CHAPTER FIVE

THE SERPENT CRUSHED

Throughout the Middle Ages, supporters of the Immaculate Conception relied on hypotheses, based on their own reasoning, to defend its premises (see Chapter 4). Direct scriptural proofs of the doctrine were non-existent, but there were plenty pointing to the universality of sin: ‘Mirando al tiempo de la controversia inmaculista, hay que reconocer que los adversarios del dogma se hallaron en mejor posición que sus defensores con respecto al argumento de la Escritura’ [examining the time of the immaculist controversy, we have to recognize that, in terms of the argument from Scripture, the opponents of the doctrine were in a better position than the defenders] (Peinador 1955: 55). Biblical proofs of the Conception were not favoured as its principal defence until the very end of the fifteenth century. In this chapter, I will assess how far the Protoevangelium, the momentous struggle between the serpent and the Woman in Genesis 3.15, had a role to play in the imagery used for counterpointing good and evil in medieval poetry.

The Protoevangelium provided theologians with a powerful way of symbolizing the battle between good and evil, prefiguring that of the Gospels: ‘Inimicitiás ponam inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius: ipsa conteret caput tuum et tu insidiaberis calcaneo eius’ [I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; she will crush your head and you will bruise her heel] (Herzenaver 1906: 3).

Use of Genesis as proof of the Immaculate Conception became standard by the late sixteenth century, in the work of artists like Seville artists Bartolomé Estebán Murillo (1618–1682) and Francisco Zurbarán (1598–1664) (Réau 1955–1959: 88), where Mary tramples the serpent.

---

1 [Many times in Holy Scripture words are used for others]. The words are taken from the Gloss on Gómez Manrique’s poem, ‘Loores e Suplicaciones a Nuestra Señora’ [Praises and Supplications to Our Lady] (ID 3400) (2003: 287–293, 293).
beneath her feet. This now archetypal representation of Mary’s sinlessness was inspired by a detail peculiar to the Vulgate translation of the Bible, which replaces the correct rendering, ipsis [he crushed], by ipsa contrect caput tuum [she crushed your head]. At a stroke, the translation transferred the central role in the struggle to the Woman and marginalized the protagonism of her seed. It also contributed to separating the Woman/Mary from the rest of humanity. As theologians reflected on what might have occasioned the victory of Mary over the serpent, the neat idea that she was exempt from inheriting the sin of Adam and Eve began to develop. The error in the Vulgate favoured the development of a doctrine like the Immaculate Conception which accorded her special favours.

Another way in which artistic representation of the Woman and the serpent developed was by synthesizing it with Revelation 12.1. In many representations of the Immaculate Conception, Mary stands crowned with stars and on the crescent moon, as she tramples the serpent or dragon underfoot, thus taking on the attributes of the Woman of the Apocalyptic vision, the fulfilment of the prophecy in Genesis (Peinador 1955: 70; Guldan 1966: 106–108; Brown et al. 1978: 229; De Fiore & Meo 1988: 368).

En même temps, les personnages qui sont en jeu et leurs actions se correspondent d'une manière évidente, entre Genèse et l'Apocalypse. De part et d'autre la femme et le serpent-dragon s'opposent; la femme et sa descendance sont haïes par le serpent et sa descendance dans la Genèse […]. Ces ressemblances littéraires et verbales sont assez étroites et nombreuses, elles dessinent si exactement les contours essentiels des deux scènes que nous pouvons affirmer que Gen., III.15–16 est au point de départ de la vision de l'Apocalypse. (Cerfaux 1955: 26–27)

[The characters and their actions in Genesis and the Apocalypse clearly match. In both, the woman and the dragon-serpent are in opposition; the woman and her seed are hated by the serpent and its issue in Genesis; (…). These literary and verbal resonances sketch out the main elements of the same scene so clearly that it can be said that Genesis III.15–16 forms the starting point of the Apocalypse.]

Despite the close association of the Woman from Revelation and Genesis with the Immaculate Conception in art, at first sight, the prophecy about the Woman, her seed, and the serpent appears to have little to do with Mary’s origins. Even those theologians in favour of the Immaculate Conception cannot claim it as a direct proof: