

## Isabel II: *niña de la libertad*

*Richard Meyer Forsting*



The birth of Isabel on 10 October 1830 was near miraculous. Ferdinand VII's three marriages had failed to produce an heir, and it was only his fourth wife Maria Cristina that finally gave birth to the child he was longing for. While Ferdinand would certainly have preferred a boy, he had made sure during the early stages of Maria Cristina's pregnancy that a female would be able to succeed him on the throne. The Pragmatic Sanction, which reversed the Salic Law, antagonised Ferdinand VII's brother, Don Carlos, who lost his right to the throne after more than two decades as heir presumptive. While Ferdinand VII was not a liberal, his wife recognised that in order to cement their daughter's right to the throne she would have to gain the support of the liberals and embarked on a reformist course. The temporary revocation of the Pragmatic Sanction during the illness of the king in 1832 further demonstrated that the ultra-conservative elements in Spain would not support Isabel's claim.



**Franz Xaver Winterhalter: Queen Isabella II of Spain (1852)**

The Queen, now invested with executive powers as "Gobernadora", was persuaded by eminent moderate liberals and reformist absolutists that only a change in government, a purge of parts of the administration, and replacing certain key military commanders could rescue her daughter's cause. This reconfiguration of government in conjunction with a political amnesty allowing liberals to return from

exile was the first step toward the association of Maria Cristina and Isabel with the liberal cause. When King Ferdinand died in 1833 the confrontation over the succession escalated into a full-blown civil war. The absolutist, ultra-catholic forces of Carlos V, as Don Carlos proclaimed himself, confronted the liberals who were firmly wedded to the cause of Isabel II.

The infant Queen's image acquired major symbolic significance in this bellicose confrontation. Isabel II was to represent the new union between constitution and monarchy, embody the liberals' hope of progress and prosperity as well as the rallying point for the different factions opposing Carlism.

Before this close association between the queen and liberalism, the historic legitimacy of her succession was asserted. This involved justifying the Pragmatic Sanction as well as rooting her claim more deeply in Spanish history. A flood of pamphlets debated the judicial legality of the Pragmatic Sanction, which – as a sovereign act without sanction by a popular body – was not easy to defend for the opponents of absolutism. Liberals found a way around this problem by arguing that in 1789, during the reign of Carlos IV, the Cortes had approved the sanction without publishing it. In this roundabout way it had the approval of the nation as represented in the Cortes and was in line with liberal principles.

The concern with historic legitimacy was apparent in the naming of the future queen. Isabel evoked the memory of the reign of Isabel the Catholic who, as several pamphlets pointed out, also had had to fight off a challenge to her throne early on in her reign. This historical comparison was particularly useful for political propaganda. It allowed the liberals to connect the young female monarch with the legacy and achievements of the Catholic queen. Isabel II was to stand for the union of Spain, its imperial and internal regeneration and progress; all accomplishments attributed to her namesake who had united Castile and Aragon through her marriage with Ferdinand II, given the impetus for the discovery of the Americas and had furthermore started the transition of Spain into modernity.

The legitimacy of her claim was cemented when she was sworn in as Princess of Asturias in front of the Grandees of Spain with all the pomp, solemnity and public celebration that traditionally accompanied this ceremony. The link to the past was amply reinforced in literary, judicial and iconographic production. One example is Vicente Lopez's painting of the oath, which shows Isabel II guided by Isabel the Catholic to a temple of light, an allegory for the brighter future promised to Spain. The painting was hung in a public space and copies of this imagery were widely disseminated.

However, as Ana Gutiérrez Lloret has pointed out, this historic symbolical power of Isabel II's image needed to be reinforced by new sources of political legitimacy to guarantee its survival in the face of the Carlist challenge.

This was to be achieved through the representation of Isabel II and her mother, now Queen Regent, as the defenders of liberty and promises of political and economic progress. By the middle of the 1830s the liberals formed the core support of Isabel II, which found its expression in iconographical and literal output. As Jorge Vilches has argued, romanticism allowed for paintings and writings to reinforce the historicism of Isabel's claim and led to the heavy use of allegories and the idealisation of her personality. The popular projection of the infant queen encouraged a veritable fascination with the *niña de la libertad* ('girl of liberty'). Thus the infant queen became the icon of liberty, political reform and socio-economic progress, cast in sharp contrast to the reactionary and regressive nature of Carlist absolutism.

This notion found its expression in hymns dedicated to her liberal spirit and evoking the regeneration of the *patria*, as well as officially sanctioned poetry contests, such as that held by the Art and Literary School. Praise of the queen's liberal virtues reached as far as Cuba, where poems in her honour were published in the *Diario constitucional de Santiago de Cuba* and the *Eco de Cuba*. Perhaps even more important, if we consider the high rates of illiteracy in early nineteenth century Spain, were the visual representations of the Queen. While some of the allegorical and classical references would have been lost on the

wider public, it is not unreasonable to assume that its political message was still readily apparent to most.



Jose Ribelles y Helip *Alegoría de España con la Reina Maria Cristina e Isabel II* (Museo Nacional del Romanticismo)

Key components of the Queen's image frequently recurring in graphical representations were her angelic and relatively austere appearance within a highly symbolic setting. A great example is José Ribelles Helip's painting *La Reina gobernadora con Isabel II niña, cogiendo España*, which contained many symbols that were to become associated with the new monarchy. On the left the allegorical representation of Spain as a woman whose chains have been broken by three liberals, one of whom can be identified as Martínez de la Rosa (wearing the blue ribbon), a prominent leader of the movement and a minister of state under the regency. Martínez de la Rosa is placing his foot on the man who kept the nation in shackles, which can be interpreted as the victory of liberalism over absolutism. The tempest in the background with Minerva, goddess of just war and intelligence, in the clouds alludes to the Carlist war. In marked contrast we see on the right the bright future that the new regime promises to deliver; justice as symbolised by the scales of *Justitia*, material well being represented by a

cornucopia and vibrant commerce as alluded to by the ships in harbour. The infant Queen is in the centre with her mother, guiding the nation to her daughter. The image links the new monarchy, including the Queen Regent, closely to progress, liberty and the fight against absolutism. Other examples using similar symbols and allegories can be found in the paintings of Manuel Breton de los Herreros and Vicente López. These images were often presented publicly to be admired by the people at large and were copied and spread widely throughout Spain.

As time went on, an even more powerful legitimisation was to appear as part of the image of Isabel II. This was the concept of her queenship being grounded on the will of the people, the foundation of the new constitutional monarchy. With the declaration of the 1837 constitution, the monarchy and constitutionalism became increasingly fused and were represented as forming the supreme expressions of the national will.

The image of a bright, cheerful queen, surrounded by angels chasing away the demons of absolutism, while the Spanish lion lies peacefully beneath the column of the constitution, is exemplary of the union between constitution and Crown – between peace, liberty and the monarch.



Isabel II and the 1837 Constitution (Biblioteca del Senado)

The connection between the queen and peace is another important feature in the image of Isabel II. Several paintings show her holding a white dove, giving her a nickname: *iris de paz* (rainbow of peace). The more progressive forces particularly came to appropriate the queen's association with liberty when

they feared a conservative turn in government. Thus during rioting in Madrid in 1835 those opposed to the installation of a more conservative ministry would cry '*Viva Isabel II, viva la Libertad!*'. The more moderate factions, critical of justifying riots in the name of the monarch, regarded this use of Isabella's name as a misappropriation. This foreshadowed the divisions within the liberal movement, which were to contribute to the decline of the positive image created in these years. For now, however, Isabel II was the queen of all of liberal Spain.



Isabel II as a child (anonymous artist)

In the meantime other significant changes occurred to which the image of the queen had to be adapted. Maria Cristina, who had been an integral part of the association made between liberty and Crown and often referred to as 'mother of the Spanish', experienced a marked decline in her reputation. This was

reflected in her image. As we saw in the Ribelles picture, Maria Cristina as Queen Regent featured prominently in the depictions of Isabel and was generally portrayed as a strong, liberal, motherly figure.



The Queen Regent Maria Cristina and her daughters (Biblioteca Nacional de España)

However, as she became more closely associated with the moderate faction of the liberal party and with even more conservative tendencies, progressive elements used her private indiscretions against her. It had been rumoured for some time that the Queen Regent had become engaged to Fernando Muñoz, and her multiple pregnancies could not be easily hidden from view. In his testament Ferdinand VII had provided, rather cruelly, that Maria Cristina would have to renounce the regency if she remarried. If she had not married (it was not clear

whether she legitimately was) she would have been living in sin, and if she had, then she would have forfeited her position.

When her hostility to the liberal elements became more apparent and the end of the civil war in 1839 eliminated the necessity of upholding her image against the Carlist threat, the attacks on her person came out into the open. Thus, writing under the pseudonym of Ibrahim Clarete in the satirical newspaper *El Guirigay*, Gonzalez Bravo, later an important progressive politician, defamed the Regent as an 'illustrious prostitute' (*illustre prostituta*). He revealed the details of her illegitimate marriage to a wider public. By 1840 the image of the Regent as the defender of liberty was sufficiently damaged to be surpassed by the prestige of some of the successful military leaders of the Carlist war, in particular General Espartero (or to use his rather immodest title of the Duke of Victory), who deposed her as Regent in 1840 with the aid of the progressives.



Isabel II studying geography (Vicente López  
*Isabel II niña estudiando geografía*)

While, in this instance, the defamation of her mother did not rub off on Isabel II, it is interesting that toward the end of her reign her private life was the subject of similar scrutiny and scandal. For now, however, Espartero was happy to keep up and even further the representation of the young Queen as the *niña de la libertad*.

Thus, the image to be popularised was that of the '*alumna de la libertad*' (the student of liberty), studying the liberal principles and receiving instruction in her constitutional functions. This entailed a change in her court entourage, including the introduction of more progressive educators. José Luis Comellas

among others has convincingly argued that this was more of a propaganda act than a radical practical change: Isabel's political instruction was to remain underdeveloped. Yet references to the '*alumna de la libertad*' appear frequently in literary and iconographic representation. One picture by Vicente Lopez depicts the young Queen studying geography. This linked her not only to liberal and national education but also to the bourgeois ideal of a well-rounded individual.

The break with Maria Cristina also led to the development of one of the most enduring images of Isabel II – that of the victim of court intrigue and bad advisors. This concept was not new but had been used previously by the liberals during the three-year liberal interlude (1820-1823) to excuse the reactionary policies of the then constitutional king Ferdinand VII between 1814 and 1820.

Shifting the blame on courtiers and ministers was a useful tool to deflect criticism from a monarch one could not or did not want to break with completely. During Espartero's regency it was even easier to exempt the monarch from responsibility, as the queen was still a child and of course female. The failed attempt to kidnap the Queen and her sister in October 1841 further contributed to the image of the young monarch as an orphaned, innocent and vulnerable child. In this construct Espartero figured as her protector watching over her and consequently over the civil liberties of the Spanish people.

The moderates' conception of the queen remained surprisingly similar; they also saw the queen as vulnerable and innocent but to them the capturing was being done by Espartero and the progressives. Unsurprisingly the fall of Espartero did not hurt the image of the Queen; on the contrary, Her swearing an oath on the constitution on coming of age and the commemorations and public festivals accompanying this event strengthened her association with the people and liberty. Across the political spectrum the hope was expressed that her reign would produce unity, bring international recognition and further progress. Even the first controversy of her reign surrounding the signing of a decree of dissolution of the Cortes in November of 1843, shortly after being declared off

age, did not yet damage her image. Under pressure from her advisors she alleged that Olózaga, the progressive minister of state, had forced her physically to sign the decree despite her initial refusal. Although this ushered in the so called 'moderate decade', both the progressives and moderates regarded her as a victim; the former saw in the allegations the machinations of a conservative camarilla misleading the queen. The latter blamed Olózaga for forcing himself onto an impressionable young girl.

The image of the vulnerable Queen was to survive even long after her association with liberty and constitutionalism had been shattered by her increasing identification with the moderate party, Catholicism and debauchery. Having said that, the representation of Isabel as innocent also suffered as her sexual indiscretions and loveless marriage became the subject of pornographic cartoons. Nevertheless after her descent into political insignificance it was the image of an insufficiently educated, manipulated and weak Queen that survived in the popular imagination as well as in her early biographies.

The queen on her way into exile (Vanity Fair Sep 18, 1869)

Isabel Burdiel has only recently cleared up many of the myths surrounding the Queen and perpetuated by writers such as Valle-Inclán during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jorge Vilches argues that the frequency and viciousness of the



attacks on Isabel II was in part a reaction to the success of the previously constructed, highly positive image of Isabel II as *niña de la libertad*, the 'illustrious orphan' and 'the innocent girl'. Once the civil war was over and the Queen became increasingly identified with a single party, the success of the image of Isabel as the protector of liberty, peace and union was a threat rather than an asset to more progressive liberal forces.

The image of Isabel II as defender of liberty and peace did not survive, but the hopeful, promising symbol the infant queen had once presented contributed to the enduring image of her painted by Perez Galdos, as an unhappily married, manipulated and deceived monarch; "*la de los tristes destinos*" – the one of sad destinies.

Suggested Further Reading:

- Burdiel, Isabel, *Isabel II: una biografía (1830-1904)* (Madrid: Taurus, 2010).
- Burdiel, Isabel, 'The Queen, the Woman and the Middle Class. The Symbolic Failure of Isabel II of Spain', *Social History*, 29 (2004), 301–319.
- De Polnay, Peter, *A Queen of Spain: Isabel II* (Hollis & Carter, 1962).
- Pérez Galdós, Benito, *La de los tristes destinos* (Madrid: Alianza/Hernando, 1980).
- La Parra López, Emilio, ed., *La imagen del poder: Reyes y regentes en la España del siglo XIX* (Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 2011).
- Vilches, Jorge, *Isabel II imágenes de una reina* (Madrid: Síntesis, 2007).

**Citation:** Richard Meyer Forsting: Isabel II: *niña de la libertad*, AHRC-Project "Heirs to the Throne in the Constitutional Monarchies of Nineteenth-Century Europe (1815-1914)", "Heir of the Month", March 2014.

**URL:** [http://heirstothethrone-project.net/?page\\_id=900](http://heirstothethrone-project.net/?page_id=900)