

Peggy K. Liss. *Isabel the Queen: Life and Times*. Rev. ed. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. pp. xiv + 473.

**I**n *Isabel the Queen: Life and Times*, Peggy K.

Liss provides a balanced, thoughtfully constructed, and very readable account of the life of Queen Isabel of Castile, "an extraordinary woman who was also an extraordinary monarch, one of the most powerful the world has ever known" (1). Liss resists earlier quasi-hagiographical assessments of Isabel; rather than attempt to canonize her subject, some of the more problematic aspects of Isabel's reign are directly tackled. Isabel's biography unravels alongside narratives of the discovery of the New World, the establishment of the Inquisition, the conquest of Granada, and the expulsion and conversion of Spain's Jewish and Muslim populations. The traditional image of Isabel as a pious saint is replaced by the more complete presentation of the Queen as a devout, but effective, ruler and politician, who was savvy and competent in diplomatic, economic, and military affairs. Liss shows

Isabel to be both admirable and reprehensible; she deals admirably with the paradox of Isabel's religiosity and political acumen in light of her inhumane policies towards non-Christians.

To fully depict Isabel's personality and the tenor of her rule, Liss provides an insightful and interesting consideration of the queen's various guises and methods of self-presentation. She reveals a monarch who was astutely aware of the value of image making, and who, throughout her reign, sought to present herself as moral, righteous, just, powerful, and divinely appointed to enact God's will on earth. The book is at its best when delving into the image that Isabel sought to propagate as well as her representation in dedications, letters, *speculum principis*, and chronicles. This dual focus is especially effective as it highlights how Isabel exploited her populace's expectations of monarchy, and it

illuminates how she used shared cultural meanings, values, and assumptions to shape her policy, outlook, and propaganda. As such, Chapter 5, which sets out the cultural values at the root of her "Royal Heritage," is especially valuable. It is an ideal end to the first section of the book, which establishes Isabel's culture and her childhood as the background for her reign, motives, and *modus operandi*. Surprisingly, Liss' assessment of Isabel's reputation and self-presentation neglects to fully consider the importance of Isabel's gender. *Isabel the Queen* contains scattered allusions to the difficulties that Isabella encountered because of her sex, but these are not dealt with in any detail. This is particularly startling in light of Barbara Weissberger's 2003 study, *Isabel Rules: Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power*, in which Weissberger masterfully demonstrates that Isabel's rule cannot be fully appreciated and understood unless the gender and sexual power dynamics of the period are considered.

**[Editor's note: Weissberger's text is reviewed next in this issue.]** While *Isabel Rules* is

not a biography, it provides a groundbreaking analysis of how the medieval Iberian values of power, sovereignty, sex, and gender impacted upon Isabel's self-presentation, representation, and reception. Liss' biography would have benefited from a consideration of Weissberger's research.

Liss handles the difficult task of disengaging Isabel's life and rule from Ferdinand's well. Usually referred to jointly as the Catholic Monarchs, Isabel and Ferdinand's policies have been considered as unified and harmonious. Here, Liss highlights Isabel's interventions, demarcating them from Ferdinand's, and she is thus able to trace the development of an independent queen. What emerges from this biography is a good understanding of Isabel as a person and as a monarch. But, Liss does not merely restrict herself to the narrative of Isabel's life; this comprehensive portrait of Isabel is enhanced by a thorough delineation of contemporary Spanish history and concerns, wonderfully replete with vivid anecdotes. Liss' dual focus on queen and

country is reinforced through the ever-widening focus of the book's three sections as it traces Isabel and her rule within Spanish, European, and global politics. Isabel was motivated by an intense drive to control every aspect of her entire kingdom, and she justified her desires by accepting and fostering an image of herself as the Virgin Mary, destined to redeem her kingdom and cleanse it of impurities. The Inquisition emerges as a means to identify the true faithful, to create and maintain religious and political solidarity, and to further strengthen the link between God and the reigning monarch in the popular imagination. The conquest of Granada only confirmed for Isabel her deep conviction in her providential role and her belief that Spain, its people, and its rulers were the divine champions of Christendom. Further separating Ferdinand's rule from Isabel's, Liss shows that while there is a tendency to ascribe the expulsion of the Jews to Ferdinand, their contemporaries within the Jewish community held Isabel responsible. Moreover, in light

of Isabel's perception of her divine role, despite the financial motives of the expulsion, Isabel stressed the messianic implications of her policy and viewed the gruesome actions taken against the Jews as a necessary working out of God's will. Her colonial impulses were similarly articulated within an apocalyptic sense of purpose, which was facilitated by Columbus' religious rhetoric of their divinely ordained missions of royal domination and conversion. In her colonizing activities in the Americas, similarly to her treatment of Spain's Muslim and Jewish populations, Isabel perceived an absolute correlation between the propagation of the Christian faith and a highly centralized, dynastic, and providential vision of the Spanish monarchy and Spain's destiny.

While the first edition of Peggy Liss' biography of Queen Isabella marked the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus' first voyage to America, this revised edition coincides with the quincentenary of the queen's death. *Isabel the Queen* was

generally well received when it first appeared. It was especially valued as the first English biography of this important monarch. Liss incorporates much of the research on Isabel since 1992 into her revision. In fact, a major strength of this revised volume lies in its extended documentation and citation. The endnotes are more than doubled in number and fuller in detail, which makes this edition more scholarly and convincing. While the book has been slightly revised throughout, remedying oddities in syntax and style and incorporating new research, the bulk of the revision appears to be in the notes. These additions, coupled with the more comprehensive index, make the revised volume easier to use. Other slight changes also yield significant, positive results. For instance, the family tree, which was hidden at the end of the volume, is moved to a more prominent position at the front of the book. The revised edition more than compensates for its lack of the first edition's glossy images by containing approximately twice the number of images placed

at relevant and opportune places where they can fully complement Liss' arguments and visual analyses. Even the short selected bibliographies of the first edition have been omitted entirely, and a complete bibliography is still unfortunately lacking. Yet Liss manages to improve upon an already valuable and enjoyable book. *Isabel the Queen* will be of interest to historians and literary scholars of late medieval and early Renaissance Iberia as well as to researchers in women's history. This revised edition should make Liss' biography of Queen Isabel more accessible to the larger audience that it deserves, enabling more readers to become familiar with this exceptional and intriguing monarch.

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