

Barbara F. Weissberger. *Isabel Rules: Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004. pp. 326 + 5 figures.

David A. Boruchoff, ed. *Isabel la Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays*. (The New Middle Ages.) Palgrave, 2003. pp. 312 + 13 figures.

2004 marks the 500th anniversary of the death of Isabel I of Castile, arguably the most famous woman of the Spanish Middle Ages, perhaps of all of Spanish history. She is also one of the most controversial; one of the few medieval queen regents who illustrates that gender was not an absolute barrier to power, she was also an absolutist monarch who instituted some of the most intolerant policies of the late medieval era. Many Americans have a romantic view of the queen who pawned her jewels to finance Columbus' voyage of discovery, a view that casts Isabel in a supporting role behind the great man. Both these books, addressed to a broad American audience, counter this comfortable origin myth. Barbara F. Weissberger's monograph consistently takes a feminist approach to the

figure of Isabel, while David A. Boruchoff's volume presents a range of views and approaches.

Isabel Rules is one of the most important books on late medieval Spanish culture and literature of the past decade, one that hopefully will inspire additional revisionist, feminist studies in the near future. As Weissberger notes in her introduction, hers is the first sustained study of Isabel from a materialist feminist perspective, a truly surprising omission due both to the wealth of feminist studies on Elizabeth I of England and to the prominence of Isabel in Spanish historiography and national identity. While Hispanic studies are more resistant to feminist approaches than English, another reason for this omission is the persistent, deeply contradictory representations

and uses of Isabel. As Weissberger documents in her conclusion, Franco used Isabel to promote an image of Spanish womanhood as pious, chaste, maternal, and domestic, the complement to militaristic Spanish manhood. During her lifetime, Isabel both resisted and played that role, marrying and producing heirs to secure the line of succession for the Castilian throne, yet refusing to yield sovereignty of Castile to her husband. While Weissberger does explore these contradictions, her main focus is how the masculine anxieties prompted by this female monarch shaped portrayals of Isabel in literature, historiography, and even chess manuals.

The most successful chapters are those in which Weissberger juxtaposes two texts and explores their divergent yet often complementary portrayals of powerful women. Chapter 1 is a masterful comparison of Juan de Mena's *Laberinto de Fortuna* and its obscene parody, the *Carajicomedia*, demonstrating the essential misogyny of both texts.

Chapter 3, which analyzes the chronicles produced by Isabel's court historians, not only further develops the issue of masculine anxiety, but also suggests that misogyny and intolerance of otherness reflects *letrados'* humanist philosophy. Chapter 5 examines two apparently disparate texts by Luis de Lucena, a *letrado* seeking employment at Prince Juan's court. Weissberger shows that the forbidding figure of the female monarch is central to these two texts, perhaps most ingeniously in Lucena's discussion of the "new" rules of chess, in which the most powerful piece is the Queen. Chapter 6 further develops the study of *letrado* culture by examining Juan de Flores' sentimental romances and their disturbingly ambiguous women-on-top conclusions, which, Weissberger argues, expose the gendered nature of monarchical absolutism.

Chapters 2 and 4 are less cohesive, in part because they examine a broader range of texts and representations of Isabel. Chapter 2 examines literary and visual representations of

queenship composed before and after Isabel's ascent to the throne, written either to encourage a submissive role as queen consort, to defend her assertion of sovereignty as queen regent, or to propagate the myth of her co-rule with Fernando. Chapter 4 discusses Neo-Gothic theory, the idea that the Trastamara kings directly descended from the Visigoths who ruled before the Muslim invasion. Neo-Gothicism presented Isabel as a Virgin Mary redeeming Spain from the sins of Enrique IV and Rodrigo, the last Visigothic king, an image the pornographic *Pleyto del manto* counters by representing her as an insatiable cunt. While the central focus of this chapter is the bodily, material basis to Isabel's claim to sovereignty, the three parts in which Weissberger develops this theme do not quite build a cohesive whole.

Overall, Weissberger's *Isabel Rules* is a persuasive, ambitious, and carefully argued book. The contrast with *Isabel la Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays* is inevitable. The latter is a collection of essays by Hispanists

from the U.S., Canada, and Spain, representing a range of disciplines and approaches, all in English (often translated by the editor). This even-handed, broadly cultural studies approach is both an asset and a weakness. While this volume does represent the "state of the question" of Isabelline studies, it lacks the cohesiveness of a thesis-driven monograph, and the very different attitudes toward Isabel make for a somewhat schizophrenic collection.

There is no Isabel; there are only representations of Isabel, including those produced by these authors. Boruchoff is aware of this fact, as shown by his careful reading of Isabelline historiography, medieval and modern. This insight clashes with the intent of some of the historians included here, who not only seek the truth about the historic Isabel, but also defend her against modern detractors. Boruchoff tacitly acknowledges this clash by framing the collection with two essays written by him. Tellingly, the introduction lacks a discussion of the other eleven essays in which Boruchoff

could have addressed head-on, and made less problematic, the differences in this collection. There are three particularly strong essays in this collection, all of them studies of Isabelline historiography or policy. Peggy K. Liss explores Isabel's use of apocalyptic language and imagery which helped create the mythical treatment of her in Spanish and American historiography. Marcelino V. Amasuno Sárraga provides a medicolegal history of Fernando and Isabel's unsuccessful attempts to centralize control of all medical practitioners in Castile. This article stands out for its original research and extensive citations of archival evidence (translated to English) in the endnotes. The second essay by Boruchoff focuses on Spanish historiography's universalizing and exemplarizing tendencies, which, he argues, is part of the Isabelline legacy. He particularly examines the work of Fernando de Pulgar, who would "beautify" history and increase its didactic value by putting apocryphal speeches that he himself wrote into the mouths of historical figures, thereby leading his readers to form a critical perspective on

Fernando and Isabel. Weaker, but still worth reading, are the three essays that discuss Isabelline literature and art. Elizabeth Teresa Howe examines the reception of Isabel as an exemplary figure, either a warrior queen (pre-1492) or a faithful wife (post-1492). Her reading of Isabel's depiction by male writers closely parallels that of Weissberger. Chiyo Ishikawa reads the conservative Christological theme in art and literature commissioned by Isabel as a reflection of her mission to reform Castile after the corruption of Enrique IV's reign. Jesús Pérez-Magallón discusses Lope de Vega's depiction of Isabel in six plays. The second half of this essay, in which he discusses the role of theater in sixteenth-century Spain, is much more successful, as the historical and social context helps explain Lope's emphasis on Isabel's religiosity, political acumen, and wifely traits. The least successful essays are the first two in the volume, the first a brief political and economic history of Castile and Aragon, the second a rather mythical portrait of Isabel before her ascension to the throne.

Three essays stand out for their apologetic stance toward controversial Isabelline policies. José Luis Abellán studies Isabel's conception of and missionary intent for the new lands discovered by Columbus, highlighting Hernando de Talavera's theory of conversion by persuasion to deny Isabel's culpability for the deaths of indigenous peoples. Joseph Pérez provides a history of Jews and *conversos* in Castile and Aragon, arguing that the Catholic monarchs expelled the Jews not out of racism but in order to separate them from *conversos* to facilitate the latter's assimilation into the Old Christian majority. Miguel Angel Ladero Quesada also denies racism informed Isabel's treatment of Muslims. He carefully tracks the post-1492 treatment of *granadinos*, moving from conversion by persuasion to forced baptism after uprisings throughout Granada. The apologetic tone of these three essays not only distracts attention from their real strengths as historical studies but may cause readers to class them as of a piece with the panegyric histories discussed by Boruchoff.

A final issue of concern in both books is the preference of English. In *Isabel Rules*, English translations precede citations in the original, which are often buried in the endnotes. In *Isabel la Católica* monarchs' names (with the exception of Isabel herself) are translated into English, so Enrique IV is called Henry IV, Fernando is Ferdinand, etc. This preference for English contrasts with Ladero Quesada and others' use of Spanish terms in their essays. Of course it is appropriate to translate citations, but to put English first and to translate proper names implies that American readers cannot tolerate foreign words and are not interested in Spanish. These volumes risk treating their readers as Hispanophobes even as they seek to teach Americans about this preeminent figure of the Spanish Middle Ages.

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