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978-0-521-56113-6 - Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III, 1598–1621

Antonio Feros

Excerpt

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Introduction

“I am writing at the end of an era and the beginning of another about a monarch [Philip III] who never became a real king [*de un monarca que acabó de ser rey antes de empezar a reinar*].”¹ These words, written by one of the most distinguished and influential seventeenth-century Spanish authors, Francisco de Quevedo, represent perhaps the most famous derogatory statement ever made about Philip III of Spain (1598–1621). Quevedo’s sharp criticism extended to the royal *privado*,² Don Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, better known as the Duke of Lerma,³ and also to his allies and clients, all of whom Quevedo viewed as corrupt and inept. More than personal criticism, Quevedo’s words were uttered at a time when the worth of an entire era was assessed in terms of the character and deeds of the individuals in charge of public affairs. By this criterion, Quevedo’s appraisal of Philip III, Lerma, and their allies was truly devastating. His denunciation of the king and his closest advisers relegated Philip III’s reign to a position of no historical significance, in no way comparable to the reign of Philip III’s father, the “extraordinary” Philip II.

But Quevedo’s words cannot be read as an impartial assessment of Philip III’s reign. Rather, they must be understood within the context of contemporary ideological debates about Philip III’s and Lerma’s character and the nature of their government. Quevedo was neither the first nor the last to criticize them. Portrayals of Philip as a weak ruler, the puppet of an ambitious and corrupt favorite, appeared already during the very first years of his reign. Accustomed to the style of Philip’s father, who ruled without publicly recognizing the assistance of his favorites, some of Philip III’s subjects saw in his recognition of Lerma a clear indication that the new king would imitate fifteenth-century Castilian monarchs rather than his

¹ *Grandes anales de quince días*, in Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas, *Obras completas*, ed. Felicidad Buendía, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1960), vol. 1, pp. 816–55; quotation at p. 817. Quotations from Spanish documents are given in English translation. Difficult, potentially controversial words and concepts are, however, inserted in Spanish following the translation. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

² The term “royal favorite” or “favorite” has at least three Spanish synonyms: *favorito*, *privado*, and *valido*. Throughout the book I use all three to refer to Lerma as Philip III’s favorite and in discussing early modern theories of favorites.

³ For clarity I refer hereafter to Don Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas as “Lerma” or “the Duke of Lerma” even though he did not obtain this title until 1599.

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authoritative father. To these uneasy subjects, Lerma's *privanza*⁴ evoked memories of one of the darkest moments in Spanish history: the reign of John II of Castile (1406–54). John II too had promoted a single favorite, Don Alvaro de Luna (1385?–1453) and, in doing so, had brought dissension to the court and civil wars to the kingdom. Those who opposed Philip III's decision to grant Lerma an active political role believed that history was repeating itself because the new king did not understand that the presence of a powerful favorite, no matter why he had risen to power, would ultimately jeopardize the king's own authority and the kingdom's political stability.

After the king's death in March 1621 criticism of Philip III and Lerma intensified as a result of the propaganda campaign orchestrated by the Count-Duke of Olivares, Philip IV's favorite from 1621 to 1643. Olivares was a reformist minister who believed that the former rulers, because they lacked political ability, had driven the Spanish crown to a crisis without precedent.⁵ Philip III was portrayed as king in name only and Lerma as an opportunist who had risen to power as the result of Philip's many political and personal weaknesses, not in response to institutional needs or because he had superior political abilities. Even worse than their inept efforts to save the monarchy from decline were certain policies that had actively impaired the possibilities for internal and international recovery in the future. Several aspects of the reign were regarded as particularly damaging: Philip III's decision to sign peace agreements with England (1604) and with the Dutch Republic (1609); his readiness to compromise with the rulers of France, Venice, and Savoy; his determination to decree the expulsion of the Moriscos (converted Muslims living in Spain) in 1609–14; his inability to implement measures to resolve the crown's financial crisis; and his acceptance of government officials who used their offices and the state to enrich themselves.

Not all of Philip IV's and Olivares's contemporaries, however, were critical. Some of them saw the attacks on the previous reign as nothing more than a campaign of denigration constructed mainly to justify the new rulers' aggressive international and fiscal policies and to hide the fact that – like Philip III before him – Philip IV had also given enormous power to one favorite, Olivares, whose modes of governing were almost identical to Lerma's. Some of Lerma's and Olivares's contemporaries even believed that the reign of Philip III was an important historical period when attempts had been made to address structural and theoretical problems of the monarchy.

Such divergent views of Philip III, Lerma, and their times should warn historians to avoid simplistic analyses of the period. The past cannot be explained, in

⁴ When referring to the period when a royal favorite held power sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spaniards used two terms: *privanza* and *valimiento*. I use both to refer to the period when Lerma was Philip III's favorite and chief minister.

⁵ On the campaign against Philip III, Lerma, and their allies during the reign of Philip IV see below, chap. 12 and Epilogue.

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Marc Bloch's words, with a few "apothegms of banal psychology which are neither more or less true than their opposites."⁶ Unfortunately, modern historians who study the reign of Philip III have typically accepted ideologically motivated views as indisputable historical facts. Their interpretations portray Philip III as an affable and pious ruler who did not possess the strength of character of a great monarch. He usually appears as a *rois fainéant*, or, as John Lynch has written, "the laziest king in Spanish history,"⁷ who, according to Roger Merriman, "delegated everything to subordinates and was immersed in the pursuit of pleasure."⁸ Modern historians' views of Lerma are roughly similar. As Tomás y Valiente put it, in what to date is the best study of royal favorites in seventeenth-century Spain, if Philip III was lazy, so was Lerma; if the king lacked ideas, so did his *valido*; and if Philip was a pleasure-seeker, so was the Duke.⁹ John H. Elliott, in turn, describes Lerma as "an affable, easy-going man, whose prime concern was to enrich his family and to remain in power." Worst of all, according to Elliott, Lerma's lack of political skills prevented him from revitalizing a monarchy in crisis: the "passive and negative regime of the Duke of Lerma," Elliott writes, "was more remarkable for what it left undone than for what it actually did."¹⁰

Until now, Philip III's reign has received a rather sterile and incomplete assessment, when it has not been altogether neglected. The purpose of this book is to fill this historiographical lacuna by providing an analysis of the social, cultural, political, and intellectual contexts that influenced, and at times were influenced by, Philip's and Lerma's actions. The central argument is that Philip III's reign is critical to understanding the drive to create an absolute monarchy, a process initiated in the second half of the sixteenth century under the leadership of Philip II. The continuation of this process during the reign of Philip III can be seen in the reproduction of similar ideologies, images, and rituals designed to help the monarch and his men justify the sacred foundations of the monarchy. In addition, Philip III and his supporters continued to concentrate power at the center by creating new institutions and by placing favorites at the apex of the monarchical machinery.

While the period clearly shows signs of continuity with the reign of Philip II, it also manifests its own unique character. For example, unlike Philip II, who relied at least formally on multiple favorites and never publicly recognized their political role in the government of the monarchy, Philip III made no secret of the fact that Lerma was his sole *privado*. His preference for a single favorite created the distinct

⁶ Marc B. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York, 1954), p. 23.

⁷ John Lynch, *The Hispanic World in Crisis and Change, 1598–1700* (Oxford, 1992), p. 18.

⁸ Roger Merriman, *The Rise of the Spanish Empire*, vol. IV (New York, 1962), p. 668.

⁹ Francisco Tomás y Valiente. *Los validos en la monarquía española del siglo XVII* (Madrid, 1982), pp. 33–6.

¹⁰ John H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain* (London, 1963), pp. 301, 304. See also Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *Las clases privilegiadas en el antiguo régimen* (Madrid, 1973), p. 111; and Lynch, *Hispanic World*, pp. 22, 35–6.

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and influential discourse on the role, characteristics, and nature of the royal favorite, a discourse that was reproduced during Olivares's *privanza*, and which became a focus of the ideological debates of the first half of the seventeenth century. Lerma's political prestige also meant that, at least until the early 1610s, a single faction dominated the court, resulting in a complete reordering of the system of patronage and the nature and characteristics of the political debate at court.

This is not the first study of royal favorites in Spain, but it is the first to analyze the *privado* in terms of the broader implications (political, institutional, cultural, and intellectual) of his function as the king's chief minister. Some historians – Francisco Tomás y Valiente and James Boyden, for example – although aware of the favorites' active role in early modern politics, have considered their rise to power not as a reinforcement and extension of monarchical power, but as “a partial reversal of a trend toward a more impersonal and bureaucratic [by which historians usually mean modern and effective] government.”¹¹ Other historians of the Spanish monarchy have realized that a royal favorite could significantly reinforce royal power, but they only acknowledge the leadership of the “strong and capable” Count-Duke of Olivares, whose policies, methods of government and legitimating discourses are usually accepted as *ex novo* creations, completely distinct from Lerma's practices.¹²

This study does not proceed from either of these assumptions. In contrast to Tomás y Valiente, Boyden, and others, I argue that the presence and power of royal favorites, at least between the 1560s and the 1640s, did not represent a weakening of royal power but its opposite: their active role increased the king's capacity for independent action and inhibited the efforts of monarchical and territorial institutions (both at the center and in the various Spanish kingdoms) to impose limitations on royal power. This thesis was briefly indicated by the Spanish historian Jaume Vicens Vives in a paper presented to the eleventh *Congrès des sciences historiques* (1960). After analyzing the existing institutional and political limitations on the king's power, Vicens Vives described some of the counter-initiatives taken by the rulers: the creation of new and more manageable institutions (*juntas*, committees *ad hoc*, intendants) to circumvent the powerful councils and parliaments; the promotion to high offices of men loyal to the king and his closest advisers (in Spain the so-called counselors of *capa y espada*, experts in “politics,” not in law, and committed thus to implementing the king's orders); and the elevation of the royal favorite to the role of chief minister.¹³ In Spain, these initiatives began during the reign of Philip II, crystallized under Philip III, and continued without major

¹¹ James Mark Boyden, *The Courtier and the King. Ruy Gómez de Silva, Philip II, and the Court of Spain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 64, 154–6. See also Tomás y Valiente, *Los validos*, chap. 1.2.

¹² See John H. Elliott, *Richelieu and Olivares* (Cambridge, 1984); and John H. Elliott, *The Count-Duke of Olivares. The Statesman in an Age of Decline* (New Haven, 1986).

¹³ Jaume Vicens Vives, “Estructura administrativa estatal en los siglos XVI y XVII,” in Vicens Vives, *Coyuntura económica y reformismo burgués* (Barcelona, 1969), p. 124.

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changes during the reign of Philip IV, at least until the fall of Olivares in 1643.¹⁴ Most historians have identified the influential European favorites/chief ministers as the Count-Duke of Olivares, Cardinal Richelieu, and Cardinal Mazarin, entirely dismissing Lerma, who preceded them. This is an unfortunate historical oversight of the legitimating discourses Lerma promoted, the institutional initiatives he undertook, and the style of government he created, which provided the original blueprint later followed by those better known early modern chief ministers.

This study is not designed as a narrative of each and every event, initiative, idea, and action taken by the Spanish rulers. Rather, the goal is to offer an interpretation of selected themes, problems, processes, and discourses that characterized the period. This new interpretative framework addresses questions of concern not only to students of Spain but also to all students of the early modern period. How was power exercised? What discourses, concepts, and languages were used to justify royal power? What were the limitations of royal power and what were the crown's responses? Also addressed are the conditions and ways in which individuals create their own social, linguistic, and ideological contexts while constrained by these and other contexts. More specifically, this study analyzes the ways in which individuals respond to new political practices and, as a result, to the creation of new concepts and discourses providing a framework for the discussion of politics. Since these issues are examined in the specific context of the Spanish monarchy, this study will present no "general models" necessarily applicable to all early modern European monarchies.

The book is divided into four parts. The first addresses several topics essential to understanding the reign of Philip III and the *privanza* of Lerma: the education of Prince Philip, the family background of Lerma, and sixteenth-century theories on royal favorites as well as changes in these theories during the reign of Philip II. It also examines factional rivalries at the court of Philip II and the attempts by several courtiers to gain the favor of Philip III while he was still prince. Unlike previous works, this analysis of these topics is situated within the linguistic, political, and institutional contexts in which they took place, particularly the theories on royal power promoted by Philip II, the institutional structure of the monarchy, and Philip II's initiatives for limiting the power held by certain royal institutions, a task he accomplished by endorsing new institutions and giving power to selected close advisers.

The second part covers some of the most important issues that attracted the attention of Philip's and Lerma's contemporaries, issues also of interest to modern historians: the nature and ideological foundations of royal power developed during Lerma's *privanza* when political writers began clearly to articulate the principles sustaining the monarch's claims to absolute authority; the way in which political influence was won and conserved in personal monarchies; the increasing complexity

¹⁴ See below, chap. 12 and Epilogue.

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of the discourse that justified the power of royal favorites; the political and institutional changes provoked by the presence of a royal favorite, now conceived – in theory and in practice – as the king’s chief minister; and the forms of government Philip III and Lerma enforced to secure the implementation of their policies.

Parts III and IV explore similar topics but from a different perspective – practical politics. Here chapters are organized chronologically around topics that are central to understanding political developments during Philip III’s reign. Part III draws attention to several topics that dominated politics at the beginning of the reign: international affairs, the financial crisis of the monarchy, and the beginning of the criminalization of the political debate. Part IV consists of a study of the political opposition that ultimately led to Lerma’s fall in October 1618. The last chapter and the Epilogue analyze the political crisis that developed with Lerma’s fall from power. These final sections also examine how the debates about the reign and Lerma’s *privanza* influenced the methods and policies of the new monarch, Philip IV, and his favorite/chief minister, the Count-Duke of Olivares, as they tried to halt the decline of Spanish power and solve the political and financial problems that the Spanish crown had faced since the end of the sixteenth century.

Some other topics deserve further mention. In analyzing the reign of Philip III most historians have tended to rely on a few documents, usually the ones produced by Philip’s and Lerma’s opponents or by foreign observers, mainly the Venetian and other Italian ambassadors to Spain. Many other documents from Philip III’s regime have remained largely untouched. Moreover, modern historians have denounced many of the cultural and political propositions promoted by the regime as flattering propaganda, spurious ideological manifestations of corrupt politicians whose only desire was to justify unjustifiable acts. In contrast, this study examines a wider range of documents and critically analyzes texts left behind by Philip III, Lerma, members of their government as well as by their opponents: official documents produced by governmental institutions, the king, the favorite and his closest advisers; letters and reports penned by Spanish and foreign observers; plays, novels, poems, and images; and treatises on royal power, on the constitution of the monarchy, and on the role and characteristics of royal favorites.

This study also reconstructs Lerma’s *privanza* from analyses of the policies, discourses, and institutional initiatives he and his allies promoted. There are several justifications for this approach. Firstly, until now the regime’s views have been seriously neglected, and they need to be assessed if we want to understand the complexity of the period. Secondly, although it would have been impossible to address all topics – those that captured the attention of Philip III and his men and those that they evaded and left unresolved – some of the latter are implicit in the views of those who opposed the regime’s policies and Lerma’s role as the king’s chief minister (see Parts III and IV and Epilogue). Thirdly, related issues and problems as well as the attitudes of other members of the body politic have been examined by other historians: foreign policies (Geoffrey Parker, I. A. A. Thom-

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pson, Bernardo García García, and Paul Allen); financial matters (Juan Gelabert and Ildefonso Pulido Bueno); the policies and alternatives proposed by the Castilian *Cortes* and cities (Pablo Fernández Albaladejo, Charles Jago, I. A. A. Thompson, and José Ignacio Fortea Pérez); the situation and matters that affected non-Castilian kingdoms (John H. Elliott, Fernando Bouza, Xavier Gil Pujol, and Giovanni Muto); and the activities of Queen Margaret and her circle of advisers (Magdalena Sánchez). The reader should consult these studies to complement the analyses and information provided in this volume.¹⁵

Throughout the book the main character is Lerma, which raises an important issue: the determination of political responsibility during this period. Was Philip III anything more than a cipher, the servant and not the master, of his favorite? The question of whether Philip III was the ruler or the ruled has puzzled modern historians. Most have opted, as seen above, to agree with Philip III's critics in their assumption that, because he did not follow his father's style of government, he must have been a weak monarch, who surrendered the active role in his kingdoms to his *privado*.

This study attempts to reassess a reality that was far more complex than generally recognized. As Orest Ranum has indicated, the modern concept of political responsibility is an important one, but one that, nonetheless, "is severely limited" when applied to the early modern monarchies. The main limitation stems from the political culture of the early modern period, especially from the principle that "the king was the source of political power in the state," which "did not permit ministers to acknowledge, to their credit and detriment, political decisions."¹⁶ In the Spanish monarchy this view was particularly dominant during the reign of Philip II. Despite the fact that Philip II made all his decisions after consulting with his ministers and his favorites, often simply approving their suggestions, he remained throughout his reign a monarch jealous of his prerogatives and his power as the sole sovereign. He never publicly delegated his authority to any of his ministers, he forced everyone to consult him on all matters, and he personally sent orders to all ministers and institutions. And, although Philip II created a privy council (the so-called *Junta de Noche*) to help him rule the monarchy (see Chapter 1), he never permitted its members to take any official responsibility in the decision-making process.

This style of majesty changed during the reign of Philip III, when Lerma's rise to power as the king's sole favorite affected, sometimes in radical ways, the role the monarch played in the government. Many of the ministers and institutions were, for example, ordered to send their suggestions and memoranda to Lerma, who discussed them personally with the king. In addition, debates in the royal institutions could only begin after Lerma had communicated the king's orders to them (see Chapter 6). As we shall see, in theory at least, this style of government was

¹⁵ These and other works are cited in the Bibliography.

¹⁶ Orest Ranum, *Richelieu and the Councillors of Louis XIII* (Oxford, 1963), p. 3.

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designed to protect the king from criticism by transforming the favorite into the king's protective shield.

But, whatever the intentions, this style also had negative consequences for Philip III's public image, because it conflicted with the model of rulership promoted by Philip II, a model which was never officially challenged or changed during subsequent reigns. The first of these conflicts with Philip II's model of rulership, analyzed in Chapters 5 and 6, resulted from the clash between Lerma's actual role in the decision-making process and traditional political theories that upheld the exclusive sovereignty of the monarch, who could not delegate, in any form, his power to administer the monarchy to his subjects. The second conflict, perhaps the more important, was between official discourses that required the monarch to be the sole protagonist in court life and ceremonies, and the fact that Lerma, during his *privanza*, occupied the king's role in state ceremonies and other activities traditionally linked to the practice of kingship (such as, for example, attending to the claims of the king's subjects and organizing the distribution of royal patronage). As a result, Lerma's *valimiento* was perceived as a period characterized by the weakening of the king's role in the rule of the monarchy, and, therefore, as a radical break with the model of kingship created by Philip II.

In reality, however, Philip III maintained his sole sovereignty by claiming the right of final decision, as demonstrated by his answers to the memoranda from his ministers and royal institutions. On occasion Philip III followed the advice of ministers other than Lerma, and endorsed policies the Duke opposed, especially after 1611. Moreover, Philip III ordered Lerma to leave the court once he decided that his favorite's political views were undermining his own power and reputation.¹⁷ But, as discussed in the Epilogue, both Philip III and Lerma were responsible for failing to grasp the consequences of the theories and practices they promoted, which seriously affected the king's historical image.

¹⁷ For a very interesting analysis of Philip III's and Lerma's relationships with the Council of State, the most important royal institution, demonstrating that both played an active role in the everyday ruling of the monarchy, see José Antonio Escudero, "Los poderes de Lerma," in *Homenaje al profesor Alfonso García-Gallo*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1996), vol. II, pp. 73–86.

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PART I

The rising stars

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