

Word count: 6,071

Isabel: Her Legitimacy, Her Sexuality, Her Legacy

Isabel of Castile spent her life reconciling her own sexuality with the political and behavioral expectations of a young princess and later a queen. Late medieval Castilians viewed sexuality as a public matter, so Isabel used sex as a political tool to gain support for her own cause.

Even though sex heavily influenced her reign, Isabel had a modest and conservative upbringing. The young princess of Juan II of Castile and Isabel of Portugal did not anticipate becoming queen, since few princesses grew up with the intention of ruling. Most women who sat on the throne of Castile served as regents for their dead husbands or underage sons.¹ Isabel learned the “cultivation of womanly virtues—reading and writing in the Castilian vernacular, prayers, the Bible, embroidery, needlepoint, and gilded painting.”² Her brothers most likely received an education targeting secular, political, and worldly concerns.

Fray Luis de León’s *La Perfecta Casada* informed Isabel’s education and her future expectations. While her brothers read Aristotle, Isabel learned how to behave as a wife, including possibly these lines:

Although this good wife has to be ready for anything, which is what Solomon here calls strength, she does not thereby have licence to be disagreeable in her disposition and unpleasant in her manners and dealings...I mean to say that neither her diligence nor watchfulness nor the attendance to the things of the home should make her harsh and terrible, nor even less should grace and gentle talk and mien be lax and unbridled, but rather tempering one with the other, let her preserve a balance in both things and mix the two in a pleasant and excellent combination.³

¹ Elizabeth Lehfeldt, “Ruling Sexuality: The Political Legitimacy of Isabel of Castile,” in *Renaissance Quarterly* (Chicago: 2000), 33.

² Nancy Rubin, *Isabella of Castile* (New York: 1991), 29.

³ Fray Luis de León, *A Bilingual Edition of Fray Luis de León’s La Perfecta Casada*, edited by John A. Jones and Javier San José Lera (Lewiston: 1999), 201.

This excerpt illustrates the expectations for Isabel's behavior as a future wife. Isabel needed to maintain her composure and a cheerful disposition for her husband. Stressful situations at home did not justify a disagreeable attitude in a wife, she needed to remain pleasant at all times. Though this education taught Isabel how to be a proper wife for Ferdinand, Isabel regretted her lack of formal education after she ascended the throne.⁴

Isabel spent much of her youth at the castle of Arévalo and received some of her instruction from the nuns at the convent of Santa Ana in Ávila.⁵ At the birth of his daughter Juana though, Isabel's brother, Enrique IV summoned Isabel to his court. Rubin believes that Isabel encountered a life of "flirtation and sexual-innuendo" at court, a stark contrast to her quiet life of prayer, study, and outdoor entertainment at Arévalo.⁶



Young Isabel of Castile.

Rubin asserts that Enrique lived a carefree life at court, preferring to hunt and to furnish his extravagant lifestyle than to deal with the issues concerning Castile.⁷ During Enrique's reign (1454-1474) he suffered the nobles' discontent, lack of heirs followed by lack of legitimate heirs, rumors of impotence and homosexuality, and his wife's infidelity. The nobility of Castile wanted a legitimate male heir, more effective action against the Muslims at Granada, and a stricter approach to the Jewish and Muslim populations of Castile.⁸

Historians focus on the turmoil in Enrique's personal life that contributed to troubles in his rule. Enrique IV of Castile and Henry VIII of England remain the only European kings who sought to annul their marriages. We know little about Enrique's first wife, Blanca. Daniel Eisenberg surmises that Enrique petitioned for annulment from Blanca because he expected to produce an heir with a second wife. The quest for an heir is another commonality between Enrique and the Tudor king.⁹ While Enrique and Blanca attempted to consummate their marriage, Blanca's father waited outside the wedding suite with trumpets. Eisenberg suggests that this caused problems for Enrique.¹⁰

Both William Phillips and Townsend Miller agree that Enrique enjoyed success in his first ten years as king. Phillips argues that Enrique laid the foundation for many of the policies of the Catholic Monarchs.¹¹ Karen Kennelly, who reviewed Phillips' book, echoes this sentiment, arguing that the Catholic Monarchs glorified Castile "because of rather than in spite of"

⁴ Rubin, 30.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rubin, 32.

⁷ Rubin, 54.

⁸ Lehfeldt, 33.

⁹ Daniel Eisenberg, "Enrique IV and Gregorio Marañón," in *Renaissance Quarterly* (Chicago: 1976), 28.

¹⁰ Eisenberg, 29.

¹¹ William Phillips, *Enrique IV* (Cambridge: 1978), 45.

Enrique's tenure as king.¹² Highfield agrees with both Phillips and Kennelly. He contends that Enrique fostered the important bureaucratic offices of 'letrados' and 'corregidores', usually attributed to the Catholic Monarchs.¹³

Enrique's marriage to his second wife, Juana, also had issues. Seven years of marriage passed before the birth of their first child. The court disputed the infant's paternity, especially because Enrique's queen, Juana of Portugal, maintained a large entourage, allegedly dressed provocatively to flatter her figure, and engaged in flirtatious relationships with the men of her husband's court.¹⁴ Notably, many nobles envied Beltrán de la Cueva's popularity and obvious favor at court. Beltrán often bragged about his access to Queen Juana, so the court viewed him as a possible father for Juana's child, especially as many courtiers counted back the weeks and months of Beltrán's visits speculating that he, not Enrique, fathered the child.¹⁵ Enrique, after all, admitted his impotence with first wife Blanca. Juana's lack of decency and morality made Beltrán a more likely candidate for the father of the child.¹⁶

The child, Juana 'La Infanta' quickly received the nickname of, 'la Beltraneja'. Enrique added fuel to the fire by elevating don Beltrán to Count of Ledesma at the celebration of Juana's baptism. Miller contends that this action signified a pay-off or a reward for Beltrán's 'merits' and 'willing services' to the crown.¹⁷ Critical to the future of the Iberian Peninsula, Isabel's claim to the throne depended entirely on proving Juana la Beltraneja's illegitimacy.

More problems developed in the second decade of Enrique's reign, following the birth of Juana. Phillips focuses on the political aspects of Enrique's reign and omits much of the speculation and gossip concerning his personal life. Highfield's review of Phillips' book praises this fact, arguing that Enrique's alleged impotence and the question of Juana's legitimacy eclipsed the more important issues facing Castile in the mid-1400s. Highfield also agrees with Phillips' claims of Juana's legitimacy, emphasizing that the public accepted Juana as legitimate and any claims to the contrary were not biologically based.¹⁸ In effect, historians reject Isabel's accusations regarding Juana's birth.

Another of Phillips' reviewers, Joseph O'Callaghan, appreciates the author's assertions that Enrique was not an "ineffectual or inept" ruler. O'Callaghan does, however, take issue with the fact that Phillips upholds Juana's legitimacy simply because there is no strong evidence against it. O'Callaghan believes that this is a weak argument because Phillips does not give an explanation of Enrique's abandonment of Juana and his recognition of Isabel as heir to the throne of Castile.¹⁹

Townsend Miller wrote the only other book-length biography of Enrique IV in English. Phillips harshly criticizes Miller's work. He concedes that Enrique "was probably homosexual and possibly impotent," but continues in his review to admonish Miller for indulging in the

¹² Karen Kennelly, Review of "Enrique IV" in *Journal of Medieval Studies*, Vol. 54 No. 3, 620.

¹³ J. R. L. Highfield, Review of "Enrique IV" in *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 96 No. 378, 205.

¹⁴ Rubin, 31.

¹⁵ Townsend Miller, *Henry IV of Castile* (Philadelphia: 1972), 121.

¹⁶ Miller, 120.

¹⁷ Miller, 123.

¹⁸ Highfield, 205.

¹⁹ Joseph F. O'Callaghan, Review of "Enrique IV" in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 84 No. 4, 1033.

“political history scandals, and imbroglios of the court and high nobility”. Phillips chastises Miller for his neglect of the lower class and argues that Miller is too confident in his conclusions without solid evidence, which is an interesting criticism given that O’Callaghan criticized Phillips for drawing conclusions based on lack of evidence.²⁰

Historians of late medieval Castile often debate the reasons behind Enrique’s flamboyant behavior. Did he suffer from a medical condition or did his behavior emerge as a result of his alleged homosexuality? Before examining these questions, it must be established that to use the term ‘homosexual’ in reference to Enrique is anachronistic, entirely out of place chronologically, as the term did not exist in fifteenth century Castile. It emerged in the nineteenth century as a hybrid word, replacing the biblical ‘sodomite’, the medieval term used in Enrique’s generation. Sodomy comes from the Latin word ‘Sodom’ referring to the ancient Palestinian town destroyed by fire from heaven because of its wicked people in Genesis 19:24.²¹ Therefore, any modern presumptions of Enrique’s ‘homosexuality’ suffer from an historic bias that does not acknowledge change over time in terms of sexuality. This kind of analysis reveals more about understandings of illness and sexuality in the twentieth century than it does about the 1400s.

A narrow-minded view of homosexuality during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drove Gregorio Marañón to seek a biological reason for Enrique’s sexual inclination. Marañón, a twentieth century Spanish physician and political supporter of the Spanish Republic, spent a portion of his career looking for a diagnosis of Enrique’s medical condition or an endocrinological reason behind his alleged homosexuality—the term used in Marañón’s research. Marañón deemed Enrique’s love of music, ability to play the lute, preference for solitude, and aversion to having his hands kissed as a sign of loyalty, “homosexual inclinations.” Marañón also took into consideration the fact that Enrique kept dwarves and unusual men in his court. All of these perceived oddities led to Marañón’s description of Enrique as a “deficiente sexual”. However, the medical field of endocrinology completely rejected the notion of a hormonal cause of homosexuality in the latter half of the twentieth century. Marañón posthumously diagnosed Enrique’s illness as both acromegaly and eunuchoidism. Acromegaly is a pituitary disturbance that causes gigantism while eunuchoidism is an endocrine issue that causes an “insufficiency of the male sexual hormones”. Effects of eunuchoidism include a high voice pitch, absence of facial hair, feminine body shape and fat distribution, and reduction or loss of libido or potency.²²



Enrique IV of Castile

While Marañón believed Enrique suffered from a combination of these diseases, a number of factors invalidate this diagnosis. First, the history of medicine contains documentation of only one or two of these rare cases, so Marañón’s diagnosis of Enrique is highly unlikely.

²⁰ William D. Phillips, Review of “Enrique IV” in *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 53 No. 1, 150.

²¹ Oxford Dictionary Online, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/Sodom?q=sodom>, Accessed 22 February 2012.

²² Eisenberg, 22-25.

Secondly, numerous sources mention Enrique's 'abundant beard'. Since loss of facial hair is the first indicator of eunuchoidism, Enrique most likely did not suffer from this disease.²³

Sources also document Enrique's sexual potency prior to his first marriage. The king often sought prostitutes in Segovia and many of them testified to his potency in his petition for annulment. Eisenberg believes that the king suffered from an ailment different than eunuchoidism. Other symptoms overlooked by Marañón, including, "large thick fingers, the lion-like appearance, the oversized skull with its protruding jaw and misplaced teeth, [and the] enlarged chest barrel" indicate an abundance of pituitary hormones that lead to acromegaly. Eisenberg asserts that this overload of hormones resulted from a tumor or other pituitary issue.²⁴

Marañón's posthumous diagnosis of Enrique's illness, almost five hundred years after his death, does not provide a reliable or verifiable presumption. We cannot know Enrique's exact symptoms, only his appearance and his actions as seen by witnesses. These accounts are not always reliable. Therefore, Marañón's twentieth-century diagnosis of a fifteenth-century illness serves as poorly supported speculation at best, not as a properly researched historical analysis. Nevertheless, Eisenberg attempted his own, admittedly more thoroughly researched diagnosis of Enrique's health condition.

Eisenberg supports his own diagnosis with an overview of acromegaly. This progressive disease primarily affects adults, a fitting detail as Enrique showed no signs of illness as a child. Acromegaly also causes "fatigability, vague nervous symptoms, and considerable instability". Other common side effects in the advanced stage of this disease include loss of potency and libido. Many accounts describe Enrique as wavering between emotions and Eisenberg believes that Enrique's alleged impotency resulted from the acromegaly as well.²⁵

These twentieth century diagnoses of illness and investigations surrounding Enrique only serve a purpose in regards to concepts of sexuality in the present era. Historians benefit more from understanding how Enrique's illness and sexuality were used against him as a political tool by Isabel. Isabel discredited her brother through the use of royal chronicler, Alfonso de Palencia. Propaganda from Isabel's supporters publicized Juana la Beltraneja's illegitimacy and therefore Enrique's impotency as fact to bolster Isabel's cause. Palencia detailed many allegations against the King in his *Crónica de Enrique IV*. Isabel oversaw the writing of this chronicle making its entire contents propagandistic support for her legitimacy claims and her reign as queen. Weissberger claims that Palencia's treatment of Enrique in the *Crónica* created a 'discourse of effeminacy' which garnered Enrique the name of 'el impotente'.²⁶

The *Crónica* details Enrique's alleged pleasures, his marriage to Juana of Portugal, and the available evidence of his impotence. Palencia claims that Enrique's introduction to sodomy happened at the age of fourteen and that the infatuation lasted throughout the rest of his life. Weissberger writes that Palencia accused the King of constructing a secluded building where he entertained shady characters including dwarves, an allegation previously noted by Gregorio

²³ Eisenberg, 24-25.

²⁴ Eisenberg, 26.

²⁵ Eisenberg, 27.

²⁶ Barbara Weissberger, "'¡A Tierra, Puto!' Alfonso de Palencia's Discourse of Effeminacy," in *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, edited by Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson (Durham: 1999), 297.

Marañón. The negative connotations used by Palencia reveal the chronicler's prejudice against the King. The unspeakable act of sex between men, the *pecado nefando*, led Palencia to describe Enrique as having "disgusting vices".²⁷

Palencia's *Crónica* also reveals the available evidence of la Beltraneja's illegitimacy. Apart from the King's alleged impotence and sodomy, and Queen Juana's notorious affairs, Isabel's camp perpetuated the rumor that,

...Princess Juana's nose had been broken at birth to compensate for the fact that she bore no physical resemblance to Enrique, and that an attempt had been made, also at her birth, to exchange her for a male child born on the same day in the same town.²⁸

To many Castilians, the likelihood of this possibility increased with Palencia's claim that Enrique's marriage to Juana was "devoid of conjugal affection".²⁹

Whatever ailment he suffered from, the severity of Enrique's health condition potentially contributed to the troubles in the second half of his reign. Rebel groups, unsatisfied with Enrique's dealings with the Muslims in Granada and with his policies concerning the Jews and Muslims of Castile, deposed the king at the Farce of Avila in 1465.³⁰ After stripping Enrique of his scepter and sword, rebels threw his effigy to the ground shouting, "¡A tierra, Puto!" a reference to the King's alleged sodomy.³¹ In his place, the rebels put the likeness of Enrique's younger brother Alfonso on the throne.³² The rebels' hopes for Alfonso to assume the throne dissipated when the young prince died from a pneumonic strain of the plague in July of 1468.³³ The death of her younger brother left Isabel next in line to the throne of Castile, behind only Juana 'la Beltraneja'. The rebels hesitated to pledge their support for Isabel to assume the throne. Isabel, however, refused to usurp the throne while Enrique lived. Fearing more rebellion and civil war, Enrique hesitantly agreed to make Isabel heir to the throne, provided that the princess and the rebels take no action until his death.³⁴

In September of 1468, Isabel and Enrique met on the plain of Toros de Guisando outside of Ávila. The resulting Toros de Guisando pact named Isabel and not Princess Juana as legitimate heir and successor to the throne of Castile-León after the death of Enrique. Until then, Isabel had to remain loyal to Enrique and respect him as her king. Isabel received properties and money to compliment her elevated station. Lastly, Enrique promised to find his sister a suitable husband, though Isabel reserved the right to decline the marriage proposal. In turn, Enrique prohibited Isabel from marrying without his consent.³⁵ Some historians and even royal chroniclers viewed this pact as Enrique's acknowledgement of la Beltraneja's illegitimacy. Griffiths postulates that Enrique never abandoned Juana as legitimate heir of Castile, instead that he planned to remove Isabel from the picture altogether. All of the suitors suggested by Enrique

²⁷ Weissberger, 296.

²⁸ Weissberger, 298-299.

²⁹ Weissberger, 295.

³⁰ Angus MacKay, "Ritual and Propaganda in Fifteenth-Century Castile," in *Past and Present* (New York: 1985), 9.

³¹ Weissberger, 301.

³² MacKay, 11.

³³ Rubin, 50.

³⁴ Rubin, 53-54.

³⁵ Rubin, 56.

lived outside the realm of Castile. Griffiths suggests that Enrique manipulated this situation. If Isabel married and left Castile, that left Juana the sole and legitimate heir to the throne.³⁶

Isabel saw within a short span of time that Enrique failed to uphold his end of the Toros de Guisando Pact. Enrique did not release Isabel's towns to her authority. Nor did he seek to divorce Juana or to send her, along with La Beltraneja, to exile in Portugal. Isabel chose to take action and arrange her own marriage, with or without Enrique's approval. Her selection, Ferdinand of Aragon, shared customs similar to her own and already had illegitimate children, a sign that their future marriage held heirs for the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. Ferdinand already ruled Sicily as king and stood to inherit Aragon upon his father's death. A marriage between Isabel and Ferdinand promised to reunite the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and also to reunite the Trastámara line.³⁷ The marriage between Isabel and Ferdinand required a dispensation as their relationship violated the fourth degree of consanguinity law. The two shared the same paternal great-grandfather, making them second cousins, too closely related to marry without permission from the pope.

Isabel and Ferdinand married on 19 October 1469, after months of arrangements. Unbeknownst to the bride, Ferdinand's father forged the dispensation present at the wedding.



Ferdinand and Isabel shortly after their marriage.

Pope Paul II refused his permission for the marriage. After his death though, the new pope, Sixtus IV, granted a dispensation sanctioning Ferdinand and Isabel's marriage in 1471. Enrique refused to recognize the validity of Isabel's marriage at first, citing the false dispensation. Instead, the king sought to disinherit Isabel and reinstate his daughter, La Beltraneja, to the line of succession by betrothing her to the French king Louis XI.³⁸

Tensions in Castile continued to mount as rebels resumed protests over Enrique's policies and civil war loomed near. Then, Isabel gave birth to her first child, daughter Isabel. Despite the female gender of the child, Isabel's fertility promised future heirs for Castile. The birth of her second child, a son, sealed Isabel's claim of legitimacy. With Prince Juan, Castile received a male heir to the throne.

Enrique's death in 1474 ignited civil war between Isabel's supporters and the few who remained loyal to La Beltraneja. Isabel seized her chance at the throne immediately, despite Ferdinand's absence, as she feared La Beltraneja's supporters would have the chance to rally. After Enrique's funeral, Isabel oversaw a gathering in the main square of Segovia. After the event, the present clergy and nobility vowed allegiance to Isabel and announced her ascension to the throne. Isabel then rode through the town in procession. The new queen demonstrated

³⁶ Cristina Guardiola-Griffiths, *Legitimizing the Queen: Propaganda and Ideology in the Reign of Isabel I of Castile* (Plymouth: 2011), 49.

³⁷ Rubin, 65-66.

³⁸ Rubin, 91.

perhaps the first legitimate manipulation of her sexuality by carrying a “decidedly phallic symbol,” a sword, rather than the traditional scepter.³⁹

La Beltraneja fled to Portugal following her father’s death. Those who rallied for her cause eventually failed, and Isabel sought to eliminate the final threat to her legitimacy. After the birth of their son Juan, Ferdinand and Isabel presented La Beltraneja with the option of betrothal to their heir, or of entering a convent. Enrique’s daughter quickly chose to become a nun, knowing the betrothal would likely fall through. Juana entered the convent of Santa Clara de Santarém in Portugal in 1479.⁴⁰ Isabel thereby solidified her claim to the throne.

Isabel fought for and succeeded in gaining the throne of Castile-León, despite a lack of precedents. Salic law, which prohibited a woman from inheriting the throne, did not exist in Castile. Nevertheless, past Castilian queens served as regents or consorts and nothing more.⁴¹ Castile’s monumental expectations for Isabel forced the new queen to carefully and tastefully manipulate and in some cases hide her own gender and sexuality.

Ferdinand anticipated a role more than that of consort in Castile after Isabel succeeded Enrique. The new king of Castile-León learned of his wife’s coronation as queen three days after it took place in Segovia. Ferdinand and Isabel signed agreements before their marriage that restricted Ferdinand’s power in Castile once Isabel assumed the throne. Ferdinand, however, “...had not expected that Isabel would be crowned without him or that the unsheathed sword, that ancient symbol of the highest sovereign authority, would be raised aloft in that ceremony for a female monarch. ‘I never heard of a Queen who usurped this male privilege,’ he said.”⁴² Through her swift actions in the coronation process, Isabel demolished any expectations or assumptions that she would relinquish her sovereignty in Castile to Ferdinand. Isabel’s chronicler, Alfonso de Palencia, disagreed with the Queen’s use of the sword in her coronation ceremony and suggested that Isabel allow Ferdinand a greater role in the rule of Castile.⁴³ While Palencia helped Isabel to discredit Enrique and his reign, the chronicler took issue with the Queen’s adopted masculinity. Palencia saw this as a usurpation of Ferdinand’s role as King, despite his status as consort.

After the initial establishment of her sovereignty, Isabel spent the rest of her reign reconciling her gender with her power and sexuality. Fray Martín advised Isabel, in the early years of her reign, to overcome what he viewed as the inadequacies of her sex. Fray Martín shared the view of many Castilian men, including Juan Luis Vives, that “Womans thought is swyfte and for the most parte unstable.”⁴⁴ Fray Martín also echoed Palencia’s sentiment that Isabel share the rule of Castile with her husband. These men depicted Ferdinand as a voice of reason in the rule of Castile, a necessary measure to balance Isabel’s “weakness and timidity”.⁴⁵

³⁹ Lehfeltdt, 34.

⁴⁰ Rubin, 175.

⁴¹ Guardiola-Griffiths, 52.

⁴² Rubin, 128-129.

⁴³ Elizabeth Lehfeltdt, Review of “Isabel Rules: Constructing Queenship and Wielding Power” in *Biography*, Vol. 27 No. 4, 852.

⁴⁴ Juan Luis Vives, *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, edited by Virginia Walcott Beauchamp, Elizabeth H. Hageman, and Margaret Mikesell (Chicago: 2002), 16.

⁴⁵ Lehfeltdt, 36.

The expectations of Isabel as a wife did not change, despite her sovereignty as ruler of Castile. Isabel, however, took her role as a wife very seriously. Though she ruled a realm of greater size and wealth than that of her husband, Isabel's power lay strictly outside her marriage. The Castilian queen sewed Ferdinand's shirts on her own as a sign of devotion to her husband, and taught her children to do the same.⁴⁶ Isabel's daughter, Catherine of Aragon, famously followed her mother's teachings even after her husband left her for his mistress Anne Boleyn. Because of the education she received, Isabel knew how to act as Ferdinand's wife according to the accepted gender roles of her era.

The daunting expectations placed on the Queen forced Isabel to walk a fine line in balancing her gender with her position of power. Leffeldt writes that Galen viewed women as cold creatures, while Albertus Magnus asserted that women possessed humid complexions. These qualities made women "inconstant and always seeking something new". In their view, these qualities also differed entirely from the distinctly male characteristic of heat. According to Leffeldt, a man who possessed heat, also possessed courage, honesty, and strength. Therefore, Isabel needed a male to counteract her weak and humid nature with his heat and strength.⁴⁷

As a female ruler, Isabel needed to take on certain male characteristics, while maintaining select female characteristics. The Queen could not simply behave as a man in her administration of Castile. Leffeldt argues that the examples set by Sarah's chastity, the Virgin Mary's humility, and St. Martha's charity served as models for female rulers, such as Isabel, to follow. Consequently, to succeed as a ruler, Isabel needed to both embrace and reject her nature as a woman.⁴⁸

Thankfully, subjects like Hernando de Talavera helped to carve an image of Isabel as the solution to Castile's problems brought on by Enrique. Leffeldt believes that at the close of Enrique's reign, Castilians viewed the monarch as a cuckolded and ineffective ruler. Castilian culture respected aggressive authority and potency, characteristics Enrique lacked.⁴⁹ Talavera sought to garner support for Isabel by highlighting the failures and downfalls of Enrique's tenure as king. Leffeldt asserts that Isabel's sexuality had the potential to work to her advantage when contrasted with Enrique's sexual failings. Isabel's chroniclers needed to emphasize her own potential though, not simply draw attention to Enrique's failures as king. Diego de Valera asserted that Castilian property, churches, and women fell victim to neglect under Enrique. The lack of an assertive and aggressive monarch caused a breakdown of social order in Castile.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Rubin, 30.

⁴⁷ Leffeldt, 40.

⁴⁸ Leffeldt, 41.

⁴⁹ Leffeldt, 33.

⁵⁰ Leffeldt, 41-42.

Isabel used symbolism, to confirm and assert both her power and her sexuality. For instance, Talavera chose the icon of the eagle for the crest Isabel shared with Ferdinand. Isabel's father, Juan II, used the same symbol in his own reign. Lehfeltdt believes that the use of the eagle by Isabel served as a nostalgic reminder of Juan's reign before the perceived disaster of Enrique's tenure. The word eagle in Castilian, "aguila" is a feminine word. Lehfeltdt asserts that this draws parallels between Isabel and the "queen of the birds". The use of the eagle also served to contrast Isabel's rule with her brother's. The eagle served as a symbol of renewal, a hopeful image in Castile as Enrique's reign ended and Isabel's began. Talavera also asserted that Isabel, like the eagle, was not an idle ruler.⁵¹ As discussed, Enrique often suffered complaints and criticisms for his preference of hunting or entertaining over dealing with issues concerning Castile. The eagle served to remind Castilians that Isabel possessed the qualities Enrique lacked.



Ferdinand and Isabel's Coat of Arms

The crest of the Castilian monarchs also features the motto "Tanto Monta," meaning "always riding". This motto relayed the message that Ferdinand and Isabel will always be riding into battle. The motto promised action, whether against the Muslims at Granada or against any threat to the realms of Castile and Aragon. Ferdinand and Isabel's approach, unlike that of Enrique, promised to be aggressive and assertive. The phrase "Tanto Monta" also has a more sexual meaning. "Tanto Monta" implied that Ferdinand and Isabel were both sexual and fertile rulers, unlike Enrique, who planned to provide an undisputed heir for their kingdoms.

The bottom left corner of the royal shield holds Ferdinand's symbol of marriage to Isabel, the *yugo* or quiver that holds the arrow. The bottom right corner of the shield holds Isabel's symbol for Ferdinand, the arrows themselves, or *flechas*. The first letters of these symbols, *F* and *Y*, symbolize the names of the monarchs, while the images hold a more sexual symbolism as well. The arrow of Ferdinand and the quiver of Isabel represent the fertility of the royal couple.⁵²

The promise of an heir for Castile and Aragon delighted the people of these kingdoms. However, this also put Isabel's gender and perceived weakness on display. Women supposedly had to restrict activities during pregnancy. This threatened Isabel's newly consolidated power. In response, the Castilian queen did not enter confinement during any of her pregnancies. Instead, she maintained the throne, needing no regent, leading to and following her births.⁵³ The impracticality of confinement likely led many late medieval Castilian women to forego the practice as well.

⁵¹ Lehfeltdt, 38-39.

⁵² Nicole von Germeten, Class lecture on Spanish monarchs, Winter 2011.

⁵³ Lehfeltdt, 49.

Isabel's religious devotion and piety earned her many comparisons with the Virgin Mary. However, the queen's sexual nature also earned her comparisons with Eve and her original sin. Isabel needed to reconcile one comparison with the other. Lehfeldt observes that,

Isabel was able to provide sanction for her womanly nature. She was married and had borne children but neither of these things compromised her ability to rule...The kingdom would not be corrupted by Isabel's female nature.⁵⁴

Mary redeemed Eve's sin with the birth of Jesus following the Immaculate Conception. Similarly, Lehfeldt postulates that the birth of Isabel's own son, Juan, symbolically delivered Castile from an era of breakdown and sin into an age of reformation. By bearing the pains of childbirth, Isabel delivered Castile into redemption by providing an undisputed male heir.⁵⁵

Isabel sought reform in many aspects of Castilian life. It is no surprise that the devout queen wanted strict religious reform within Castile. The nobility perceived Enrique's dealings with the Castilian conversos, false converts from Judaism to Christianity, as one of his greatest failings. Ferdinand and Isabel placed the papal inquisition under their control to seek out heretics and false converts.⁵⁶ This decision dealt with conversos in a way that Enrique avoided for the majority of his reign.

The monarchs also hoped to reform the clergy. Lehfeldt asserts that Isabel believed the integrity of the Church in Castile lay in the virtue of virginity of religious women. As a result, the monarchs sought to enclose the female religious population. Enclosure ensured a stronger focus on prayer and piety without influence from the outside world. Aside from being enclosed, religious houses also received strict monitoring and limited visitors regardless of their status. Lehfeldt believes that Isabel viewed all women, religious women in particular, as susceptible to seduction. Enclosure limited any likelihood of and opportunity for this possibility.⁵⁷

Ferdinand and Isabel's successful conquest at Granada marked one of the greatest accomplishments of their reign. Isabel knew Enrique's failure to force the Muslims out of Granada caused immense discontent in the kingdom. Castilians waited to see whether Isabel would deliver them into the promised golden age – *Siglo de oro* – with a victory at Granada. Isabel's status as a woman prohibited her from leading the troops into battle, but the Queen did not wait idly at home in Castile while her husband led the conquest. Instead, Isabel resided in the south, near Granada, for the duration of the war.⁵⁸

When Ferdinand advised a temporary cessation to the Granada campaign in order to turn attention to the border with France, she told him he could remain in Aragon to meet those challenges, but the war in the south would continue. She appeared before the troops and even rode with them at the start of individual campaigns.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Lehfeldt, 53.

⁵⁵ Lehfeldt, 50.

⁵⁶ Lehfeldt, 43.

⁵⁷ Lehfeldt, 46-49.

⁵⁸ Lehfeldt, 44.

⁵⁹ Lehfeldt, 44-45.

Isabel's determination to claim victory at Granada led her to defy her husband's wish to temporarily end the war. While Isabel usually submitted to her husband in marriage, the war concerned the rule of her kingdom and she refused to relinquish victory despite Ferdinand's objections.

In spite of her wish to prove successful at Granada, a decisive victory meant more to Isabel. Lehfeltdt asserts that victory at Granada promised religious renewal for Castile. The campaign, partially financed by the papacy, saw mosques transformed into churches and Muslims forced out of the country.⁶⁰ The success of the campaign at Granada, the religious reform in Castile, and the reinstatement of the papal inquisition under their rule earned Ferdinand and Isabel recognition from the Church. Pope Alexander VI bestowed the title of the 'Catholic Monarchs' or '*Los Reyes Católicos*' on Ferdinand and Isabel in 1496 as reward for their devotion to the Catholic faith. Isabel succeeded where Enrique failed. Castilians no longer viewed Isabel as a questionable alternative to her brother. Isabel brought Castile into its long awaited Siglo de oro through religious reform, military victory, and delivery of a male heir to the realm.

Today, many historians view Isabel's reign as successful compared with that of her brother Enrique. Both of these rulers experienced problems or issues with their gender or sexuality though. In Enrique's case, the public knew of his alleged impotence and sodomy. In Isabel's case, her gender might have been her downfall if it weren't for her careful manipulation. In reality, many Castilians experienced these same issues concerning gender and sexuality.

Regardless of late medieval prejudices against the *pecado nefando*, Cristian Berco asserts that sodomy occurred regularly in the region known today as Spain. While Palencia argued that Enrique's devices deprived him of masculinity, Berco believes that at this point in time, "...there existed no greater proof of masculinity than sodomizing another male." Berco also writes that these men understood the rules of sexual dominance but that they applied to either men or women.⁶¹

The existence of court cases regarding sodomy highlights the fact that late medieval Castilians viewed sex and sexuality as a public matter. The public nature of sex included accusations of impotence as in the case of Enrique. Today's idea of sexual privacy does not fit within the context of late medieval Castile. Society aimed to establish a "well defined hierarchy" between social classes and genders. Other issues and concerns, like privacy of the individual, fell by the wayside.⁶²

Common knowledge dictated that impotent men should not marry. Marriage required that a man control his wife's sexuality. Since potency enabled a man to dominate his wife, this established a direct link between potency and power.⁶³ Canon law defined marriage consummation as erection, penetration, and insemination. Some couples unable to consummate their marriages sought annulments from the Church claiming that one spouse suffered from impotence.

⁶⁰ Lehfeltdt, 45.

⁶¹ Cristian Berco, *Sexual Hierarchies, Public Status: Men, Sodomy, and Society in Spain's Golden Age* (Toronto: 2007), 55, 50.

⁶² Edward Behrend-Martínez, *Unfit for Marriage: Impotent Spouses on Trial in the Basque Region of Spain, 1650-1750* (Reno: 2007), 85.

⁶³ Behrend-Martínez, 87.

Women typically initiated these annulment trials by charging their husband with impotence. For some women, these proceedings provided a way out of their unhappy marriage. Unlike today where divorces are readily granted by the courts, the Church required proof of impotence in the late medieval period. In the case of Enrique, the King initiated his own annulment proceedings, claiming impotence in his desperation to dissolve his first marriage. However, much like other impotence trials of the time, Enrique underwent the mandatory examinations required in these trials. Men underwent examinations to test their potency and women sometimes received examinations to verify their virginity. The Church required these exams since some spouses or couples used this allegation as a way to dissolve their marriages.⁶⁴

Often times an annulment granted one or both spouses the opportunity to dissolve the marriage and start again with someone else. In Enrique's case, the King claimed Blanca made him impotent but that his potency later returned. In other cases though, men proven impotent lost the right to marry again. Women in impotence cases stood to gain a lot from their annulments. A woman took control over her own dowry, could likely marry again, and potentially walked away with a portion of the money earned during her marriage. Men on the other hand, stood to lose almost everything if they lost an impotency trial. An impotent man could not marry again, lost his wife's dowry, and suffered public humiliation due to the loss of his masculinity.⁶⁵

While Enrique did marry again, hoping to produce an heir, the King's claim of impotence and therefore infertility, and his allegations of sodomy destroyed his masculine image for the rest of his reign. Enrique's alleged impotence led to the dispute surrounding the legitimacy of his wife's child Juana la Beltraneja, a dispute that continues today.

The issue of fertility affected women as well. Late medieval society prized fertility above all in women. Women felt the pressure not only to bear children, but to bear sons. If a woman bore a daughter she proved her own fertility. If a woman bore a son, she completed her familial contribution. Society prized male children as they carried on a family line and made up the more educated and reasonable portion of society. Late medieval Castilians viewed women, even Isabel, as weak and fickle members of society.

Many Castilians of this period experienced problems and issues similar to those faced by both Enrique and Isabel. The issues facing these Castilian monarchs existed on a much larger scale and consistently questioned their position on the throne. For Enrique, the public aspects of sex and sexuality worked against him and ultimately caused his downfall. Isabel played a key role in this demise. Her manipulation of Enrique's sexuality perpetuated rumors of impotence, sodomy, and illegitimacy that strengthened her own claim to the throne. These rumors persisted, encouraged by Isabel and her supporters, long after Enrique's death and into Isabel's reign as a means to support her claim of legitimacy.

In turn, Isabel learned from Enrique's experience, and manipulated her own gender and sexuality to work in her favor. The Queen took on masculine characteristics when needed, at her coronation in Segovia and at Granada when she went against Ferdinand's wishes and continued the war. Isabel also strategically maintained her feminine characteristics. The Queen managed this through her religious devotion and value of chastity, and through the birthing of children

⁶⁴ Behrend-Martínez, 89.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

which ultimately delivered the long awaited male heir to the Castilian throne. Isabel's use of symbolism, especially in her coat of arms, kept her fertility and therefore her role as a woman on the minds of Castilians while the Queen completed the masculine tasks required of her position.

This use of symbolism and manipulation of her own gender and sexuality enabled Isabel to rectify the failures and issues that arose during Enrique's tenure as king. With Ferdinand, Isabel brought the papal inquisition under her control to seek out and reprimand false converts and heretics. Along with her husband, Isabel also succeeded in pushing the Muslims out of Granada. This was the last endeavor of the Spanish Reconquista which served as both a military and religious victory. Isabel also reformed the churches within Castile and financed voyages that led to the discovery of the New World. The Castilian queen even ensured the future success of her realm with her delivery of Prince Juan. Despite the Prince's untimely death in 1497, Castile ultimately passed into the hands of Isabel's grandson Carlos I who initiated the unification of the Spanish kingdoms that ultimately became the country of Spain. In spite of her questionable legitimacy as Enrique's heir, the successes of Queen Isabel's reign laid the groundwork for the world we know today.