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I, the Queen: Power and Gender in the Reign of Isabel I of Castile

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Abstract

The role of women in society, in particular, women in leadership positions, constantly is debated. However, this discussion extends far back in history. As one of the most memorable rulers of Early Modern Europe, the life and reign of Queen Isabella of Spain, more accurately known as Queen Isabel I of Castile and León, can provide answers. Scholars have long grappled with the degree to which Isabel embodied or transcended the gender norms of her time as well as whether she ruled more through the joint monarchy with her husband King Fernando of Aragón or as a sovereign in her own right. The careful examination of primary and secondary documents relating to Isabel's life, her fight for the throne, the joint monarchy, propaganda used during her reign, and her more notable achievements, reveals her unshakable belief in her own right to be queen and the complexity of her sovereign power. Far from adhering to the expectations of her time period, Isabel challenged gender norms and ruled independently as a sovereign queen. The strength of her independent power shows that even when faced with societal and political adversity, women can successfully hold powerful leadership positions. Female leaders today can learn important lessons from Isabel's determination and strength.

Keywords

Isabel I of Castile, Spain, Gender, Queenship

Disciplines

European History | History of Gender | Leadership Studies | Sociology | Women's History

Comments

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I, the Queen:
Power and Gender in the Reign of Isabel I of Castile

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*I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.*

Ask any elementary school child in the United States and they will probably be able to tell you that Queen Isabella sent Christopher Columbus to find America. A historical figure of epic proportions, she is often discussed in the context of exploration; however, her complexity and significance go far beyond that single act. More accurately known as Queen Isabel I of Castile and León, she reigned from 1474 to 1504 and together with her husband King Fernando II of Aragón, united the Spanish kingdoms and ushered in a golden age.¹ Yet despite the importance of her marriage to Fernando, Isabel was first and foremost a queen in her own right. In spite of the inferior status of most women at the time, she became one of the most powerful female rulers in European history. Although she displayed sensitivity for traditional gender roles and worked closely with Fernando, Isabel's conviction in her right to the Castilian throne caused her to subvert sexual norms subtly and rule as an independent sovereign; the importance of her own power and kingdom superseded everything else.

As the only daughter of the King of Castile and León, Isabel's early life was strongly influenced by her proximity to ever changing royal power. She was born on April 22nd, 1451 in Madrigal de las Altas Torres to Juan II and Isabel of Portugal. When her half-brother Enrique IV ascended the throne in 1454, she was second in line to the throne behind her brother Alfonso. Political intrigue surrounding the royal succession was a major part of her life from the very beginning. She grew up in Arévalo and although her mother eventually succumbed to a deep depression and possible insanity, Isabel seems to have had a fairly stable childhood. However,

¹ Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, "Ruling Sexuality: The Political Legitimacy of Isabel of Castile," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2901532> (accessed October 15, 2013). Although she is referred to as both Isabel and Isabella, I have chosen to use Isabel on the basis of Peggy K. Liss' argument that Isabella is only used as a reference to Elizabeth I of England and that "It is high time to drop the latter-day diminutive and restore the strong original, Isabel, most consonant with her personality." Peggy K. Liss, *Isabel the Queen: Life and Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), vii.

discontent with Enrique's rule was evident by 1464 when his opponents united around Alfonso as rightful king. Isabel sided with him against Enrique, but Alfonso died after an illness in 1468, pushing her into the limelight for the first time. By virtue of her birth she became a rallying point. To bring peace between the rebels and the crown, Enrique named her his heir on the condition that the seventeen year old Isabel would need his permission to marry. However, she went against his wishes and married Fernando of Aragón on October 19th, 1469. This alliance to a ruler who was receptive to female sovereignty clearly shows that Isabel had learned the importance of political support and leverage by the time Enrique's health began to decline in the early 1470s. When he died on December 11th, 1474, she was able to prevail through a civil war to take the crown.² The trials of these early years gave Isabel traits that would have significance on her rule of Castile.

A handsome woman, Isabel's intelligence and firmly moral personality are key to understanding her reign. Writing in 1601, chronicler Juan de Mariana describes her as "attractive in appearance... demonstrating a singular gravity, moderation, and modesty."³ She had auburn hair, blue-green eyes and was very astute.⁴ Her appearance gained her acceptance by society and her intellect made her a skillful politician. Scholars debate the exact nature of her education, but most agree that she at least knew Latin.⁵ Therefore, she had access to the intellectual movements sweeping across Europe and scholarly treatises on sovereign power. As a person,

² Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 11-14, 57, 63-69, 79, 96.

³ Juan de Mariana, "The Conquest of Granada," 1601, in *Early Modern Spain: A Documentary History*, ed. Jon Cowans (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 13.

⁴ Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 19, 78.

⁵ Cristina Guardiola-Griffiths, *Legitimizing the Queen: Propaganda and Ideology in the Reign of Isabel I of Castile* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 19-20. In particular, Jean Hippolyte Mariéjol asserts that Isabel had read Cicero, Seneca, and Livy. Jean Hippolyte Mariéjol, *The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 308.

Isabel had an unbending sense of what was right and wrong and believed in sobriety, structure, and purity. She was not a person who changed her policies for political reasons, which can be seen in every decision that she made as queen. Determination and certainty marked her political life. Equally important were the Catholic ideals and morals that were impressed upon her from an early age.⁶ Her piety became famous throughout Europe and played a significant role in a number of the more notable events of her reign. These personal qualities form the basis for arguments on the relationship between Isabel and contemporary gender roles.

When examining Isabelline power, scholars disagree as to whether she exemplified or transcended the ideal feminine qualities of her time. An ideal medieval woman was chaste, modest, and pious.⁷ Although these traits were not always conducive to effective queenship, Theresa Earenfight writes that Isabel was always careful to follow those expectations for the sake of her own power.⁸ She knew the importance of working within the patriarchal society in which she was raised. Scholars particularly focus on examining her piety and virtue.⁹ These two aspects of her character adhered exactly to how an ideal woman of the time should act. However, women in general were also seen as fundamentally flawed. In his fourteenth century work, *Concerning Famous Women*, the famed Renaissance humanist Giovanni Boccaccio makes clear that women are inherently weak. While describing the legendary Joan, who disguised herself as a man to become a female Pope, he affirms that it is unnatural for a woman to have authoritative political

⁶ Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 14, 18-19.

⁷ Barbara F. Weissberger, *Isabel Rules: Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 170; Leffeldt, "Ruling Sexuality," 41, 33.

⁸ Theresa Earenfight, "Two Bodies, One Spirit: Isabel and Fernando's Construction of Monarchical Partnership," in *Queen Isabel I of Castile: Power, Patronage, Persona*, ed. Barbara F. Weissberger (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), 11.

⁹ Weissberger, *Isabel Rules*, xxi.

power.¹⁰ A contemporary of Isabel, Martín de Córdoba, writes that “the female body is weak and soft, so is her soul malleable in its desire and will.”¹¹ A good ruler needed to be able to make strong and logical decisions, something women were believed to be incapable of doing.

Elizabeth Leffeldt writes that to be an effective ruler, Isabel would have “to acknowledge her shortcomings as a woman and to transcend these characterizations whenever possible.”¹² She could not ignore the gender norms of her time, but as a woman in power she could not completely embody the traits expected of the female sex. After careful examination, it seems that Isabel was far more likely to demonstrate behavior considered inappropriate for women than submit to men. This debate is intertwined with discussion on the very nature of Isabelline power.

The influence of a joint monarchy on Isabel’s personal power is one of the most heated historiographic debates surrounding her reign. In terms of function, the joint monarchy did play a large role and its creation was a prudent political move by Isabel as it allowed her to make her position more palpable to those uneasy with female sovereignty.¹³ Fernando was treated as a king within Isabel’s territories and anything official would come from them both, implying that decisions and policies would be made together.¹⁴ Earenfight sees the joint monarchy as the most important factor of Isabel’s rule. She writes that the joint monarchy should be viewed as two “interlocking, interdependent, and dynamically relational institutions, each one substantially

¹⁰ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 1374, trans. Guido A. Guarino (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), xxxiii- xxxiv, 231-232.

¹¹ Martín de Córdoba, *Jardín de nobles doncellas*, ca. 1476, quoted in Barbara F. Weissberger, *Isabel Rules: Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 34.

¹² Leffeldt, “Ruling Sexuality,” 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴ Ferdinand of Aragon, “Marriage Concessions,” 1469, in *Early Modern Spain: A Documentary History*, ed. Jon Cowans (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 8; De Mariana, 12.

affecting the other.”¹⁵ Within such an institution, the two monarchs were equals and their actions or policies could not be attributed to just one. On the other hand, scholars such as Barbara Weissberger view Isabel as a monarch independent of Fernando, and in fact, far more powerful.¹⁶ Her power came from the supremacy of the Castilian throne, not from the acceptance of her marriage. Lehfeltdt largely agrees with Weissberger and calls attention to the fact that within Isabel’s sovereign domain of Castile, Fernando was a king-consort rather than an equal ruler.¹⁷ She was queen in her own right, whereas he had no claim there. Although both arguments are excellently defended, my research indicates that Isabel was far more autonomous than cooperative as a monarch. She was aided in this by historical precedent.

The examples set by earlier female rulers on the Iberian Peninsula provided the basis for Isabel’s independent sovereign power. Salic Law had never been a part of the Castilian political system.¹⁸ Legally, there was no prohibition to the rule of the female Isabel, only a cultural and societal reluctance. In fact, there was a longstanding tradition of women holding positions of power in Castile and Aragón, which gave Isabel important historical legitimacy.¹⁹ In particular Urraca of Castile and León and Juana Enríquez of Aragon provided Isabel with important models of queenship. Urraca reigned as a queen in her own right from 1109-1126 and it was her rule that “established a legal precedent for Isabel’s legitimate succession.”²⁰ Urraca had shown that female rule was reasonable and a feasible option for the kingdom, regardless of cultural expectations.

¹⁵ Earenfight, 7.

¹⁶ Barbara F. Weissberger, “Tanto Monta: The Catholic Monarch’s Nuptial Fiction and the Power of Isabel I of Castile,” in *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko Suzuki (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 46.

¹⁷ Lehfeltdt, “Ruling Sexuality,” 31.

¹⁸ Mariéjol, 121.

¹⁹ Earenfight, 4. Although Earenfight makes a strong case for female political power in Iberia it is important to note that scholars such as Lehfeltdt doubt the actual power that these women wielded. Lehfeltdt, “Ruling Sexuality,” 33.

²⁰ Earenfight, 8.

Although her power was derived from her husband, Fernando's mother Juana Enríquez, had complete control over the kingdom of Aragón as Queen Lieutenant when her husband was absent. Her use of power gave Fernando a unique perspective on the viability of female rule.²¹ He had seen first-hand that effective female rule was possible and his support was critical in the viability of Isabel's sovereignty. With his support and such models to follow, Isabel was instilled with belief in her own right to rule Castile.

Isabel's royal lineage anchored her faith that she was destined to be the rightful and sole ruler of Castile. It was instilled in her from an early age that she had a pedigree of the noblest and purest kind supporting her claim to the throne.²² To have known something for so long created an unshakable certainty within her. "Hers was a heritage for a queen" writes Peggy K. Liss.²³ With her lineage, it was clear to her that she was meant to rule. However, although she was declared Enrique's heir in 1468, her claim was not undisputed. Despite significant doubts over her paternity Enrique's daughter, Juana, fought Isabel for five years before Isabel managed to secure her throne.²⁴ Juana's alleged illegitimacy made her blood inferior and only someone who was completely confident in her cause would undertake such a long struggle as Isabel did. Fernando also had a distant claim to the Castilian throne, but due to the fact that Isabel was a more direct descendant of the kings of Castile, her ancestry was better.²⁵ In this case, cultural norms did not matter to her. Her bloodline was superior to his and, therefore, she ruled in her own right. In order to strengthen her case, she was forced to symbolically show that she could be a strong and effective ruler.

²¹ Earenfight, 9, 14.

²² Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ Sharon L. Jansen, *The Monstrous Regiment of Women: Female Rulers in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 12-13, 16.

²⁵ Guardiola-Griffiths, 20.

In order to eliminate resistance from those who opposed her right to rule, Isabel propagated a range of symbols that connected her to masculine power and superiority. She needed to use images to show that even if she was a woman, she could also be powerful in a masculine way.²⁶ Cristina Guardiola-Griffiths writes that as a queen, Isabel “needed to appropriate masculine images of royal power and needed to tailor them to her necessarily feminine persona.”²⁷ It was specifically male imagery that she needed to use in order for people to understand that she would be a strong and effective ruler. Her propaganda campaign began as early as her coronation on December 12th, 1474 when she rode behind a traditional symbol of masculine authority: an unsheathed sword.²⁸ There are few images more blatantly associated with male virility and strength. By using such an obvious visual, Isabel openly proclaimed that she would show that same strength as a sovereign. What is perhaps even more intriguing is the symbol of the joint monarchy: the royal seal. According to Weissberger, the placement of Isabel’s arrows over the Fernando’s yoke indicated superiority. Isabel not only possessed masculine qualities, she was symbolically superior to Fernando and not the weaker sex at all. The seal was everywhere in the joint monarchs’ kingdoms.²⁹ Isabel wanted to spread the idea of her power and these various declarations of supremacy clearly undermined how she was expected to behave as an early modern woman. Furthermore, she displayed her transcendent strength in her actions as well as through propaganda.

Isabel not only defied convention through symbolism, she also displayed characteristics as a ruler that transcended her gender as well. As anti-feminist as de Córdoba is at times in his work *Jardín de nobles doncellas*, he supports Isabel and memorably declares, “even though you

²⁶ Weissberger, *Isabel Rules*, xiv.

²⁷ Guardiola-Griffiths, 20.

²⁸ Earenfight, 12; Lehfeltdt, “Ruling Sexuality,” 34-35.

²⁹ Weissberger, “Tanto Monta,” 44-45.

are a woman by nature, you must endeavor to be a man in virtue.”³⁰ In order to be a strong, effective, and powerful ruler, she had to act like a man. She could not ignore the gender norms of her time, but as a woman in power she could not blindly submit to society’s expectations. More than that, she had to adopt characteristics of an ideal prince as well in order to be effective.³¹ Even with her presumed inferiority, she was held to the same standards when it came to governance. Isabel eventually became known for her “strong will, courage and intellect” as well as “the fear she inspired” in her subjects.³² Rather than the virtues thought necessary in any decent woman, Isabel was, in many ways, highly unconventional even within her own marriage. When she felt Fernando was wrong, she told him rather than remaining the meek wife that society expected her to be.³³ A woman was always supposed to bow to her husband’s will, something Isabel did not do, especially at the expense of her own power. This certainty of power can be seen in the precautions she took upon her marriage, her political position and the more significant policies and decisions of her reign.

Isabel’s desire to be an independent ruler is evident from the care she took to protect her rights upon her marriage to Fernando. In the Marriage Concession signed in January 1469, he makes significant promises that acknowledge Isabel’s direct and sole control over her own dominions. He promises to never separate her from any children they might have or take them out of the kingdoms. During this period, the father controlled every aspect of family life, making Fernando’s promise to give her that kind of authority monumental. He also agrees to reside with her in Castile, not in Aragón and that within Castile she would have control over their movements. As her territory, she determined where they went and why. Anything held by Castile

³⁰ De Córdoba, 35.

³¹ Guardiola-Griffiths, 18.

³² Weissberger, *Isabel Rules*, xxi; Mariéjol, 33.

³³ Mariéjol, 260-261.

was not his to manage without Isabel's express approval. Although goods were shared between husbands and wives, it was her kingdom not his. Significantly, he pledges that he "will undertake no war or peace treaty with any neighboring king or lord of any kind... without the will and knowledge of Her Highness the princess and her counselors."³⁴ Even Isabel would not cross into the male dominated area of the military, but even before leading an army in Castile, Fernando needed her consent. Clearly Isabel was not a woman to be monarch in name alone and subordinate to her husband; she asserted her political power and was independent of Fernando. The Marriage Concessions show her desire to defend that power rather than meekly accept her position within the weaker sex. These guarantees were reaffirmed when she ascended the throne.

The significance of Isabel's personal power was revealed in changes to the succession made upon her ascension and Fernando's adherence to the agreements. The Concordia de Segovia was signed on January 15th, 1475 and reaffirms many of Isabel's rights as stated in the Marriage Concessions.³⁵ However, Fernando was given the right to act in Isabel's stead when she was absent and his control over Castile's military continued.³⁶ Although these two elements gave him significantly more power than the original Marriage Concessions, he had to command the military because of Isabel's female status and the right of proxy was common among consorts, such as in the case of his own mother. Regardless, Isabel was still the only sovereign ruler of her territory and continued her precedence in the choosing government officers and the allocation of crown revenues.³⁷ Most importantly, the document explicitly ensured the

³⁴ Ferdinand, 7-9.

³⁵ Weissberger, *Isabel Rules*, 47. Due to the fact that few documents pertaining to Isabel's reign have been translated, I was unable to find an English copy of the Concordia de Segovia. The information here has been gleaned from the paraphrasing of secondary authors working from the original Spanish source.

³⁶ Earenfight, 12.

³⁷ Lehfeltdt, "Ruling Sexuality," 34.

“continuation of the Trastámaran dynasty through the female line.”³⁸ Isabel asserted the superiority of her bloodline over Fernando’s by changing the laws of succession, despite the tradition of male dominated inheritance. Intriguingly, Fernando seems to have followed both the Marriage Concessions and the Concordia de Segovia, as opposed to subverting the female power they supported.³⁹ For a man of his time to agree to give his wife such power indicates that Isabel was powerful indeed. In fact, Isabel was able to obtain these agreements in part because of the ways in which she equaled and at times surpassed Fernando as a ruler.

Isabel was in many ways a better and more powerful monarch than Fernando, leading her to challenge him despite the united front they presented for their joint monarchy. By examining their respective educations, one finds that, while she knew Latin, he did not.⁴⁰ This allowed her access to important academic and legal information that related to power and kingship. Because Latin was the academic language of the time, these texts would have been closed to Fernando. Furthermore, Liss recounts the Count of Castiglione saying in the 1520s that while Fernando was seen as a good ruler, it was Isabel who was the ideal.⁴¹ She exemplified the princely qualities so valued at the time in ways that at least equaled, and some would say surpassed, her husband. Isabel was clearly aware of her right to display these characteristics. However, at the root of it all, was the fact that,

Because Castile was demographically and economically far stronger than Aragon, because Isabel inherited her kingdom five years before Fernando claimed his, because many of the rulers of the crown of Aragon had Castilian origins, and because Aragon was composed of distinct constituencies, each with its own parliament and traditional liberties, for all these reasons Isabel remained the stronger partner.⁴²

³⁸ Guardiola-Griffiths, 20.

³⁹ Earenfight, 13.

⁴⁰ De Mariana, 13.

⁴¹ Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 358.

⁴² Weissberger, “Tanto Monta,” 46.

Her femininity did not diminish the fact that her country was more powerful than Fernando's. She held the same lofty position as previous Castilian kings had and did not hesitate to exercise the power it endowed her. It gave her support in the constant state of debate over what was best for the two legally separate dominions.⁴³ Isabel had resolved to put Castile first and if she disagreed with a policy of Fernando's for that reason, she did not merely submit to what her husband thought was best. Her resolve to do what was best for Castile and her own power influenced every decision she made while she was queen.

During her reign, Isabel independently enacted significant reforms, especially to the justice system, in Castile, in part to reinforce her own image. Tax system reform, the increased value of Castilian money and the flourishing of printing presses due to tax exemption were all attributed to Isabel alone.⁴⁴ Even though she was a woman, she received sole credit for these changes that improved the economic and intellectual life of the kingdom. However, it was as a judicial reformer that she made the largest strides. In contrast to her forbearers, Isabel administered justice through judges and courts rather than the military and aristocracy. During one two month period, she heard cases and pronounced judgments herself once a week. She made these decisions and resolutions independently of any other power; justice was her prerogative as a sovereign, regardless of her gender. Most notably she established fixed royal courts called *audiencias* in regional cities. Royal authority and justice would now be available in every corner of Castile.⁴⁵ Not only did she create a better legal system, she increased her own power simultaneously. David A. Boruchoff writes that the perception of justness was "very

⁴³ José Luis Abellán, "Isabel and the Idea of America," in *Isabel La Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays*, ed. David A. Boruchoff (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 79.

⁴⁴ Mariéjol, 212, 219; Weissberger, *Isabel Rules*, 136.

⁴⁵ Mariéjol, 177-182.

painstakingly contrived by the Catholic Monarchs, and especially Isabel.”⁴⁶ For the sake of her own political support, Isabel needed to be seen as synonymous with justice. Indeed, her largest reforms were for the sake of her own sovereignty.

The most significant change to Castilian politics during Isabel’s reign was the increase of her own power through the centralization of royal authority. Not only did her early conviction in the superiority of her heritage give her the right to rule, it also led her to see political sovereignty as a supreme God-given right.⁴⁷ For her, the will of God was indisputable and it was her destiny to rule with complete authority. Helen Nader notes that Fernando and Isabel “centralized Castilian administration and imposed royal authority throughout the realm.”⁴⁸ Although Nader gives credit to both monarchs, it is significant that it was in Castile that the changes took place. Over the course of Isabel’s reign, the kingdom’s administrative system was reformed so that local officials answered only to the monarchy, the property of wealthy nobles was decreased, and money could only be legally minted by her government.⁴⁹ The consolidation and centralization of Castilian monarchical power increased both Isabel’s independent power and that of the state. Liss writes that Isabel “left a legacy of personal, absolute monarchy so strong that Spain had to wait centuries for representative government.”⁵⁰ She would be an absolute queen or not at all and that strengthened Castile in an era when the political systems of other kingdoms were highly fragmented. In this way, her belief in the strength of her own power regardless of her gender

⁴⁶ David A. Boruchoff, “Instructions for Sainthood and Other Feminine Wiles in the Historiography of Isabel I,” in *Isabel La Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays*, ed. David A. Boruchoff (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 13.

⁴⁷ Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 15.

⁴⁸ Helen Nader, *Libert in Absolutist Spain: The Habsburg Sale of Towns, 1516-1700* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 81.

⁴⁹ Mariéjol, 26, 32, 219.

⁵⁰ Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 357.

helped to forge that nation-state of Spain. Royal centralization also allowed her to create and strengthen Christian purity in Castile.

One of the most controversial aspects of the joint monarchy, the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, effectively demonstrates the independence and strength of Isabel's personal power. In 1478, Fernando and Isabel requested Pope Sixtus IV to create the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Although the Inquisition eventually covered all of the monarchs' territory, the original landmark bull applied specifically to Castile.⁵¹ In this case, Isabel's territory is still treated as separate from Fernando's and she saw a need to establish a means of religious repression in her own country. In fact, Jews had been banished from a number of Castilian cities prior to the papal bull. It was Isabel's authority that was used to drive out unbelievers. Perhaps most interesting is that while Muslims were expelled from Isabel's territories in 1502, Islam was tolerated in Aragón until Isabel and Fernando's grandson Charles V took the throne.⁵² If their power had been completely intertwined and inseparable, Isabel never would have been able to act as she did. The application and use of the Inquisition in Castile shows that Isabel was able to rule as she saw fit within her own kingdom. Her religious principles would provide similar motivation for bringing the Iberian Peninsula under Christian control.

Although she was barred from military activity as a female, Isabel was a driving force behind the *Reconquista*. Since 711, the Christians of Iberia had struggled to loosen Islamic control in the peninsula in campaigns of "reconquest." Isabel viewed this mission as a holy calling to drive out the infidel and create a unitary Christian kingdom; the joint monarchs finally

⁵¹ Joseph Pérez, "Isabel la Católica and the Jews," in *Isabel La Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays*, ed. David A. Boruchoff (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 158.

⁵² Mariéjol, 52, 56. I would like to note that here I am not supporting the decisions made by Isabel, but rather making the point that she had the power to act as she saw fit, independent of Fernando.

achieved it in 1492.⁵³ It was a legacy from her forbearers that she believed was her duty and destiny to complete. However, not even Isabel was willing to cross into the strictly male world of warfare. It was one area from which she was strictly forbidden, but she still influenced the Granadan campaigns in truly significant and essential ways. One year she began preparations for the upcoming offensive herself while Fernando stayed behind to deal with business in Aragón.⁵⁴ Without the certainty of her faith and spiritual leadership, the Christians might never have achieved their objective. “Despite Fernando’s prominent and overtly military role in the campaign” writes Lehfeltdt “contemporary observers and chroniclers often credit the Queen with both the mental burden and the success of the effort.”⁵⁵ It was her will and her belief in the divinity of her mission that drove the Spanish soldiers. She also assisted the wars in logistical ways as well.

In addition to her endless support for the Christian cause, Isabel contributed significantly to the success of the Granadan campaigns through practical contributions. She ensured that supply lines ran smoothly and the Castilian forces were mustered due to her efforts.⁵⁶ It was Isabel who managed the financing of the war, thereby ensuring its continuance. She did everything she could in the planning of the campaign to ensure Spanish victory, even though the practice of war was inherently forbidden to her. During the actual operations, she stayed with the armies as much as she was able, giving moral support and travelling with them. The military knew that although she could not fight herself, she would lead them as far as she was able.

⁵³ Peggy K. Liss, “Isabel, Myth and History,” in *Isabel La Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays*, ed. David A. Boruchoff (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 64; Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 229.

⁵⁴ Lehfeltdt, “Ruling Sexuality,” 45.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth A. Lehfeltdt, “The Queen at War: Shared Sovereignty and Gender in Representations of the Granada Campaign,” in *Queen Isabel I of Castile: Power, Patronage, Persona*, ed. Barbara F. Weissberger (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), 108.

⁵⁶ Lehfeltdt, “The Queen at War,” 111.

Though she could not be on the battlefield, she played an important role in the settlements made between herself, Fernando, and their opponent Muhammad XII of Granada.⁵⁷ With the political finesse she had acquired as a sovereign ruler, she worked for peace as well. Through her sensible efforts, she contributed to the war in ways that were critical to the success of the nearly 800 year quest for Christian dominance. This achievement was only barely surpassed by the age of exploration that Isabel set in motion.

The most well-known symbol of independent Isabelline power was the initiative that Castile took in the support of exploration. Much like the *Reconquista*, Columbian exploration was a goal of Isabel's, rather than Fernando's. Aragón was expanding into the Mediterranean and in a clear instance of division in the joint monarchy, Isabel supported Columbus in order to increase Castile's prestige.⁵⁸ Although the 1,140,000 *maravedís* she gave him was not an enormous sum, it indicated Castilian rather than Aragonese support.⁵⁹ As José Luis Abellán writes "Isabel was queen in Castile, and it was in light of Castilian interests that she made most of her political decisions."⁶⁰ Columbus's proposal was no different; she supported him for the sake of her own country, not because Fernando also supported him or thought it was a good idea. Most significantly, in a 1493 bull, Pope Alexander VI granted "To you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, forever...all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered."⁶¹ Isabel and her heirs were given control over the New World completely independently of Fernando. Even before the bull, she was the one who pushed for the

⁵⁷ Miguel Angel Ladero Quesada, "Isabel and the Moors," in *Isabel La Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays*, trans. and ed. David A. Boruchoff (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 181.

⁵⁸ Abellán, 81-82.

⁵⁹ Mariéjol, 92.

⁶⁰ Abellán, 80.

⁶¹ Alexander VI, *The Papal Bull Inter Caetera*, May 4, 1493, LaSalle University, <http://www.lasalle.edu/~mcinneshin/356/wk03/divtheworld.htm> (accessed November 17, 2013).

discoveries that would become a font of Spanish wealth.⁶² Atlantic exploration is one of the clearest expressions of how Isabel's power was independent from Fernando's and she acted in the interests of her own kingdom. That independence permeated every aspect of her reign.

Above all, Isabel of Castile was absolutely certain of the considerable power she wielded as an individual, yet she also knew what was expected of her as a woman, something which must be taken into consideration when comparing her to the other female monarchs. In particular, scholars often group Isabel together with Elizabeth I of England as the two great paragons of female sovereignty in early modern Europe. Although both women maintained exceptional levels of power and challenged gender norms during their respective reigns, there are significant differences between them, best illustrated by their attitudes towards marriage as a political tool. Regardless of one's beliefs regarding the joint monarchy, Isabel's marriage to Fernando gave her important support and legitimacy. However, for Elizabeth "virginity seemed integral to her ability to get and maintain her position."⁶³ She was willing to completely flout convention, whereas Isabel took a far more subtle approach. She preferred to manipulate gender constructions for her own purposes while appearing to work within them. Although this can be harder to appreciate in today's world of female emancipation, it also shows that Isabel had a tremendous amount of agency in how her own image and power were constructed. Furthermore, she can still provide important insights for modern women.

Although it could be assumed that Isabel's historical context is too different from that of current female leaders, important lessons can still be gleaned from her determination and strength. She was a woman of impressive political power who achieved more than was ever expected of her even in the face of political adversity. The circumstances might differ in the

⁶² Abellán, 80.

⁶³ Jansen, 153.

business world or political arena of the early twenty-first century, but women continue to face significant challenges. Perhaps Liss captures Isabel's current applicability best when she writes "Hers is a story of conjugal love, familial warmth, and ambition to excel... [and] the use to which are put extraordinary reserves of will, resolution, and courage."⁶⁴ Isabel has a great deal to teach today when one examines the balance that she was able to maintain. Unlike Elizabeth, she did have a successful political marriage and provided the throne with heirs through her five children.⁶⁵ Through her, women in leadership roles can learn how one can challenge the boundaries of gender norms and be a highly effective leader while still retaining some of those same norms. Most of all, Isabel's certainties in her ability to lead and prove that she could be a successful ruler are qualities from which female CEOs and politicians can easily draw. Things have changed radically since the fifteenth century, but the importance of Isabel's belief in her own leadership and creation of political power still holds true for women today.

⁶⁴ Liss, *Isabel the Queen*, 359.

⁶⁵ Lehfeltdt, "Ruling Sexuality," 49.

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