

Public Abstract  
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The Beautiful Woman in Medieval Iberia: Rhetoric, Cosmetics, and Evolution  
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Literary portraits of the beautiful woman in medieval Iberia emphasize several physical features, such as long, blond hair, or light-colored and hairless skin. Women's cosmetic practices of the time aim at achieving many of the same features, suggesting that the literary ideal is not only a rhetorical formula, but reflects a widespread social ideal. This study hypothesizes that this standard of beauty expresses evolved male preferences for female features that indicate youth, health, and fertility, as recent evolutionary-based research of female beauty in contemporary societies shows.

This study examines the specific features mentioned in literary portraits of the beautiful woman in several major works and genres from medieval Iberia. It also traces the rhetorical sources of these portraits to the Latin tradition, whose influence is evident in other early vernacular literatures of Europe. It then analyzes several medieval cosmetic treatises in Latin and in vernacular languages that attest to medieval women's beautifying practices, such as the use of hair-dyes, depilatories, and skin-whitening creams.

The comparison of the literary and cosmetic evidence shows a canonical view of feminine beauty that encompasses different cultural areas in medieval Iberia. This view is also consistent with ancient literary and cosmetic Western traditions, as well as with twenty-first century conceptions of beauty. These findings suggest that the ideal of feminine beauty in medieval Iberia is not unique, but rather a manifestation of near-universal male preferences shaped by sexual selection. They also show that evolutionary-based research can contribute to our understanding of literary and historical works.