

## Female Agents at the Royal Palace of Madrid: Political Interests, Favors and Gifts (ca. 1598-1640)

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**ABSTRACT:** The rise of the New Diplomatic History in the late twentieth century led to a methodological revolution altering the foundations of traditional historiography. One of the principal consequences were a new recognition that there were multiple sorts of diplomatic agents that included artists, businessmen, men of the church, travelers, and women. It is this last group to which we devote this essay. In this paper we will analyze several case studies in order to offer a general perspective of the mechanisms used by these female agents so as to establish a pattern of behavior. We will focus on aristocratic women at the Madrid court during the reign of Philip III and Philip IV in order to know how the foreign ambassadors approached these women seeking information. These women get in return gifts and *mercedes* for them, their families and members of their patronage networks. Finally, we will study the multiple fidelities developed by female agents.

**KEYWORDS:** Diplomacy; Women; Queen's Household; Patronage; Spanish court.

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**RESUMEN:** *Agentes Femeninos en el Palacio Real de Madrid: Intereses Políticos, Favores y Regalos (ca. 1598-1640).* – El surgimiento de la Nueva Historia Diplomática a partir de las últimas décadas del siglo XX tuvo como consecuencia una revolución metodológica que cuestionó los cimientos de la historiografía tradicional. Uno de los resultados más relevantes ha sido el reconocimiento de la existencia de una pluralidad de agentes diplomáticos de diversa naturaleza y condición que incluye a artistas, hombres de negocios, religiosos, viajeros o mujeres, colectivo que constituye nuestro objeto de estudio. A partir del análisis de varios estudios de caso, ofreceremos una visión conjunta que nos permita establecer modelos o pautas de comportamiento que expliquen los mecanismos empleados por estos agentes femeninos. Nos centraremos en la función de informadoras que desarrollaron algunas mujeres pertenecientes a la nobleza en la Corte de Madrid durante los reinados de Felipe III y Felipe IV para conocer la manera en la que los embajadores de otras cortes se acercaban a estas mujeres en busca de información, un servicio que fue premiado mediante regalos o recompensas para ellas mismas, sus familiares o miembros de sus clientelas. Así mismo, estudiaremos las múltiples fidelidades desarrolladas por los agentes femeninos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Diplomacia; Mujeres; Casa de la Reina; Patronazgo; Corte española.

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In 1605 the Italian jurist and diplomat Orazio della Rena (1564-1630), who was in the employ of the Tuscan court, sent Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici an account of his time in Madrid as ambassador. The report, the *Relazione segreta delle cose della corte di Spagna*, indicated who were the most influential people at court during the early years of Philip III's reign.<sup>1</sup> Among them he singled out the 6<sup>th</sup> Countess of Lemos, Catalina de Zúñiga y Sandoval (1555-1628). Rena said that despite not being a member of any royal council, given that she was a woman, it was still useful to be close to her. His reasons for saying so were her privileged role as Queen Margaret of Austria's chief lady-in-waiting and, even more so, the enormous influence Catalina had over her brother, Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Lerma and the king's favorite, or *valido*. It was well known that Lerma consulted with her on important political matters and also that the countess was a good mediator for those seeking the duke's help (Goldberg, 2003, p. 123; Enciso Alonso-Muñumer, 2007, pp. 256-257). But the countess was no exception in this regard; in his report Rena also mentioned the Duchess of Cea, the wife of Cristóbal Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, Lerma's eldest son and later the Duke of Uceda, whom the Italian envoy also recommended the Tuscans keep in mind (Goldberg, 2003, p. 124).

The rise of the New Diplomatic History in the late twentieth century led to a methodological revolution altering the foundations of traditional historiography.<sup>2</sup> One of the principal consequences were new perspectives taking into account the transnational nature of diplomacy as well as questions related to cultural diplomacy (Carrió-Invernizzi, 2013, pp. 99-106) such as the importance of ceremony, the transmission of artistic taste, and the use of gifts as objects of diplomacy.<sup>3</sup> To this list we must add a new recognition that there were multiple sorts of diplomatic agents. For many years the historiography looked at international relations from the viewpoint of nation states, in which professional diplomats, called ambassadors, acted on behalf of their kingdoms in foreign courts. But this vision has been entirely transformed. Instead it is accepted today that there were different types of agents who participated in diplomacy, a heterogeneous group that included artists, businessmen, men of the church, travelers, and women. It is this last group to which we devote this essay.

In what follows we offer new analytical perspectives on female agents, particularly how certain aristocratic women at the Madrid court in the first half of the seventeenth century served as conduits of information. There have been other studies of women's participation in diplomacy, but our aim is to reflect on the mechanisms used by these female agents so as to establish a pattern of behavior through several case studies.<sup>4</sup> To this end we shall try to resolve several questions: was it the foreign ambassadors who approached these women, seeking information, or was it the women who established the contact? What did they get in return? And was the Spanish crown aware of the fluid nature of these interactions and, if so, did it try to limit them in any way?

## INTRODUCTION: WOMEN AS MEDIATORS IN THE EARLY MODERN ERA

Authors of diplomatic treatises during the early modern era described women as being well-suited to be intermediaries. Among these writers we should especially mention Cristóbal de Benavente y Benavides, author of *Advertencias para Reyes, Príncipes y Embaxadores* (1643), dedicated to crown prince Baltasar Carlos (1629-46), eldest son of Philip IV and Elizabeth of Bourbon. In his treatise, Benavente y Benavides offered several examples of women throughout History who had served as negotiators, among them Louise of Savoy, mother of Francis I of France; and Charles V's aunt, Margaret of Austria. Together they were responsible for the Peace of Cambrai (1529), also known as the Peace of the Ladies, a reference to their crucial role (Benavente y Benavides, 1643, fols. 123-28).

Such accounts drew upon the traditional vision of queens as guarantors of peace. During the Old Regime it was usual for marriages to be negotiated between dynasties so as to consolidate a recent peace declaration. This happened more than once between the monarchies of France and Spain. The Peace of Cateau Cambresis (1559), for example, was followed by Philip II's second marriage, to Elizabeth of Valois. And a half-century later, the Peace of Vervins (1598) was consolidated for many years through twin marriages in 1612 in which Spain's Philip III and his wife, Margaret of Austria, exchanged children with the French monarchs, King Henry IV and his wife, Marie de' Medici: the Spanish *infanta* Ana Mauricia was married to the French prince who would later become King Louis XIII, and her brother, crown prince Philip (the future Philip IV), married the French princess Elizabeth of Bourbon. The offspring of this latter marriage, Maria Theresa of Austria, would later marry Louis XIV of France in 1660, a union that sealed the Peace of the Pyrenees (1659) and symbolized the transfer of hegemony from Spain to France. There were hopes that the arrival of these "princesses of peace" might put an end to conflicts between the two kingdoms, though, as we know, such hopes were in vain.

Research over the past three decades in the history of women has revealed the diplomatic influence of women other than queens. According to Magdalena Sánchez (1998), the Descalzas Reales convent in Madrid was effectively a political space dominated by Empress Maria, Philip II's sister; her youngest daughter, who when she entered the convent took the name of Sor Margaret of the Cross; and Queen Margaret of Austria, Philip III's wife. Daily visits by the imperial ambassador and the papal nuncio turned this religious space into one of the Holy Roman Empire's favorite places for doing business. But in fact this was nothing new. The Descalzas Reales had been a meeting place for the women of the Habsburg dynasty ever since it was founded in 1559 by Princess Joanna of Portugal, and the convent grew in importance during the last years of her brother Philip II's reign (Sánchez, 2009; García Prieto, 2016).<sup>5</sup>

These women's influence was due not only to general recognition of their power, the reason so many ambassadors came to visit them. It was also due to the frequent visits by the monarchs, often accompanied by their children, who came to see them and their families. After all, Empress Maria and Sor Margaret of the Cross were, respectively, Philip III's aunt and cousin. Something similar occurred with the Encarnación convent, founded upon Margaret of Austria's orders, which began being built in 1611, a few months before the queen died.<sup>6</sup>

Royal women's noble servants also participated in their mistresses' games of political influence. The servants, themselves members of the leading noble families of Spain and its territories in the rest of Europe, acted as ladies-in-waiting, ladies of honor, governesses, and attendants for Queens, princesses or *infantas*. Thus, their spheres of political influence were not limited to palaces and convents but extended to noble homes as well. One example was the "Pernstein's salón" in the home of María Manrique de Lara, the Spanish widow of Vratislav of Pernstein, who had been chancellor of Bohemia. María Manrique de Lara had accompanied Maria of Austria (1528-1603) when the latter traveled to the Holy Roman Empire in 1553 to marry the future Emperor Maximilian II. According to Pavel Marek (2009, p. 1026), her salon became the second-most important site of Spanish diplomacy in Prague. When Empress Maria returned to the Spanish court in 1580, her entourage included some of the daughters of the Spanish ladies who had traveled with her thirty years earlier. Among them was Juana of Pernstein, María Manrique de Lara's eldest daughter, who took good advantage of her intimacy with the empress to lobby in favor of the Central European nobility (Marek, 2019, pp. 282, 289-294).

A similar example was that of Margaret of Cardona, another of Maria of Austria's ladies, who continued serving her in Vienna until she married Adam of Dietrichstein (De Cruz Medina, 2014). Many years later, in 1562, Dietrichstein moved to Madrid with his wife and their daughters María, Ana and Hipólita to accompany Archdukes Rudolf and Ernest and serve as the imperial ambassador to Philip II's court (De Cruz Medina, 2009, p. 1270).<sup>7</sup> When the couple returned to Central Europe, their daughters remained in Madrid to serve Anne of Austria, Empress Maria's daughter and, since 1570, Philip II's wife.<sup>8</sup> Vanessa de Cruz (2003-2004) has studied the abundant correspondence between Ana of Dietrichstein and her mother, which reveals that the daughter was essentially an agent working on behalf of her family, supplying them with information about everything that happened in the Alcázar palace.

These examples share two aspects. First, these were women who belonged to the Habsburg dynasty or who worked for them, having come from the Empire. Second, these women acted primarily on behalf of their own families, either to defend a dynasty, which was the case of queens, princesses, and empresses, or to defend a noble lineage. But moving beyond these examples, we are interested more in those cases in which women in the roy-

al palace acted as diplomatic agents on behalf of foreign courts. Our chief example will be not the Holy Roman Empire but, instead, Italian states.

## WHO WERE THESE WOMEN?

There are plentiful references in contemporary documents to women who acted as intermediaries at court in Madrid. One example was the Marquis of Osera's diary (Martínez Hernández, 2013). The 2<sup>nd</sup> Marquis of Osera moved to Madrid in 1657 to try to obtain the release of his brother, who was imprisoned in the royal jail of Barcelona accused of having raped a Catalan noblewoman. Before embarking on his journey, Osera asked his brother for information and letters of introduction for people who might be able to help him. Among these there were several women who had access to important royal advisers, such as their aunts, the Countess of Osorno y Morata and the Marchioness of Mancera, who, according to the marquis's brother, "could advise and assist even though they are women (*aunque mujeres, aconsejarán y ayudarán bien*)" (Martínez Hernández, 2013, pp. 23-24).

As this exchange indicates, contemporaries were aware of women's ability to obtain, through alternative channels of power, whatever it was they sought to favor a given party. A recent monograph by Elisa García Prieto (2018) shows how any analysis of Philip II's court is incomplete if it excludes the women who served the queen, princesses and *infantas*. Those too are the focus of this study, the daughters, sisters, and wives of leading noblemen at the Habsburg court who held positions in the Alcázar palace in Madrid.<sup>9</sup>

Ever since the publication of Norbert Elias's *The Court Society* in 1969 (Elias, 1983) there have been many studies about the critical role of the court and the men who worked there.<sup>10</sup> But that was not the case regarding the entourages surrounding queens. Fortunately, this omission is being rectified, as in the recent volume edited by Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben (2014) concerning the political role played by ladies-in-waiting. This female space strengthened the power of women in two ways: it increased the queen's power, now that she could use patronage to develop clientage networks among the women who served her.<sup>11</sup> And, second, the proximity of these women to the monarch made them very attractive targets for anyone wishing to gain privileged information or obtain a favor. Belonging to these clientage networks offered multiple benefits to these women, as can be seen through recent studies on the courts of Paris (Kleinman, 1990), London (Payne, 2004), Brussels (Houben, 2011; Houben and Raeymaekers, 2014), and Madrid (Oliván, 2009; García Prieto, 2018; López Anguita, 2018). Frequently noblewomen whose fathers had leading posts at court would themselves join the households of the royal family's women. When they began these tasks as children, they were called *meninas* and were the ideal companions for the youngest *infantas*, with the older of these attendants taking charge of their care and their education. When the *meninas* grew older, they became ladies-in-waiting.

Their main job was to accompany the queen or the older princesses and engage in typically feminine activities such as reading, embroidery, playing games, or participating in theatrical productions, which the Habsburg women were all very fond of.

The ladies at court received a fixed salary that included the wages of their own maids and servings of special foods, which were greatly valued. One of the most important perquisites, along with daily access to the king and queen (Sánchez, 1998, p. 43) was the dowry they would receive from the monarchs when they left the Alcázar to marry or enter a convent. The dowry included a fixed amount according to the woman's social rank: a million maravedies if she belonged to the titled nobility, and double that amount if she was the daughter of a grandee. If the lady in question had a close relationship with the queen, the money might be supplemented with presents, from dresses to valuable jewels, along with fixed-payment annuities. While women opting to join a convent would not return to serve in the palace, those who chose matrimony might return years later when they were widows, acting as ladies of honour (*dueñas de honor*) or *guardas de damas* who attended to the queen's daily activities and supervised the younger ladies. Two activities in particular were especially important to these women once they reached a certain age, be they widows or married to one of the king's advisers. There were two posts in particular, however, that were occupied by married women whose husbands were, as it happened, *validos*, as was the case with the Duchess of Lerma and the Countess of Olivares: one was to be chief lady of the chamber (*camarera mayor*), the person responsible for the queen's household, and the other was to act as *aya*, or nanny, to the crown prince and his siblings.

### HOW TO BECOME A FEMALE AGENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY TIES AND SERVICE IN THE QUEEN'S HOUSEHOLD

What drove these women to transmit information from foreign ambassadors? Were their names included in the official instructions that foreign monarchs sent to their representatives, or were they mentioned in secret missives?

Let us start with the last question. In the case of Florence, we have found no reference to noblewomen in the instructions that the Grand Dukes of Tuscany sent to their envoys, which were key to understanding relations between Florence and the Spanish crown in the seventeenth century. But that was not the case with Rome. The instructions that Pope Paul V in 1611 sent to his nuncio in Madrid, Antonio Caetani, recommended that he focus on the Countess of Lemos (Giordano, 2003, p. 888; Visceglia, 2010, p. 61).<sup>12</sup> Paul V was anyway familiar with her because he had read reports from previous nuncios to Pope Clement VIII, who described the countess as a good intermediary at court (Visceglia, 2010, pp. 105-109). She would remain one until the fall of her brother, the Duke of Lerma, a situation that Caetani, who lived in Madrid in 1611-18, was well aware of (Periati, 2016).

Returning to the Tuscan documents, they did mention women whom the ambassador should speak to, but they were all members of the royal family. The instructions that Cosimo II (1609-21) sent to Giuliano de' Medici as resident ambassador on 24 April 1619 referred to the utility of contacting Princess Elizabeth of Bourbon, wife of the future Philip IV (Martelli and Galasso, 2007, pp. 318-322). One must keep in mind the family connections that tied the Florentine prince to the princess in Madrid; her mother, Marie de' Medici, was the daughter of Francesco I de' Medici, grand duke from 1574 to 1587. In around 1620 the Tuscan ambassador told Grand Duchess Christina of Lorraine about the good relationship between Elizabeth and her father-in-law, Philip III, and suggested that Christina strike up a personal correspondence with the young princess (Franganillo, 2013, p. 137).

Three months after that, Giuliano de' Medici wrote to Cosimo II describing all the people he had visited. He began by going to the Descalzas Reales, where he gave Sor Margaret of the Cross a letter from the Grand Duke's wife, Maria Maddalena of Austria, sister of the Queen of Spain, Margaret of Austria. Once again, family ties were important; in this case Sor Margaret was a Habsburg, the same dynastic family to which Maria Maddalena of Austria belonged, though she was on a collateral line.<sup>13</sup> From there, Giuliano went to see several women at the Alcázar, among them the Countess of Lemos, the Duchesses of Gandía and Sessa, and the Marchioness of Del Valle. He made special note of his encounter with Leonor Pimentel, more on whom below, who told him of her devotion to the Medici and in particular to Christina of Lorraine. Finally, the ambassador explained his failure to meet with the abbess of the Encarnación convent, Mariana de San José, who had a fever, or with the Countess of Barajas, who was not in Madrid.<sup>14</sup> Soon after Cosimo II died in 1621, his wife, Maria Maddalena of Austria and her mother, Christina of Lorraine, who had both acted as regents of Tuscany in 1621-28, sent Ottaviano Medici to Madrid to swear allegiance to the new Spanish king and express his condolences for the recent death of Philip III. Once again, the only woman mentioned in the instructions that Ottaviano Medici took with him to Madrid was Sor Margaret of the Cross (Martelli and Galasso, 2007, pp. 338-342).

If we want to discover who the Tuscans' agents were in the Alcázar, we have to look at their ambassadors' correspondence and secret instructions. We opened this essay with a fragment from Orazio della Rena's secret instructions of 1605, which mentioned several women, most especially the Countess of Lemos, Catalina de Zúñiga y Sandoval, who had enormous influence over her brother, the powerful Duke of Lerma. In 1603 Catalina had replaced her sister-in-law, the Duchess of Lerma, as chief lady-in-waiting to Queen Margaret of Austria, which placed Catalina de Zúñiga in a pivotal position at court. Already during her time as vicereign of Naples (1599-1601) the Countess of Lemos and her husband had enjoyed a close relationship with Giulio Battaglini, a Tuscan agent who was a frequent visitor at their house in Posillipo.<sup>15</sup> That was when the countess grew accustomed to receiving gifts

from the Grand Dukes, a practice that continued after she was a widow and her brother requested that she return to Madrid.<sup>16</sup>

New ambassadors, in addition to relying on instructions from their predecessors, also acquired information from their own agents. That was the case of Leonor Pimentel, one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. During the delicate period after the fall of the Duke of Lerma in autumn 1618, Leonor told the ambassador which people at court now enjoyed the trust of Philip III. Among them was the king's confessor, Fray Luis de Aliaga.<sup>17</sup> And there were also women, including the prioress of the Encarnación convent, Mariana de San José.<sup>18</sup>

Blood ties to the men closest to the throne were of great importance, as we have seen. Thus, the fact that the Countess of Lemos could easily influence her brother, Philip III's favorite, explains why in addition to presents from Tuscany she also received gifts from the Duke of Mantua, Vincent I Gonzaga (Goldberg, 1996a, p. 111).

Another woman related to the *valido* would play a crucial role in negotiations in 1615-16 between Spain and France regarding the establishment of the households of Queen Anne of Austria, in Paris, and Princess Elizabeth of Bourbon, in Madrid. The difficult personalities of the French queen mother, Marie de' Medici, and her son, Louis XIII, and the latter's antipathy toward the Spanish advisers created a tense situation between the two crowns and no shortage of misunderstandings.<sup>19</sup> When the Spanish ambassador in Paris, Íñigo de Cárdenas, was not granted authorization to visit Anne of Austria, the only people allowed to have personal contact with her were the Spanish ladies who had traveled with her and who formed part of her official entourage. Among them was the Countess of la Torre, Inés Enríquez de Sandoval, who in 1615 had been appointed as Anne's chief lady-in-waiting, a position she owed in no small part to the fact that she was the Duke of Lerma's cousin (Hugon, 2004, p. 163). The Duke of Monteleón, who followed Cárdenas as ambassador, vouched for the Countess of la Torre's service to the Spanish crown despite complaints from Paris regarding issues between her and one of the most important French ladies at court, Madame Laurence de Clermont.<sup>20</sup> In the end, the conflicts prompted Louis XIII to expel the countess from Paris in late 1618 (Hugon, 2004, p. 164).

It was not only blood ties to kings' favorites that mattered; being related to the Medici also helped. Among the ladies with these ties, aside from the royal family itself (Margaret of Austria, Elizabeth of Bourbon, and Sor Margaret of the Cross), several women who lived in the Alcázar as the queen's ladies-in-waiting also played an outstanding role. Among them was Leonor Pimentel y Colonna.

Her maternal aunt, Leonor de Toledo y Colonna, was married to Pietro de' Medici, youngest son of Grand Duke Cosimo I and his wife, Leonor de Toledo.<sup>21</sup> In 1593 when Leonor Pimentel was thirteen, her mother, Juana Colonna, died. Her father, Enrique Pimentel, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marquis of Távara, died in 1600. Three years later Leonor joined the court of Margaret of Austria as a lady-in-waiting, where she continued for twenty years; after Margaret she served the *infantas*

Ana Mauricia and Maria of Austria, and the princess and future queen, Elizabeth of Bourbon. In 1610 the secretary of the grand duke, Belisario Vinta, sent a letter to the Florentine ambassador in Madrid, Orso d'Elci, referring to a lady related to the Medici who enjoyed the queen's favor.<sup>22</sup> It is likely he was referring to Leonor Pimentel given that in the years to come she became a favorite intermediary between the Tuscan ambassador and members of the royal family. In fact, Leonor was one of the people chosen by the grand dukes, along with Mariana de San José and Sor Margaret of the Cross, to deliver gifts to Philip II, Prince Philip, Princess Elizabeth, and the other royal children (Franganello, 2013, pp. 135-137).

Returning to the qualities that made these women suitable as intermediaries, proximity to the queen clearly was important. Some occupied the most important post, head of household. That was true, as we have seen for the 6<sup>th</sup> Countess of Lemos, who served Margaret of Austria in 1603-11, and a similar case was that of Juana de Velasco, Duchess of Gandía.

Philip II in 1588 chose Juana de Velasco to be head of household for his two daughters, the *infantas* Isabel Clara Eugenia and Catalina Micaela. In 1598 the Duchess of Gandía moved on to serve Margaret of Austria, though on 4 December of the following year the Duke of Lerma replaced her with his own wife, Catalina de la Cerda. After Philip IV took the throne in 1621, the new monarch tried to undo the errors of his father's government by restoring to power those whom the Duke of Lerma had banished, and the Duchess of Gandía returned to the palace, this time as *camarera mayor* of the queen, Elizabeth of Bourbon. As a result, ambassadors and nuncios coming and going in the palace found Juana de Velasco to be a most attractive agent. The Duchess of Gandía met frequently with representatives of the Grand Duke of Tuscany and the Duke of Savoy, giving them palace news. For example, the Tuscan ambassador turned to her to learn about the queen's state of health after the birth of her first daughter, María Margarita of Austria, on 14 August 1621. The baby died the following day, and the *camarera mayor* conveyed the Florentine's condolences to the queen.<sup>23</sup>

Juana de Velasco also was a frequent correspondent with several popes and their cardinals in Rome. She was the one, for example, who gave Pope Gregory XV's presents to the queen before the childbirth.<sup>24</sup> She also was an informant at the behest of Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi via his agent in Madrid and also through her son, Cardinal Gaspar de Borja, who lived in Rome. In one of the messages the Duchess of Gandía sent to Ludovisi, she assured him that she would do everything she could for him, telling him furthermore that his agent had been able to speak with the queen, something that must have worked to the benefit of Juana de Velasco herself.<sup>25</sup> The Duchess of Gandía died in 1627, and a few months earlier the papal nuncio expressed his sorrow over her illness given that she had always favored Rome's interests.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, let us turn to one of the most important factors ambassadors would take into account when choosing their agents: they wanted women who, even if not *camarera*

*reras mayores*, nonetheless had a close relationship to the queen. One such case was Leonor Pimentel, whom Orso d'Elci chose to tilt Elizabeth of Bourbon, still a princess, toward Tuscan interests. To that end, Leonor grew close to Elizabeth's confessor, the French Jesuit François Marguestaud.<sup>27</sup> It would appear that Leonor was successful, given that a letter from Orso to Grand Duchess Christina of Lorraine confirmed the princess's favorable leanings, which he had learned about through a confidante he had in the palace.<sup>28</sup>

Another relevant example is María Sidonia de Riederer, who served Margaret of Austria when she still lived in Graz. María and her sister accompanied the Archduchess to Spain on the occasion of the latter's marriage to Philip III in 1598 (Marín Tovar, 2011, pp. 671-673). At the Spanish court, María eventually became the queen's favorite lady, which apparently did not sit well with the Duke of Lerma. In 1603 María married Diego Zapata de Mendoza, 2<sup>nd</sup> Count of Barajas and Margaret's majordomo, forcing María to give up her job.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, she remained close to the queen until the latter died in 1611. Indeed, the Countess of Barajas was named in the queen's will and inherited 40,000 ducats and all the jewels that Margaret had brought with her from Austria (Marín Tovar, 2011, p. 680).<sup>30</sup> It would appear that the lady managed to retain her influence after the death of the queen Margaret of Austria, given that the Tuscan ambassador turned to María Sidonia de Riederer as an intermediary before members of the royal family.

The Florentine ambassador Orso d'Elci in 1618 wrote a letter to Grand Duchess Maria Maddalena of Austria telling her that the Countess of Barajas had given him a sample of the fabric Philip III wished to use to cover the altar at the Encarnación convent, which, it will be remembered, had been founded by the late Queen Margaret.<sup>31</sup> This order was facilitated by the nuns in the convent, whose prioress, Mariana de San José, was a confidante and a regular correspondent of Maria Maddalena of Austria (Sánchez Hernández, 2011). María Sidonia was the one chosen to transmit the measurements of the Grand Duchess's hands which the ambassador had given her so that the king and his daughter, *infanta* María, could give her a pair of gloves as a present.<sup>32</sup>

#### AT THE SERVICE OF ITALIAN PRINCES: POLITICAL INTERESTS, FAVORS, AND GIFTS

In addition to keeping in touch with Tuscan ambassadors, these women also developed personal correspondence with Grand Duchesses Christina of Lorraine and Maria Maddalena of Austria, regents in Tuscany from 1621 to 1628.<sup>33</sup>

Leonor Pimentel was one such example, as she had a direct correspondence with Christina,<sup>34</sup> picking up where her mother, Juana Colonna, had left off.<sup>35</sup> The connection grew stronger after Leonor in 1622 married the 9<sup>th</sup> Count of Benavente, her cousin Antonio Alfonso Pimentel Quiñones Herrera y Velasco, who also was Elizabeth of Bourbon's chief majordomo.<sup>36</sup> Christina was delighted

at Leonor's new standing and realized that the marriage would favor Tuscan interests.<sup>37</sup>

Letters stored at the Archivio di Stato in Florence reflect Leonor's recognition of her standing as a servant of the Grand Duchess, both in her own name and that of her husband, the Count of Benavente.<sup>38</sup> The Tuscan ambassador many times revealed Leonor's mediation role not just as the carrier of gifts to the royal family but also delivering recommendations from the grand dukes to the queen.<sup>39</sup> Leonor was skilled at holding her own in the world of the court despite all the political viscidities; she worked on behalf of the Duke of Lerma and the Duke of Uceda, and her influence only grew after Philip IV took the throne in 1621.<sup>40</sup>

Though we have not located any personal correspondence between Leonor and Maria Maddalena of Austria, Leonor was involved in the matters that most concerned the Grand Duchess in her later years, especially the marriage she wanted for her second son, Giovanni Carlo de' Medici, with Princess Anna Carafa (Franganillo, 2016, pp. 110-116). Despite efforts by Leonor and her step-daughter Catalina Pimentel (the count's daughter by his first wife) to get Philip IV to consent to the marriage, the king would not agree.<sup>41</sup> Leonor's privileged position at court was diminished by the Count of Benavente's illness in 1630 and the subsequent loss of his post in the queen's household. After his death, on 31 August 1633, the ambassador's letters make no further reference to Leonor.

The Duchess of Gandía also corresponded with the two Tuscan regents. After returning to her post as chief lady-in-waiting in 1621, Juana de Velasco served Maria Maddalena of Austria as she had served her sister, Queen Margaret of Austria.<sup>42</sup> The Grand Duchess knew of the Duchess's influence at court, which she mentioned in a letter to her ambassador in Madrid, Orso d'Elci. Though we have not uncovered letters that Juana de Velasco wrote to Christina of Lorraine, the existence of drafts that the Grand Duchess ordered her secretary, Alessandro Bartolini, to send to Juana shows that the correspondence took place.<sup>43</sup> In those drafts, in addition to announcing the appointment of Averardo de' Medici as ordinary ambassador to Madrid, Christina of Lorraine made clear her respect for Juana and the latter's son, Cardinal Gaspar de Borja.

And though we don't have the letters, we know thanks to Giuliano de' Medici that Grand Duchess Maria Maddalena also wrote frequently to Maria Sidonia Riederer, who was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Margaret, as we mention before.<sup>44</sup> But we have seen two letters from the Countess De la Torre written in her own hand when she was in Paris serving que Queen of France Anne of Austria, to Maria Maddalena of Austria. In them, the Countess De la Torre provides news regarding the Queen of France and declares herself to be at the recipient's service, thanking Maria Maddalena for a favor she had granted, though we do not know what that favor was.<sup>45</sup>

Not surprisingly, acting as conduits and intermediaries was also beneficial to these women themselves, which undoubtedly was one of their motives. The Duchess of Gandía was quite clear about this, asking Cardinal Ludo-

visi for three thousand ducats for her grandson Francisco, to compensate for the services Juana de Velasco had rendered to the cardinal.<sup>46</sup>

If there was one thing that the Medicis excelled at it was taking advantage of the exceptional artistic production in Florence, where cultural objects were basic instruments of diplomacy.<sup>47</sup> Marcello Fantoni explains the meaning of the term *dono* by offering the example of gifts from the grand dukes to the Spanish monarchy as signs of fidelity and cordiality (Fantoni, 1994, pp. 97-137). Starting toward the end of Philip II's reign there were intense cultural exchanges between Spain and the governments of Ferdinando I (1587-1609) and Cosme II (1609-21). While Philip II's ministers declined many of the gifts, the situation was reversed during the following reign, when Lerma and his creatures were among the prime beneficiaries (Goldberg, 1996a, pp. 108-109). Nor did the Tuscans overlook the women surrounding the *valido*, including the Duchess of Lerma and, especially, the Countess of Lemos. The duke's sister was especially fond of cosmetics from Florence, paintings, and, most of all, relics, which more than once she requested to decorate her chapel (Goldberg, 1998, p. 912). The Countess of Benavente also received many gifts including ambergris<sup>48</sup> and Florentine fabrics,<sup>49</sup> in addition to loans<sup>50</sup> and favors for members of her entourage.<sup>51</sup> She also frequently requested stomach medication after her husband fell seriously ill in 1630; he continued using it until he died and, according to Leonor, it was the only thing that reduced the pain (Franganillo, 2016, p. 112).

### SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY OF WOMEN AND DIPLOMACY

In her review of the historiography of informal and cultural diplomacy in Spanish Italy, Diana Carrió-Invernizzi (2013, p. 102) argued that Spanish historians had not sufficiently studied the question from the perspective of gender. As readers will have seen over the preceding pages, fortunately the situation has changed over the past seven years, as various works have taken into account the role that women played, though their role was complementary (Cohen, 2006, p. 331).

The case studies we have considered permit us to reach some conclusions and to respond to the questions we posed at the start. We were interested in exploring the advantages offered by the "minor states," as the smaller Italian duchies were called. We focused especially on the Grand Duchy of Tuscany given the depth of information offered by its agents in their official reports as well as private correspondence from female Spanish agents to the Tuscan government, an unusual and valuable source.

Together these documents show that women were positioned in a privileged spot for managing relations between Spain and Italy. We also have been able to intuit their motivations for offering their services to foreign courts and revealing information regarding the royal family and political news affecting Italian diplomatic interests. This was key, as our aim was not so much to untangle

the multiple routes through which diplomatic relations between Tuscany and the Spanish monarchy traveled but rather to focus attention on how female agents acted.<sup>52</sup>

Though it is clear that correspondence between female agents in Madrid and the Grand Duchesses of Tuscany grew during the period when Christina of Lorraine and Maria Maddalena of Austria governed as regents, the correspondence had existed earlier and continued existing afterwards, so their particular role was not essential. We also have seen that during the government of Cosimo II, ambassador Orso d'Elci pointed to the benefits that could be derived from growing close to these women, and he advised investing in their goodwill by sending them presents from Florence.

Though historians traditionally have maintained that the marriage between Christina of Lorraine and Grand Duke Ferdinando I opened the way for Tuscany to enter into the French orbit, during the last decades of the sixteenth century and especially during the female regencies in Tuscany there was a balance between Spain and France. Recent studies have shown that Maria Maddalena of Austria used her blood ties to the Spanish royal family to emphasize her importance to the Florentine court and to favor her children's interests (Volpini, 2016; Franganillo, 2019).

These Spanish informants were involved in matters that generally interested the Medicis. Given the long-running conflict between Tuscany and Savoy regarding whose prince would lead Italy, the Savoyards had in their favor a long list of ties to leading European kingdoms. Among these were the marriage of Duke Carlo Manuel I with Catalina Micaela, Philip II's daughter; and between the future Duke Victor Amadeo I with Christine of France, daughter of Henry IV and Marie de' Medici. The Grand Dukes of Tuscany, in contrast, had not managed to marry directly into the Spanish or French royal families. Christina of Lorraine was the granddaughter of the former queen regent of France, Catherine de' Medici; and Cosimo I's wife, the Spaniard Leonor de Toledo, was the daughter of the former viceroy of Naples, Pedro de Toledo, a member of one of Spain's leading families but not the Habsburgs. Nevertheless, that situation might have changed after the death of Queen Margaret of Austria in 1611. According to a document in the Moreniana Library in Florence, Tuscan ambassadors considered the possibility that Philip III might take as his new wife one of the Medici princesses or that one of his daughters might marry Grand Duke Ferdinando II, with the Duke of Lerma acting as intermediary.<sup>53</sup>

Neither of those options materialized, but twenty years later one of the Spanish ladies at the court, María de Velasco y Alvarado, embodied a new possibility. Ever since she had married the 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis of la Hinojosa, Juan de Mendoza, governor of Milan and one of the few Lerma creatures to survive the duke's fall, she had been one of the Tuscan ambassadors' chief informants. After the marquis's death, María de Velasco in 1628 married Rodrigo Pimentel, 7<sup>th</sup> Marquis of Viana, son of the 9<sup>th</sup> Count of Benavente, whom we have met, and his first wife (Franganillo, 2016, pp. 113-114).

María de Velasco raised hopes that the Medicis might manage to marry directly into the Spanish Habsburgs. In 1631 Queen Elizabeth of Bourbon was gravely ill, and in Madrid it was rumored that she might be replaced by one of the emperor's daughters. María suggested to the Tuscan ambassador that he send portraits of the grand duke's sisters to Madrid so that Philip IV could see them when the King visited the Encarnación convent. If the monarch was pleased by what he saw, perhaps one of them could become queen consort.<sup>54</sup>

We have seen that these female intermediaries stood to gain by their activities. Along with gifts from Tuscany, there were additional economic benefits for themselves or their families, but they also gained influence and contacts. More than one of the women we have discussed was close to ambassadors other than the Florentines, which meant they could diversify and multiply the gains. The Spanish monarchs were aware of the meetings between these women and ambassadors and were not happy about it. In fact, Philip IV tried to limit the contacts by issuing decrees prohibiting them. One such order came in 1632 when the King ordered that wives of royal council members not receive nuncios or ambassadors given the possible damage to crown interests, a measure impossible to implement.<sup>55</sup> Just one week after the death of Sor Margaret of the Cross in 1633, the Count-Duke of Olivares, who also wished to put an end to convents being used as political spaces beyond his control, tried to prevent ambassadors from entering the Descalzas Reales (Sánchez, 2015, p. 78).

The case studies in this essay clearly show that they were not exceptions. On the contrary, this was a widespread phenomenon. For that reason, one has to ask if these women really should be referred to as "informal" agents acting on the margins of power, particularly in those instances when they were specifically mentioned in official instructions. Though it is obvious that they did not operate in the same official channels as ambassadors, they became essential, particularly when only women could gain access to female spheres at court. The addition of case studies from other places would provide us with a more complete vision of the critical role women played at courts in Europe and in the New World during the early modern era, where diplomacy was just one of their many fruit-bearing facets.

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## NOTES

- 1 On Rena's career see Volpini, 2009.
- 2 On the transformation of diplomatic history in recent years see Dooley and Baron, 2001; Hugon, 2004; Cools, Keblusek and Noldus, 2006; Watkins, 2008; Carrió-Invernizzi, 2016.
- 3 On ceremony see Visceglia, 2002. On gift-giving between Spaniards and Italians see especially Colomer, 2003; Carrió-Invernizzi, 2008; Von Bernstorff and Kubersky-Pireda, 2013.
- 4 The recent volumes edited by Sluga and James (2016), and Anderson, Oliván and Suner (2021) addresses the role of women in early modern diplomacy. In addition to the works we cite throughout this article, there are others by Spaniards concerning the political influence of imperial ambassadors' wives in Madrid during the second half of the seventeenth century (for example Oliván, 2017) and the wives of English diplomats at the Spanish court such as Lady Fanshawe (Robles Ballesteros, 2018).
- 5 On Joanna see Cruz, 2009. On the foundation and architecture of the palace-convent of Descalzas Reales see Tojas Roger, 2016.
- 6 Sánchez Hernández, 1997, provides information regarding the foundation of the Encarnación and the social background of the nuns who resided there.
- 7 On Dietrichstein's rise see Edelmayr, 1993.
- 8 After she was a widow, Margaret of Cardona returned to Madrid in 1595 and once again joined the court of Empress Maria, becoming her chief lady-in-waiting. She was accompanied by her younger daughter, Beatrice, who joined the court of the princess Isabel Clara Eugenia. De Cruz Medina, 2014, p. 103.
- 9 On the *camareras mayores* see López-Cordón Cortezo, 2003.
- 10 The bibliography on courts is immense and here we limit ourselves to point to the collection by Vázquez Gestal (2005).
- 11 See the fundamental work on the French seventeenth century in Kettering (1989).
- 12 "*Convieni far conto della contessa vedova di Lemos, sorella del duca [di Lerma] che ama di essere stimata, et che per essere stata in Italia et in Roma ha personaggi grandi che le scrivono di continuo et ricercano favore da lei, come dirà a V. S. il signor cardinal Carafa.*"
- 13 For a recent biography of Maria Maddalena of Austria see Galli Stampino (2013).
- 14 Archivio di Stato di Firenze [hereafter ASF] Mediceo del Principato [hereafter MdP], filza 4949, fol. 74, Giuliano de' Medici to Cosimo II, 28 July 1619.
- 15 ASF MdP filza 4087, fol. 659, Giulio Battaglini to Lorenzo di Francesco Usimbardi, Naples, 26 September 1600.
- 16 See Goldberg, 1996a, 1996b, and 1998, for a study of the gifts sent by the Grand Dukes of Tuscany to important figures at the Spanish court.
- 17 On Aliaga see García García, 1998.
- 18 ASF MdP filza 4947, fol. 167, Giuliano de' Medici to Curzio da Picchena, Madrid, 21 January 1619.
- 19 The problems that Spanish court attendants had in Paris, which led to their expulsion in 1621, have been described in Río Barredo and Dubost, 2009.
- 20 Archivo General de Simancas [hereafter AGS] Estado Francia, K-1455, no. 64, Philip III to the Duke of Montelón, San Lorenzo, 3 October 1618; AGS Estado Francia, K-1472, no. 56, Duke of Montelón to Duke of Lerma, 21 September 1616.
- 21 On Pietro see Volpini, 2010. On Grand Duchess Leonor de Toledo see the recent work of Palos, 2015.
- 22 ASF MdP filza 4943, fol. 138, Belisario Vinta to Orso d'Elci, Florence, 23 August 1610.
- 23 ASF MdP filza 4951, fol. 950, Madrid, 1 August 1621.
- 24 Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana [hereafter BAV], Barberini Latini, leg. 8605, fols. 12-13, Duchess of Gandía to Gregory XV, nd.
- 25 BAV, Barberini Latini, fol. 15, Duchess of Gandía to Cardinal Ludovisi, 27 July 1621. Also cited in De Cruz Medina, 2010, p. 254.
- 26 Archivio Segreto Vaticano [hereafter ASV], Segreteria Stato Spagna, vol. 67, fol. 307, Madrid, 18 August 1627.



- 27 ASF MdP filza 5079, fol. 824, draft of a letter from Andrea Cioli to Giuliano de' Medici, Florence, 27 March 1620. Marguestaud had considerable influence over the princess. Earlier, Grand Duchess Maria Maddalena had had close ties with her sister Margaret's confessor, Ricardo Haller; ASF, Acquisiti e doni, fol. 242, inserto 3.
- 28 ASF MdP, filza 5080, fol. 904, Orso d'Elci to Christina of Lorraine, Madrid, 22 September 1618.
- 29 ASF MdP, filza 5080, fol. 364, nd.
- 30 ASF MdP, filza 6083, 17 October 1612, unfoliated
- 31 ASF MdP, filza 6083, 20 January 1618, Orso d'Elci to Maria Maddalena of Austria, unfoliated.
- 32 ASF MdP, filza 6083, 9 June and 16 July 1618, Orso d'Elci to Maria Maddalena of Austria, unfoliated.
- 33 For many years, historians have claimed that the decline of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in social, economic, and cultural terms, took place during the regency of these two women (Galluzzi, 1781; Diaz, 1976). But more recent work has undermined this link and provided a new vision. Among the most important of these contributions highlighting the role of women in Italy are Arrivo, 2007; Arcangeli and Peyronel, 2008; Angiolini, 2009. On Tuscany, the most complete work continues being the volume edited by Calvi and Spinelli, 2008, the essays by Contini and Spagnoletti therein being of particular interest.
- 34 On Christina see Martelli, 1999; Paoli, 2015.
- 35 ASF MdP, filza 5977, fol. 5, Marquis of Tavera to Christina of Lorraine, 16 June 1589.
- 36 On the 9<sup>th</sup> Count of Benavente see Simal López, 2002.
- 37 ASF MdP, filza 5019, Leonor Pimentel to Christina of Lorraine, Madrid, nd, unfoliated.
- 38 ASF MdP, filza 5977, fol. 179, Leonor Pimentel to Christina of Lorraine, Madrid, nd.
- 39 Such was the case when Averardo de' Medici petitioned her to favor Tomasso Lanario; ASF MdP, filza 5976, fol. 496, Averardo de' Medici to Christina of Lorraine, Madrid, 12 March 1622.
- 40 ASF MdP, filza 5079, fol. 928, Giuliano de' Medici to Andrea Cioli, 11 October 1619. On Lerma's fall from power see García García, 1997.
- 41 Catalina also received Tuscan gifts: ASF MdP, filza 4962, 20 February 1631, unfoliated; ASF MdP, filza 4962, 8 May 1631, unfoliated.
- 42 "Your Highness knows my obligation to serve you given who Your Highness is as well as being the sister of my first mistress." ASF MdP, filza 6083, Duchess of Gandía to Maria Maddalena, Madrid, 9 May 1621.
- 43 ASF MdP, filza 6022, Christina of Lorraine to the Duchess of Gandía, nd, unfoliated.
- 44 ASF MdP, filza 4949, fol. 99, Giuliano de' Medici to Cosimo II, Madrid, 9 August 1619.
- 45 ASF MdP, filza 6072, Countess of la Torre to Maria Maddalena, Paris, 1 July 1612; and Paris, 2 September 1612, unfoliated.
- 46 BAV, Barberini Latini, leg. 8605, fol. 18, Duchess of Gandía to Cardinal Ludovisi, 30 August 1622. This is one of many letters to the cardinal asking for favors.
- 47 On the economy of gift-giving see Clavero, 1991; Mauss, 2009.
- 48 ASF MdP, filza 5979, fol. 969, 14 April 1621.
- 49 Among there is mention of "a black silk Florentine skirt decorated with glass." Archivo Histórico Nacional Toledo [hereafter AHNT], Nobleza, Osuna, c. 3320, exp. 5319, fol. 23; ASF MdP, filza 5979, fol. 969, 14 April 1621.
- 50 In 1619, the Countess of Benavente asked for a loan of 500 escudos; ASF MmdP, filza 4949, fol. 125, 2 September 1619.
- 51 Among other things Leonor asked the Grand Duchess to favor Fray Alonso de Jesús; ASF MdP, filza 5977, fol. 186, Leonor Pimentel to Christina of Lorraine, unfoliated.
- 52 These relationships have been brilliantly outlined in other works; see especially the volume edited by Aglietti, 2007, and the more recent work by Volpini, 2018.
- 53 Biblioteca Moreniana, Florence, Fondo Palagi, ms. 30, "Convenzione in occasione del matrimonio tra una principessa toscana e un Principe di Spagna."
- 54 ASF, MdP, filza 4958, unfoliated, "Marchesa della Inojosa, signora Stata sempre molto affezionata à sta Casa, et oggi tanto più, essendo accasata con don Rodrigo Pimentelli, secondogenito del Conte di Benavente."
- 55 AHN Estado, leg. 2812, caja 1, fol. 6, Real decreto original sobre que las mujeres de los Consejeros de Estado no visiten a los nuncios y embajadores extraordinarios.

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