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**A Tale of Two Sitters:
Juan & Alfonso de Valdés**

Peter Elvy



This investigation concerns a half-length, sixteenth century, Netherlandish portrait known simply as “A Scholar with a Book,” which is a statement of the obvious and probably derives from an art dealer in the not-too-distant past. The portrait was once attributed to Hans Holbein the Younger. On the reverse of the board, the great man’s name is inscribed suspiciously clearly. There are also marks: “YDE/-/-” and also a number 1334. In the last seventy years, the picture has changed hands three times in England, accompanied each time by an attribution to the “School of Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen,” a broad church if ever there was. The portrait is not widely known and is privately owned and, as far as I know, no one has put forward any ideas about who this “Scholar” might be – until now. The hypothesis driving this investigation is that it is an important sixteenth-century writer and reformer who was born in New Castile but spent the last and most productive decade of his life in the Spanish Kingdom of Naples.

Juan de Valdés (1500-1541) came from a mixed ethnic background, half-Castilian and half-Jewish. Four of his great grandparents were *conversos*, i.e. converts from Judaism. In the 1490s, during a decade-long judicial pogrom, nearly one thousand former-Jews were burnt at the stake for backsliding, including Juan's maternal uncle Fernando de la Barrera, a priest. In Spanish Naples, where so many *conversos* found better opportunities, Juan became the

central figure among a group of reform-minded churchmen, artists and poets, notably the poets Vittoria Colonna and Marcantonio Flaminio, and the beautiful Giulia Gonzaga, who loved Juan to the death and beyond and, at personal risk, became his literary executrix.

Whether or not he is Juan de Valdés, this is not just a portrait of a long-gone someone. This sitter is not simply sitting. He is saying something, gesticulating - a fact that is quite obvious from his arms and fingers and ring, and from the huge knot in the curtain behind him. I suggest that, if he is Juan de Valdés, the positioning of his right arm and fingers may be imitating a priestly Eucharistic manual act and also that the knot in the curtain is probably a statement of his imperialist opposition to the divorce of Catherine of Aragon by Henry VIII of England. There are two signs of his imperialist sympathies, the special cut of his beard and the Caesar-like head on his ring. As for the book, it appears to have gold lettering or ornamentation on one cover and also to have a cloth or leather bookmark. A version of the *Missale Romanum* was first printed in 1482 and printed editions of various sacramentaries¹ were also in wide circulation.

There is another portrait, in the National Gallery, London, entitled "A Man holding a Coloured Medal" (*attribution: An Associate of Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen*). The two portraits are strikingly similar and the two faces, by one quantitative measure, are nearly identical. Google's Facial Similarity Meter is, of course, intended for photographs of real people and not, I imagine, for oil paintings. And yet the photometric measurement of the face-areas in these two portraits yields a similarity-score of 93 percent and throws up the verdict "*a likeness of the same person.*" But the Similarity Meter led me astray. It seemed to confirm my first, but erroneous, idea that, despite a difference in beard color, the two portraits, the "Scholar" and the "Man" are likenesses of the same person - my "one-sitter hypothesis."

As far as the National Gallery is concerned their man is "Alfonso de Valdés ?"(Sic.). There is no question mark on the worldwide web! "A Man holding a Coloured Medal" is found on websites, book-covers and even on coffee mugs. He is Alfonso de Valdés, and no questions asked. The estimated date of the portrait is 1530/1, although one National Gallery expert came up with a later date.

The Gallery's somewhat hesitant identification of Alfonso could not have been made without the medal in the sitter's right hand. Since the late 1930s, the medal has been seen as the key to the whole picture. In this study, I hope to re-position some of the available evidence.

Still thinking that the "Scholar with a Book" and the "Man holding a Coloured Medal" might be the same person, I sent a photograph of the "Scholar" to four contemporary scholars, Spanish, Italian, English and Canadian. One replied that the sitter was Alfonso. One said he was definitely not. One said the similarities are (just) generic. And one, Professor Manuel

¹ The Roman Missal was not codified until the council of Trent.

Rivero Rodrigues of the Autonomous University of Madrid, is almost certain that the Scholar is in fact Alfonso's twin brother Juan, which of course provides an elegant "two-sitter hypothesis" by which the likenesses and the differences between the two portraits are explained. There were two sitters and they look so alike because they were identical twins.

For good measure, Professor Rodrigues also surmised that the Scholar portrait might well have come to England in the baggage train of Juan's great admirer Cardinal Reginald Pole. I understand that Lambeth Palace, London, still has at least one oil-on-board painting, which may have arrived in this way.

It is enormously difficult to create a reliable timeline for either Juan or Alfonso de Valdés. Questions of authorship remain, and much is still contested. Between them, the brothers produced a great deal. For many years the famous *Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón* (a scathing attack on Papal standards and policy), was attributed to Juan. Now it is widely believed to be the work of Alfonso, while a minority of scholars believe it to have been a joint effort. The reasons for so much confusion are obvious. The brothers' early work was written in Spanish and circulated anonymously for fear of the Inquisition. In Spanish Italy, where Juan settled, his output primarily focused on catechisms, "considerations," and scriptural commentaries. Publication of his works increased after his death but the process was brought to an abrupt halt when (posthumously) he was declared a heretic. Much of his thought comes down to us in a book, the *Beneficio di Christo*, written after his death, by someone else.

What do we know about their characters? Alfonso, the imperial servant, is a little easier to characterise, but Juan is an enigma. We can measure the effect he had on his followers but we cannot pin him down enough to get to know him. It is almost like New Testament criticism and the failure (as some see it) to get hold of the historical Jesus. Maybe Juan will always be a pale-Castilian. He italianised his name to Valdesso. He was thin and small (maybe). He was brilliantly witty. Many told of his abundant charm but some of his early writings could be as smutty as Thomas More's. He fled from Spain in 1531 but remained relatively wealthy, having collected a number of lucrative ecclesiastical prebends. He was a lawyer, or rather he operated as if he was a lawyer. He was well known to the Emperor for whom he may have fulfilled a number of tasks, including residence in Rome as Charles V's political agent. And then, from 1534, in the Spanish Kingdom of Naples, he became the focus of a reform-minded group of high ecclesiastics, former monks, artists and aristocratic women. His teaching and faith became more and more centred on the Bible which seems to have led him along a personal path to an inner light. South of the Alps, there was no greater "reformer" than Juan de Valdés but he was no Lutheran, no Evangelical. Although (with Luther and many others) he shared a belief in Justification by Faith he never considered leaving the Roman obedience. Indeed he approached death with all the ceremonies that Catholicism can offer. Then, after his death, men were executed for Valdesianism, although no one was quite sure what it was. And we still do not really know the man, but we know more and more about the influence he had.

Since the early nineteenth century, the biographies of Juan have been full of fulsome adjectives, but no one – least of all me – can get hold of the noun.

Professor Rodrigues referred me to a recent biography of Juan de Valdés by Dr. Daniel Crews of the University of Central Missouri in which Juan's ten siblings are listed, but Dr. Crews made no mention of twins. I thought the cause was lost, but took up the matter with the author and congratulated him on his careful scholarship. He replied that, since the publication of his book, he became aware of irrefutable evidence discovered by an archivist in Cuenca, the hometown of the Valdés family.² Alfonso and Juan were indeed twins and their father Fernando was so pleased with them that he even kept the placenta. And this, I surmise, makes Juan and Alfonso identical twins rather than fraternal twins.

Whoever he might be, the "Scholar with a Book," seems to me to be actively trying to communicate. His right arm seems frozen in a priestly Eucharistic manual act but he was not a priest, let alone a one-armed priest. However, anyone brought up with the Latin Mass would have recognised his right-hand gesture. Once the sacred host had been touched, forefinger and thumbs must be locked and only released after the final ablutions. This was an absolute requirement, and had been since Gregory the Great and, after Juan's time, was confirmed by the Council of Trent. And there may be a trace of something else. The awkward angle of the right arm (elbow tucked uncomfortably into the body), is an echo of one of Van Scorel's portraits of Adrian VI, the Dutch Pope, and Charles V's tutor. Adrian's arm is at the same uncomfortable angle as the Scholar's but the papal second and middle finger are giving a blessing. One distinguished Italian expert sees no particular significance in the hand gesture and suggests that the Scholar is simply explicating a point from the book in the left hand. Perhaps this is so and it would in no way disallow the identification of Juan, who was above all a teacher.

The key to understanding the portrait is, I believe, the ample knot in the curtain above Juan's right hand. "Knot" is perhaps the wrong word. It appears to be a narrow proboscis of cloth, a long narrow twist that is half-wrapped by a smooth and ample length of similar material. This feature must be significant and my speculation is that it is a statement about the English royal marriage. The anonymously published manuscript, the *Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón* included a criticism of Henry Tudor's proposed divorce. In Book 2 of the *diálogo*, Mercurio argues that, even if he wanted to do so, the Pope did not have the authority to allow the annulment of the English royal marriage because in the law of Israel it is commanded that, if a husband dies without children, his

² Editorial note: Miguel Jiménez de Montserin has been the Munciple Archivist of Cuenca for around thirty years. He has made numerous discoveries about the Valdés family. This particular document he found in the Cuenca Diocesan Archive. Because of the citation's significance, the editors asked Sara Nalle, a frequent resident in Cuenca, to check the citation for absolute accuracy. We thank Professor Nalle for her assistance. See Miguel Jiménez de Montserin, "Los hermanos Valdés eran gemelos," in *Ecos Callados de Cuenca (Hallazgos históricos)*, ed. By Manuel Amores Torrijos (Cuenca: Editorial Alfonsipolis, 2004), 131.

second brother could/should marry the widow, which is just what the King of England had done. Therefore Henry's marriage was by no means against the law of God but was indeed enjoined by that very same law - unlike the case of King of Portugal.³ The Valdés brothers' standpoint on the divorce can, I think, be taken at face value as support from strongly imperialist Spaniards for the youngest surviving child of Ferdinand and Isabella and the aunt of the all-important Emperor.

I guess that the smooth green overlay represents a priest's stole or maniple wrapped around the linked hands of a bride and groom as their marriage was pronounced, and that couple are Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. If this is so, the "Scholar with a Book" is an advertisement, an apologia, a defence of the indissolubility of the royal marriage, an example of the ancient art of rhetoric, the art of persuasive speech - but, in this case, the "speaking" is in oil on wood. Why the "Scholar" might need to make this particularly strong pictorial affirmation is another question.

In the early 1530s Juan served the Emperor as an agent in Rome, and Clement VII as a Papal Chamberlain. Pope Clement was at this time in an enforced friendship with the Emperor (post-Pavia, post-Sack of Rome, post-his prison experience in the San Angelo castle). I doubt that His Holiness was emotionally involved in the divorce question. In 1530/31, the purpose of the portrait might not have been to impress the Pope, but it might well have been to continue to impress the Emperor.

For reasons explained below (the beard and the ring) there is another scenario which demands a later date for the portrait, maybe towards the end of Juan's life (1541) or even later? If the portrait arrived in England after Queen Mary's accession (1553) in the baggage train of her kinsman (and Juan's friend and admirer) Reginald Pole, one of the effects of the painting would have been to argue the catholicity of the late, and much maligned, Señor Juan de Valdés.

The "Scholar" is holding his book with his left hand and the large gold ring on his forefinger is prominent. High definition photography compensates for five-hundred years of wear and tear and reveals a gold cameo ring surrounded by a circular rim which is either decorated or lettered. A laurel wreath crowns the male head in profile. The chin is noticeably large. This is almost certainly the Holy Roman Emperor Charles and strongly resembles some of his coins. Imperial imagery like this is often found in the furniture and decorative arts of the 1530s and '40s. As Roy Strong reminds us, the stately progress to the

³ "Que muy más verosímil es que el Papa tenga poder para dispensar en el matrimonio de Inglaterra que no en el de Portugal, porque en la ley dada al pueblo de Israel, está mandado que si el marido muere sin hijos, su hermano segundo se case con la mujer viuda, como hizo el rey de Inglaterra, por donde parece que el casamiento de Inglaterra no solamente no es prohibido de iure divino, mas era en la ley mandado que así se hiciese lo que no se puede decir del matrimonio de Portugal." The date and place of publication of the first Spanish edition is unknown. An estimated date of 1528? is reasonable. The first Italian translation was printed in Venice and a reprint was dated 1545. See the edition edited by José Montesinos (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A.), 1971), 147-148.

imperial coronation in Bologna "would appear to have marked the emergence of Charles as successor to the Roman emperors" and "this triumphal itinerary shaped the imperial myth."⁴ One would expect the head on this ring to be aligned ("fore-'n-aft") with the sitter's hand and fingers but, in this portrait, the painter has forced a quarter-turn on "Caesar's" head (as well as a slight displacement of the cameo) to make things easier for the viewer. The sitter wants us to see - and recognize - his ring!



A necessary question: Is the internal evidence in the portrait now sufficiently robust to point to Juan even if the National Gallery portrait of Alfonso did not exist? Is this an independent, standalone identification, or is it based on some unspoken reliance on the "Man holding a Coloured Medal?" My answer is oblique, rabbinic indeed. A crime can sometimes be solved thanks to an initial tip-off, or a name whispered in a detective's ear, but this clue does not have to be part of the evidence that leads to a conviction in court.

The similarities between the "Scholar" and the "Man holding a Coloured Medal" provided the "tip-off," the "lead" to the Valdés family, but now, I think, the internal evidence of the picture takes over and is sufficient, unless proved otherwise by forensic science or provenance, either of which could still sink the "two-sitter hypothesis." Stylistic differences could not do so, for this research is not trying to prove a one-artist hypothesis.

Juan's beard (so I believe) is cut in the special style of Charles V, for whom (I suppose) it was specially developed to mask the Emperor's *mandibular*

⁴ Roy C. Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals 1450-1650*, (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1984), 78-90.

prognathism (the famous Hapsburg jaw). If this argument is allowed, and, leaving aside all evidence that might be derived from the National Gallery, this is what we might have:- an un-ordained scholar with strong imperialist sympathies and possibly making a sacramental argument about one of the decade's knottiest problems. He is possibly rather slightly built and although (as I am reminded by my good friend and former colleague Rabbi Dr. Mark Winer MBE) no-one "looks Jewish" and several ethnic groups (Irish, Afghans and Arabs and not Jews alone) are known for their red hair. It is not inconceivable that this sitter could have come from a fifty/fifty Castillian/*converso* background.

Why are there no other extant portraits of Juan de Valdés? I think that is an easy question to answer. After his death and with the ascendancy of Cardinal Gian Pietro Carafa (later Pope Paul IV), Juan de Valdés was denounced as a heretic. His followers either fled, recanted, or were killed. Portraits of him, in Italy at least, would have disappeared very quickly indeed.

Unlike the "Scholar," "A Man holding a Coloured Medal" is easily found on the internet by searching for Alfonso de Valdes, with or without the Spanish accent. Better still go to the National Gallery website and enter the catalogue number NG2607. In the Gallery itself, it is found high up on a wall in Room A, which is only open on Wednesdays. Nine pages are devoted to this painting in the Gallery's Sixteenth-Century Catalogue.⁵



⁵ National Gallery. "The Sixteenth century Netherlandish Paintings with French Paintings before 1600."

A mug shot of the Latin Secretary to the Holy Roman Emperor on ebay.

The National Gallery has always had lingering questions about the identity of its "Man holding a Coloured Medal." Until recently, in a corner of the Gallery's website, a somewhat-Olympic suggestion could be found that NG2607 might be a "medal winner." The Austrian academic and museum director and eventual refugee from fascism, Dr. Gustav Glück, identified the sitter as Alfonso in the 1930s, but not all scholars agreed.⁶ For the moment, we will assume that there is no need for a question mark and that the sitter is Alfonso de Valdés, high-ranking official in the imperial court, and author of a spirited and semi-official apologia for the dreadful sack of Rome in 1527, by out-of-control imperial troops.

He is holding a medal commemorating his former superior, the hyper-imperialist Grand Chancellor Mercurio de Gattinara (1465-1530).⁷ In the National Gallery catalogue, the medal is examined in some detail and the point is rightly made that there were a number of versions, all of them by Christoph Weiditz. However, the black and white illustration in the catalogue is not (so it seems to me) the same medal that is seen in the portrait. There were various Gattinara medals and Weiditz cast them in both lead and bronze. I think that, in the portrait, the sitter is holding a lead medal, which corresponds exactly with a specimen in the *Historische Museum*, Basel (Inv.1905.759).

Furthermore, alone among the various bronze and lead versions, the Basel specimen carries text on its reverse side. The outer rim has the legend SOLA FIDES TERRIS FOENICEM SUSTULIT ISTAM - and then inside – CONIUNXIT SUPERIS HANC QUOQUE SOLA FIDES. In the centre, there is a phoenix, rising from a fire on an altar with the inscription FIDES. (*Faith alone has lifted the phoenix from the earth / Faith alone has joined it to the Gods.*)

This reverse side of the medal (invisible of course in the portrait) is written in somewhat faulty Latin - HAEC would do better than HANC. The text is in two concentric circles. The outer ring is intended to be a hexameter and the inner is a pentameter. It is surprising that the original Greek word Phoenix is rendered here, in Latin, with a letter-F. Almost certainly there are echoes of Luther, who had set Europe alight when he famously added SOLA to the FIDE of St. Paul. However, I think they are only echoes and intended to be so.

⁶ G. Glück. "Bildnisse aus dem Hause Hapsburg. I. Kaiserin Isabella," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien, N.F.*, vol. 7, (1933): 183-210; Gustav Glück (1871-1952) became Curator-Director of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in Vienna in 1916 and was the author of major books on Netherlandish Art. At first he thought the portrait might be Nicholas Perrenot de Granville but changed his mind in favour of Alfonso de Valdés.

⁷ Google publishes a truly wonderful, widely-angled Vermeyen portrait of the clean-shaven Burgundian patron of Erasmus, Jan II Carondelet, but quite wrongly identifies him as Mercurino Gattinara. The sitter looks as if he ought to have been a grand chancellor but unfortunately he was not!

Thanks to Luther, the whole of Europe was talking about faith in the 1530s. Could a human being earn her place in heaven by faith alone or by good works? How important is it to do good works? Do they count for anything in the divine ledger? But what we have here is not the doctrine of Justification by Faith, neither the full-blown Evangelical variety of Luther nor the Catholic versions of the Italian *spirituali* or the later Council of Trent version. Here we have, not faith in a person or a god but faith *per se*. Could this be imperialist hype, faith in the future world-empire so ardently hoped for by both Gattinara and his former secretary Alfonso de Valdés, but taken with a large pinch of salt by Charles V himself? Or could the message be intended for the Pope? If there was one place in Europe badly in need of a phoenix, it was the eternal city of Rome and its ruler, for in 1527 it had been comprehensively spatchcocked.

To make clear a point that is not made clear enough by the National Gallery, I cannot think that the medal itself was at any time coloured, like some tin soldier. It is only the representation of the medal in the portrait that is coloured - to compensate, perhaps, for the dull leaden metal.

Gattinara's vision of a world empire (*dominum mundi*) under the house of Hapsburg included an alliance with Rome and, in the early 1530s, there was, at long last, such an alliance. There was no need, in this portrait, to emphasise – at least to the Emperor – the fact that the Grand Chancellor was also a cardinal of the church, for it was the Emperor himself who had arranged Gattinara's promotion. From the Bologna coronation, the imperial court would move on to Augsburg for a formal colloquy with the Evangelicals. Gattinara died en route and Alfonso was destined to play a big part in the negotiations.

"The Man holding a Coloured Medal" might have been intended to emphasise Alfonso's Catholicism. By an artistic intervention, a splash or two of cardinal red, the Grand Chancellor's ecclesiastical rank is emphasised, either for aesthetic or political reasons. Gattinara had been in post when the Emperor's leaderless and unpaid forces sacked Rome. Significantly, Alfonso de Valdés had been the same man who had drafted the semi-official *diálogo* (*Lactantius and the Archdeacon*) justifying the sack. But here he is seen, holding a medal, in filial devotion to the Grand Chancellor who is also a prince of the church and now at peace with the Pope. So could this be an Alfonso they had not seen before? Not just Alfonso the imperialist high-flyer - but Alfonso the "Catholic negotiator?" Could this portrait be almost a celebration of the peace that, at long last, existed⁸ (but not for long) between Hapsburg imperium and Medici papacy, and the need to look to the north to deal jointly with the Evangelical threat?

The "Scholar with a Book" could be a copy or version of the "Man holding a Coloured Medal" or vice versa. This thought is reinforced by the attitudes of the two nearly-identical heads and similar but not identical alignment of each torso, and the perspective chosen by the painter(s). There are many close

⁸ The Treaty of Cambrai 1529 (*so-called Paix Des Dames*) left the Pope with few military allies.

similarities between these two portraits. We have not touched on the clothing or the green backgrounds, which, on the right hand side of each painting, are identical. The two boards would have the same dimensions, had not NG2607 been rather clumsily re-sized at some stage. The idea that the "Scholar with a Book" is Alfonso's twin-brother Juan is beguilingly plausible. Scientific testing of pigment and wood, and provenance-research, are the next steps. This present research has had a narrow focus, its primary concern being the identification of the sitters. Expert comparison of technique and style may reveal one artist or two artists, working in one place or two places, at the same time or. . .!

On October 31st 2017, there will be great events to mark the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, published (so they say) with the help of his hammer and nails. Not every idea listed above is a thesis, but all concern a sixteenth-century Netherlandish painting that may be the only extant portrait of the Spanish-born reformer Juan de Valdés. His was a quieter, person-to-person reformation, developing, as he grew older into a non-doctrinaire, Bible-inspired search for an inner light. In the Spanish Kingdom of Naples, he was the focus for an influential group of followers. This was the most coherent group of its kind in the whole of Italy. Among its members were some of the highest flyers in the arts and in the church. Some eventually seceded, notably the former monks Bernardino Ochino and Pietro Martyri Vermigli, but, for most of Juan's friends, there was no idea of breaking away from Rome. The North and South were very different. When, after Juan's death, Valdesianism was eventually declared heretical, his followers had either to recant or flee or be put to death. In Italy, there were no safe havens, no protecting powers, no organisation. In the 1530s, one thread ran through all European reform movements, North and South, Catholic and Evangelical; adherence to a Pauline doctrine that, down the centuries, has flowed in and out of Christian history like a symphonic motif. After the buoyant optimism of the renaissance, doubts about human perfectibility began all over again; doubts that (despite the counter-arguments of Erasmus) were raised by Catholics like Cardinals Contarini, Morone and Pole as well as the Evangelical secessionists inspired by Luther, who we now call Protestants. For a short time, a few years, the doctrine of Justification by Faith was common ground.

Juan de Valdés photo: Matthew Hodgkin

Alfonso de Valdés photo: Peter Elvy