

How to lose friends and alienate people: The transformation of the image of Ferdinand VII



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A quick search on Ferdinand VII will return his two enduring and most famous bynames: *el Rey deseado* (the desired king) and *el Rey felon* (the felon/criminal king). These diametrically opposed attributions might seem surprising at first, but they are simply the result of a transformation of Ferdinand VII's image over time. The former byname was attributed to Ferdinand while he was still heir to the throne and briefly during his early reign (March-May 1808), whereas the latter emerged during the last ten years of his reign, the so called 'ominous decade' (1823-33). How does a king go

from being the desired one to ending as the felon, the criminal king?



Ferdinand as Prince of Asturias as painted by Goya in 1800

The answer lies in the mythical image of Ferdinand that was constructed while he was still Prince of Asturias (1789-1808) and then during his exile in France (1808-14), as well as in his subsequent inability and active refusal to conform to the expectations thus formed. This is the story of the construction and diffusion of that myth, its endurance and its clash with the reality of Ferdinand VII's conservative upbringing, absolutist camarilla and reactionary convictions. It is a demonstration of how the dynastic position of an heir, and his lack of direct involvement in government

allows for the construction of an idealized conception of the future king. Once on the throne, the heightened expectations and positive attributions would clash with the reality of the king's rule, which can make it increasingly difficult to sustain the previously constructed myth. This is also a story of missed opportunities and failure: Ferdinand missed the opportunity to use the prestige he acquired as heir to modernise and regenerate the monarchy, thus ultimately entering history as the felon who failed to bring constitutional rule to Spain.

***El principe inocente* – The innocent prince**

When Ferdinand was born at the Escorial on 14 October 1784, he was only the fourth in line to the throne, behind his brothers and his father. However, within one month of his birth his brothers (twins) had died and shortly after his father came to the throne, the physically rather weak and sickly prince was sworn in as Prince of Asturias. During his formative years Ferdinand was, on the wishes of his parents, kept at a distance from government and administrative business. His early years did certainly not point to him becoming the great promise of regeneration of the Spanish monarchy. At the same time the court favourite Manuel Godoy rose to an ever more powerful position in the kingdom, so that he ended up being seen by many as the true ruler of Spain. The struggle against the *Prince of the Peace*, a title Godoy received from Carlos IV to the chagrin of Ferdinand (it was customary that only royal offspring were allowed the title prince), became an important element in the rise of Ferdinand and his growing popularity. In October 1802, Ferdinand married Maria Antonia de Borbon, whose mother was a firm opponent of Godoy and his promotion of an alliance with France. Encouraged by his wife and entourage Ferdinand became increasingly active trying to undermine Godoy. This found its expression in a satirical campaign against Godoy in the winter of 1806 when prints were distributed amongst the nobility and the populace which discredited the court favourite, and by association Ferdinand's parents. The growing number of Godoy's enemies subsequently became closely associated with the heir to the throne, earning them the denomination *grupo fernandino*. Despite the fact that this group was conservative and largely disgruntled with reforms weakening their privileges, their opposition to Godoy found wide resonance among a public that was

dissatisfied with the apparent corruption of the court and suffered under an economic crisis.

In October 1807 a conspiracy against Godoy was discovered, which directly implicated Ferdinand. As MIGUEL ARTOLA has shown, the ultimate aim of this conspiracy was to force the resignation of Charles IV and place Ferdinand on the throne. The lightness of the punishment handed out to the conspirators and the Prince of Asturias were seen by many as proof that the whole affair was in fact a grand ploy by Godoy to discredit the heir to the throne and his followers. Charles IV decided to publicise the affair in the official newspaper, the *Gazeta de Madrid*, thus giving it a public and high profile. Ferdinand thus came to be the focal point of opposition to the unpopular Godoy. The myth of the 'innocent prince' fighting the corrupt and evil court favourite was born.

The tense situation at court came to a head on 17 March 1808, with the events that came to be known as the *Motin de Aranjuez* (Mutiny of Aranjuez). Aided by important sectors of the court and a popular riot at the royal residence of Aranjuez, Ferdinand forced the abdication of his father and the arrest of Godoy; the latter only just escaping with his life. The crowds in front of the palace balcony, conveniently assembled there on 19 March 1808, proclaimed Ferdinand their new king. The usual procedure of referring the abdication to the Cortes was skipped and the accession constructed as a spontaneous decision by the people rejecting Godoy and acclaiming their new king.

As LAPARRA has put it, the important thing was 'the hope that a virtuous and innocent prince would bring about the regeneration of the monarchy', not procedural detail. During the following brief first reign of Ferdinand VII some of these hopes seemed to be fulfilled. The king and his entourage relentlessly persecuted Godoy and some of his most unpopular reform measures were overturned. Most importantly for Spanish liberals he released some prominent political prisoners such as the famous liberal lawyer and writer Jovellanos; it appeared that a more enlightened reign was being ushered in. In fact, though, the liberation of prisoners was more about revenge on Godoy than a wish to do away with political repression. Nevertheless, the liberals preferred to laud the new king and represent his fight against Godoy as a struggle of good against evil, with virtue triumphing over corruption. Ferdinand could do no wrong, he was hailed as *el rey inocente*, *el mas amado* (the most beloved), *el mejor de*

los monarcas – the best of all monarchs. By doing so they not only gave a very idiosyncratic interpretation to events but also (deliberately) ignored the dubious legality of his accession, his reliance on the disgruntled nobility and his deep conservatism.

The coup, while portrayed as a popular uprising, was in fact planned and executed by a group of courtiers close to Ferdinand, who were more interested in rolling back the substantial reforms of the armed forces and stopping the expropriation of church lands than in the plight of the people. Furthermore the liberals overlooked Ferdinand's complete lack of 'enlightened' inclinations. As MORAL RONCAL has shown, the education of Ferdinand and his brother Don Carlos remained closely wedded to absolutist conceptions of government and religion. His teacher José Escoiquiz, a conservative cleric and opponent of Godoy, had been and remained a key influence on Ferdinand. He was one of the main directors of the camarilla pushing for a coup against Godoy and later on convinced Ferdinand VII to leave Spain for the meeting with Napoleon that cost him the throne. Rather than interpreting the first measures of Ferdinand VII as enlightened, it is perhaps more reasonable to see the policies adopted by Ferdinand VII as demagogical, making use of the popular hatred toward Godoy to further his own popularity. But this interpretation did not serve the aim of the liberals when the War of Independence broke out – they chose to put their hope in the young monarch.

***El Rey deseado* - The desired King**

When, on 24 March 1808, Ferdinand moved to Madrid, where crowds once more acclaimed him as the rightful king, the capital had already been in control of Napoleon's forces. Godoy had allowed French forces into the capital to undertake a joined French-Spanish campaign against Portugal. The problem for Ferdinand VII was that Napoleon did not recognise him as legitimate king of Spain. This was most clearly expressed by the French emperor addressing him as *Su Alteza Real* (Your Royal Highness) instead of *Su Majestad* (Your Majesty) in his correspondence with Ferdinand. Hoping for a meeting with Napoleon, which would legitimise his rule and give it the military support it needed, Ferdinand left Spain for Bayonne in France. There he was unexpectedly reunited with his father. Napoleon pressured Ferdinand and Charles into passing their

rights to the throne onto him. On 12 May 1808 Ferdinand issued a manifesto to the Spanish nation, declaring this transfer of rights and calling on the Spanish to accept Napoleon's orders.

In Spain this provoked numerous uprisings and the formation of Juntas (Councils), which held onto Ferdinand VII as their rightful king and declared war on the French empire. It was in this confused political environment and the ensuing conflict that an absolutist prince could become the great liberal hope. It has been demonstrated that the new authorities were largely responsible for creating a positive image of Ferdinand VII, casting the king in the role of the victim; first of the interior tyrant (Godoy) and now of the external tyrant (Napoleon). As LA PARRA puts it, from then on 'the myth is propagated systematically and intentionally'. The transfer of his rights was portrayed as illegitimate, as it was forced and the prince was being held in captivity against his will.



Ferdinand VII disembarks at Puerto de Santa María, painting by José Aparicio (Museo del Romanticismo, Madrid)

The Juntas saw it as their mission to 'inspire in the people enthusiasm and ardour for the defence of the Patria and the King', to quote the *Suprema Junta de Gobierno de Sevilla*. The myth of the innocent king, the 'desired king' as he now became known, was vital to unite the Spanish in a fight against the external enemy. The great worries of the Juntas were that divisions would rip the movement apart and that the liberal elements could become radicalised. The figure of Ferdinand VII was the perfect antidote to both those dangers.

However, when the Cortes convened in Cadiz, the first signs began to emerge that Ferdinand co-operated rather willingly with his capturer. Indeed his correspondence with Napoleon proves that the 'desired king' congratulated the emperor on his victories over the rebellious Spanish forces and even expressed the desire to become his adopted son. While the published letters were rejected as forgeries and French propaganda, the deputies at Cadiz sought to restrict the king's power and explicitly based the monarch's legitimacy on the agreement of the nation. As RICHARD HOCQUET has argued this implied the emergence of a new monarchical culture, which affirmed the pre-eminence of the sovereignty of the nation. The balancing act performed by the liberals was to keep with the dominant discourse of the innocent, virtuous desired king, when the actions of that very monarch made them lose confidence in his sincerity and take precautionary measures by limiting his prerogatives and resting his legitimacy on popular assent. However, as the MARQUES DE MIRAFLORES, witness to the events, pointed out, the myth surrounding Ferdinand VII 'invested him with immense moral force that made him the arbiter of all situations, from his accession to the throne to his death'. Unfortunately for the liberals their doubts proved well founded and the return of the king was to destroy their hopes for a regenerated and constitutional monarchy.

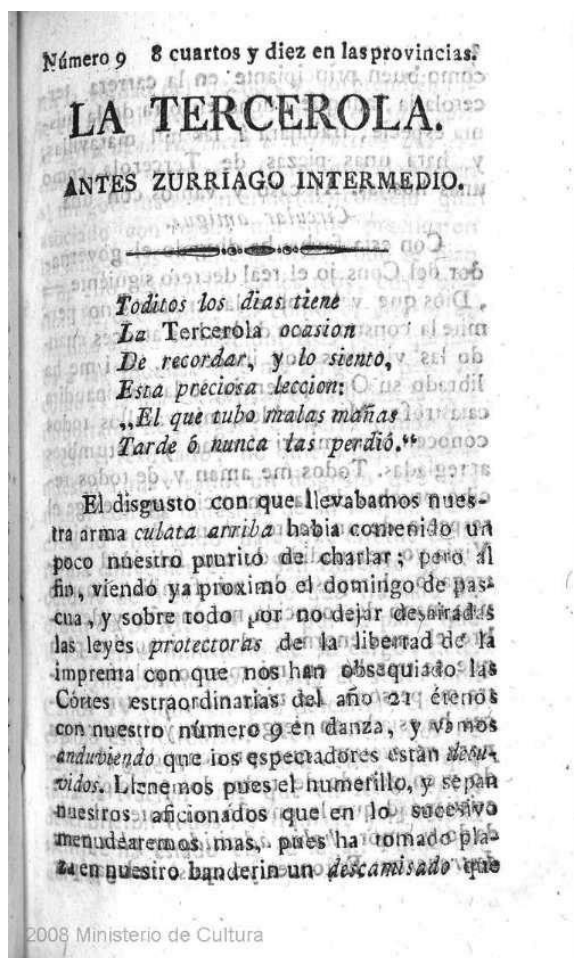
El rey engañado - The deceived king

Maybe the most surprising aspect of the myth surrounding Ferdinand VII is its durability. Toward the end of the war, when doubts over his actions were spreading, the Cortes still employed the same language portraying Ferdinand as 'innocent and helpless' and 'captive and oppressed'. (See for a good example of this rhetoric [Representación](#) to Ferdinand VII at Cervantes Virtual). Furthermore the myth was not even completely discarded on Ferdinand's return to Spain, despite his complete disregard for the constitution and his persecution of liberals. On his return on 22 March 1814, Ferdinand VII refused to swear an oath to the constitution and formed an alliance with General Elio and other conservative military leaders so as to restore absolute power to him. One of his first acts upon his return was to decree the suppression of the constitution and have some of the most prominent liberal deputies of the Cortes thrown into prison. It was the beginning of six years of harsh repression and persecution. The

plots of liberal army officers against the regime were dealt with ruthlessly, mostly involving the execution of their leaders. However, in 1820 the young officer Rafael del Riego succeeded in his rebellion and forced the restoration of the 1812 constitution, initiating the three years of liberal rule known as the *Trienio Liberal*.

In March 1820 Ferdinand swore an oath to the constitution and famously declared, 'let us march, and me first, down the constitutional path'. While it might be assumed that this Pauline conversion was rather unconvincing after the events of the last six years, the myth of the innocent prince was resurrected and underwent another interesting metamorphosis. The positive image of the king had become so widely popularised and ingrained in public discourse that liberal writers and politicians found it hard to contradict it now. Instead of condemning the king for his past behaviour and making him repent publicly, the liberal authorities and media sought to excuse his actions. They attributed the unconstitutional actions of Ferdinand VII to inexperience, his ignorance to the absence from the *patria* and most importantly they pointed to the bad advice he had received from his *camarilla*. The king had been misled by the absolutist elements around him and could hence not be considered to have acted freely. The insistence on the king's personal innocence kept the mythical image of Ferdinand alive.

This theory of the *rey engañado* (deceived king) became a type of official doctrine, despite the doubts many must have privately harboured about the sincerity of the monarch's constitutionality. The insistence on the innocence of the king was also widely diffused through plays, discussions in the emerging café culture and liberal newspapers. One particularly illustrative example is a drama entitled *Fernando VII desengañado por los heroes de la nación* (Fernando VII disabused by the heroes of the nation), which was performed at a patriotic society in Palencia in 1820. The title's translation is not straightforward, but the word *desengañado* (disabused/set right) encapsulates the idea that previously the king had been *engañado* (cheated/abused) and was now finally free. Thus even some of the more radical and prominent liberals and patriotic societies were publicly defending the king.



The infamous 9th issue of *La Tercerola*, which in its article 'Al Rey' published one of the fiercest attacks on Ferdinand VII (Madrid, 1822)

The myth only entered its dying phase when elements close to the palace, probably with Ferdinand's consent, attempted a coup against the constitution on 7 July 1822. Now the more radical liberal press no longer held back about its reservations concerning the king and his actions. The infamous radical newspaper *El Zurriago* and its sister publication *La Tercerola* started re-

publishing Ferdinand VII's letters to Napoleon and called for the king to be declared unfit to rule. However, the government and mainstream liberal press still held onto the monarch and even started persecuting those directly attacking the king. In 1823 the Holy Alliance decided to invade Spain to overthrow the constitutional system and restore order to the increasingly unstable Peninsula. When Ferdinand refused to accompany the liberal government and much of its remaining force during their flight to Cadiz, the Cortes finally declared him 'morally impeded' to rule Spain. After the swift success of the foreign invasion, Ferdinand was restored to absolute power once more and unleashed an even more repressive and ruthless reaction than in 1814. This last decade of his rule was to become known as the *decada ominosa*. Perhaps the strength of the myth is best encapsulated in many liberals trusting Ferdinand's initial promise of a pardon to all those involved in the constitutional project. Many paid with their life for their trust and mythical belief in the goodness of their king. One of them was the leader of the 1820 rebellion, Rafael del Riego. He was publicly hanged in Madrid's Plaza de la Cebada on 7 November 1823.

***El Rey felon* - the felon King**

In light of his stern absolutism and the complete betrayal of liberal hopes invested in him, it is not surprising that Ferdinand has entered history as *el Rey felon*, the felon or the criminal king. The liberals found it extremely hard to break with the myth of the innocent prince and even tried to exculpate him from his action in exile and the six years of repression following his return. However, they ultimately had to accept the reality that Ferdinand was neither liberal nor constitutional. Spanish liberalism had invested its hope into an ‘innocent prince’ that turned out to be an unapologetic absolutist. The king under whose banner they had fought and died against Napoleon betrayed them.

It had been possible to portray and imagine Ferdinand in his role as heir and exile as the liberal hope for regeneration in opposition to an internal and external enemy. His lack of involvement in government affairs meant that it was relatively easy to ignore his reactionary tendencies and conservative upbringing. However, the myth was impossible to sustain when Ferdinand became king and decided to rule in complete contrast to the image that had been projected onto him.



Not the look of a constitutional King: Ferdinand VII with the insignia of the Order of the Golden Fleece. Painting by Vicente López, 1830 (Palacio de España, Rome)

Heirs have the opportunity to acquire considerable political capital without having to actively engage in government affairs. Once the heir ascends the throne, the myth surrounding him as king depends on his actions and his achievements. In the light of the disappointment of the liberals with Ferdinand's return it is remarkable that the myth of the heir was able to live on for such long time in the figure of the king. Ferdinand VII failed to use his considerable political capital to regenerate the monarchy and rest it on a constitutional foundation. In the end he even lost his prestige

among the ultra conservative forces in the kingdom who joined his brother in a struggle against his heir, Isabel II, after his death in 1833. Indeed he managed to lose almost all his friends and allies, forcing his wife into an alliance with his old enemies, the liberals, to support her daughter's claim to the throne. The liberals meanwhile never forgave Ferdinand VII, who to them would always remain the felon King.

Suggested reading:

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