, are at the same time closely linked to topics that can be found in long-established Marian miracles. As we will see, Leonor’s narrative engages in ways of thinking about conversion through the Blessed Mother that can be traced back to this

²² Curry, “Las *Memorias*”, pp. 49–50.

²³ Mirrer, *Women, Jews, and Muslims*, p. 143.

tradition, although her account took on less stable connotations during the time of plague and unrest at the end of the fourteenth century.

In recent years Francisco Prado-Vilar has studied depictions of children being baptized through the intercession of the Virgin in the textual and visual imagery of Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (*Songs of St Mary*), compiled in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Of specific interest are songs like *Cantiga* 89, in which an ailing Jewish mother calls out to the Virgin during pregnancy and then gives birth to a twin son and daughter, soon afterwards receiving baptism along with her offspring. Even more telling are two other *cantigas* in which the Incarnation provides a means of imagining what Prado-Vilar calls a “complete spiritual and physical transformation of the Jewish body into a Christian subject—a new subject who, like Jesus, emerges from [...] the Virgin Mary”.²⁴ In *Cantiga* 108, a boy who has been saved by the Virgin from his father's error of Judaism is miraculously healed from a monstrous birth defect; a group of women are shown in illuminated panels witnessing his conversion, in what Prado-Vilar calls a “domestic space of femininity” that sets the stage for the son's “rebirth to Christianity” as the baptismal font becomes a “container that symbolizes Mary's womb [...] in the context of the bio-theology of the Incarnation” (p. 127). Similarly, *Cantiga* 4 features a boy who is rescued from an oven by the Virgin—a tale that also appears in Berceo's *Milagros*—in a way that evokes the baking of Jewish bread of sacrifice, and the Incarnation of Christ in Mary's womb together with the preparation of the Eucharist. In this case the boy is first drawn to an image of the Virgin during Easter mass and receives the consecrated host from her, prompting his murderous father to throw him into the fires of a glassblowing oven that comes to symbolize a womb-like site of conversion and entrance into a female Christian communion that will include his mother. Prado-Vilar refers to these miracles as instances of the *Judeus sacer*, insofar as the newly converted boy is both cursed and excluded (one meaning of the Latin term *sacer*) by the Jewish community that gave him biological birth, and reborn and sanctified (another meaning of *sacer*) within a Christian community through the new birth of baptism made possible by the intervention of the Virgin and witnessed by female devotees.

I would suggest that Leonor's belief in this kind of maternal, conversional attribute of Mary leads her to present the Christianized boy as, at first, a blessing in her life. There is, of course, an important difference: whereas Jewish

24 Francisco Prado-Vilar, “*Judeus sacer*: Life, Law, and Identity in the ‘State of Exception’ Called ‘Marian Miracle’”, in *Judaism and Christian Art: Aesthetic Anxieties from the Catacombs to Colonialism*, ed. Herbert L. Kessler and David Nirenberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 115–42 (126).

fathers are almost always characterized as villains in the hagiographical tales, the boy in Leonor's *Memorias* was orphaned by Christian mobs after the anti-Jewish uprising of 1391 spread from Seville to Córdoba, provoked in part by the infamous preacher Ferrán Martínez.²⁵ The unrest occurred in an atmosphere of collective anxiety and violence that was worsened by continuing outbreaks of plague. In calling the mob riots in the Córdoba Jewish quarter a "robo", Leonor echoes the description given in the account by the chronicler López de Ayala, who also identified a material motive behind these pogroms: "Perdiéronse por este levantamiento en este tiempo las aljamas de los judíos de Sevilla e Córdoba, [...] los que escaparon quedaron muy pobres [...]. E todo esto fue cobdicia de robar, segund pareció, más que devoción".²⁶

Before returning to Leonor's account of these disturbances, it will be useful to consider a recent full-length study in which Amy Remensnyder sheds light on the social implications of the type of miracle tradition that I have been discussing. She observes how such tales "unfold in a deliberately featureless past that through its lack of definition is no different from the present", so that "in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Christians in Castile continued to believe that Mary could bring the Jews [...] to baptism"; one Castilian Madonna, Our Lady of Guadalupe, "was particularly reputed for her evangelical ability in the later Middle Ages and exercised this talent".²⁷ As I hope to show, the *Memorias* evoke and then problematize the apparent ease and willing passivity of Marian conversion, traced with what Remensnyder calls "the crisp lines of Divine will [...] placing the convert clearly on the Christian side" (pp. 186–87). Following the outbursts of 1391, which led to Jews being murdered for refusing to convert, such miracle stories could take on especially menacing connotations. Hagiographers like Alfonso X, as we have seen, celebrated children being brought to Christianity through the maternally compassionate and merciful nature of Mary, which Leonor invokes and imitates. In her discussion of these

25 For an account of these events see, for instance, Emilio Mitre Fernández, "De los pogroms de 1391 a los ordenamientos de 1405: un recodo en las relaciones judíos-cristianos en la Castilla Bajomedieval", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*, Serie II: *Historia Medieval* 2 (1994), 281–88. He suggests that Ferrán Martínez was one of few people who foresaw that such an outbreak of violence would erupt (288).

26 *Crónica de Enrique III*, año 1, cap. 20, in Rosell, *Crónicas de los reyes de Castilla*, II, 167, 177 ("Due to this uprising, at this time the Jewish communities of Seville and Cordoba were lost, [...] those who escaped were left very poor [...]. It was a greedy desire for plunder, as became apparent, rather than devotion"). López de Ayala's account is discussed by Julio Valdeón Baroque, *Judíos y conversos en la Castilla medieval* [2000], 2nd edn, Alarife 22 (Valladolid: Ámbito, 2004), pp. 69–71.

27 Amy G. Remensnyder, *La Conquistadora: The Virgin Mary at War and Peace in the Old and New Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), p. 186.

conventions and their later reception, Remensnyder singles out the Virgin of Guadalupe as especially known for her protection of innocent Jewish youths "in order to convert them to the good that they [did] not enjoy"; but comments that these tales "were not entirely innocent celebrations [...] of Mary's maternal mercy. They too narrated the triumph of baptism" (p. 188). Like bread or glass in the oven depicted in *Cantiga 4*, the children of Jews were seen as malleable, easily susceptible to be reformed and reshaped by the motherly charms of Mary. This tradition lived on in fifteenth-century miracles such as the story of the Lady of Guadalupe converting a Jewish boy to Christianity after kindly placing his hand on her chest. Such contemporary tales suggest that Leonor's Marian relationship with a Jewish orphan was conditioned by her family's connexion to this particular cult and shrine, as well as by the broader potency of the Virgin in effecting such baptisms. The narrator of *Memorias* similarly views the baptized boy through what Remensnyder calls a "medieval Christian imagination" in which such children were "impressionable"; "all that was necessary to tip them toward the Church was the delicate touch" of Mary's compassion. Jewish boys are "graced with tokens of her love before their baptism"; they are "passive recipients of these miracles, but women actively solicit them" (p. 197).

Yet the tale told in Leonor's imaginative, autobiographical text is that of a conversion and hoped-for final miracle gone wrong. Alonso, now a young man, is working for his adoptive mother when another virulent outbreak of the plague strikes Córdoba, forcing Leonor and her family to flee to the countryside. She takes refuge with her adopted son in Santaella, and then, after Alonso returns from a trip to Écija on Leonor's behalf bearing obvious symptoms of the plague, in a larger house in Aguilar. Seeing his condition, a group of female relatives urge her to send the convert away before the contagion spreads:

Y el dolor que a mi corazón llegó, bien lo podéis entender [...]; y en pensar que por mí había entrado tan gran dolencia en aquella casa. Fize llamar un criado [...] e roguéle que llevase aquel mozo a su casa. El cuitado hubo miedo y dijo, 'Señora, ¿cómo lo llevaré con pestilencia que me mate?' Y díjle: 'Hijo, no querrá Dios' [...]; e por mis pecados treze personas que de noche lo velaban, todos murieron. Y yo facía una oración que había oído que hacía una monja ante un crucifixo [...] y rezaba de rodillas siete mil vezes: 'Piadoso hijo de la Virgen, vénzate piedad'. [...], rogando a Dios me quisiese librar a mí y a mis hijos [...]. E plugo a Dios que una noche no fallava quien velase aquel mozo doliente, porque habían muerto todos los que hasta entonzes le habían velado. E vino a mí aquel mi hijo [...] e díxome: 'Señora, ¿no hay quien vele a Alonso esta noche?' E díxele: 'Veladlo

vos por amor de Dios'. Y respondiome: 'Señora, agora que han muerto otros, ¿queréis que me mate?' E yo díjele: 'Por la caridad que yo fago, Dios habrá piedad de mí'. E mi hijo por no salir de mi mandamiento lo fue a velar; e por mis pecados aquella noche le dio la pestilencia, e otro día le enterré. Y el enfermo vivió después, habiendo muerto todos los dichos. (*Memorias*, pp. 23–24)

[And the pain that reached my heart you can well imagine [...]; and on thinking that it was through me that such great illness had entered that house, I called for a servant [...] and begged him to take that young man to his house. The coward was afraid, and said, 'Lady, how can I take him with the plague, which will kill me?' And I said to him, 'Son, it will not be God's will' [...]; and for my sins, thirteen people who watched over him during the night all died. And I made a prayer which I had heard a nun saying before a crucifix [...] and she recited on her knees seven thousand times: 'Pious Son of the Virgin, may pity conquer you'. [...], praying that God would free me and my children [...]. And one night it was God's will that no one was found to watch over that sick young man, because all who until then watched over him had died. And that son of mine came to me [...] and said, 'Lady, is there no one to watch over Alonso tonight?' And I told him, 'You watch over him, for the love of God'. And he replied to me, 'Lady, now that the others have all died, do you want him to kill me?' And I said to him, 'For the charity I am doing, God will have pity on me'. And my son, not to disobey me, went to keep vigil over him; and for my sins, that night he [Alonso] gave him [the son] the plague, and the next day I buried him. And the sick one lived, after all the others had died.]

Leonor is then ordered by angry relatives to remove the body of her deceased biological son, twelve-year-old Juan Fernando, from the house. She copes with her loss by continuing to engage in shows of affective piety, publicly imitating the Virgin's sorrow over the death of the sacrificial Son of God. Of course, this kind of *imitatio Mariae* had become increasingly popular during the late Middle Ages, and also fuels narratives by other, better known woman authors of the period studied by scholars such as Sidonie Smith and Rosemary Hale. Smith, for example, has shown how emulations of the Virgin Mother as *Mater Dolorosa* provided a mode of feminine self-representation in the *Book of Margery Kempe*. The female narrator of this text, as Smith observes, associates "her life story with divine mystery" as a kind of "strategic necessity" that allows for a "doubled ambivalence" in which "imitating the Church's fiction of an ideal woman [Mary] speaks of the unbounded possibilities of female

storytelling”.²⁸ This strategy is not unlike that of Leonor, who imbues her own unconventional story with images of maternal sacrifice and Marian pieties, inviting the audience to witness and affectively participate in human tragedy and redemption. Such approaches to narration formed part of a larger spiritual movement or wider “religious milieu” that, as Hale points out, emphasized the humanity of Christ as child and martyr in representative imitations of the *realia* of Mary’s “compassion and maternal affection” conflated with “mourning and weeping in scenes of the Passion”; examples are recounted and relived in the work of female autobiographers from the period.²⁹

Similarly, in Leonor’s *Memorias*, the mournful mother narrates how she felt abandoned by God and humiliated before a gathering of villagers, who are even said to have spontaneously cried out as if moved by a Passiontide procession:

cuando lo llevaban a enterrar fui yo con él, y cuando iba por la calle con mi hijo, las gentes salían dando alaridos, amancillados de mí, y decían: ‘Salid, señores, y veréis la más desaventurada, desamparada, e más maldita mujer del mundo’, con los gritos que los cielos traspasaban. E [...] hicieron grande llanto conmigo como si fuera su señora. (*Memorias*, p. 24)

[when they took him to be buried, I went with him. And as I went through the streets with my son, the people came out wailing, pitying me, and said: ‘Come out, lords, and see the most unfortunate, forsaken, and accursed woman in the world!’, with shouts that reached the heavens. And [...] they made a great lament with me as if I were their [feudal] lady.]

This turn of events in the narrative, the death of Leonor’s son and the survival of the contagious convert, has long “perplexed” readers, with some seeing her as “cruel” and others “duty bound to care for Alonso at the risk of everything she holds dear”.³⁰ The episode is certainly difficult to reconcile with what critics like Suelzer and Encarnación Juárez have often viewed as her opportunistic religiosity at other times in the *Memorias*, especially when compared to more

28 Sidonie Smith, “The Book of Margery Kempe: This Creature’s Unsealed Life”, in her *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), pp. 64–83 (79, 83).

29 Rosemary Hale, “*Imitatio Mariae*: Motherhood Motifs in Devotional Memoirs”, *Mystics Quarterly* 16.4 (December 1990), 193–203.

30 Hutcheson, “Leonor López de Córdoba”, p. 182.

mystical writers like Margery Kempe.³¹ In fact, Leonor's seeming admission of guilt in the death of her sons appears at first as a surprisingly unscripted, even damning revelation. How could the self-described imitator of Mary send these innocent victims to their death, consigning one after another to likely infection at the sick bed of the Jewish convert, while she wrongly awaited a divinely ordained immunity to the plague? Mirrer, like Curry, sees this "startling" development as having philosemitic implications, which, together with her later influence in the court of Catherine of Lancaster, may have contributed to Leonor's tarnished reputation among chroniclers and poets from the period.³² Amasuno describes the survival of Alonso as an "aspecto patéticamente paradójico" ("pathetically paradoxical aspect"), while Domínguez views it as a partial answer to her prayer.³³ God seems to have protected her from the plague, but among Leonor's exposed children only the adopted son contracts the disease and then recovers. What is more, like her conversion of Alonso in tribute to Mary, Leonor's expectation of a medical miracle corresponds with late medieval legends surrounding the Guadalupe cult. Christian (*Apparitions*, pp. 90–91) has edited material dating back at least to the early fifteenth century that describes how the herdsman who purportedly first discovered this Marian image learned from his wife that their sick son would die. According to legend, the Virgin soon after cured this boy so that he could accompany his family on pilgrimage to the site of the original apparition, where many other "persons sick with diverse ailments came [...]"; as soon as they reached the image of St Mary they recovered from all their sickness".

In the late medieval imaginary, the very different outcome of Leonor's Marian protection of her adopted and biological sons could be anticipated or even predicted by Alonso's status as a convert from Judaism, whatever the historicity of her account. Leonor first introduces the boy's change of faith as an uncomplicated act of devotion and matter-of-fact transformation that pleases the Virgin. However, Remensnyder's study makes clear that Mary's unquestioned ability to bring about such conversions in miracle stories was, well before the *Memorias* were recorded, being met with a "spiritual landscape clouded by ambivalence and taboos [...], where religious borders were openly

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- 31 Encarnación Juárez, "Autobiografía de mujeres en la Edad Media y el Siglo de Oro y el canon literario", *Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica* 13 (1997 = *Canon Formation/Exclusion, Hispanic Women Writers*), 154–68.
- 32 As mentioned earlier, Hutcheson, "Leonor López de Córdoba and the Configuration" associates the feminine world of the *Memorias* with the anxieties expressed by her detractors about Leonor's close friendship with Catherine, which might have been perceived as an inappropriate same-sex relationship.
- 33 Amasuno, "Apuntaciones", p. 54; Domínguez, "Chains of Iron", p. 39.

crossed. In its very essence conversion was subversive”, and—even in the case of children—tended to be accompanied by “anxieties about where in the person of the convert the Jew [...] ended and the Christian began”.³⁴ Local laws or *fueros* dating back to the thirteenth century had already included prohibitions against Christians raising the children of Jews as their own.³⁵ Seen in this light, the ultimately morbid influence of Alonso in the *Memorias* can be interpreted as a sort of divine punishment, a kind of imperfect, even ironic answer to Leonor’s prayers for the health of her children (adopted versus biological). In the words of the historian Rábade Obradó:

lo que hay que leer entre líneas es el convencimiento de que las relaciones entre cristianos viejos y nuevos estaban marcadas por el signo de la fatalidad; por más que los conversos se hubieran bautizado, seguían llevando en sus venas [...] algo que les marcaba, que les impedía ser auténticos cristianos, y que [...] atraía el castigo de Dios sobre los cristianos viejos que estaban dispuestos, pese a todo, a estrechar vínculos con ellos.³⁶

[what has to be read between the lines is the conviction that relations between Old and New Christians were marked by the seal of fatalism; for all that the *conversos* were baptized, they still carried in their veins [...] something that marked them, that stopped them from being true Christians, and that [...] drew down the punishment of God on those Old Christians who, despite everything, were inclined to strengthen ties with them.]

The fatality inherent in transconfessional relations was, of course, tied to the ongoing disaster of the plague itself. Not only did Jews become scapegoats in late fourteenth-century Andalucía, as elsewhere on the Peninsula—and get blamed for poisoning Christians with plague elsewhere in Europe—but, as David Nirenberg has pointed out, they could also be indirectly or figuratively thought of as a contaminating presence, spreading contagion through the body social by their “continued existence in the midst of Christian society”.³⁷ It

34 Remensnyder, *La Conquistadora*, pp. 186–87.

35 Ezequiel Borgognoni, “Los judíos en la legislación castellana medieval. Notas para su estudio (siglos X–XIII)”, *Estudios de Historia de España* 14 (2012), 53–68 (63).

36 María del Pilar Rábade Obradó, “Judeoconversos y monarquía: un problema de opinión pública”, in *La monarquía como conflicto en la Corona castellano-leonesa (c. 1230–1504)*, ed. José Manuel Nieto Soria (Madrid: Silex, 2006), pp. 299–358 (325).

37 David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), p. 240.

is in this context that the baptism of a *Judeus sacer*, to use Prado-Vilar's term, gives way to his contaminating status at the close of the *Memorias*, when Leonor tries, as it were, to force another miracle to happen. Alonso's initial conversion and his later convalescence in the family home could be viewed as miraculous, insofar as they enabled the female narrator to successfully imitate Mary's adoptive maternity, and to sacrifice and lament the death of her biological son Juan Fernando, depicted as giving his life for the sake of the baptized Jew. However, Leonor's account of a Christianizing rebirth accomplished through her own apotropaic devotion to the Virgin is irremediably complicated and confuted by the problem of the convert's contagiousness. In the end, keeping vigil over Alonso has the implicit effect of undermining notions of the pristine conversion of Jewish children that are so central to the Marian storytelling tradition that appears to have inspired the *Memorias*.

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