

# ENHANCING *REPUTACIÓN*: IMAGES OF THE QUEEN IN EARLY MODERN SPAIN

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Historian John Elliott explains that in early modern Spain, *reputación* meant “the other person’s perception of oneself” (146). The reign of Philip IV (1621-65) was marked with a preoccupation about opinions toward the Spanish king and his dominions as these compared to other European powers. This concern with appearance led to a program of improving the prominence of the Monarchy so as to achieve authority within Spain and esteem abroad.<sup>1</sup> The need to enhance the Crown’s *reputación* stemmed largely from the lack-luster performance of the preceding reign of Philip III, from whom his son inherited a disgruntled Spanish populace whose loyalty had been tested by the draining effects of war. By the time Philip ascended to the throne in 1621, Spain was perceived both at home and abroad as in a state of decline. Guided by his favorite, the Count-Duke of Olivares, Philip was convinced that a campaign of reforming the Crown’s image was essential to regain the support of his subjects and the respect of other European rulers.

This propaganda program was widespread in its projection of the symbols of monarchy. The technique to promote *reputación* lay in utilizing the objects and people closely associated with the king to reinforce his image as “Felipe el Grande” and the Spanish court as the greatest in Europe. One such tool lay in exploiting the queen’s image as an emblem of monarchy. In recent studies on early modern politics, much attention has been directed toward the deployment of images and symbols by absolutist regimes, but the propaganda value of the queen has been little explored. This paper addresses the place ascribed to royal women in politics and how this role was determined by the needs of governance and the social standards for women of the time. Specifically,

I will examine how one regime shaped the public image of Philip's wives, Isabel de Francia and Mariana de Austria. The Crown carefully dealt with issues of marriage, childbearing and clothing so as to mold the political identity of its queens within an acceptable moral framework for women of the seventeenth century. Pictorial representations of the queen in medals and portraits, as well as chronicles and funerary publications form part of the devices used to enhance the Monarchy's *reputación* both on Spanish soil and in foreign lands.

Foremost, married women of all social classes were considered appendages to their husbands. This was no different for the queen-consort. Evidence of this role is depicted by chronicler Antonio de León Pinelo, who records the marriage ceremony celebrated by Felipe and his young French bride in a 1615 entry of the *Anales de Madrid*. Contained within the text is the reproduction of a medal, entitled "El Príncipe D. Felipe y la Princesa Da Isabel."

Noteworthy is the symbolic language of sexual hierarchy in the royal couple's relationship, visible in the gesture of the prince. Felipe exhibits a peculiar gesture in that his left arm is pushed over in an abrupt movement of *blocking* part of Isabel's bust. The viewer's gaze rests on the bent elbow of the Prince, which protrudes at a right-angle upwards towards the princess. His motion signals that his new wife is his own; a view of her *entire* body remains for Felipe's privilege. In her article, "The Renaissance Elbow," Joaneath Spicer explains how a display of this limb in art "evinced a sense of territoriality" where the gesture of the male "serves to mark the boundary signaling his territory" (108). While shielding part of Isabel's upper body, the prince really defends with his elbow the territory of her lower body, her sexual body.

The importance placed on Isabel's sexuality indicates that the medal also looked to the future, to the heir who would be produced by the consummation of the marriage bond. As the future queen, Isabel is the key site for assuring the continuity of Habsburg rule in Spain even though the Crown only desired to recognize the continuity between Sovereign and Prince based upon the principle of patrilinear inheritance. Felipe may try to hide Isabel's reproductive belly, but the viewer is drawn to precisely that area. By concealing Isabel's lower body, the elbow reminds the viewer of what is supposed to be forgotten: that even within governing traditions

of patrilinear inheritance, the queen's reproductivity matters. The medal thus outlines the identity of the princess as it relates to the marriage contract. That is, Isabel is to be known through her association with the prince, and the wifely duty of childbearing is clearly marked as her most important role.

The dating of the medal, however, poses problems for an interpretation of the coin's purpose as strictly a commemoration of the marriage. The medal was not minted until 1622, a year after Felipe inherited the crown, and nearly six years after the marriage ceremony. One cannot but consider the coin as propaganda that heralds the power of king upon his recent ascension to the throne. Certain clues in the medal such as body placement and the king's garments accentuate the political might of "El rey planeta." The placement of the prince on the proper right and the princess to his left is an observation of protocol, accentuating the superiority of the king. Felipe wears a suit of armor, reminiscent of Titian's "Charles V at Mühlberg" (1548), where that King of Spain is depicted as the standard-bearer for the Catholic faith. Charles V was among a handful of great Spanish rulers whose character Felipe tried to emulate. Viewed in this manner, striking a medal that presents the married couple is merely an excuse to extol the heightened political status of the king.

The monarchy's *reputación* could not be upheld if the stability of the Crown was threatened. Only providing an heir for the throne could ensure the smooth transition of Habsburg rule. As stated previously, childbearing was a critical function of the queen. Chiefly, the aim was to provide a male heir. Although in Spain a daughter could legitimately inherit the throne, females were viewed as easily influenced; likewise, there was concern that, through her marriage, the throne would succumb to dynastic change, or that the line would die out if she failed to marry and produce offspring (Orso 6). Chronicler Jerónimo del Barrionuevo expresses the pessimistic view regarding male births in his 1654 entry of the *Avisos*: "They say that the queen suspects she is pregnant. Let it be God's will, and if it should be a girl, why do we want her? Better that it not be, for women we have enough" (61). Due to the problems that Felipe and his wives faced in producing healthy male offspring, the Crown tried to reassure its subjects that an orderly transition of power would occur

when Felipe's rule ended.

Disseminating rumor of the queen's pregnancies was an action that hoped to curtail criticism about the shortcomings of the royal couple's ability to procreate. Barrionuevo recounts many suspected pregnancies of Queen Mariana, chronicles her cravings during pregnancy and even reports when the queen and king bed together. While Barrionuevo was a courier, his proximity to the royal family would have been limited. The intimate information he details in his *Avisos* could only have reached him through sources closer to the queen who would have been made privy to the happy news—most likely, these were her ladies-in-waiting. If we are to trust that Barrionuevo faithfully recounted such news,<sup>2</sup> what we find is a very anxious royal couple who notified their attendants upon the first indication of a lapse in the queen's menstrual cycle. His Majesties knowing well that this information would soon reach the rest of the court and travel beyond the palace walls.

Such hasty notification of pregnancy is understandable. By the time Felipe remarried, he was nearly fifty years old and the Crown sat without a male heir. Moreover, Mariana experienced many miscarriages and gave birth to numerous children who died within the first months of life. In a state where Christian providentialism held fast, the prospect of a healthy male born late in the king's life was viewed as God's satisfaction with the Spanish and their ruler. Felipe himself expresses this sentiment in a letter to his confidante Sor María de Agreda. He writes to the abbess, "I know well that all of our suffering is born from our offending God. [. . .] Pray to her [the Virgin Mary] that she intercede with her Holy Son so that it be [a boy], and that he give this Monarchy the day so longed for, if it be his will" (83-4). A male heir would remove Spain from questions of succession, and providing hints about the queen's pregnant state was an attempt to offset the public's doubt about the Empire's future.

Besides utilizing the queen in her valuable roles as appendage and childbearer, these queens were *fashioned* by the state. For, apart from bodily and aesthetic functions, fashion also served political interests. One interesting event where the queen's attire served a political motive was Isabel's royal entry ceremony into Madrid in 1615. At the time, the beleaguered Crown was facing much criticism for the declining economic state of the country and needed to spark sentiments of nationalism in its

subjects. León Pinelo's account of Isabel's entry affirms and imposes this display of nationalistic pride that the Crown desperately sought after.

As a foreigner, Isabel is an ideal figure to use for accentuating Spanish identity. The chronicler focuses upon the princess's dress to first depict a woman distinct from Spanish life. He writes in the *Anales de Madrid*: "Su Alteza iba vestida a lo francés, con saya entera de raso encarnado bordado de canurillo y su gorrilla aderezada de diamantes y lechuguilla, muy bien tocada *al uso de Francia*" (466, my emphasis). Visible in her attire, Isabel still clearly embodies her French ties. But in marrying the Spanish Habsburg monarch, the princess would be expected to alter her loyalties, at least the outward signs of national fealty. León Pinelo continues that after six or seven days, "La Princesa nuestra señora y todas las damas francesas salieron este día *vestidas a la española*. [. . .] *Salió toda la corte a ver a Su Alteza por el nuevo traje*" (472, my emphasis). The focus on clothing signifies the shift from French to Spanish identity and Isabel's acceptance of Spanish customs necessitated by her new role as a representative of the Spanish Monarchy. This completes at least a public transformation of her national identity, much to the delight of the entire court, which came out to see her precisely because of her dress change.

Clothing served not only as a symbol of national identity but was a signifier of marital status, particularly that of widowhood. Queen Mariana's dress in pictorial images after Felipe's death in 1665 serves as a focal point to understanding the late monarch's objectives for her as regent of his empire. In the culminating hieroglyph of Felipe's *exequies*, Mariana is robed as a religious sister and holding a cross. The crowned, winged heart symbolizes Felipe's soul ascending into heaven. The seven figures watching him represent the seven virtues of Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, Prudence, Fortitude and Religion, who substitute for Temperance. Steven Orso explains the depiction of Mariana in his rigorous study of Philip IV's *exequies*, *Art and Death at the Spanish Habsburg Court*:

It was customary in the seventeenth century for a highborn Spanish widow to abandon her usual dress for a nun's habit. [. . .] Including a figure wearing a nun's habit among the virtues who bid Philip farewell becomes more than a declaration of his

religiosity. It is also a discreet representation of Mariana as the virtuous widow who has survived him. Furthermore, placing her where the viewer expects to find Temperance comments favorably upon the temperance with which she will carry out responsibilities as regent. (110)

Such representation of the queen was meant to quell the fears that Spaniards felt about the future of the country. Juan de Carreño's state portrait of Mariana also wearing a nun's habit sitting at her desk exudes a sense of the pious queen "religiously" tending to the office of governing. Both of these images indicated that Mariana would defend Spanish interests by dutifully executing the policies of her late husband.

Mariana and the regency council named by her husband were called upon to sustain the reputation of the Spanish Monarchy during what was essentially considered a "crisis" period for the Crown. While the visual depictions of the queen are meant to persuade the viewer of Mariana's suitability as regent, they did not successfully sway the queen herself into accepting this position on the terms established for her by Felipe and his council. Mariana's political actions and the vehemence expressed toward her as regent indicate that she behaved in the exact opposite way of the role that the regime ascribed to her in the artistic renderings. From the start, Mariana defied tradition by refusing to attend Felipe's *exequies* (Orso 63-4). In governing, her actions led to factioning as she vied to meet the interests of the Austrian court headed by her brother, Emperor Leopold I. She was especially criticized for elevating her Austrian confessor Nirhard to a high ministerial position. She had the priest naturalized as a Spaniard, thereby outwitting the provisions of the late king's will which specified that no foreigner should serve on the councils of state (Kamen 331). It was even rumored that Mariana engaged in an intimate relationship with the disliked minister Valenzuela (Hume 400). Chastity in Catholic Europe was the celebrated tradition in widowhood. Such an action would have defied the patriarchal guidelines for celibate widowhood and been considered a dishonor to the memory of her husband.

When tensions between Mariana and the rest of the council reached a climax, she was ousted from power, banished from Madrid and ordered

to a convent. Mariana's royal *exequies* as recorded by Antonio de Zamora extend a bitter farewell to the disliked Queen Mother. One of the hieroglyphs reads "Melior est tibi mors quam vita" ("It is better for you to die than live") A stanza from among the poetic verses claims: "Tesoros derramaste generosa/Con sed Christiana, Christianidad sediente." Orso notes that the Habsburg's observed strict adherence to elaborate rules of *etiqueta* during royal *exequies*. However, these hieroglyphs far from render appropriate honors to Mariana. Indeed, they are extraordinary both for the bitterness with which they blame the queen for Spain's ruin and for mocking the strict etiquette of funerary honors through the crafty choice of the "pious" Mariana image first (un)veiled at Felipe's funeral ceremonies.

The Monarchy realized the importance of appearance and used the figure of the queen as one through which to channel its reputación. We have seen how depicting the queen as a stout supporter of her husband—by serving as an appendage to the king, as dutifully childbearing male offspring and even her fashion—served important political interests for the Crown. The treatment forced to Mariana's image at her death comments on the seriousness with which the queen was expected to fulfill the role outlined for her by the regime and how any deviance from this "pictorial policy" met with great retribution.

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## NOTAS

<sup>1</sup> The term Monarchy, or *monarquía española*, as used in the seventeenth century implied not just the ruler of Spain but the entire Spanish Empire.

<sup>2</sup> It is highly unlikely that Barrionuevo concocted these stories himself since he provides the historian with two volumes of verifiable local, national and international field reports.

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