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SAINT OF THE SILVER SCREEN: QUEEN ISABEL OF ARAGON'S LEGACY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

ABSTRACT:

This article investigates the medieval and modern narratives of Portugal's only Saint-Queen, Isabel of Aragon (1271-1336). The hagiographical text composed after her death in the fourteenth century relates tales of Isabel's model queenship and miracles. This narrative had an enduring effect on Isabel's legacy, which was sustained through the creative and religious engagement of her cult up to the late nineteenth century. During the twentieth century, an influx of scholarly interest and the fictional retellings of her life by Vitorino Nemésio and Rafael Gil mark a shift in her narrative and usher in new types of engagement with this fascinating medieval figure.

KEY WORDS: Isabel of Aragon, Vitorino Nemésio, Rafael Gil, sainthood, queenship.

RESUMEN:

Este artículo investiga las narrativas medievales y modernas sobre la única Reina-Santa de Portugal, Isabel de Aragón (1271-1336). El texto hagiográfico compuesto después de su muerte en el siglo XIV relata su reginalidad modelo y milagros. Esta narrativa tuvo un efecto duradero en su legado, que se sostuvo con manifestaciones creativas y religiosas elaboradas por su culto hasta fines del siglo XIX. Durante el siglo XX, hubo un crecimiento notable de interés académica en su vida, junto con representaciones ficticias de su vida por Vitorino Nemésio y Rafael Gil. Estas representaciones modernas marcan un giro en la narrativa de esta figura medieval fascinante.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Isabel de Aragón, Vitorino Nemésio, Rafael Gil, santidad, reginalidad.

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1. INTRODUCTION

To reach the pinnacle of secular power in medieval monarchical Iberia, one was primarily dependent upon the accident of one's birth. Isabel of Aragon (1271-1336) had the fortune of high birth; she was born a princess in an influential kingdom, daughter to King Pere III of the Crown of Aragon. But beyond the elevated social status her family adventitiously bestowed upon her, the story of her actual birth was itself imbued with a strong sense of providence. Delivered in her translucent caul, Isabel began her life literally encased in a glistening image of the miraculous. Over the course of her life, her miraculous birth story was folded into a collection of other tales of her innate saintliness that traveled throughout the Iberian Peninsula, radiating outwards from Portugal. The social standing into which Isabel was born positioned her so that, early in her adolescence, she became queen-consort of Portugal through her marriage to Dinis I.

After arriving as a foreign princess at the Portuguese court, Isabel promptly proved that her royal birth had also provided her with the practical education necessary to adroitly navigate the complex machinations of members of that court, even as a very young woman, by circumventing gossip with her quiet, prayerful life. Moreover, she engaged in a series of self-fashioning projects that enhanced public perception of her as holy and supernatural, and further bolstered what would later become her claim to sainthood. The secular power she derived from her marriage was limited yet dynamic, as was the case with most medieval queen-consorts, but it was the holiness cultivated both by her public works and by the cult of her followers that extended to her a special power that endured during her life and after it, ultimately resulting in her canonization by Pope Urban VIII in May of 1625.

This article seeks to draw into relief the salient elements of the saint-queen's legend as imagined through textual and material representations created by Isabel herself and by her early modern cult, so that they can then be contrasted with a selection of modern representations of her story produced in the twentieth century. The dominant features of Isabel's life story, as emphasized in early modern renderings of her narrative, will be compared with the shifting emphasis of her story and the mediums used to tell it in the twentieth century. A keen academic interest, as well as several creative reinterpretations of her life story, contributed to a resurgence in Isabel's popularity and cultural relevance that was sustained throughout the twentieth century. The academic community began reediting and publishing medieval documents concerning the saint-queen early in the century and, by the century's close, a historical novel of Azorean origin, *Isabel de Aragão rainha santa* (1936) by Vitorino Nemésio, and a Spanish film, "Reina Santa" (1947) by auteur Rafael Gil, had both been added to the list of

freshly reimagined Isabel narratives. The continued cultural need to tell Isabel's story designates it as an ideal case study with which to explore the modern fascination with medieval subjects. This is especially true since, while certain key elements of her story have remained consistent, a shift in narrative emphasis can be observed in the twentieth century academic, novelistic, and cinematic renditions.

2. THE MEDIEVAL (SELF) FASHIONING OF A SAINT-QUEEN

Isabel was considered a saint even before her death on July 4, 1336. Her cult formed and began to expand almost immediately after Isabel's burial in the Santa Clara convent she founded in Coimbra. The spread of her postmortem popularity is due, in large part, to the dissemination of her hagiographical *vita*, commonly referred to as the *Lenda da Rainha Santa*. Historian Iona McCleery discusses the circumstances under which the *vita* was likely originally composed in her article "Isabel of Aragon: Model Saint or Model Queen?" She attributes the authorship of the *vita* to one of two possible authors, both executors involved in Isabel's canonization inquiry: the bishop of Lamego, Salvado Martins OFM; or Isabel of Cardona, Isabel's niece and abbess of the Santa Clara convent. Though the definitive authorship of the *vita* – along with the original copy of the text – were lost, the *vita's* importance for Isabel's enduring fame cannot be understated. It serves as one of the foundational narratives upon which all subsequent iterations of her biography were based. As Hayden White has asserted in his essay "The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory", any historical narrative "figurates the body of events that serves as its primary referent and transforms these 'events' into intimations of patterns of meaning that any *literal* representation of them as 'facts' could never produce" (122). The *vita* is inculcated with medieval ideals that reveal not simply 'facts' about Isabel's life but, more interestingly, the cultural milieu in which her story originated. As the first biographical text written on Isabel, the *vita* serves a direct historical purpose in compiling a narrative that details the circumstances of her birth, death, and posthumous miracles. As the text that helped galvanize her cult and canonization, it is also imbued with a deeply allegorical function; as White has suggested, "it is more correct to regard [historical narrative] as allegorical, which is to say: it says one thing and means another" (122). Isabel's *vita* thus allegorically reveals the importance of three primary topics for the medieval audience: Isabel's relationship with religious institution and the divine, her genealogical lineage, and the practice of her queenship.

Isabel's *vita* is replete with examples of her inherent role as conduit of God's grace, describing several miracles completed by the saint-queen during her life. The miracles related in the *vita* account for some of the most iconic moments of the

queen's life, owing to their dramatic and magical qualities. These miracles include an episode in which Isabel enters into a year of intense prayer after a mysterious messenger informs her that her recently deceased daughter was suffering in Purgatory. At the close of that year, Isabel sees a vision of her daughter ascending to heaven, freed from purgatorial fires. On another occasion, Isabel was publically intercepted and reprimanded by Dinis for spending funds from the royal coffers on almsgiving projects. In response, Isabel unbundles her skirts before her, revealing that she carried not bread or coins but roses, blooming in spite of the fact that they were not in season. On yet another occasion, Isabel rides out, plainly dressed and on the back of a donkey, between the poised armies of Dinis on one side and her son Afonso on the other. Miraculously unharmed during this daring intervention between husband and son, Isabel successfully circumvented the looming civil war and assisted in brokering peace. The action of this last miracle directly coincides with the types of peacekeeping efforts that helped to define Isabel's queenship, which represents another of the *vita's* crucial narrative threads. As queen, the *vita* depicts Isabel as simultaneously contending with her husband's chronic infidelity and illegitimate offspring, protecting against the potential threat these other offspring posed to her own son's inheritance of the throne, all while appearing to comport herself with stoic Christian obedience. Her ability to successfully carry out all of these exemplary queenly duties is attributed implicitly in her *vita* to the family from which she descended.

The third core topic of the *vita* is elaborated through persistent references to Isabel's (and her children's) place in a powerful genealogical network. These references appear at the beginning, middle, and end of the text and continually link the Portuguese queen to her extended royal family in other parts of Iberia and beyond. Continual references to lineage are common among the hagiographical texts of medieval Europe but, as Angela Muñoz Fernández has pointed out in her analysis of Isabel's *vita* in *Mujer y experiencia religiosa en el marco de la santidad*, the emphasis on lineage carries out a specific function in these hagiographies: "el prestigio de la aristocracia no reposa solamente en el poder político o en la riqueza que detenta, sino sobre la consideración de una cualidad mágica ligada al hecho de su alto nacimiento" (27). This is particularly true in the case of Isabel, grandniece to another saint-queen, Elizabeth of Thuringia (d. 1231). The prestige of her lineage not only links her to royal families across Christendom, but it also links her directly to a saint who reconciled the same disparate ideals Isabel needed to reconcile as queen and saint: great wealth with great humility and charitable acts, motherhood with a chaste demeanor, power with obedience. The structure of Isabel's *vita* draws from the medieval master narrative for holy queens: the story of the Virgin Mary. Thematically, it closely resembles Elizabeth of Thuringia's hagiographical narrative in the *Leyenda Dorada*. Elizabeth's narrative, and indeed St.

Clare of Assisi's, served as important models for Isabel during her life and were equally important textual models for her *vita* in death. Their narrative links create a kind of aesthetic lineage, adding to the authority derived from blood relatives.

These model hagiographies informed not only the writing of Isabel's *vita*, but also several of the more public, lasting projects Isabel completed during her life. Isabel engaged in public prayer and almsgiving projects, religious pilgrimage, and founded a Poor Clares convent in Coimbra. She stipulated in her will, composed several years before the King's death, that she would not be buried alongside her husband, as was typical for a queen-consort. She chose instead to be buried in her convent in Coimbra, dressed in the Poor Clares robes in a tomb of her own design. Isabel thus helped to control and mold her postmortem fame by defining specific geographic and aesthetic parameters that set her apart, rather than associated her with, the very different fame garnered by her husband. In defining these aesthetic parameters, Isabel went farther than most other monarchs of her time by commissioning Pèro of Aragon, an artist from her native Crown of Aragon, to elaborate a tomb that she co-designed.

Isabel's tomb featured a near life-sized effigy of the queen wearing Poor Clares robes, carrying a pilgrim's staff, and donning a coin pouch emblazoned with the shell symbolic of the Camino de Santiago. Atop her head was a replica of the crown she wore as Queen of Portugal and which she turned over to the Archbishop at the Cathedral of Santiago upon completing the Camino as a pilgrim in a public display of obedience to the Church. Surrounding the queen's effigy on all sides of the tomb were miniature effigies of figures with which she closely allied her image, including St. Francis, St. Clare, the Virgin Mary, and the Poor Clares nuns. This tomb, and the convent in which it was housed, ensured that visitors to her resting place would experience her physical remains in a heightened and spiritual manner. Her body, eventually found to be incorruptible, maintained vibrancy through the highly stylized, premeditated aesthetic that augmented the saintly features of her legacy. The effigy of Isabel on top of the tomb, though in repose, has her eyes open and looking towards heaven, as though even in death Isabel remained attentive to the prayers of her subjects.

Isabel's self-fashioning projects visually and experientially promoted not only her successful service as queen but also underscored her saintly activities. These projects resulted in a physical space on earth where her cult could maintain a connection to a woman perceived to be far off in heaven. These two representations of Isabel's legacy in the medieval period – the physical space created by her tomb and the textual experience created by her *vita* – depict an eternal Queen, a woman who devoted her

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life to service and charity, and who continued after death to bestow special favors upon her cult through miracles.

3. THE SAINT-QUEEN IN THE MODERN ACADEMY

From the fourteenth through the eighteenth century, Isabel's memory was preserved through various mediums, including paintings, poetry, theatre, religious festivals, and even a sermon by the preeminent Portuguese Jesuit preacher, Antonio Vieira. These textual and performative renderings of her narrative were constructed in such a way as to shape the saint-queen's story into a distinctly vertical orientation, one that emphasized her life's heavenward trajectory. She began with a high birth, ascended to a high position of secular power, and was then assimilated into the hierarchy of heaven as one of God's elect.

The image of the saint-queen generated by her *vita* makes use of this verticality on several key occasions. The majority of painterly representations of Isabel from the early modern era, for instance, depict a woman of royal, maternal bearing who gazes with eyes cast gently downwards, presumably in the direction of her subjects and her cult below. Eliseo Serrano summarizes, in his text "Entre devoción y política: La canonización de Isabel de Aragón, Reina de Portugal" the eyewitness accounts of the very first official celebrations of Isabel's feast day in Rome, Madrid, and Coimbra. These accounts describe processions featuring effigies and paintings of Isabel borne aloft, soaring above the heads of the many revelers. Religious festivals in Isabel's honor continued annually and were often marked by special sermons in her honor. In 1674, Antonio Vieira delivered a sermon on the saint-queen at the Igreja de Santo António dos Portugueses. Vieira's sermon was centered on the image of a doubly crowned queen – crowned on earth and crowned in heaven. His sermon repeatedly drew attention to Isabel's crown – the highest point of the queen's physical presence – and used it as a synecdoche for the queen herself, orienting the veneration of Isabel vertically upwards in a symbolic association with the eternal divine.

A shift in this vertical construction of Isabel's image begins to appear in the modern period. In the late nineteenth century, amid quests for cohesive national histories, Isabel became the subject of scholarly research and analysis. The most significant contribution to this intellectual inquiry came from António Garcia Ribeiro de Vasconcellos who, in 1894, published the two-volume collection of documents and literature concerning the saint-queen, *A evolução do culto de Dona Isabel de Aragão*. The two volumes contained documents composed by the queen herself, such as her final Will and Testament, reports used in the canonization

process, and other texts that played a paramount role in the development of her cult before and after canonization. These volumes provided, at the turn of the century, a single source in which one could discover much about Isabel's life and legacy.

Beyond textual study, several visual narrative projects marked the culmination of Isabel's popularity in the 1990s. Early in the decade, archeologists began work in earnest on a long overdue renovation project. The monastery Isabel founded and in which she had originally been buried, now referred to as Santa Clara-a-Velha, had been flooded since the mid-seventeenth century when the Mondego River outgrew its banks. Rather than divert the water and clear out the monastery, a new one was built in 1648. Isabel's remains were moved to Santa Clara-a-Nova, where they remain today, encased in a silver tomb very different from the one the saint-queen had originally designed for herself. While her incorruptible body was rescued, the old building was left to languish for centuries. River water and silt covered the lower part of the building and the cloister well into the 1990s after a failed renovation effort in the 1930s. It was not until 1991 that a definitive restoration project got underway by a team of archaeologists, led by Artur Côrte-Real. The project was completed in 2009 and the doors were reopened for the first time in four centuries. Visitors were able to retrace the saint-queen's footsteps down the halls of the monastery, and then venture next door to a newly built museum containing the uncovered artifacts of the Poor Clares nuns who lived there in the fourteenth century as well as a very modern coffee shop from which to contemplate the past and view Isabel's legacy eye-to-eye.

This momentous archaeological contribution to the study of Isabel's environment in Portugal seemed to reverberate through her broader Iberian cult. By the end of the 1990s, a large-scale art exhibit was curated by the Igreja de Santa Isabel de Portugal in Zaragoza, displaying artifacts such as Isabel's jewelry alongside paintings ranging in date from the Baroque to the present. From May 13 to July 4, 1999 (Isabel's feast day), visitors were treated to self-guided interactions with the saint-queen's semblance, which included modern abstract depictions of her in bright and pastel hues. While a detailed analysis of the art exhibit lies outside the scope of this essay, a thorough analysis is possible elsewhere, as the Diputación de Zaragoza published a two-volume exhibit catalogue, complete with high quality reproductions of the art and photographs of the artifacts.

The intellectual milieu of the twentieth century in which scholars, archaeologists, and artists were producing revised histories of the saint-queen naturally also gave rise to a resurgence of Isabel's medieval *vita*. The Portuguese scholar Joaquim J. Nunes published the first modern edition of Isabel's *vita* in 1921. The Nunes edition, titled *Vida e milagres de Dona Isabel, Rainha de Portugal*, suddenly made the legend of

the saint-queen readily available to a wider, non-academic audience, inspiring the return of her widespread popularity. By the end of the twentieth century another Portuguese scholar, Maria Isabel de Cruz Montes, again reedited the *vita* as part of her 1999 Masters thesis at the University of Lisbon. This edition, however, was never published and is not available to the general public. Nevertheless, the availability of Isabel's *vita* in modern, standardized Portuguese made her story – replete with court intrigue, battles, and miracles – ripe for creative reinterpretation and fictionalization by twentieth century imaginations.

Isabel's *vita* was adapted for modern popular culture, transformed into a historical novel by the Azorean author, Vitorino Nemésio, and later into a film by Spanish director, Rafael Gil. These fictional representations of Isabel shift the previously established vertical, eternal elements in her narrative by bending her story's focus back to earth, remaking Isabel into a historical woman with a defined historical context rather than a place in an eternal (divine) narrative continuum. While the medieval *vita* and Isabel's own self-fashioning projects peer far into a distant future, the twentieth century renditions of her story are nostalgic, backward-gazing narrations of a distant historical time. The medieval project of creating an enduring story and launching it forward through future generations was inverted by the twentieth century, as the search for a national identity, required a solid, completed past, and psychologically rich characters through which to understand that past.

4. THE SAINT-QUEEN IN THE MODERN NOVEL

Vitorino Nemésio's novel constructs a main character that fits with Isabel's "historic" narrative framework while at the same time altering the overall effect that narrative has on the reader. This is accomplished through the application of two main narrative strategies. The novel's structure mimics the original medieval *vita*'s three thematic tenants, as described above, and uses a barebones narration style to underscore key psychological additions to the story. The text's omniscient narrator peers into Isabel's interior, providing an emotional and intellectual context for the historical action. The observations on the saint-queen's interior are delivered subtly, tucked into paragraphs that rapidly move through the events of Isabel's life. As Maria de Fátima Marinho has pointed out, this is a common technique applied to many historical novels of the twentieth century. "[N]ão interessa a repetição de grandes acontecimentos históricos, mas uma espécie de ressurreição poética dos seres humanos que deles fizeram parte" (22). The description of the miracles and peacemaking campaigns are given the same level of attention as the blush that appears on Isabel's cheeks when she first sees her future husband because that blush

confirms that, apart from a saint-queen, she was also once a shy young girl. With its choppy paragraphs, the slim novel's pacing reads more like a short story, moving resolutely through the historical events of Isabel's life, rarely hovering over any one event in particular, except to add those touches of poetic license that transform Isabel from legend into woman.

The novel's sparse language contributes to the weight of these poetic observations. Nemésio's economic use of words further enhances the effect of his descriptions of Isabel as precocious, self-conscious, an inhabitant of a strange and confusing world. The concise yet dense style is immediately apparent as Nemésio's narrator begins describing the family into which Isabel was born: "Pela mãe de seu pai, Pedro III o Grande, descendia das casas de Hungria e de Este. Por Constança de Navarra, sua mãe, era neta de Manfredo de Nápoles e Sicília e de D. Brites de Saboia ..." (2). At first glance, this passage would appear to be replicating the medieval emphasis on Isabel's grandiose and saintly lineage. But instead of generating a long list of illustrious names and associations, the narrator immediately points out how the saint-queen is related by blood, and separated by only a few generations, to Lucrecia Borgia. "Corria-lhe assim nas veias parte de um sangue que, com a ajuda do tempo e de outras linhas reais, aqueceria Lucrecia Bórgia" (2). Isabel's indirect association with Lucrecia Borgia, a woman whose legacy is never associated with saint-queens, destabilizes the authority and prestige traditionally acquired through the exercise in tracing lineage. The blood in Isabel's veins did no more to make her a saint than did the presence of the same blood in Lucrecia's veins make her one of history's infamous women. Indeed, Nemésio explicitly states as much in the very next sentence: "Com suprema indiferença a história extrai da mesma matéria humana os destinos mais opostos" (2). For Nemésio's narrator, history selected Isabel of Aragon and Lucrecia Borgia from the same bloodline for their respective destinies with cold indifference.

By initiating Isabel's story in this way, the concept of a saintly life preordained by God is replaced with the very real notion that one must be responsible for creating one's own destiny, inventing one's own mythology: "Naqueles tempos obscuros, de conflitos rudes e violentos," the narrator continues, "... o mistério desempenhava um papel decisivo na interpretação do futuro, que as imaginações antecipavam sob formas poéticas e simples" (2). The future was so uncertain, amidst an environment that the narrator disparagingly refers to as "dark" and "violent", that the imagination became an essential component in the construction of one's life. Any bright moment in this troubled environment could be designated as a sign or symbol from on high, and the signs in turn were infinitely malleable in their interpretation.

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Isabel's birth story, for example, was historically portrayed as the moment in which Isabel's favor with God is first revealed. In Nemésio's novel, the narrator explains that Isabel was delivered in the caul, and that this was indeed worthy of amazement, although this only takes up the space of three short sentences:

No parto de D. Constança, viu-se sair um serzinho completamente embrulhado numa película húmida, uma espécie de sub-placenta que lhe encobria os membros. A mãe, quando cortaram aquilo, mandou buscar alvoroçadamente um <<causela>> de prata e guardou o estranho envolvedor no segrêdo das suas arcas. Era um grande prenúncio" (3).

Isabel's birth was traditionally the moment when her saintly character is revealed to the reader. But in this passage, the perspective has been changed: the reader indirectly witnesses Isabel's birth through the eyes of her mother, Constança. Isabel is born not as an icon of who she will become, but rather as her mother's daughter. Constança sees her small child emerge completely covered with a strange film that she does not recognize immediately as saintly but more as a strange anomaly she must guard in secret. The narrator declares flatly that the caul represents a "grande prenúncio," but instead of drawing a connection between it and its implications for Isabel's saintly destiny, the narrator hastens back to a description of Constança, who has just experienced the realities of childbirth, its physical and mental effects:

Ainda pálida de um acto carnal que àquela hora, mesmo em cama dourada, a nivelava com a mais pobre mulher que fosse mãe no reino, Constança recobrou a sua consciência régia e pensou de-certo que o céu não esquecia os grandes da terra. Havia uma tutela celeste para os que tinham o ofício de reinar (3).

Here, childbirth has equalized all women, connecting them to a physical human experience that is both singular and universal. At the time of Isabel's birth, then, while it's true that her mother experienced something completely unique, it is also what all other mothers experience, regardless of their social position. Constança is a mother like all mothers; a queen did not deliver Isabel in the caul, a woman did. After the moment of birth however, Constança is brought back to her queenly bearing through her interpretation of the "sign" of Isabel's special birth. Thus the meaning of Isabel's birth in the caul is filtered through the perspective of the child's mother and is not understood as a direct intervention from God but as a human interpretation of a "mysterious" world.

The human experience of childbirth emerges again later in the novel, when Isabel gives birth to her first child coincidentally called Constança. There are several parallels between the scenes of Isabel's birth and the scene in which she gives birth. The most

apparent parallel between the two scenes is the emphasis placed on the response to childbirth:

Em Janeiro de 1290 veio o primeiro filho. O ano tinha entrado na ante-véspera, o frio parecia querer descascar os sobreiros e Isabel estava um pouco pálida, de costas, com as mãos deitando uma estriga de luz no lençol côr de cal. El-Rei suspendera tôdas as correições à espera do herdeiro – mais ainda não. Era uma menina, um palmo de pessoa de que saía uma nota muito tempo, como das gaitas galegas antes de esvaziarem. A imaginação do rei estava poética, mas havia considerações de fazenda e de estado que pediam licença para entrar. Foi ao berço tocar naquela carne, reconhecer o seu sangue. Depois ficou de pé a ver Isabel como um horizonte todo branco ...” (26).

This passage’s short sentences appeal to several senses at once in their description of the quiet moments of rest and recovery after Isabel’s initiation into motherhood. There is a sense of calm after a storm: the outside weather is cold and windy, but only a sliver of light enters the scene, crossing Isabel’s supine, resting body. Her poet-husband is in the room, imagining her body as a white horizon, revealing the way in which he privately turned his poetic mind towards his wife. Dinis’ fatherly instincts override his kingly agenda, as he touches his crying baby with reverence, unconcerned in this moment with the fact that the child’s sex means he does not yet have an heir to his throne.

These scenes of childbirth, both her own birth story and the story of her daughter’s birth, provide a corporal context in which to understand Isabel’s character. Her body moved through the thoroughly elaborated historical context that Nemésio includes in the narration. Isabel’s body was affected by physical interaction with its environment: it grew, aged, reproduced, suffered, and changed over time. Isabel’s body was also a sexual body, one that her husband looked at with desire. Though she chose to dress as a nun during the final years of her life, she never took the Clarissan vows and remained very much engaged with the political and personal dramas of her son and grandchildren, all reminders of her marriage bed.

The novel begins with Isabel’s birth and ends with her death, using her physical body as a frame for her story. There is no epilogue in which her corpse is found to be incorruptible, there is no mention of the miracles that occurred at her tomb. Isabel’s body acts as the vessel of her story; there is simply no more life in the story once vessel dies. The final sentence of the novel resonates with the finality her death brings: “Embrulharam-na num pano de lã alinhavado, pasaram-lhe uma corda à cintura, e, metendo o esquife num coiro de boi com o pêlo para for a, prepararam-se para a levar debaixo do calor a Coimbra” (64). Isabel is wrapped in cloth and

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taken away for burial without any description of emotion, without any hint at a continued presence through sainthood.

The modern Isabel that *Isabel de Aragão Rainha Santa* brings to life is a tangible, flesh and blood woman bound to her moment in time through the rigors of mortality. While the novel includes the most famous events of her life – her miracles – these events share equal narrative space with descriptions of childbirth, to the way her body reacted to fasting, to the physical relief she felt when taking off her queenly jewelry, to her aging body chaffing in Clarissan robes, to her swift, quiet death. Nemésio's Isabel character is first and foremost a real woman, one who did her best to interpret her world within a medieval context and shape her experience in it by using her intellect.

4. SAINT OF THE SILVER SCREEN

Rafael Gil, in his film *Reina Santa* (1947), appropriates the isabeline narrative to claim her as a hero of a more golden, medieval “Spain,” in keeping with an overwhelming majority of Spanish films produced during Francisco Franco's military dictatorship. In Gil's film, Isabel becomes a token of popular culture, representing an imagined, heroic past, resurrected to serve his present political climate. Franco “used film as a visual language to impose the mythology of his regime,” writes Virginia Higginbotham in her preface to *Spanish Film Under Franco*. As cinema's popularity exploded, so did its potential as a tool for establishing and disseminating this mythology. Under Franco, film became subordinate to the quest for controlling the dominant narrative of the regime. But while film may have been a medium of the future, with the cinematic industry rapidly growing and advancing technologically, in Spain it was used to express a nostalgic past. The only permissible subjects of the State-controlled film industry in Spain were “war epics and historical extravaganzas celebrating the glories of Spain's colonial past in images of patriotism, militarism, and religious heroism” (x). In this context, the dynamic and mysterious medieval character of Nemésio's novel and even of Isabel's medieval *vita* becomes an untenable model for a film with a propagandistic agenda. Instead, Isabel's story is manipulated to serve as an aggrandizement of historical persons emerging from “Spain.” “[H]istory transformed into myth becomes distorted and duplicitous in order to serve not fact, or authenticity, or even the demands of the box office, but an intention” (x). Isabel's story is manipulated in Gil's film in order to fit into the mold of 1940s Spanish film. As a result, Isabel becomes marginalized in her own story.

Rafael Gil's black and white film opens in the courts of medieval Portugal during the early days of King Dinis' reign, immediately following the successful defense of his inheritance of the throne, which had been contested by his brother, Afonso. The film begins *in media res* in a lush room filled with men in close conversation with the King. These advisors entreat the king to shore up the safety of Portuguese borders through an alliance with the Crown of Aragon. This alliance is to be brokered through marriage to King Pere III's young daughter, Isabel. Upon hearing that the girl is rumored to be very beautiful, Dinis agrees to send an emissary to the court in Barcelona to make the marriage proposal. Although presumably the film is about the "Reina Santa," the opening scene belongs to the Portuguese king and the way in which the events of history, rather than a predestined sainthood, shaped Isabel's life.

Isabel is also absent from the second scene of the film, during which the audience again views a huddle of powerful men in a luxurious room. This time, Pere and his advisors weigh their strategic position in the Peninsula, discussing their current vulnerability to neighbor, Castile and Leon, and their desire to secure the much sought-after region of Naples for the Crown of Aragon. The ambassador from Portugal already awaits an audience with the King, whose advisors urge him to consider marriage between Isabel and Dinis as a way of strengthening the Crown of Aragon's position. Pere agrees, but on the condition that Dinis proves a suitable companion for his daughter, reinforcing the special favor with which he looked after Isabel, present in the medieval *vita* version of events.

Yet the titular character of the film has yet to appear onscreen. When she does finally appear in the third scene, she is infantilized – not because of the age at which the film introduces her – but because of her inability to interpret signs from God, which is something she is born able to do in the *vita's* version of her story. The medieval depiction of an autonomous saint-queen, guided through her holy journey primarily by prayer, is replaced here with an invisible girl who, though her name has a presence in the royal halls of Iberia, she herself does not.

In the film's first glimpse of a very young Isabel in the third scene, she is asleep and dreaming. Lying utterly prone, Isabel is a passive recipient of the images in her dream, which are soon revealed to be scenes of a great battle in progress. She awakens from the dream frightened and calling out for her mother, who comes and comforts her by reassuring her that it was all just a dream. Her mother's calm attitude regarding her daughter's dream persists, in spite of the fact that young Isabel repeats "No. No es un sueño...es una visión horrible." This vision has been framed by the preceding two scenes of political negotiation and therefore contextualizes Isabel as a kind of conduit through which God joins in with kings' advisors to advance certain

strategies and plans. The dream becomes prophetically related to shifting political powers and Isabel's unconscious participation in those events when she describes the battle scene to her father. He reacts as if God, his ultimate advisor, has just weighed in on Isabel's marriage to Dinis by revealing the potential political fallout should he fail to strengthen his kingdom with a Portuguese ally. "Nada tenemos ya que decidir, porque fue Dios quien decidió," says her father. God's intervention becomes more about its effect on politics than it does on the reputation of the girl through whom He intervenes.

Rather than a true introduction to the titular character, the dream scene acts more like a rhetorical device used to demonstrate how the child-Isabel experienced her path to maturity and adulthood, to social and political awareness. Isabel is literally awakening to the real political dangers surrounding her, although she still relies on her father to interpret them for her. It is suggestive, however, that this awakening takes place in her bed; the audience is aware that a marriage proposal from the King of Portugal is already being considered by her father and that soon she will have to abandon her childhood bed for her conjugal bed. In place of a saintly young girl, given to fasting and prayer, the audience first meets Isabel on the eve of her betrothal and thus her entrance into the world of adulthood, queenship, and public affairs.

Yet the topic of Isabel's sexuality is never dealt with in the film, even her marriage takes place off-screen. The next time the audience sees Isabel, she is a fully-grown woman and queen, confidently commanding the attention of her ladies-in-waiting. The film avoids at all costs alluding to the saint-queen's sexuality, skipping both of Isabel's childbearing experiences. Depicting a pregnant saint onscreen in late 1940s Spain would have "tarnished" the virginal aura with which film imbued its Isabel character.

Sexuality is not the only suppressed element of Isabel's story in this film, however, as the film ends before she dies. After serving as a kind of divinely inspired political advisor alongside her husband, the denouement of the film is the moment of Dinis' death. He lies in a sumptuous bed, reconciling himself with all of his children and with Isabel, and proffering kingly advice upon them one final time, until his eyes gently close. The violins swell and a narrator's voice intones the remainder of the story in montage form: Isabel journeys the Camino de Santiago in her "homeland," a heroic Spaniard returning to her rightful place after making Portugal's king into a great man. This ending ignores the fact that Isabel died and was buried in her adopted home of Portugal. In lieu of situating Isabel's story in her physical body like Vitorino Nemésio did, Rafael Gil opts to make her into a symbolic emblem of Spanish heroism. Gil uses the medieval context as the structure within which he

contains Isabel's story, rooting her to her time and thereby glorifying the past by reimagining her life.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The revisions of Isabel's narrative have continued in both academic and creative spheres in the twenty-first century, most notably with the publication of Maria Filomena Andrade's comprehensive monograph *Rainha Santa, mãe exemplar: Isabel de Aragão* (2012) and António Cândido Franco's novel *Os pecados da Rainha Santa Isabel* (2010). These works reflect a continuation of the desire to deeply know the historical Isabel, as if she were separate from the myth she herself consciously helped to construct during her life. Filomena Andrade's incredibly detailed and researched volume plainly states in its introduction "Isabel não é, pois, uma mulher extraordinária; é simplesmente uma Mulher" (13). The Isabel narratives of the twentieth century seek to place Isabel in a specific time and place, to contain her story within the boundaries of the past, and the twenty-first century is carrying on this project, though with new nuances. The medieval narratives, on the other hand, purposefully wove narrative qualities in Isabel's story that were considered transcendent, timeless. As the medieval isabeline narrative reaches towards the future, the contemporary one reaches back to a remote, bygone past.

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