



*Queen, Mother, and Stateswoman:
Mariana of Austria and the
Government of Spain*

Silvia Z. Mitchell

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Mariana of Austria (1634–1696), consort (and niece) of Philip (Felipe) IV of Spain as well as mother and regent for their son Charles (Carlos) II, has long been a divisive figure in Iberian historiography. In this new biography, Silvia Z. Mitchell aims to redress Mariana’s reputation of being an ineffective and “power hungry” regent whose rule on behalf of her son has been tied to a rhetoric of deep decline in the final years of Hapsburg rule in Spain. Mitchell argues that the historiography of this period, written mainly by men and with the hindsight of the chaotic War of the Spanish Succession and Bourbon period that followed Charles’ death, has “disempowered” Mariana and belied her politically savvy actions during the regency, as she steered a course for the Spanish empire and the monarchy through the turbulence of the political quagmire of late seventeenth-century Europe (5). In this work, Mitchell has re-evaluated Mariana’s regency, and given a thorough coverage of her life as a whole, through an intensive examination of the archival material and an approach to Mariana’s life that combines political history and queenship studies to cast new light on this controversial queen.

The biography focuses almost exclusively on Mariana’s dowager period as queen regent and queen mother, with six of the seven body chapters dedicated to the period between her son Charles’ accession in 1665 and her return to court in 1679 after a brief period of exile in Toledo. However, the first chapter, which covers Mariana’s early years as an Imperial archduchess and as Philip IV’s consort, is extensive and does an excellent job of demonstrating both the thorough preparation Mariana had for queenship and the intensive pressure she was under as a young bride to ensure the Hapsburg succession. The second chapter discusses the initial period of the regency and the work Mariana did in reforming the court and ruling council, making adaptations to both structure and personnel to support her authority as regent, weeding out those whom the queen “found unsuitable or difficult to work with” (75). Mitchell challenges previous arguments that Philip IV set up the Junta de Gobierno to limit Mariana’s authority or that it demonstrated a lack of faith in his wife’s administrative abilities. Mitchell unpicks the testament that set up Mariana’s regency, bringing in the views of contemporaries and comparisons with Isabel de Bourbon’s brief regencies to give a fresh perspective on the Junta’s role as an institution that would support, not undermine, the queen’s authority and rulership. The third chapter looks at Mariana’s strenuous diplomatic efforts to deal with a

combative Louis XIV who sought to take advantage of a young Spanish king, her work to resolve the situation with Portuguese independence, and her attempts to build a Triple Alliance with England, the Dutch, and Sweden against the French threat. Chapter four turns to the home front, beginning a discussion of the tension between Philip's natural son Don Juan and the queen, which ultimately undermined her rule and relationship with her son Charles. Chapter five, however, is focused on Mariana's "Pinnacle of Power" from 1670–1675, returning to her handling of foreign policy in war and diplomatic efforts to create peace in the face of conflict between France, England, and the Dutch. This chapter also evaluates Mariana's work with the rising favourite Valenzuela to prepare the court for Charles' impending majority by re-establishing the king's household. The end of this chapter and the beginning of chapter six examine the increasing attempts to separate Mariana from her son. While she was able to fend off an attempted coup against her around the time of Charles' emancipation on 6 November 1675, the following year saw a *confederación* of twenty-three nobles who called for the king's separation from his mother and the installation of Don Juan as the king's advisor. Although Mariana fought strenuously to maintain her position and even tried to extend the king's minority, she was undone by the king's secret flight to the palace of Buen Retiro—physically separating himself from his mother and declaring his independence from her authority. The rest of this chapter, and chapter seven which follows, evaluates Mariana's period of exile in Toledo and her eventual reconciliation with Charles in 1679. Mitchell highlights two strategies that helped Mariana return to her son's side: first, by examining the queen's correspondence with her son while in exile where Mariana stressed to her son that she was "*tu madre que más te quiere*" ('your mother who loves you most'). Secondly, Mitchell demonstrates the need for Charles to bring his mother back into the political sphere by leveraging her familial ties to her brother Leopold of Austria to resolve a diplomatic impasse over a betrothal between Charles and her granddaughter Maria Antonia, which had become politically inexpedient. The death of Don Juan removed the final obstacle to Mariana's return to court, with safeguards in place to ensure the king's independence—this, combined with the arrival of Marie Louise d'Orléans later that year as the new queen consort, enabled Mariana to complete the transition from regent to queen mother and carve out a new place for herself at court. The final years of Mariana's life and her historical legacy are briefly addressed in the conclusion. Here Mitchell reflects on Mariana's "role in changing the course of Spanish history" and recaps the queen's political accomplishments (232). Mitchell argues that Mariana's actions need to be fully appreciated in appraisals of the reign of Charles II, noting new studies of this period demonstrate greater resurgence and stability

than previous studies, which had argued his reign marked the irreversible decline of the once great Hapsburg Spain.

While it is difficult to fault this excellent work, there are a couple of minor quibbles that could be made. Mitchell's revisionist approach to Mariana's reign works incredibly well and is very effective, but it does verge on being apologist at times in its strenuous defence of Mariana's actions. There are also some sequencing issues at times: for example, in the discussion of the plot to oust the queen in chapter six, which affects the clarity of the narrative and make it harder to follow the precise series of events and the motivations behind them. However, neither of these issues are problematic, nor do they alter the fact that this is an impressive work of scholarship that adds a great deal not only to our knowledge of late Hapsburg Spain, but also to the field of queenship studies by increasing our understanding of both the life of this formidable royal woman and the mechanisms and challenges of female regency itself.

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