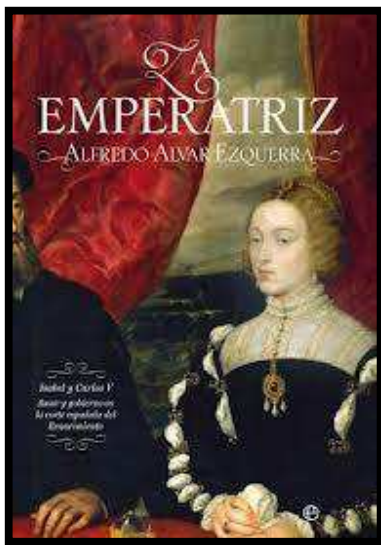


Alfredo Alvar Ezquerro. *La Emperatriz. Isabel y Carlos V. Amor y gobierno en la corte española del Renacimiento (1503-1539)*. Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2012. 478 p. ISBN: 9788499702766.

Reviewed by Claire Gilbert
University of California, Los Angeles



In 1503, a daughter was born to the kings of Portugal, Manuel de Avis y María, herself the third daughter of the Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabella. The newborn Isabel de Portugal was the product of a long and complicated process of dynastic alliances between Portugal and Spain and, indeed, Isabel and her future husband Charles V were both the grandchildren of the Catholic Kings. Though raised in different courts and countries, both cousins were educated to carry out important roles on the political stage. Charles's reign is better known, but Isabel, as Holy Roman Empress and Queen Regent of Spain in Charles's frequent absences from the Peninsula, was no less important to the political history of the early sixteenth century. Their marriage and political partnership was cut short by Isabel's early death in 1539, following the birth of her sixth child (her first child was Philip II, the heir to the Spanish throne). It is this short but important life that Professor Alvar seeks to reanimate by the systematic analysis of innumerable documents, and convey through fluid biographical narrative.

Professor Alvar has already demonstrated narrative deftness and scientific rigor in other biographies ranging from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Thus it is no surprise that he begins his story long before the birth of Isabel in 1503, and carries it far beyond her death in 1539. He grounds his work in a rich description of the political and dynastic context beginning in the late fifteenth century and leading up to the meeting in Granada in 1526, underscoring just how uncertain the outcome of the negotiation for this royal match actually was. The road to the wedding was made long not only by the years of political negotiation, but also in time spent physically travelling. Professor Alvar contextualizes and brings to life all of the ceremonial and other obligations laid along the route for each partner during their respective itineraries, from Lisbon via Badajoz for her and from Toledo for him. Despite these complications, as the author highlights, when the two met for the first time in the *Patio de las Doncellas* of the Royal Alcazar in Seville in 1526, according to all reports it was love at first sight. A modern photo of the Patio can be found in the beautifully reproduced color prints bound into the center of the book. This collection of prints is a

tremendous asset to the volume, as it also serves to give the reader an idea of the different way her story has been represented from the sixteenth century until the Romantic period.

Professor Alvar uses Isabel's biography to explore many key points of the history of the first decades of the sixteenth century, and it is here that his long chronology takes on particular significance, since only by delving into the previous generations can the shape of Charles and Isabel's match be fully explained. No less important is the endurance of Isabel's memory among her descendants the later Habsburg monarchs, as well the dispersal of her material effects, which took generations (p. 364 y 374). As Professor Alvar recounts Isabel's short life, he takes on a wide array of topics of general interest to any early modern historian, from the Comunidades de Castilla and Charles' royal response (p. 63), the process of castilianization which took place in the queen's largely Portuguese household (p. 154), the repercussions of the actions of the royal court in the practice of Castilian politics (p. 158), the intimate and often overlooked connection between giving birth and making out one's will (p. 123), the daily life of ruling the Peninsula and the Empire, Isabel's involvement in the management of the North African presidios (p. 305) and her influence on the military campaigns against Tunis and Algeria –the latter realized two years after her death. He emphasizes throughout the book the pressure put by distance on a couple already weighed down with political responsibility, at the same time that he explains the historical reasons for this separation and its consequences. These consequences ranged from the fact of her regency and how she reigned vis-à-vis the royal council, to the way letters were used to circulate news, information, and advice as much between the two spouses as between the networks of nobility that stretched between all the courts in Europe. He also describes in detail the ceremonial and administrative management of Isabel's death, and insists on the lasting presence of her memory, taking advantage of her example to discuss the long process of exhumations and reburials suffered by the royal dead in their journey to the pantheon in El Escorial under Philip IV. This wide array of topics and ample chronology is united by a clear and amiable narrative and supported by a tremendous and tremendously diverse source base, including financial accounts, written reports, chronicles, and the correspondence of and about the Empress. The years of archival research which are the backbone of this book represent an investigation that was carried much farther and conducted more systematically than any previous study of the life of Isabel, of which there have been very few. Professor Alvar succeeds in shedding new light on even the most well known historical events via the lens of the Empress's daily life and personality. The overarching historical narrative coupled with rich documentary detail, in particular from letters, allows the reader to understand why and how in this period the public and private realms were highly intertwined when it came to practicing politics. Thanks to Professor Alvar's use of such a large array of sources generated by a multitude of individuals associated with the bureaucratic apparatus of the Empire and the court of Charles V, as well as with the Empress and her household, many different individuals

from all social strata fill the scenes of Isabel's life in his account. In fact, it is not only the life of his protagonist Isabel that he seeks to describe for the reader, but of all those individuals who may be glimpsed through the documents.

Professor Alvar has provided his readers with a work of great erudition that also happens to be written in a personal tone, one which explicitly invites the reader to reconsider well-documented historic events from his or her own subjectivity. This narrative approach fits nicely in a work that has as its central focus the life of a single individual, albeit as the departure point for a much wider context. As a writer, Professor Alvar draws his reader into his enthusiasm –not for his subject Isabel or her surroundings, in which he is certainly highly interested– but for the process of recovering an historical period and person to the extent made possible by the painstaking and thorough analysis of primary sources. The author's enthusiasm for the historian's craft, even more than the fascinating details and characters that populate Isabel's biography, makes the book personal and compelling. It is a work of scientific narrative history, and is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand the personal factors that shaped the politics of the sixteenth century. The author eschews footnotes, using instead brief parenthetical annotations and citations, as well as a healthy bibliography organized by chapters and themes, to be found at the end of the book. Despite the lack of footnotes, each piece of information is well accounted for in the text, which weaves the reasons for why a document was generated and why and where it has been preserved into the historical narrative itself. This ability to convey both the story and its sources without interrupting the narrative flow is no mean feat, and is representative of a historian who has spent a lifetime cultivating an expertise not only of historical subjects but also in the learning, writing, and teaching of history. Although the format is somewhat different from a traditional monograph of history, any interested reader or specialist will find in Professor Alvar's book an extremely useful reference whose scholarly apparatus is easy to use, as well as a beautifully written work of history and biography.