



*Catherine of Lancaster and
Her Religious Court Poets*

By Lesley Twomey

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**Reviewed by: Carmen Poblete
Trichilet**



Catherine of Lancaster and her Religious Court Poets. By Lesley Twomey. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. ISBN: 978-3-031-58479-4. xiii + 465 pp. €124,75.

Lesley Twomey's latest book explores the influence of Catherine of Lancaster on Castilian courtly culture during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There is limited biographical information available about this Castilian queen and her political activity. However, the author offers a new perspective on how her life may have been connected to innovations in Castilian medieval literature during her reign. The book examines the role played by this English-born queen of Castile in the development of Castilian poetry and the links that can be established between these literary evolutions and her English cultural heritage.

Catherine of Lancaster was the queen who legitimised the Trastámara dynasty's claim to the Castilian throne. She was the granddaughter of King Pedro I, who was killed by his half-brother Enrique, Duke of Trastámara—later Enrique II—in 1369. At first sight, her primary role in serving the Crown's interests appears to have been motherhood, as the birth of her son, the future Juan II of Castile, united both dynasties by blood. Nevertheless, Twomey introduces her for the first time as a cultural bridge between two worlds, tracing her journey from the household of John of Gaunt to her roles as princess of Asturias, consort queen of Enrique III, and later, regent of Castile alongside her brother-in-law, Fernando of Antequera—future king of Aragon—until her death in 1418.

The focal point of Twomey's study is the poetry compiled in the *Cancionero de Baena*. The texts within this songbook are analysed in detail to understand the themes they explore, as well as the stylistic techniques used to construct the queen's image as presented to the court by the poets included in the collection. The book examines the cultural circles in which Catherine of Lancaster was raised and the medieval literary traditions that likely influenced her from childhood to her final years. This approach enables the author to connect her biography to the rhetorical strategies employed in shaping her historical portrayal, both through textual and visual means.

Twomey's analysis of primary sources is monumental. The extensive collection of manuscripts she has studied attests to her expertise in medieval literature, religious poetry, and queenship studies. Furthermore, her discussion is enriched by the inclusion of both archival and visual sources, recognising that Catherine of Lancaster's cultural patronage cannot be fully understood without considering

architectural references such as her foundation of Santa María la Real de Nieva in Segovia. The relationship between imagery and text is a crucial aspect to understand the significance of her role. Additionally, Twomey's engagement with secondary sources highlights the richness of contemporary European historiography on queenship studies, demonstrating her command in this scholarly field. This expertise is fundamental to her proposal of a relational analytical framework. Indeed, Twomey is the first to portray Catherine of Lancaster as the link between the literary cultural traditions of the courts of John of Gaunt and the Castile of the Trastámara dynasty, using medieval manuscripts as her main source of research.

The book's methodological competence is quite evident as Twomey establishes connections between Catherine's biography and medieval literary productions in both England and Castile. Such scholarly precision is particularly noticeable in the detailed endnotes found in each chapter. The book's structure is organized by an introduction which is followed by a chapter about Catherine's biography to introduce the two parts of the analysis. The first part is focused on the queen's courtly culture and politics while the second one studies her devotion to the Virgin as seen by Castilian poets included in the Baena songbook, both of which support the author's conclusions. Another noteworthy aspect is her translation of each title and stanza from Middle-Aged Castilian into English. By providing bilingual translations, the discussion becomes accessible to a broader audience interested in medieval queenship, power, and artistic patronage.

The analysis of Catherine of Lancaster's cultural influence begins with the reconstruction of the cultural circles in which she may have participated during her early life. The places she frequented, the noblemen and ladies of her parents' household, and the manuscripts and poets she was exposed to are fundamental to understand the literary influences she experienced during this period. Twomey explores how these influences may have permeated Middle Castilian verse, examining key connections such as the court of Gaunt and its ties to Canterbury, as well as the influence of Catherine's mother, Constanza of Castile, and her half-sister, Philippa of Lancaster, who married King João I of Portugal.

One of the most compelling aspects of Twomey's study is her analysis of how the arrival of an English-born queen introduced changes in Castilian poetry and shaped the development of her image. Firstly, she observes that from Catherine's time onwards, poets were no longer exclusively noblemen or clerics. The queen appears to

have established her own literary court in which poets also held administrative positions for the first time. Villasandino and Páez de Ribera are two notable figures whom Catherine of Lancaster promoted. Furthermore, this strategy of forming her own cultural and political circles seems to have been linked to her conflict with her husband's brother, Fernando of Antequera, during the regency period. As a result, the portrayal of Catherine of Lancaster in Castilian literature evolves—from a messianic figure linked to the birth of the heir, employing Virgin Mary iconography, to a more negative depiction during her co-regency, influenced by poets aligned with her brother-in-law.

Nevertheless, Catherine of Lancaster's cultural legacy cannot be fully assessed without considering her religiosity and the iconography she employed. The cloister of her monastery, Santa María la Real de Nieva, reveals how she combined English and Castilian references to craft her identity. This influence is evident in her daughter, María of Castile, and her daughter-in-law, María of Aragon, who played a role in completing the foundation's construction. Additionally, the queen's devotion to the Virgin Mary was a defining feature of her life. While the Annunciation was already a prevalent theme in Castile, Catherine introduced new perspectives on the Mariological debate into Castilian poetry, likely due to her close connections with the Dominican Order. This explains the presence of lyrics supporting an anti-Immaculate Conception stance, such as those written by Martínez de Medina, which constitute a *unicum* within Middle Castilian religious poetry.

Twomey's rigorous analysis of the *Cancionero de Baena*, prioritising primary sources, offers a fresh perspective on the biography of Catherine of Lancaster as a cultural patron and a bridge between two literary traditions. Without her English heritage and intervention, it would be impossible to trace the introduction of specific themes and structures from English poetry into Castilian verse. Twomey's argument, linking Catherine's biography to poetic compositions that directly or indirectly reflect her influence, establishes this study as an essential reference for scholars of medieval queenship and female religious literature. Additionally, the book can be particularly appealing to those interested in the construction of women's networks in late medieval Castile and their foreign influences.

CARMEN POBLETE TRICHILET

University of Castilla-La Mancha