



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

**Silvia Z. Mitchell**

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**Review by: Charles Beem**



*Queen, Mother, and Stateswoman: Mariana of Austria and the Government of Spain*, by Silvia Z. Mitchell. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-271-08339-1. xi + 293 pp. \$84.95.

The author of this review wishes he had read this book prior to the publication of his recent survey on early modern European queenship, which presents a less than positive assessment of Queen Mariana of Spain's late seventeenth century regency for the underage Carlos II (r. 1665-1700). *Mea culpa*. Silvia Z. Mitchell rescues Mariana, consort of Philip IV of Spain (r. 1621-1665), from the trash heap of historical mediocrities to offer a well-researched and argued revisionist history of Spain's sole female regent of the early modern era. Shaking a historical reputation for mediocrity is always an uphill battle, especially for feminist scholars who write about female rulers, as recent scholars have done for Mary I of England, by bringing documentary evidence of "competence" to bear in critical assessments of "traditional" political narratives emphasizing Mary's lack of political acumen. Utilizing a similar methodology, Mitchell takes a sledgehammer to the interpretation that Mariana was a "passive victim of headstrong political winds," or an incompetent figurehead for the *Junta de Gobierno*, the regency council devised by Philip IV. In doing so, Mitchell challenges longstanding seventeenth century Spanish historiographical certainties regarding Mariana's political naivete, arguing that she was an "active historical agent" who developed "strategies to shape her regime" (54).

Mariana is long overdue for an English language study of her queenship, which unfolded just as Louis XIV of France began to flex his dynastic muscles at the rest of Western Europe. But this is not a comprehensive biography; her early life as a Hapsburg Archduchess in Vienna, the daughter of Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III, and her life as queen consort of Spain are covered in the first fifty pages, while the final seventeen years of her life, momentous for Mariana and her son, are covered in a brief epilogue. Nor is this book a comprehensive analysis of Mariana's queenship. Mitchell's area of interest and expertise is Mariana's *regency*. Within these parameters, Mitchell offers a solid political and diplomatic analysis, showcasing the breadth of her strengths in these fields. The real strength of this book is seeing both the creation and implementation of domestic and foreign policy through Mariana's own actions and reactions, through the analysis of documentary evidence that allows her to credibly question assumptions about Mariana's supposed naivete, against the background of a narrative that provides just the right amount of context and explanation. The scope of Mariana's diplomatic activities is sweeping, such as her pivotal role in negotiating the triple alliance against Louis XIV. This book views the diplomatic and military hurricane of the 1660s and 1670s through the eye of Mariana's administration, identifying her as firmly in the driver's seat.

While Mitchell's understanding and analysis of contemporary events is exemplary, she does not situate Mariana's regency in a much larger historical context, such as comparison to the regencies of Mariana's predecessor as queen, Isabel of Bourbon, or the queenship of Isabella of Castile, whose brand of queenship was integrated into the

Hapsburg model that Mariana was the historical recipient. Much of what Mitchell uncovers about Mariana is comparable to the way other dowager queens behaved during the minorities of their heirs, such as Louis XIV's mother, Anne of Austria, another Habsburg queen, whose own historical agency was only recently uncovered in works such as Katherine Crawford's excellent *Perilous Performances*. In this book, Mariana also emerges as a pragmatic queen, realizing the effort to retain an independent Portugal was a fruitless expenditure of Spanish resources in a complicated and perilous European military and diplomatic landscape. This study also reveals Mariana as a true Habsburg queen, a well-developed historical tradition that emphasized devotion to family, intense religiosity, and a willingness to step into political vacuums when circumstances demanded it.

Mitchell stays on familiar turf in this study. There is no analysis of material culture, while discussions of the character of Carlos II and his relationship with his mother lack the depth of analysis shown towards Mariana's political and diplomatic efforts. Mitchell does tend to put the most positive spin on Mariana's efforts, suggesting that Mariana may have had access to her husband's state papers in her efforts to counter the notion that Mariana was "young and inexperienced" (45). She also appears to minimize the losses of the War of Devolution with France that cost Spain lands in Flanders never to be recouped. But if Mitchell crosses the occasional bridge too far in assessing Mariana's accomplishments as regent, her study does much to illustrate how a woman could command the forces of the Spanish bureaucracy and run a global empire.

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