

THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN MEDIEVAL IBERIA:
RHETORIC, COSMETICS, AND EVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

Literary portraits of the beautiful woman in medieval Iberia tend to emphasize several physical features, such as long, blond hair, or light-colored and hairless skin. This study examines the specific features of the beautiful woman in several major works and genres from medieval Iberia. It also traces the rhetorical sources of these portraits to the Classical and medieval Latin traditions, 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 as well as with twenty-first century conceptions of beauty. The 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 in the course of human evolution.