



MARK EVAN DAVIS<sup>1</sup>  
Michigan State University - [mdavis@msu.edu](mailto:mdavis@msu.edu)

## HISTORY, NATIONAL MYTH AND MELODRAMA IN TVE'S *ISABEL* (2012-2014)

### RESUMEN

La exitosa serie dramática *Isabel* (2012-2014), de la TVE, ha sido recibida con elogios —a veces exagerados— por lo que los guionistas del programa aseveran es un respeto escrupuloso de la verdad histórica. Y es cierto que Javier Olivares sus colegas merecen reconocimiento por el rigor de su presentación de la corte medieval de Isabel I, por estimular el interés popular en el período y por adoptar una perspectiva crítica, en ocasiones. Sin embargo, el uso del material histórico en la serie no cambia la naturaleza fundamental del programa. *Isabel* es, en primer lugar, un melodrama televisivo, escrito con la intención de gustarle al público español de una época turbulenta ofreciéndole una nueva versión de un mito de origen nacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Isabel*, Melodrama, Ficción histórica, Televisión, TVE

### ABSTRACT

TVE1's successful television drama *Isabel* (2012-2014) has earned sometimes extravagant praise for what its writers claim is scrupulous respect for the historical record. Javier Olivares and his colleagues do deserve considerable credit for relative rigor in their presentation of the medieval court of Isabel I, for stimulating popular interest in the period and for adopting a critical view on occasion. Nevertheless, the use of historical material in the series does not change the fundamental nature of the show. *Isabel* is, first and foremost, a television melodrama, crafted to appeal to the Spanish audience of turbulent times by offering a new version of a national origin myth.

KEYWORDS: *Isabel*, Melodrama, Historical fiction, Television, TVE

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD por la Michigan State University en Hispanic cultural studies, es actualmente Asistan profesor de la misma universidad.

## 1. *ISABEL'S* IMPORTANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT SPANISH TELEVISION DRAMA

Since the beginning of this century, there has been a growing consensus that television is entering a new Golden Age. As the big screen gradually continues to lose its predominance, there has been a sharp heightening of investment into and competition between high-quality television production enterprises in the US; from private cable channels, like HBO and AMC to newer, Web-based media powerhouses, such as Netflix and Amazon.

From the age of the silent movie, wherever US and other multinational media giants have been given substantial access to foreign markets, the competitive force they exert on local media producers has unfailingly had a profound impact on local producers. Spanish television is no exception. For example, Lucía Salvador Esteban observes that fresh competition from foreign cable giants led Spanish media to virtually cease producing historical drama altogether in the period between 1990 and 2000. Fearful that such programming would do poorly when run head-to-head with trendier foreign fare, state-run TVE and its subsidiaries tried to maintain market share by making what were then considered safer bets on more popular or family fare: police procedurals, medical and family dramas, and shows aimed at adolescent audiences (153).

To its credit, over time Spanish television responded to the new competitive environment by stepping up its investment in quality and by playing up its unique connections to local or national audiences, such as a long tradition of historical programming. One measure of the success of this trend can be found in Paul Julian Smith's declaration in 2006 that Spain's modern television production had also entered a "new Golden Age".<sup>2</sup> For Smith, this period is defined by "a huge wealth of material, often superior in quality to the feature films that are more widely studied both at home and abroad" (61). He goes on to lament the fact that despite this revolution in the quality of Spain's recent television production, it has generally drawn far more negative press (both in Spain and from abroad) and less critical appreciation than Spanish cinema. Whatever a critical viewer may think of Smith's assertion about the relative quality of Spanish cinema and television, he does make a strong argument for taking at least some select, Spanish television programming of more recent years seriously.

Though Smith cites several other authors who focus on a variety of Spanish television genres, the greater part of the weight of his declaration of a new Golden Age really rests

---

<sup>2</sup> Smith bases this conclusion on his own qualitative judgment of television content and his sense of the importance and impact of national programming. Looking at quantitative data on market share, Natalia Quintas-Froufe, has come to the opposite conclusion: that Spanish television suffered a steep decline from 2010 to 2015.

on his critical appraisal of the long-running historical drama *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (TVE, 2001--). For Smith, the importance of this show—and others like it—is that this kind of television is:

[A] forum for addressing national issues which, in an age of diversity, have no simple solution. Through the empathy of drama in particular, events that are resisted or known only intellectually (such as the terror of dictatorship) can achieve in viewers a conviction based on lived experience, or a convincing simulacrum thereof. (73)

Here Smith refers to the way Spanish audiences are invited by *Cuéntame* to examine and “work through” highlights of a fraught period in recent Spanish national history by viewing the dramatic representation of the life of a typical, middle-class family. The series follows the course of the Alcántara family’s lives through the crucial period beginning with the end of the Franco dictatorship, through the democratic transition and beyond. Smith’s use of the term “work through” refers back to Sigmund Freud’s article “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” of 1914, thereby suggesting that a television series can have a kind of therapeutic psycho-social purpose and effect (73). Whether television is an effective means of applying sociocultural therapy may or may not be a provable proposition, but in any case, it falls beyond the scope of this study. However, that such an outcome may be among the aims of a program’s producers, consciously or not, seems a safer conjecture. In fact, I will argue that keeping this kind of rhetorical goal in mind is a powerful tool for interpreting the appeal and intended impact of the content of any number of other television programs, including *Isabel*.

At this point, I leave aside the question of whether the recent flowering of Spanish television in general constitutes a new Golden Age and focus on the cultural impact of one specific case: that of Spanish TVE’s primetime, biographical / historical drama, *Isabel* (2012-2014). Whether or not the series was part of a wave of quality programming or not, the remarkable success of the state television channel’s show makes it a cultural phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention.

Given the timing of the show’s début, there was initially considerable doubt as to its viability. Development of the project began in 2008, during the period in which the Socialist (PSOE) government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was actively responding to public outcry against low-quality *telebasura* or junk television programming. TVE executives were not satisfied with the quality of the work being done by the first production contractors. Specifically, according to the principal screenwriter, Javier Olivares, the historical rigor of the content was unacceptable. The transfer to a new production company, Diagonal TV, meant putting off taping the first season until July of 2011. During this time, the Great Recession took hold of the Spanish economy with a vengeance, simultaneously putting pressure on public confidence in

governing institutions and undermining all government-subsidized activity, like TVE programming. Filming of the second season of *Isabel* had been slated for December 2011 and season one was originally scheduled to air in January 2012. However, the conservative (PP) government of Mariano Rajoy took office in December 2011 and, under pressure, immediately announced millions of euros in budget cuts for TVE. The premiere of season one was deferred until September 2012 and season two looked like it might never be filmed. In fact, concern about the funding for future seasons was serious enough that the crew of the show was ordered to begin dismantling its sets (Sans). But once it aired, season one proved to be a hit, by the Spanish television standards of the day, garnering a 20.1% share in prime time. As a result, TVE finally got a green light to continue production for season two (Marcos 170).

## 2. *ISABEL'S* HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY

How to explain the ability of a dramatic series focused on the life and exploits of late medieval Spanish monarchs to capture one fifth of the primetime television audience?

Part of the series' appeal is certainly that it helped satisfy some segment of the Spanish viewing public's taste for historical material generally, and desire to know more about the crucial period surrounding the reign of the Isabel I (1474-1504), specifically. In fact, Lucía Salvador Esteban alleges that *Isabel* "se sustenta en... el rigor histórico" (159). That is to say, the series' attraction for Salvador, depends on the fact that it is what she calls a historical series and not a mere period piece, because historical accuracy is paramount. For Salvador, though fictional elements are clearly present, they only serve to supplement the story where the documentary sources are silent or where it is necessary to enrich the factual record. Accurate representation of historical fact is both the primary purpose and general effect of the program (158).

Salvador bases her assessment of the historical fidelity of the series largely on interviews with what she regards as historical authorities. The two most important among these sources are Prof. María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, a specialist on the period at the University of Valladolid, on the one hand, and Javier Olivares, scriptwriter and story coordinator for the first and third seasons of the show, on the other.<sup>3</sup> Salvador cites the former as saying "*Isabel* es una ficción con una fuerte base histórica, bien concebida historiográficamente en términos generales, cuyo fin último es trasladar a la sociedad unas ideas generales sobre la vida de Isabel I de Castilla" (cited in Salvador 161). In her conversations with Salvador, the noted historian even adds that one of the great

<sup>3</sup> In part, Salvador attributes Olivares' insistence on historical accuracy to his qualifications as an "historiador" (163).

achievements of the series is to counterbalance the longstanding misuse of the image of Isabel I by the dictatorial Franco regime for its propagandistic purposes (168).

For his part, Olivares repeatedly claims he and his team of writers, including his brother Pablo, made sure that the “eje vertebrador del relato fuera el sustrato histórico y político, en lugar de los romances enrevesados y la tergiversación de los personajes reales”. He does admit that what the writers for the program have done is fictionalization, but says that any introduction of dramatic material not present in the historical record is strictly limited to that which is necessary to flesh out the bare bones of the truth for the purposes of recreation. He must supplement the record because while historians use written sources to establish the general outlines of the past, they do not explain “qué movió a los personajes a nivel personal para tomar una decisión en vez de otra, por qué llegó aquel día y no el otro” (Así se rodó). Moreover, Olivares explains there are rules, or principles of historical fidelity that guide him as he composes his fictional representation of medieval Castile. While he takes artistic license, uses his imagination and does speculate on some matters, such as personal relationships or conversations not recorded in the documentary sources, he nevertheless stays within certain boundaries. One such principle is that the writer may not substantially change or misrepresent established historical facts: dates, key events and what is known about actual historical figures are all to be respected. Also, while some events or characters may be blended in order to improve the clarity and pace of the story, this practice must be kept to a minimum because, again, the writer may not invent out of whole cloth, nor distort historical reality.

It is hard to miss what are certainly some internal problems or tensions, if not contradictions, in these assertions. To begin with, historians and biographers do in fact often speculate on historical figures’ motivations and how or why they made one decision rather than another. The real difference between the dramatist’s version and that of an academic historian is that the documentary historian will make it clear when she is speculating and when she is quoting her sources and will also comment on the reliability of those sources. The nature of film and television drama makes it impossible for the screenwriter and director to do the same.

Moreover, while it is reassuring that Olivares enumerates principles of historical authenticity, it is easy to see how carrying them out is in fact more complicated than it might seem at first glance. One example of this problem is mentioned by Salvador herself, who notes that the character who is represented as a kind of father figure for Isabel, Gonzalo de Chacón, is in fact a composite of several noble gentlemen associated with her household. Though Chacón himself was a real historical figure and relatively close to Isabel for some time, in order to simplify the plot, Olivares “blended” him with

others by attributing their deeds to him. He further exaggerated the intimacy of the bond between Chacón and Isabel as well as the length of his presence at her side (165). Technically then, the screenwriter can claim he has not made up the facts. Still, this is clearly a subordination of historical fact to dramatic necessity, or a distortion, even if a forgivable one. In the course of the three seasons of the series, there are dozens of similar dramatic adjustments of the facts or speculative additions. Some of these episodes clearly cannot possibly have verifiable historical sources, such as the emotional, one-on-one dialog between Isabel and her half-brother, Enrique IV, underneath a tree at Guisando; or the scene where Fernando de Aragon's jealous lover deliberately leaves a window open at night in hopes that the royal couple's young son will fall ill (Salvador 165).

Whatever one may think of one historical distortion or another, or the use of dramatic embellishment, there are a pair of more serious reasons to be skeptical about claims of historical veracity in *Isabel*. First, any historical argument is subject to the general critique that it can never be considered a simple presentation of the facts. Rather, by necessity it is a representation assembled and edited by its author and therefore inevitably must reflect that author's subjective interpretation to some degree. No matter how careful its screenwriters are, in historicized fiction (or fictionalized history) like *Isabel*, the degree of subjectivity is necessarily greater than that of a documentary or academic history, and as a result it is even more open to criticism for misrepresentation, or even malinterpretation. This is the basis of Janice North's analysis of the first season of the series. She takes the historical content of the program seriously enough to evaluate Olivares' representation of the role of gender and sexuality in medieval Castilian politics. However, North contrasts Olivares' representation with information from documentary and secondary sources and ultimately comes to the conclusion that the version of events presented on television is flawed because it leaves out controversial aspects of Isabel's acts and discourse, specifically her "historical use of homophobic and misogynistic rhetoric" (80).<sup>4</sup> She goes on to allege that the purpose of the program is not to present an accurate historical look at Isabel I, but rather to clean up her image by the "tried-and-true method of infusing feminism into an adapted narrative" (81).

On one hand, North's argument for the partiality of the show's representation of Isabel I is not unfounded. On the other, if one uses a comparative standard, the series' adhesion to historical authenticity is unusual, even remarkable, all the same. Perhaps the only way to reconcile these two apparently contradictory assessments is to point out that it is a

---

<sup>4</sup> North cites several sources, but the most important primary texts are Alonso Fernández de Palencia's chronicles and her principal critical, secondary pieces are by Barbara Weissberger, especially her 2004 book, *Isabel Rules: Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power*.

mistake to base a judgment of the success of *Isabel* as a television series on its accuracy as a historical document. Despite Javier Olivares' frequent protestations to the contrary, the television drama could never have seriously aspired to more than relative historical accuracy, if for no other reason than because its primary purpose was never really to educate the viewer on medieval history.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, it must be admitted that it is fairly easy to criticize the program for its lapses in historical accuracy; however, in the end there is little to be gained by debunking those errors. Although the series was partly marketed to its audience for its historic truth value, in fact its producers never really set out to film a documentary. Moreover, the executives behind the production have always been honest with anyone making more than the most cursory of inquiries, that their primary goal was to make the show compelling dramatic entertainment.

As North and Salvador point out, even Javier Olivares, the member of the team most willing to go out on a limb to claim historical rigor, is careful to admit some degree of willingness to sacrifice accuracy for dramatic effect. As an example, Salvador cites a personal interview with Olivares in 2011 in which the screenwriter grants that, although he did use material from the chronicles penned by Alonso Fernández de Palencia, he was aware of their doubtful reliability, given Palencia's political attachment to Enrique's enemies, like Isabel I herself (163). Other members of the production team are much more open and far less oblique on this point. Jordi Frades, director of the series for all three seasons, notes: "me daba mucho miedo que fuera un poco hueso la serie, que fuera dura para el espectador. Quería que, de todas todas, fuese agradable de ver y entretenida de ver". He goes on to add, "me documenté, pero tampoco leí veinticinco libros de Isabel porque los guionistas sí se los leyeron" (*Así se rodó*). José Luis Martín, Olivares' successor as story coordinator and chief screenwriter for season two, says it as clearly as possible: "elegimos la versión buena y, si es posible, la más dramática y la más emocionante y la más interesante para el espectador porque, insisto, hacemos ficción y no un documental" (*Así se rodó*). For his part, Javier Pascual, Assistant Director of Fiction at TVE, describes the balance between history and entertainment this way: "necesitábamos ficcionar de manera que el público se entretuviese con las historias y, a veces, forzar un poco las situaciones reales. Pero desde el punto de vista histórico también tenían que ser en ese sentido muy clara y que no hubiese fisuras" (*Así se rodó*).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The series' producers have disputed this idea, pointing to the considerable effort they put into developing a remarkable set of Web resources with additional information and reports that a number of schoolteachers were using the series as classroom aids. None of that is in dispute. Nevertheless, I am referring here to the *primary* purpose of the broadcast program, which was clearly commercial.

<sup>6</sup> Pascual's original title is "Subdirector de Ficción".

If in the end, the idea that *Isabel* is more historical document than period piece is unsustainable, the question arises as to why so many figures associated with the project make that very claim. One answer to that question is clearly a sense of participation in and proprietorship over a national historical tradition. Apart from Javier Olivares' pronouncements on the issue, we also have several others. Raúl Mérida, who plays Philip the Fair of Habsburg, puts it very succinctly: “[e]s nuestra historia, nuestra propia historia” (Así se rodó). For her part, Michelle Jenner, playing Isabel I herself, remarks “Isabel y Fernando son unos reyes muy míticos. Formar parte de una historia que ha sido real siempre [tiene] un punto más de una que solo es ficción” (Así se rodó).

So clearly, one of the primary goals of TVE's executives is to maximize interest in the Spanish viewing public by persuading it that the series is more than just a dramatization. This effort helps to sell it to the audience, by suggesting viewers are seeing something more than a fantastic story: as they watch the series they are, in a sense, directly witnessing a crucial period of past events. The audience must take *Isabel* seriously, it is suggested, because it is uniquely faithful to the historical record.

At the same time, the program also invokes Spanish national pride by celebrating the shared (Castilian) Spanish national past. *Isabel* and its contributing artists could boast of winning several national television awards during or shortly after the show's run. Michelle Jenner won Ondas and Fotograma de Plata awards for her acting in 2013 and 2015, while costar Rodolfo Sancho, playing Fernando de Aragón, won his Fotograma de Plata in 2015. More importantly, TVE and the series itself won Ondas and Premio Nacional de Televisión awards in 2012 and 2014, respectively. The Premio Nacional de Televisión, in particular, specifically praised the show's creators for their historical rigor and their “labor divulgativa y su contribución a la difusión de valores” (‘Isabel’, Premio Nacional de Televisión 2014).

In addition, producers and actors of the series explicitly measure their own success against that of the other most notable producers of historical television of the day, the British and Americans. Jaume Banacolocha, executive producer of the series, suggests that Spanish television has fixated on other nations' histories to the detriment of its own: “[n]os tragamos todas las historias de todos los reyes ingleses y parece que nos gusta que nos lo cuenten, o de Italia o de donde sea, y nunca nos paramos a contar la historia de España” (Así se rodó). In a similar vein, Sergio Peris-Mencheta, who plays Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, seems to conceive of the program as a kind of patriotic counterattack against American cultural imperialism: “es hora de que defendamos nuestro patrimonio, que lo hagamos nosotros y no los americanos” (Así se rodó).

### 3. VIEWING THE PRESENT IN THE PAST

It seems safe to say, then, that the TVE's *Isabel* is calculated to appeal to more than just the fraction of Spanish television viewers with a peculiar affinity for medieval history. It is meant to appeal to a national audience living decidedly in the present day. This brings us to a general notion about representations of the past: even specialized, academic historical studies are rarely solely about the past. Of necessity, no historical text can be produced outside its specific temporal context. That is, it cannot help reflecting the author's present, even if the writer succeeds in limiting that perspective and confines himself to only indirect or implicit references. If in no other way, then the present day will at least be present by way of contrast with the practices and cultural environment of the past. Naturally, in popular fare, like a television series seeking broad appeal in the mass media, it is even more important for the product to make clear its relevance to the viewers' present.

Prominent television critic Manuel Palacio not only explains the way this principle affects modern television, but also how it is connected to the purpose of reinforcing Spanish national identity in the context of the competitive media marketplace:

Es sabido por todos que la televisión crea imágenes y representaciones que circulan en el espacio social. En la televisión de la edad de oro de los servicios públicos televisivos la operación decisiva consistía en privilegiar la circulación de imágenes asentadas en el imaginario colectivo para ajustar los relatos a las necesidades del presente. En la televisión contemporánea los procesos están mediatizados por las necesidades comerciales y por las reglas del consumo televisivo; pero el objetivo siempre es el mismo: reelaborar el espacio público cultural del presente, bien para la reivindicación de los valores de la sociedad de consumo bien para trabajar con las políticas de identidad. (77)

For his part, Javier Olivares acknowledges deliberately forging a link between past and present in *Isabel* when remarking that knowledge of the period of Isabel I's reign is especially important because without it "difícilmente podemos entender lo que es España en la actualidad" (cited in Salvador 168).

More concretely, I suggest that one of the principal ways *Isabel* connects to modern viewers is by exploring important issues in the national life of Spain between 2012 and 2014 through its representation of the development of similar issues during the formative period of the reign of the Catholic Monarchs. There are many such topics to choose from, so I will confine myself to just a few, including: the prestige of the royal family as a unifying national symbol; abuses perpetrated by powerful national and international elites; and the political composition of the ethno-religious unity of Spain.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> I have chosen not to examine the representation of the status and agency of women; not because it is not a central issue, but rather because the topic has already attracted considerable critical attention. For a recent

The sharp economic downturn of 2008 and the accompanying financial crisis known as the Great Recession in the United States was serious enough to be called “la depresión económica” in Spain. Though GDP growth had returned to positive territory by 2014, unemployment, especially for the young, had still not returned to its previous levels by 2018. Some economists have argued that the austerity policies demanded by EU authorities and implemented by the Spanish national government served largely to extend Spain’s suffering needlessly. In any case, economic desperation, especially amongst middle and lower classes has posed a political challenge to Spanish institutions of all kinds. As often happens during periods of economic hardship, Spaniards became both more aware and more vocally critical of the failures of the traditional political parties and institutions. They were especially outraged by public figures’ failure to control—or even their participation in—financial scandals.

Then, in 2010 royal family of Spain was drawn into just such a scandal—the Nóos affair. In 2011, King Juan Carlos’ son-in-law, Iñaki Urdangarin, was publicly charged with using a non-profit (Nóos) to enrich himself through tax evasion, fraud and misappropriation of funds. His wife Cristina, the king’s daughter, was also accused of tax crimes. In April of the following year, Juan Carlos himself became the focus of unsympathetic attention when it was discovered that, despite his honorary position as chair of the World Wildlife Fund in Spain, he had flown to Botswana and paid thousands of euros for the privilege of hunting exotic animals. Though the king had gone on similar hunting trips years before, the changed economic circumstances for ordinary Spaniards made the trip look like an unconscionable extravagance, especially since Juan Carlos broke his hip while on safari and had to get a costly private flight out for medical attention. There may or may not be a direct relationship between all this and Juan Carlos’ decision to abdicate in favor of his son Felipe in 2014. Nevertheless, by that time the Crown was still concerned about polishing up its tarnished image as a result of the Nóos scandal (Santos 900).

An analogous situation is represented near the end of the first season of *Isabel*. After Isabel marries Fernando de Aragon without royal permission, wily King Enrique moves to apply financial pressure on his half-sister by forcing her vassals to withhold payment of her rents. Years of war and bad harvests have caused great hardship, especially for the common folk. There are occasional flare-ups of rebellion in Aragon, which Fernando feels he must crush in order to preserve law and order. Isabel urges mercy and negotiation, but

---

work centered on this question, see Tatiana Hidalgo-Marí’s “De la maternidad al empoderamiento”. Cristina Barrientos Martín’s “Isabel: Una reina recuperada por el lenguaje cinematográfico” is less specifically focused on gender, but also very useful. María Isabel Menéndez’ “Ponga una mujer en su vida” focuses on shows that aired years before *Isabel* debuts, but provides a helpful perspective on female protagonists in Spanish television generally.

is overruled by her fiery husband. One day, Isabel decides to reassure the people by taking a walk amongst them. She is forced to beat a hasty retreat as a peasant woman berates her for her privilege. Though Isabel is suffering penury herself, she is too dignified to contradict her critic. In fact, all the characters of Spanish royal blood, including Enrique, are unfailingly portrayed as being deeply sympathetic to the suffering of their subjects, but as largely being powerless to help them as they might like. Even Fernando, who is shown violently pursuing rebellions rooted in economic distress, repeatedly declares that he regards the task as a necessary evil.

By contrast, the high nobility, powerful families who use pretenders to the throne to advance their own political ends, receive much rougher rhetorical treatment—especially figures antagonistic to Isabel and her claim to the throne. With few exceptions, the powerful men and women of foreign courts, such as France, Portugal and the Vatican, are portrayed in much the same way: as corrupt, moral hypocrites whose only interest is in increasing their own power and who think little of the abuses they commit along their way.

The two most notorious members of the Castilian elite to be treated as heavies in the first season are scheming Alfonso Carrillo, Archbishop of Toledo, and most of all, Juan Pacheco, Marqués de Villena. Interestingly, at one time or another each is happily received by Isabel as a valued ally who can help her maneuver around Enrique IV. Nevertheless, at the back of her mind, she maintains her suspicions of them and carefully maintains the emotional and moral distance she will need to be able to shut them down once the time comes. Treacherous Juan Pacheco is a more thorough villain, and he breaks with Isabel long before she might have occasion to get rid of him. Carrillo is a slightly more complicated case: he is very useful to Isabel during a crucial period in her struggle to take power and they do develop some regard for one another. It is only when he later shows he is more interested in controlling the queen and her reign, that she decides to put him firmly in his place by settling on a rival cleric for a cardinal's hat. And so, part of Isabel's triumph at the end of the first season is putting corrupt elites either in their places at her side or far from where they can do more harm to the nation.

A similar dynamic is played out amongst the Spanish nobles further along in the story arc; however, after season one the range of Castilian political influence expands considerably, so that foreign leaders are more likely to wear the black hats in seasons two and three. In season two, the overarching theme is the territorial and religious and / or ethnic unification of Spain, which culminates in the conquest of Nasrid Granada. Isabel's primary antagonists here are, naturally, several branches of the Muslim nobility who are no less cruel and treacherous than Juan Pacheco. Moreover, Fernando and Isabel find the task of imposing their will on the remains of Muslim Spain much easier than it

might be because the brutal factions of Moors really are their own worst enemies and do much of the dirty work themselves.

This has the odd effect of making it possible for series director Jordi Frades and his scriptwriters to represent the Catholic Monarchs more as liberators of Granada than as conquerors. They do not entirely edit out all the zealous Christian oppression that would later be visited on the Moors; the fanaticism of some missionary attempts to stamp out Muslim beliefs and culture does make it onto the screen. At the same time, though, more sympathetic figures, like Fray Hernán de Talavera, the kindly if somewhat sanctimonious archbishop of Granada, and Isabel herself, are notably shown doing what they can, within the limits of their time, to improve the lot of the defeated Moors and to mitigate the rougher treatment of more severe believers, such as Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros. When they punish Muslim infractions or place burdens on the community, they are always portrayed as acting out of sincere Christian belief.

It is hard not to hear echoes of modern-day discomfort with relations between the Islamic world and Spain in this ambivalent treatment of the last of the medieval Spanish Muslims. This representation of the conflict between the two religions five hundred years ago seems to be profoundly divided about believers in Islam and practitioners of Islamic culture. On the one hand, some see in them only the savage cruelty of the terrorist. Yet many would find it hard to deny Muslims have often been the objects of cruel treatment from their Christian counterparts, in Spain and elsewhere.

There is an interesting subplot in this season that points out the limits of what North might call the rhetorical “exculpation” or absolution of Isabel for her political sins. The show does not hide the fact that Isabel approved the expulsion of the Jews. Moreover, there are several emotional scenes in which Christian abuses against the Jews (and Jewish converts to Christianity or *conversos*) are represented with chilling clarity, including explicit images of the torture of falsely accused Jewish conspirators or renegade *conversos*, including a sympathetic young woman attached to Isabel’s court. However, there is usually a long distance between any real unpleasantness and Isabel herself; it is her more fanatical followers, such as the infamous Inquisitor General Juan de Torquemada, that bear the onus of responsibility for any truly atrocious behavior. In the end, then, even where there is no way to justify what the Catholic Monarchs did five hundred years ago, despite everything, it is possible for an uncritical viewer to continue to understand and admire Isabel’s piety and heartfelt concern for all her subjects.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Curiously, the Spanish parliament, led by the government, made an effort to redress this historic wrong by granting Sephardic Jews the right to claim Spanish nationality and return to Spain through the *Ley de concesión de la nacionalidad española a los sefardíes* in 2015. The project seems to have initiated in 2014, shortly after the issue of

#### 4. *ISABEL* AS NATIONAL, FAMILY MELODRAMA

This brings me to what I regard as the real nature and purpose of *Isabel* as a series: to maintain the audience's admiration for and emotional attachment to the figure of Isabel I as mother of the nation. Viewers are not meant to agree with every decision she makes, nor to identify with her, exactly. But they are meant to love her in a familiar way, which is to say, as they might love an especially charismatic member of the family. There are several components to this kind of attachment the series is meant to inspire. For one thing, the audience understands the challenges Isabel faces are something like those it faces in life, if not exactly the same. Where she faces down a power-hungry and corrupt nobility, they face an equally greedy and compromised political and economic elite. Where she confronts the duplicity and intrigues of Philip the Fair of Habsburg in Flanders, they face the unfeeling and inscrutable bureaucracy of Brussels. She is called on to make difficult decisions about how to treat ethnic and religious minorities and, especially when under the influence of less enlightened subordinates, she repeatedly errs on the side of religious purity (if not zealotry). But these decisions are presented as comprehensible mistakes in the context of her times, mistakes which could, after all, be corrected in the present (Chicharro 221). And above all, despite her historical excesses and some of the flaws in her character, such as immoderate jealousy of her husband's affairs, the viewing public is nevertheless invited to understand and forgive her because it knows that in the bottom of her heart, she always has Spanish national interests at heart and is a strong, reliable leader.

All this places *Isabel* roughly in the territory of what Thomas Elsaesser calls family melodrama in his wide-ranging study of the genre. As Elsaesser notes, it is not easy to define melodrama as a genre in thematic terms because it has migrated through many specific cultural manifestations across time and space. Rather than trying to pin down its essence in one or another of its many specific thematic incarnations, he suggests a more formal approach, choosing to examine melodrama as “a body of techniques [or] a stylistic principle that carry[es] the distinct overtones of spiritual crisis” and which makes it possible for filmmakers to “put the finger on the texture of their social and human material while still being free to shape this material” (74). To put it another way, Elsaesser considers melodrama “an expressive code”, or “a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones” (75).

---

the expulsion of the Jews was so vividly portrayed in *Isabel*. Of course, it is impossible to trace the impulse for the law back to a television program. At the time, the conservative government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (PP) was also engaged in a political rapprochement with the government of Israel and with US Jews (Gutiérrez Calvo). Still, the coincidence does signal that the issue was still present in the Spanish political imaginary as late as 2015.

According to Elsaesser, one important component of the family melodrama is the use of the family unit and the relationships between its members as a symbolic representation of larger social groups, patterns or problems. The fact that *Isabel* is set in a remote historical past helps in some ways to make it a more effective family melodrama of this kind. After all, in the medieval period, the high politics of state was a family matter. Marital unions, usually forged by necessity, and the ups and downs of personal alliances and enmities were not just produced by politics but were its very substance. Elsaesser associates the theme of young women being forced into arranged marriages as characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic melodrama of the rising bourgeoisie, but it is also a constant *topos* in *Isabel*, especially in the first season, when Isabel herself is on the marriage market (70). As Barrientos points out, the matter of whom she will marry is portrayed as a test of the strength of Isabel's character and her determination to choose a mate after her own tastes. Though history records Isabel was sincerely pleased with her union with Fernando de Aragon, the final decision was likely made mostly for political reasons and in consultation with close advisors (Barrientos 273). The story of Isabel's willfulness makes a far better melodrama, however, so that is the interpretation the television series presents to the audience. Family is also at the heart of the love-hate relationship between Isabel and her brother Enrique in their struggles to determine the succession to the Castilian throne, and the similarly fraught relationship between Portugal and Castile. Finally, the series portrays Isabel as feeling profound conflicts when arranging the marriages of her own daughters (without considering their wishes) in season three. This representation of the political world in microcosm, in addition to making it easier for the audience to follow along, also has the effect of heightening the emotional stakes of the drama.

There is a similar melodramatic strategy of reduction and intensification in the spatial organization of the *mise-en-scène*. Frades creates a sense of elevated psychological pressure by deliberately compressing both the pacing of the action and the scale of most of the scenery. José Luis Martín says that he frequently chose to place a scene, for example, “en la alcoba, digamos. En el rincón oscuro donde se mantienen las conversaciones íntimas y donde vemos cómo esos personajes a veces se ven forzados, a veces cometen errores a la hora de tomar decisiones” (Así se rodó). Compare that statement to Elsaesser's: “an acute sense of claustrophobia in décor and locale translates itself into a restless and yet suppressed energy” (77). While there are occasional, brief panoramic views of battle scenes or larger gatherings (often filled out with digital graphics), for the most part the action in *Isabel* consistently takes place between a handful of characters in the limited space between the walls of a dim chamber in a castle somewhere.

There are several other clear points of comparison between Elsaesser's “code” of melodrama and the composition of *Isabel* as a television drama, including, of course,

the use of music. But it might be more useful at this point to turn to some equally clear differences or peculiarities in the way the Spanish primetime drama works.

First and foremost, since the larger part of this essay refers to the efforts of the director and screenwriters of *Isabel* to establish and adhere to unusual standards of historical veracity, it is important to mention the way the constraints of historical accuracy affect the dramatic tension. Suspense is slightly more complicated to achieve in a historical piece like *Isabel*, because the audience already knows what to expect in many, if not most cases. Hence, the film must rely in part on the aforementioned “closed world” of an intimate, but constricted space to keep a kind of atmospheric pressure up. However, the social customs of the medieval period and the very pre-determined historical character of the plot can be used to magnify dramatic impact, too. What really propels the plot is this constant hot-cold alternation between two opposing and contrasting authenticities: the historical record so highly prized by Javier Olivares on the one hand, and the emotional jolt of the dramatization, on the other. For instance, it is one thing follow the logic of developments when Juana de Castilla (‘la Beltraneja’) decides to carry out her late mother’s plans for her and agrees to marry King Afonso V of Portugal. It is quite another for the modern viewer to watch the frightened teenager, reluctantly but resolutely, urge her uncle, a man more than three times her age, to consummate the union.

Some of the variations of the melodramatic model evident in *Isabel* seem to have their origins in specific developments in television film drama in the Spanish context. I refer, of course, to the Spanish *telenovela*. Both technical and ideological components of this tendency can be detected in *Isabel*.

As Hugh O’Donnell notes, melodrama and its Latin offspring, the *telenovela* are widely regarded as inferior forms of artistic expression (39). I have no doubt that most, if not all, *Isabel*’s producers would not be pleased to hear the series compared to soap opera in any way. Nevertheless, series director Jordi Frades and Diagonal TV established themselves largely by producing Spanish *telenovelas* in Catalonia in the 1990s and 2000s (Chicharro 216). Though this programming may not be considered high prestige fare, the truth is they, amongst others, performed the artistic service of adapting what had been a Latin American form to the needs and tastes of mass audiences in Spain. It does not seem out of place to assume that they deployed some of what they had learned during those creative years when creating *Isabel*.

And, in fact, O’Donnell identifies a number of filming standards that are common in Spanish telenovelas that are easily identifiable in nearly every episode of *Isabel*. Common visual conventions that O’Donnell considers realistic in effect include: filming in color with constant tone, shots predominantly at eye-level, medium duration and with medium

close-ups. This style is even better described by the artistic embellishments it does not permit: speakers are always in focus and with very few exceptions there are generally no “inner-vision”, impossible or symbolic shots. There are no interior monologues, narrative time is real (no slow-motion, speed-ups or repeats) and chronology is typically linear.<sup>9</sup>

O'Donnell calls the former, more understated conventions “realist visual discourse”, which he says “works to locate the viewer as a plausible physical participant in the drama”.<sup>10</sup> As I say, the vast majority of filming in *Isabel* is done in this style, which contributes to the power of the show to relate to a viewer who “could always imagine himself or herself physically occupying any point taken up by the camera” and could therefore “identify with” the performers on-screen (45).

Finally, in her study of Spanish *telenovelas*, Mar Chicharro Merayo asserts that recent Spanish dramas have been developing a socializing function, by which she means:

they tend to reinforce the idea of Spain as a nation, based upon the common past and difficulties faced by the people. The evocation of a territory, showing of a language, portrayal of other cultural elements such as folklore, customs or history and the reference to current social concerns, are some of the elements that fiction uses to reinforce the feeling of identity and to legitimate the idea of a single Spanish nation. (217)

Chicharro is characterizing *telenovelas*—primarily daytime programming, and not primetime series, like *Isabel*. So obviously, though *Isabel* shares these characteristics with *telenovelas* does not mean the series is itself a *telenovela*. The similarity does however, reduce the conceptual distance between the two dramatic subgenres, however, especially since, as I have shown, there is considerable aesthetic and thematic overlap between them, as well.

## 5. CONCLUSION

TVE's successful, primetime series *Isabel* is a family melodrama with realistic, historical pretensions and characteristics whose overall effect and overarching purpose is to draw

---

<sup>9</sup> There are several notable exceptions to these realist principles in *Isabel*. Seasons one and three begin with preages of the culminating chapters to come at the end of the narrative cycle: Isabel's assumption of the throne and her death. Season one also begins and ends with Enrique IV's “inner-vision” of his own death. There are a couple of very dramatic bird's-eye (impossible) shots at the very end of the series. There are surely a few other scenes where the director has allowed himself additional flights of fancy, but on the whole such creative cinematography is vanishingly rare in *Isabel*.

<sup>10</sup> O'Donnell calls the other, more exotic conventions “melodramatic”, but is not using that term the way Elsaesser or I do. Rather, he is referring to a “less realistic” style of filming.

Spanish viewers in through the exotic spectacle of a glorious history and sympathetic characters with whom they can identify. Further, the show's producers encourage its viewing public to participate and to work on modern problems, without challenging the coherence of the basic foundations of Spanish national identity.

In the end, to fact-check the vaunted accuracy of the series, especially by contrasting the TV script for one season with what the chronicles say, is to mistake a feature of the program for its main thrust. While the series' writers do a comparatively good job fostering public interest in Spanish history, the series not only does not have, but can never achieve substantial credibility as history. The show is, first last and always, a television drama.

Olivares and the other writers and dramatic directors do deserve some credit for representing some unpleasant truths and competing visions on many occasions. But Janice North is correct to point out that this critical material never rarely really touches the figure of Isabel herself, at least not in most cases. The producers pull punches and even whitewash certain aspects of their Catholic Majesties and their reigns. But the point of the series' complex project is not really to present a reasoned or innovative argument about what really happened at the close of the 15th century in Spain. It's not even to really develop the character or image of Isabel, as interpreted by Michelle Jenner. The purpose is to entertain Spanish TV viewers by re-creating or expressing a new version of a national origin myth. And in the words of Paul Smith, that exercise serves to express "the complex interplay of ethical principles, religious-metaphysical polarities and the [national] aspirations" typical of the Spanish viewing public in the 2010s in the hopes they might work on (if not work out) some issues surrounding Spanish national origins and body politic's longtime glories and ignominies.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Así se rodó la serie Isabel*. Dir. Félix Llorente. Diagonal TV. 2014. Online. <<http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/isabel/isabel-asi-se-rodo-serie-isabel/2885544/>>.
- Barrientos Martín, Cristina. "Isabel: Una reina recuperada por el lenguaje cinematográfico." *III Congreso Internacional de Historia, Literatura y Arte en el Cine en español y portugués: Hibridaciones, transformaciones y nuevos espacios narrativos*. Ed. Centro de Estudios Brasileños. Salamanca: U de Salamanca, 2015. 266-278. Online. <<https://congresocinesalamanca2015.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/salamanca-actas-tomo-1.pdf>>.
- Chicharro Merayo, Mar. "Telenovelas and society: Constructing and reinforcing the nation through television fiction." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16.2 (2012): 211-225. Print.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama." *A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*. Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991. 68-91. Print.
- Gutiérrez Calvo, Vera. "El Gobierno vende en EE UU su gesto hacia los sefardíes." *El País* 15 marzo 2014. Online. <[https://elpais.com/politica/2014/03/15/actualidad/1394895807\\_715302.html](https://elpais.com/politica/2014/03/15/actualidad/1394895807_715302.html)>.
- Hidalgo-Marí, Tatiana. "De la maternidad al empoderamiento: una panorámica sobre la representación de la mujer en la ficción española." *Prisma Social* Número Especial 2 (2017): 292-314. Online. <<http://revistaprismasocial.es/article/view/1551>>.
- Isabel*. By Javier Olivares. Dir. Jordi Frades. Perf. Michelle Jenner. Prod. Jaume Banaclocha. 2012-2014. Online. 29 03 2019. <<http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/isabel/>>.
- "'Isabel', Premio Nacional de Televisión 2014." *El País* 9 Oct 2014. Online. <[https://elpais.com/cultura/2014/10/08/television/1412775524\\_304249.html](https://elpais.com/cultura/2014/10/08/television/1412775524_304249.html)>.
- Marcos Ramos, M. "El presente y futuro de la ficción televisiva en TVE." *Sphera Pública* 1.13 (2013): 166-82. Print.
- Menéndez Menéndez, María Isabel. "Ponga una mujer en su vida: análisis desde la perspectiva de género de las ficciones de TVE *Mujeres y Con dos tacones* (2005-2006)." *Área abierta* 14.3 (2014): 61-80. Print.
- North, Janice R. "Three Queens for the Same Throne: Politics, Sex and Disorder in TVE's *Isabel*." *Bulletin of Spanish Visual Studies* II.1 (2018): 63-81. Print.
- O'Donnell, Hugh. "High Drama, Low Key: Visual Aesthetics and Subject Positions in the Domestic Spanish Television Serial." *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 8.1 (2007): 37-54. Print.
- Palacio, Manuel. "La televisión pública española (TVE) en la era de José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero." *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 8.1 (2007): 78-83. Print.
- Quintas-Froufe, Natalia. "El ocaso de la televisión pública española ante su audiencia: un lustro decadente (2010-2015)." *Palabra Clave* 21.1 (2018): 165-190. Print.
- Salvador Esteban, Lucía. "Historia y ficción televisiva. La representación del pasado en 'Isabel'." *index.comunicación* 6.2 (2016): 151-171. Print.
- Sans, Elisabet. "'Isabel', la cara oculta de la serie." *El País Semanal* 2 diciembre 2013. Online.

- Santos García, Irene y Pérez Rufi, José. “La construcción del imaginario monárquico: presencia del Príncipe de Asturias en los informativos de TVE en los meses previos a la abdicación de Juan Carlos de Borbón.” *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* 22.2 (2016): 899-914.
- Smith, Paul Julian. “The Approach to Spanish Television Drama of the New Golden Age: Remembering, Repeating, Working Through.” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 83 (2006): 61-73. Print.
- Weissberger, Barbara F. *Isabel rules: constructing queenship, wielding power*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2004. Print.