Historians have long admired the achievements of the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella, Queen of Castile (1474-1504), and Ferdinand, King of Aragon (1479-1516). 'The most glorious epoch in the annals of Spain', wrote W. H. Prescott in 1837. 'The monarchy was falling apart at every joint; the Catholic Sovereigns restored it on a new plan', claimed J. H. Mariel in 1892. 'It was a happy golden age', declared Ramón Menéndez Pidal in 1962. And it was the verdict of John Lynch, writing in 1981, that their reigns produced 'the makings of a nation state, united, peaceful beyond any in Europe'. Recent biographers of Isabella, notably Joseph Pérez (1988) and Peggy Liss (1992), have been similarly fulsome in their praise. Contemporary writers had a near unanimous verdict on Isabella. She was the ideal monarch who brought greatness to their country. She was El Encadenada (the hidden one), who saved her people from anarchy and heresy, slayed the infidel and re-established order in a war-torn land. In the words of one of her chroniclers: 'It can be said in truth that just as our Lord wished that our glorious Lady might be born in this world because from her would proceed the Universal Redeemer of the human lineage, so he determined that you, My Lady, would be born to reform and restore these kingdoms and lead them from the tyrannical government under which they have been for so long.'

In an age where female rulers were a rarity, Isabella was certainly an exceptional woman. She introduced the Inquisition, assisted Ferdinand in the reconquest of Granada, and purged her country of heretics. Her reign saw the end of civil war and the restoration of royal justice, and, together with her husband, she unified the Spanish kingdoms and established an overseas empire. Any one of these accomplishments would be a major triumph, and to be successful in so many fields may well justify the view that this was a 'golden age'. The aim of this article is not to re-state these achievements but to consider some of them in a wider context. Three questions will be asked. Firstly, what was the legacy of Henry IV, King of Castile, in 1474? Secondly, was the role of Ferdinand deliberately played down by Castillian chroniclers? And thirdly, and more controversially, did Isabella actually solve her country's political problems?

The legacy of Henry IV (1454-74)
Most chroniclers claimed that Henry was impotent, incompetent and unfit to rule. In the 1480s a Castilian chronicler, Andrés Bernáldez, looked back upon his reign and stated:

'At this juncture envy and covetousness were awakened and avarice was nourished; justice became moribund and force ruled; greed reigned and decadent sensuality spread, and the cruel temptation of sovereignty overcame the humble persuasion of obedience; the customs were mostly dissolute and corrupt.....And Our Lord, who sometimes permits evils to exist on the earth in order that each malefactor should be punished according to the extent of his errors, allowed so many wars to break out in the kingdom, that nobody could say that they were exempt from the ills that ensue from them... These wars lasted for the final ten years for which this King reigned. Peaceful men suffered much violence at the hands of new men who rose up and wrought great havoc.'

How accurate was this judgement? Was his reign really that bleak?

Henry ruled Castile for 20 years and historians now acknowledge that, in the first half of his reign, he administered his country effectively, commanding widespread respect and obedience. In the absence of a central administration, the Crown depended upon the support of the principal nobles, clergy and towns. Political tension was always near the surface and any attempts by the Crown to interfere in local affairs by, for example, appointing corregidores (royal governors), were resisted by town councils. The Crown was also restricted financially and militarily. Neither the nobles nor the clergy paid direct taxation and, as the King could not afford a standing army, he depended upon them for loans, troops and co-operation. In effect, his position was very vulnerable. Though most subjects recognised the advantages of strong
The major casualty in this political bear garden was justice. Intermittent civil war had left deep scars and the restoration of royal justice would be a slow process.'

Joanna was not his daughter, and modern research suggests that he was right. It suited disgruntled nobles and Isabella's churlishly ambitious claimants to stress the poor condition of Castile at her accession. He was reconciled with the honourable Isabella, his weakness with her strength, his daughter's spurious claim with Isabella's legitimacy. In their biased and retrospective view, her succession in 1474 marked the beginning of a new era.

The role of King Ferdinand

Castilian writers were understandably biased in favour of Isabella. They censured royal patronage and were not averse to writing partisan accounts, even against her husband. 'If anything worthy of praise was accomplished in Andalucia', wrote Alonso de Palencia, 'it seemed to be due to the Queen's initiative. It was certainly a marvellous thing', declared Fernando del Pulpio in 1485, 'that so many men and great lords could not agree to effect in many years, one lone woman carried out in a little time.' Ferdinand was thus portrayed as indefatigable, weak, and subordinate to a dominant Queen. Yet this is a historical travesty since, without his help, she might never have secured her throne.

Within weeks of her accession, several nobles and towns declared their support for Joanna, revolts occurred throughout the kingdom, and, most seriously, the King of Portugal invaded Castile with the intention of marrying the princess. Ferdinand assumed command of Isabella's army and directed military operations. Between 1475 and 1476, he travelled from Burgos to Zamora, fought the battle of Toro, and stopped the Portuguese; two years later, he was on land to repel a second invasion. There can be little doubt that if Alfonso, King of Portugal, had not been defeated, resistance to Isabella would have been much greater. Alfonso's subsequent acknowledgement that Isabella was the legitimate Queen, and his agreement to keep Joanna in Portugal, ended the War of Succession in 1479.

That same year, Ferdinand succeeded his father as King of Aragon. Like Castile, the kingdom was slowly recovering from civil war and foreign invasions. Royal finances were poor, trade and commerce had declined, and social conflict between landlords and peasants and between towns and nobles was endemic. Ferdinand spent very little time in Aragon – only eight out of 37 years – leaving the administration to viceroys and a council. Instead, he lived with his wife in Castile, the largest and most prosperous of their lands. From the outset of Isabella's reign, she directed Castilian domestic affairs and Ferdinand was responsible for the foreign relations of both Castile and Aragon.

Historians have long acknowledged the Queen's religious zeal and especially her crusade against the Moors in Granada (1487-92), but of equal, if not greater significance, was Ferdinand's role in this holy war of reconquista. He led the combined Aragonese and Castilian army, was present at the sieges of Ronda, Málaga, Baza and Almería, and accompanied the Queen on their triumphal entry into Granada in 1492. The war had been much harder, far longer and more costly than the monarchs had expected, but these lessons were not lost on Ferdinand who, at the same time, had been skillfully constructing a network of European alliances in preparation for his next war.

We have already seen his role in the War of Succession in Castile (1475-79) and the Granada War (1482-92); but he also went to war with France over Brittany (1491-2) and with the Papacy, to annex the Papal States (1494), and with Milan (1509-15). Ferdinand's skill lay in his balancing different yet connected objectives, harmonising Castilian and Aragonese resources, and achieving his aims with the minimum of inconvenience. He concluded marriage alliances with the royal houses of Portugal, Burgundy, England and Austria to secure Castile and Aragon's political position, and, after the death of Isabella, he married Germaine de Foix to strengthen his claim to Navarre. He joined Holy Leagues in 1495 and 1500 to safeguard his interests in Naples and Milan, and he made treaties with any enemy of France – with Henry VII of England in 1489, for instance, in order to recover Roussillon and Cerdagne for Aragon, and with Henry VIII in 1513 to seize Navarre and drive the French out of Milan. Under pre-
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By visiting every town in Castile, the Catholic Monarchs confirmed their resolve to restore justice and impart effective government but they could not be everywhere at once and had to prioritise their time. The Queen's frequent pregnancies restricted her journeys and, in the years following the Granada war, the nobility reassured itself in the face of royal justice. In the 1490s Castile Velasco threatened villagers in Old Castile, the Court of Burgos seized property near the town, the Cabrera family illegally claimed lands in Segovia, and the Duke of Vizcaya terrorized people in Leon. It is a myth that the aristocracy had been tamed by the Crown. They remained hungry for land and broke the law with impunity. Many townspeople, who petitioned the Crown to impart justice for all, were of the opinion that the judicial system was corrupt and that royal administration was breaking down.

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Books on Isabella and Ferdinand

In particular, the death of Joanna's health, the nobility and city councils split into rival camps. Some, like the Admiral and Constable of Castile and the archbishops of Toledo and Seville, supported Joanna; a second group, led by Mendoza and Villena, backed Philip; and a third faction, dominated by Alba and Tendilla, gathered round Ferdinand. No wonder an Italian diplomat commented: 'The nobles sharpen their teeth like wild boars with the hope of a great change.' The death of Philip in September 1506 may have removed one contender but it also provoked civil disturbances, and the political crisis only ended when Ferdinand intervened with an army. By 1508 he regained control and was recognised as regent but the Castilian succession was still far from settled. He accepted that Charles would succeed to both Castile and Aragon but, as the prince was still a minor and currently ruling and living in the Low Countries, arguments soon broke out between rival councillors and Ferdinand as to who should head the administration. Cardinal Cisneros, the Archbishop of Toledo, opposed Ferdinand's nominee, the Duke of Alba; there was support in some circles for the insane Joanna, now incarcerated in Tordesillas castle, and another faction viewed her younger son, Ferdinand, who had been born and brought up in Spain, as an alternative claimant. All these tensions surfaced at the death of King Ferdinand in 1516 and received varying support in the revolt of the Comuneros in 1519. If the main aim of the Catholic Monarchs had been to continue the Trastámara dynasty and to secure an undisputed throne free from the nobles' interference, then they failed on all counts.

Conclusion
The triumphs of the Catholic Monarchs were far-reaching and, in many respects, unprecedented. Isabella and Ferdinand were remarkable rulers and merited many of the plaudits heaped upon them. Many, but not all. This article has sought to set their reigns in a wider context beyond the blinkered vision of Castilian chroniclers. It has suggested that the reign of Henry IV was not an unmitigated failure, that Ferdinand played a vital part in laying the foundations of Castile's 'golden age', and that Isabella bequeathed serious political and dynastic problems, not altogether dissimilar to those which she had inherited. The political achievements of the Catholic Monarchs in general, and Isabella in particular, have been exaggerated by court propagandists and by historians - propagandists by a desire to look at the past nostalgically and historians by a readiness to accept such accounts all too uncritically.

Notes
5. Fernando del Pulgar, Cronica de la reina Catalina, ed. J. M. Carranza (Madrid, 1943), Cap IV.

For much of their married life, Isabella and Ferdinand had laboured to secure their dynasty by producing as many children as possible, marrying them into powerful royal families, and acquiring a list of claims to European thrones. Though they produced four daughters, only one son reached adulthood, and he predeceased his mother in 1497.'