



**MELCHOR MACANAZ: THE THWARTED  
CAREER OF A SPANISH REFORMER**  
Review-article on Francisco Precioso Izquierdo.  
*Melchor de Macanaz. La derrota de un "héroe".  
Poder político y movilidad familiar en la España  
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The range and detail of Francisco Precioso Izquierdo's authoritative new study reminds readers of the significance of Melchor Macanaz in understanding a key period in the political and religious evolution of Spain. The author's description of the book as an 'estudio biográfico a partir del recurso a la familia y la óptica del poder político como filtro de realidades sociales' ('biographical study taking as its starting point the family, and adopting the perspective of political power as a distillation of social realities' (32; my translation, as are all subsequent ones), belies the subtle illumination of basic issues. The text permits measured contemplation of the workings of national political life in early 18th-century Spain which enables the reader to assess, among other aspects, the power of absolute monarchy vis-à-vis the Church, allied to the function and use of the Inquisition, the significance of career ambitions based on competence rather than birth, and the muted voicing of reformist attitudes, the last of which would be central later in the century. The author tackles his subject matter with breadth, as the sub-title indicates, and does so with modesty, clarity and intelligence.

A significant novelty of this study is the recourse to family history, a feature fruitfully explored by a new generation of historians in Spain. Given the constant reprinting of the 1970 volume by Carmen Martín Gaité, setting out her recovery of Macanaz, the reader notes the renewed labors of Precioso in widely exploring archives, especially local ones, filling in details of provincial life of a family attempting to advance in Ancien Régime society and, in the case of Melchor, breaking through to matters of national importance. Martín Gaité's book - *El proceso de Macanaz. Historia de un empapelamiento (The Case against Macanaz. History of a Stitch-Up)* - has been constantly reprinted, with a new edition as recent as 2019, and serves Precioso as a reference point in detailed exploration of certain topics.

Considering the volume globally, the reader can delight in his elucidation of key issues (like regalism), refusing to take certain terms or standard interpretations for granted, which often serve to re-focus accepted thinking. The author also extends his field to aspects of 18th-century life, probing topics like the characteristics of social advancement and the rise of the meritocracy.

The title might lead one to expect an almost exclusive focus on Melchor Macanaz, but Francisco Precioso situates the politician's career in a broad framework, embracing over 200 years of family history, from the early seventeenth century to the late 1820s, revealing how members of the Macanaz family made their way in a society subject to Old Regime structures and strictures. The first quarter of the study is devoted to family antecedents in the local power structure of Murcia; the central half focuses directly on the political career of Melchor Macanaz; and the final quarter tackles the politician as subject of biographical interest after his death and the enduring written legacy of his ideas, before tackling the story of his descendants in the period 1760 to 1826, centered on the political career of Pedro Macanaz, grandson of the 'hero', who became a minister under Fernando VII.

Melchor Macanaz was born in Hellín, Murcia (the city is now in the province of Albacete), in 1670, to a family of a middling kind, '*gente media*' (51), able to accumulate wealth and occupy important positions in the local political bureaucracy while not members of the titled nobility. The author's initial presentation of local power mostly derives from documented legal disputes which exemplify struggles for rights, meticulously recorded in local archives and providing insights into the life of the times; *curricula vitae* were embellished and exaggerations common in many family ambitions to climb the greasy pole (44).

In his teens Melchor studied first in Valencia (74), before attending the elite university of Salamanca to study civil and canon law and briefly become involved in teaching (75-80), standard preparation for an administrative role. His origins prevented him from joining the university's social elites (*colegiales*), generally of noble origin and expecting later government preferment, whom he observes from his perspective of humble commoner made good thanks to family graft and efficient networking (77). Not only does he learn the virtue of diligent study, but secures a valued grounding in Spanish law, which he later described as undervalued at university, aware of the ability to support historical analysis with precise recourse to legislation (74). After practical legal training (*pasantía*), he was received into the Madrid College of Lawyers (78),

a natural progression which would have sharpened his mind and developed argumentative skills. His establishment in the capital coincided with the War of the Spanish Succession (1700-1713) and arrival of the new, French-born King, grandson of Louis XIV, and known to Spaniards as Felipe V, who replaced the previous Hapsburg family on the throne, only affirmed after a prolonged war involving the major powers of Europe. Precioso offers a balanced treatment of the dynastic change exaggerated by many earlier historical narratives as Macanaz experienced the opportunities of life in Madrid, involving attendance at socio-intellectual gatherings (*tertulias*) often frequented by nobles, winning favor for his ability and being welcomed into the circle of the cultured marquis of Villena, a founder of the Spanish Royal Academy (dedicated to both language and literature) and a keen historian, as well as aspiring politician. Spanish 18th-century studies have shown how careers could flourish from the springboard of contact with an influential noble of an intelligent nature, Macanaz being accepted into Villena's household and becoming tutor to the male heirs (81-87), as well as performing a competent administrative role basic to the household. Precioso explores patronage as an opportunity for networking and path to career betterment. Macanaz's ability comes to the fore when Villena represents Felipe V as viceroy in Italy, and the young man oversees legal and administrative matters in his master's absence (91).

In 1705 there is evidence that Macanaz worked for the French ambassador Amelot, sent by Luis XV to aid his grandson, as well as Francisco Ronquillo, a key minister in the Consejo de Castilla (97). Thus began his closeness to major figures in government, with a career promoted by the trusted Villena. Official recognition occurred in 1712 (137), when he joined the official bureaucracy as *mayordomo* to Felipe V, establishing the link which would mark out his political career but equally occasion his downfall. He became legal administrator (*fiscal*) to the monarch, charged with putting the King's wishes into effect and on occasions anticipating what the monarch desired by giving a lead in the measures necessary as the war dragged on. Macanaz, as his later autobiographical writings testify, always saw himself as a faithful interpreter of the will of the monarch, but clashes led to the *fiscal* backing down and finding one of his top-secret documents, the *Pedimento* prepared for the King, being read and condemned by the Inquisition, the policing instrument of the Church hierarchy. Scholars of 18th-century Spain know how readily attempts to restrict church powers would be treated as equivalent to heresy and even an attack on religion itself. Governmental

rejection in 1715 led Macanaz to flee Spain, initially for France, though he subsequently acted occasionally as the monarch's, often unofficial, roving ambassador in Europe, serving a man afraid to directly confront the Church. When the *ex-fiscal* was finally induced to return to Spain in 1748, after the accession of Fernando VI, he was unexpectedly confined by the new King to prison in la Coruña until 1760, when another new monarch, Carlos III, brought about his final release at the age of ninety and almost immediate death in his home city of Hellín.

Focus on the family re-appears, perhaps surprisingly, in part four of the book, dedicated to Pedro Macanaz, the grandson of the 'hero' (347-400). On the death of Melchor, the family headed by his daughter labored to re-establish their social and economic position in Hellín. With a grounding in foreign languages Pedro entered the diplomatic corps, soon joining the Spanish team in the aspiring court of Catherine II, responding to initiatives from Madrid; his progress is traced by Precioso in the extant documentation housed in Spain's archives. Serving under the later ministry of Godoy, Pedro remains faithful to the exiled Fernando VII before his restitution in 1814. He is instrumental in the re-establishment of the Inquisition in the same year, an act eliciting comment from the liberal scourge of reaction, Antonio Puigblanch, who, from the safety of London, paralleled the career of the grandson in the restoration of an institution which hounded his ancestor a century earlier (394). Having been tasked with actions against supposed enemies of the regime (including the poet and progressive lawyer Juan Meléndez Valdés) Macanaz fell from favor and was dismissed by Fernando VII. Later imprisoned for two years in the same castle in Coruña where his grandfather had been detained, he never returned to power, though he was granted a pension by the monarch, and like his ancestor died in Hellín. The similarities and differences are remarkable, while monarchical absolutism appeared unchanged (400).

Examining Melchor Macanaz's career in perspective brings out the politician's implication in the major issues of the era. The years of his rise coincided with the War of the Spanish Succession, properly understood as a civil war which led to troops from foreign countries allied to one or other side fighting to assert the rights of their claimant to the throne, thus paralleling the divided population. Sympathies were especially anti-Bourbon in Valencia and Aragon where Macanaz's role was to enforce conformity (107-128), in a struggle in which Pope Clement XI did not champion the cause of Philip of Anjou (Felipe V) but rather that of the Austrian claimant.

During the conflict Macanaz could not fail to witness at first hand the interlinking of the Spanish Church with national political governance, a power which clerics determined to maintain.

The main political program adopted by Felipe V involved implementing a New Plan (*Nueva Planta*) to assert his influence. The *Nueva Planta* was not so much punitive but rather outlined a rational, nationwide scheme for structural reorganization without making enemies of local and regional interests, a most difficult task (181). Macanaz was charged with the confiscation of the goods of dissident Valencians, at the same time as demanding their fidelity to Felipe V (109). He confronted opposition to his instructions, executed under royal order, from the Madrid-based Council of Castile and Chancellery of Valencia (107), provoking the animosity of the Archbishop of Valencia, Antonio Folch de Cardona, who consistently defied him, leading to a climb-down which annulled previously formulated measures. The perceived need for concessions led to the *fiscal's* withdrawal to Madrid in order to save face (116-117). Shortly afterwards, Macanaz was singled out for attack by Cardinal Belluga, acting as agent for both the Spanish Church and the papacy (137), entailing opposition which forced the King to give way (139). A powerful weapon employed by the Church was Macanaz's secret *Pedimento de los cincuenta y cinco puntos* (*Petition of Fifty-Five Points*), which set out a series of arguments against the powers of the papal nuncio in Spain, defending the rights in law of the Spanish monarch. Their aim was to examine the issues of immunity and Church privileges, whose promotion seemed to Macanaz to originate with the papal nuncio (149). The *Pedimento* was condemned by the Spanish Inquisitor General Francesco Del Giudice in August 1714, although the condemnation was first published in France. Precioso underlines the increased political power of the Inquisition in 1714, and matters came to a head as the King's wife María Luisa of Savoy died. However, a year later, the monarch married the Italian Princess known to Spain as Isabel de Farnesio. In typical fashion the assertive new queen removed the group of advisors close to her husband, producing fatal consequences for the career of Macanaz by removing him from the center of power (24); she became virtual ruler of Spain for the King's next two decades, with the monarch treated as physically incapacitated.

If the career of Melchor Macanaz provides the center of the story in Francisco Precioso's study, a brief parallel account gives significant support to the recreation of 18th-century Church behavior concerning Melchor's brother Fray Antonio, who became Prior of the Dominican religious

community where he resided (219-232). When Melchor worked abroad, outside the jurisdiction of the Inquisition which aimed to interrogate him before a trial, Fray Antonio was fiercely pursued by the Holy Office in search of evidence which might implicate the former *Fiscal del rey* as well as his brother, assumed to support Melchor's reformist opinions concerning the Church. On minimal evidence he was arrested in 1716 and subject to trial on the grounds that his views were unacceptable to Church authorities. Cardinal Belluga intervened again as a resolute pursuer of his guilt. Once condemned at a Church hearing, he was initially imprisoned and subsequently allowed to live in seclusion after 1720 in Baza, where he died in the 1750s. During this period his brother awaited orders from the monarch and on occasions pursued government work outside Spain, and when Fernando VI ascended the throne Macanaz was allowed to return to Spain before being summarily detained and imprisoned. Only when Carlos III succeeded his brother in 1759 and previous major political figures disappeared from the political scene could the mature monarch allow Macanaz to retire and spend his final days in Hellín. As happened at various points in the century, the arrival of a new King could reverse measures with apparent ease. Such changes demonstrate to the historically-minded observer how arbitrary the original condemnations might have been; the later cases of Olavide and Jovellanos reveal that the practice prevailed and how competent serious figures faithful to the monarchy could be side-lined when circumstances seemed, somewhat irrationally in the light of historical hindsight, to warrant it.

If the details of Melchor Macanaz's political trajectory become the central focus of Precioso's book, the reader is equally led by the author to reconstruct the overarching political characteristics of the era. The first concerns the national structures evident in the first decades of the 18th century, in which power did not lie with the monarch alone. In the initial period of Felipe V's long reign (1700-1746) the inter-relationship between monarch, the upper echelons of the Church (including the royal confessor Robinet), the French authorities, and political actors was central. What is special about the early reign of Felipe V, grandson of the ruling King of France, is the influence of the French ambassador Michel-Jean Amelot. Similarly powerful in Macanaz's case are the two wives of Felipe V; first, María Luisa of Savoy, who appears to have approved the politician's actions (201-202), succeeded by Isabel de Farnesio, who married the widowed King in 1715. Thereafter, the Italian's presence in political decisions are constant, often seen as seeking and preserving power for her family in Italy, acting for her sick husband, and a

figure never sympathetic to Macanaz. If the wives of Felipe V were crucial for the political well-being of the government servant, a change of monarch, as in the ascent to the throne of Fernando VI (in 1746) and Carlos III (in 1759), would be crucial in affecting the fortunes of Macanaz.

Precioso's book elegantly delineates the effects of Macanaz's clash with the de facto, non-royal powers at the top of the Spanish political system. Important conflicts between monarch and Church laid bare the devastating side effects which could prejudice the lives of faithful servants of the crown. Macanaz is portrayed as victim of his fidelity to the monarch when the policies of Felipe V clashed with Church custom, most usually when the Church attempted to entrench assumed power at the expense of legal treaties and precedents, whereas a skilled lawyer, as would later occur with Campomanes and Floridablanca (144), espoused allegedly 'regalist' attitudes. Cardinal Belluga became a *bête noir* on behalf of the Church in the persecution of both Melchor and Antonio Macanaz. It was he who claimed that the text of the previously mentioned *Pedimento* subverted the state (215). Martín Gaité dedicated many pages of her book to this prohibition, reproducing documents which reveal its planning, promulgation and the range of reactions in Spain, and devotes a substantial chapter to examining the *Pedimento*. The notorious secret document submitted by Macanaz to Felipe V and the Consejo de Castilla needs to be analyzed with a degree of caution because it can be argued to have been intended by its author merely to serve as an internal position paper for the monarchy and as a basis for negotiation. Martín Gaité's analysis underlines that its tone at times seems extreme and can surprise analysts. Yet to be able to assess its degree of extremism requires it being understood in the ongoing situation, even though some of its content derived from a text prepared for the government a century earlier by Juan Chumacero and Fr. Domingo Pimentel, as was pointed out at the time (205).

The Inquisitor General Del Giudice outlined in a letter to Jean Orry major objections to Macanaz's *Pedimento*, claiming that it was illicit to attack Church thinking, 'los conceptos de la religión' ('the beliefs of religion', 203). Cardinal Belluga framed his case against the lawyer from Hellín as revealing 'el despropósito con que se tratan las cosas sagradas' ('the slighting treatment of sacred matters', 212). Vague allegations treated as heresy what was in fact opinion, and certainly far from constituting heresy over theological truths which was legally the line the Church was meant to pursue. It has been pro-Catholic historians who have constantly employed the facile accusation of regalism to undermine opposing arguments from the 18th through to the

20th centuries. Francisco Precioso uses terminology with care in his study and objectively demythologizes its inappropriate use, detecting no difference between Church-State clashes in the 17th and the following century.

The author devotes a carefully argued chapter to the writings of Macanaz (265-299). He is shown to persistently put pen to paper and some of his most interesting texts were widely copied in manuscript and distributed; his own versions were bound and carefully kept, which at the end of his life the author claimed amounted to some 360 volumes. Precioso reproduces two early lists of his works drawn up by others, containing titles whose texts have so far not all been located or identified. Interested figures at the time kept copies of certain texts in their private libraries, considering them as important reading matter for any successor who contemplated undertaking similar reforms, Campomanes, the minister of Carlos III, being a well-known case. No doubt his education made Macanaz aware that his writings might later vindicate his reputation, as indeed happened. The problem for scholars is that some texts attributed to him are apocryphal, as the author of this study shows. He even supposedly wrote a utopia —*El deseado gobierno (The Wished-For Government)*— whose definitive authorship is still uncertain (271) and awaits analysis and possible publication.

The first major editor of his texts, a generation after his death, though in some cases more than half a century after their composition, was the poet, dramatist and translator Antonio Valladares de Sotomayor who published the periodical *Semanario Erudito* over four years from 1787 (315-325). Various later writings of Macanaz are commentaries on contemporary historical studies, but more significant ones attempted to detail recent Spanish history, covering issues up to the most recent ones. Precioso's analysis reveals what a difficult task remains in accurately identifying some of the author's authentic works.

As was to be expected, Francisco Precioso examines certain texts in order to define Macanaz's thinking (277-298), bearing in mind that the author always considered himself the faithful servant of the interests and views of his master Felipe V. However, he also devotes attention to a more general consideration of Macanaz's reputation as a reformer, using the *Pedimento* as well as other supporting documents and actions of his subject (144-156). The existing evidence permits identification of important ideas which reveal the reformist mentality of their author: the dangers in the growth of Church power advocated by the papacy in opposition to Spain's national interest, with the corollary of necessary limits to the role of the Inquisition; the

importance of the Spanish Government exercising greater influence over the nature and occupants of posts in Spanish universities (188-192), which in the field of law also meant devoting greater time to the study of Spanish law at the expense of Roman law (188); the urgency of the Government making official appointments based on the ability of candidates rather than on their family connections (192); the need to promote official measures against corruption in society; the call to create 'patriotic societies' (as would happen in the 1760s, initially outside Government initiatives) in order to promote the advance of the Spanish economy; Government backing to support the extension and activity of the agricultural sector as well as working to develop commerce.

The fascinating section three of Precioso's book concerns the vindication which the passage of time has produced for Macanaz, which the author labels 'Una memoria en construcción' ('A memoir in the course of creation', 301). The first public defender of the work of Macanaz was the Valencian scholar Gregorio Mayans, which began in the reign of Fernando VI, coinciding with the final decades of the Murcian politician's life (303-314); its significance has been recently examined in academic studies by the scholar Antonio Mestre. It was a member of Mayans's circle, the doctor Antonio de Capdevila, who began the first biography of Macanaz, coining the label 'hero', which Precioso borrows in his title. It was under the subsequent monarchs, Carlos III and his son Carlos IV, that Valladares saw into print unpublished works by Macanaz, as already mentioned. The still valid legacy of the predecessor was present in the deliberations of the Cortes de Cadiz (Cadiz Parliament) after the French invasion of 1808 and subsequent confinement in France of the future Fernando VII and his father Carlos IV. The lasting impact of Macanaz's reformist thinking was thus still current a century after he abandoned a central political role in Spain in 1715.

Only in the 20th century has serious historical interest in Macanaz revived in Europe, benefitting from the consequent greater sophistication in historical study. The then British-based scholar Henry Kamen devoted an erudite article to him in 1965, at the time of his ground-breaking studies centered of the War of Succession and initial years of the 18th century. The article considered Macanaz an instrumental figure alongside the French advisor Jean Orry in the establishment of Bourbon power in Spain, bringing a certain clarity to the entangled historical interpretations of the beginning of Felipe V's rule. But it was the substantial biography of Carmen Martín Gaité, completed in 1969, which brought a budding novelist's skill to setting out the

astonishing story of the life and career of the lawyer from Murcia. Her book abounds in a wealth of substantial quotations from official documents, particularly from the Madrid and Simancas archives, in addition to the very full non-Spanish coverage detailed in French diplomatic papers which include pamphlets and rumors, material remitted to the grandfather in Paris of the Spanish monarch. The flavor it gives of Spanish political life and the constant reproduction of original documents explains its continuing republication, an account to which Francisco Precioso often refers.

As the young Spanish historian makes clear, the extent of Macanaz's writings signifies that much work remains to be done, especially to determine which of the works attributed to him are genuine and which apocryphal. The invaluable bibliography compiled by Francisco Aguilar Piñal in 1983 reveals the location of many of his supposed manuscript writings in foreign as well as Spanish archives, but the task of determining their authorship awaits future scholars, although Francisco Precioso has not shirked from initiating the identification of some important ones (265-277).

Considered overall the new study enriches our understanding of a period. The family-based focus at beginning and end is instructive and innovative. It brings out the significance of noble patronage for those unable to aspire without backing to a major political career. The book clarifies the functioning of key structural factors at a specific moment in Old Régime political behavior, contributing to a measured, demythologized assessment of regalism. What the author illuminates with unbiased skill is the weakness of the monarchy when confronting the Church, elaborating on its often belligerent arm the Inquisition. In this respect the brief analysis of the inquisitorial persecution of Fray Antonio Macanaz is telling. Nevertheless, the reader senses a gradual secularization evident in the crown's push for change aimed at bringing about the decline in authority of the Holy Office. What finally prove significant are the subtle indicators of Spain's evolution, which some would consider a reaction to its perceived backwardness. Unlike the United Kingdom, Spain still lacked a competent, thrusting middle class trusted to take on key political responsibilities. In Macanaz's encounters with noble politicians one perceives a system centered on the past, one which often valued family origins at the expense of talent. Precioso's study also implicitly enables the reader to note the contrast between the first half and the more progressive second half of the 18th century. The evidence of political stagnation is made manifest in this new account and the woes of Felipe V's reign reveal frustration at the lack of progress which later

politicians and reformers recognized in Macanaz's thinking, entailing advances which could only be adopted when major obstacles were removed and forward-looking attitudes allowed to flourish.



