



Amy G. Remensnyder. *La Conquistadora: The Virgin Mary at War and Peace in the Old and New Worlds.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. ix + 470 pp. \$36.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-989300-3.

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As a personage worthy of Christians' veneration, the mother of Jesus has a post-Biblical life every bit as doctrinally and culturally complex as her life as told in the Gospels is scant. Amy Remensnyder's book adds to our knowledge of that complexity by gathering into one place a little-known but long-lived aspect of Mary. Spanning almost a thousand years of Spanish history, from the time of the *Reconquista* of Iberia from the Moors to Spain's conquest of what is now New Mexico in the eighteenth century, Remensnyder's book serves as both complement and counterweight to prevailing assumptions of Mary as always and only a gentle and nurturing maternal figure always sympathetic to all who call on her in their time of need, and aggressive (if that is the right term) only as an aid in converting souls to the church. The result makes for fascinating reading for anyone interested in the early history of the church in Spain and this hemisphere, not to mention those who would like some crucial historical context for Mary's prominence in Latin American culture.

Despite its subtitle, Remensnyder's book chiefly focuses on that which is almost certainly less well known to most of its potential readers: Mary's various incarnations as an instrument of war in Christian Spain's battles against the Moors and, later, indigenous peoples of the Americas.

The first two-thirds of her book are dedicated to retelling the gradual reconquest of Spain through the lens of the deployment of Mary as a tool in that struggle. Remensnyder notes how it was during the *Reconquista* that, over the centuries, leaders of armies moved from dedicating victories over the Moors (and rededicating their mosques) to Mary, to writing narrative poems, called *cantigas* (whose details would change over time or would become appropriated in other poems describing other battles), which describe Mary, as La Conquistadora, as fighting alongside the Christians in those battles. Meanwhile, some of those rededicated mosques and other shrines devoted to Mary assumed importance as places to be visited by kings and princes prior to leading their armies into battle against the Moors. Concurrent with this narrative of reconquest, however, is another one: the story of some Muslims' embracing of Mary because she is favorably mentioned in the Quran as obedient to God's will and thus to be admired as a virtuous figure. Indeed, she is the subject of the one *sura* in the Qur'an titled for a woman. Throughout these pages, we learn, Mary in her various manifestations became for her (Christian) devotees a means by which they could assert the essentially Christian nature of Iberia. Emerging from these pages, then, is not quite a history of the *Reconquista* but rather, as Remens-

snyder elegantly terms it, an intricate "Marian geography of Christian Spain" (p. 62). Relating events in this manner thus entails a fair amount of brief reminding of how shrines became significant and detailing of changes in the *cantigas*. Some readers might find certain passages tedious or confusing because of these retellings. Given the nature of Remensnyder's intention to create a map of Iberia that uses Marian shrines and battlefield triumphs as its landmarks, however, some revisiting of old terrain is inevitable.

The last third of Remensnyder's book assumes a more linear quality as it crosses the Atlantic and describes Mary's career in the Americas. In Iberia, there had been no concerted effort to convert either Moors or Jews to Christianity, except by force as Ferdinand and Isabela gradually consolidated their power over the peninsula. In this hemisphere, however, evangelization assumed a high priority, and Mary was the Spaniards' chief instrument in those efforts. Prior to Cortes's march on the Aztec empire, he and his men would evangelize the people he came into contact with via banners and small statues of Mary's image. Cortes's men were at most a couple of generations removed from the battles of the *Reconquista* and so knew well the stories of the Virgin's many interventions on behalf of the Christians; still, it would not be until Cortes's army found itself under duress that the Conquistadora version of Mary would make her appearance in the New World, in the figure of the Virgen de los Remedios ("Our Lady of Remedies"). Cortes's men said that she came to their aid as the Spaniards fled Tenochtitlan in 1520. (Cortes would lay siege to and take the city the following year.) As a result of her association with Cortes, Our Lady of Remedies acquired great prominence in New Spain, even being invoked by Cortes's former Indian allies as they made various appeals to the Spanish crown that it honor promises made to them. Even more striking, a legend appeared regarding Remedios's rediscovery under a maguey plant by an Indian that suggested that she merited devotion

from the Indians as well as the Spaniards. Remensnyder astutely notes in passing in this last instance and elsewhere how Catholic and indigenous worship practices merged and melded around acts of devotion to Mary into something beyond mere syncretism. By the end of the sixteenth century, those iterations of Mary less associated with the Spaniards and conquest—in particular, the dark-skinned, Nahuatl-speaking Virgin of Guadalupe—would become enormously popular among indigenous and mestizo populations in New Spain, gradually becoming emblematic of the new culture and ethnic types emerging in New Spain. But the Conquistadora who accompanied Spanish armies in their battles against the Moors would re-emerge one last time and accompany Don Diego de Vargas's expedition to retake New Mexico from the rebellious Pueblo Indians in 1692-94.

Covering almost a thousand years and two hemispheres, and covering her subject in a rather unconventional way, one can be forgiven if one thinks Remensnyder's book to be unwieldy in places. As I noted earlier, some may find its tendency to repeat itself tedious when not confusing; but, again, given her approach to her subject, I think she has chosen the best possible strategy for presenting it. I also found myself wishing she had been more patient in her discussions of some of the tapestries and images from codices that she includes in her book. These minor critiques aside, I highly recommend this book as filling a gap in our knowledge regarding Mary that I suspect few were aware of.

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