



***Maria of Austria, Holy Roman
Empress (1528-1603): Dynastic
Networker***

By Rubén González Cuerva

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Rubén González Cuerva presents an interesting image of Maria of Austria, wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II (1527-1576), which follows on from the author's long-term interest in the relationships between the Austrian and Spanish lines of the Habsburg family. González Cuerva initially demonstrated his interest in this matter in his published dissertation work focused on Baltasar de Zúñiga (*Baltasar de Zúñiga: Una encrucijada de la Monarquía Hispana (1561-1622)*, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2013), who served as the Spanish ambassador at the imperial court. In this most recent monograph, the author focuses his attention on the role of a female protagonist from the Habsburg family. In the past two decades, we can see growing interest in the research of women's history, especially in relation to gender studies. The scholarship of the Habsburg monarchy has been influenced similarly: the book written by Katrin Keller (*Die Kaiserinnen: Reich, Ritual und Dynastie [The Empresses: Empire, Ritual and Dynasty]*, 2021) joins González Cuerva's as examples among the newest works that can be mentioned and fit this scholarship excellently.

González Cuerva presents the story of Maria of Austria chronologically and has divided the monograph into nine chapters based on the different roles of the protagonist. The first two chapters analyze the childhood and education of the future Empress. Based on the author's conclusions, Maria was raised in a society that allowed "female autonomy," and this characteristic is present throughout the whole monograph. In the third chapter, the author introduces Maria of Austria as a future Queen of Bohemia through the marital agreement which gave her sufficient capital to support her household after the wedding, though she had to deny all the possible inheritances in favor of her brother, Philip II. González Cuerva also describes the creation of a new household for the Queen of Bohemia by the Duke of Alba. The author mentions the essential fact that Charles V instructed Alba to choose people who would adapt well to German-speaking regions.

The fourth chapter represents an exciting view of the struggles the new Queen experienced when adapting to a different cultural world after her arrival as part of

the Habsburg monarchy in 1552. However, Maria of Austria and her husband would not be free of Ferdinand I until his death in 1564. González Cuerva views the twelve years between 1552 and 1564 as the consolidation of her position. She was able to keep most of the Spanish servants because of the financial support from her Spanish relatives. On the other hand, she isolated herself from the “German court.” Secondly, she succeeded in the case of the education of her children. Maximilian II was forced to send his sons to Madrid. The Spanish Habsburgs were not pleased with his lack of action in supporting the Catholic religion. González Cuerva also points out the role of the Spanish ambassador, the ladies close to the Queen, and her chaplains. The successes of these individuals transformed Maria of Austria into a crucial agent of Spanish and Papal policy at the imperial court, which the author presents well in the next chapter.

The sixth chapter focuses on the role of Maria of Austria after the death of her husband Maximilian II in 1576. At first, as the mother of Rudolf II, she was expected to influence her son and still support the Spanish and Papal policies. Nevertheless, the personality of Rudolf II was slightly problematic: in addition to his education in Madrid, the Protestant nobility did not welcome a new ruler with open arms. As González Cuerva points out, the Catholic elite supported by the widow were able to access power more easily, which led to necessary conflict with the Protestant nobility. The author describes the cooperation of Rudolf II and his mother as a “working couple.” However, the widow wished to spend the rest of her life away from the imperial court in the religious house of Descalzas Reales in Madrid.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters present the return of Maria of Austria, the widowed Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, to Madrid, and her active political influence as a widow in the center of the Spanish monarchy. These three chapters represent the strength of the monograph. The seventh focuses on the actual return of Maria to Madrid, her short governance in Lisbon, her partially successful plans for her children, and settling into the palace in the Descalzas Reales monastery together with her imperial household. The last part proved to be problematic from a financial point of view, owing to the fact that her son Rudolf II did not share his inheritance with her and his siblings. In the eighth chapter, the author analyzes the widowed Empress and her efforts to influence the political matters at the imperial court

through her patronage. The last chapter focuses on the final years of Maria of Austria and her high hopes for the new Spanish king, Philip III.

In general, the presented monograph written by Rubén González Cuerva gives a comprehensive view on the life-role of a female member of the Habsburg family, Maria of Austria. The author's work is even more valuable because he is not trying to present her solely in a positive light, also following the Empress of the Holy Roman Empire through the periods of her life when she was unable to wield influence. In this case, the chapters describing her role as the widow brings fascinating analysis. González Cuerva's writing benefits from thorough archival research in several archives throughout Europe and the discovery of often unknown parts of the history between Madrid and Vienna (Prague). It could also be recommended that the author conduct research in the archives of the Rosenberg (in Třeboň) and Neuhaus families (in Jindřichův Hradec). These two families represented the most powerful Bohemian noble families in the second part of the sixteenth century. Their members (for example, William of Rosenberg, Joachim of Neuhaus, and Adam II of Neuhaus) occupied the highest offices in the Bohemian kingdom during this period. Their personal correspondences would offer a valuable perspective on the networks of Maria of Austria, for example, the patron-client relationship between Maria and William of Rosenberg mentioned by the author (131), which could cast further light on her role from a Bohemian point of view.

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