CHAPTER ONE

FELIPE V: CAESURA OR CONTINUITY?

Christopher Storrs

The arrival of the Bourbon dynasty in Spain in 1700, in the person of Louis XIV’s grandson, Felipe V (1700–46) has long been seen as a turning point in Spanish history. In the later eighteenth century especially, apologists of the new dynasty established a pattern of interpretation that has largely shaped thinking ever since.¹ According to this view, the supposed decline of Spain, associated with the “lesser” Habsburgs in the seventeenth century—Felipe III (1598–1621), Felipe IV (1621–65) and Carlos II (1665–1700)—was followed by a remarkable revival under the reforming Bourbons. In fact this interpretation is a little more nuanced, in that reform has been especially associated with the later decades of the eighteenth century, and above all with the reign of Felipe V’s son, Carlos III (1759–88), who removed from Naples to succeed his half-brother, Fernando VI (1746–59) on the latter’s death. Carlos III’s reign, coinciding in time with the broader European Enlightenment, and with the king served by a galaxy of very able and reform-minded ministers—Squillace, Campomanes, the count of Aranda, Floridablanca, Gálvez, Jovellanos and so on—effected changes which seem to justify his inclusion in the select club of so-called “Enlightened Despots” which governed Europe in the generation before the French Revolution.² Some of those ministers remained committed to reform in the more difficult days which followed the outbreak of that Revolution, in the reign of Carlos IV (1788–1808).

¹ Ricardo García Cárcel, Felipe V y los españoles. Una visión periférica del problema de España (Barcelona: Plaza y Janes, 2002).
The extent to which developments in France impacted upon Spain, not least following the Napoleonic intervention in 1808, the Peninsular War which ensued and the collapse of the Spanish Antiguo Régimen thereafter also helps explain why historians have privileged the later over the earlier eighteenth century: seeking to explain that breakdown, they have understandably sought the answer in the immediately preceding, and rather traumatic decades. Not surprisingly, the period between 1665 and 1746 remains as much of a Dark Ages of Spanish historiography—relatively at least—as when Henry Kamen made that observation as long ago as 1969.3

But this focus on the second half of the eighteenth century also reflects a very negative perception of the reign of Felipe V, and above all of Felipe himself. Succeeding to the Spanish throne aged just 18, Felipe has been largely dismissed by historians as inclined to a melancholic depression, and—partly in consequence of this—as perhaps the most uxorious of monarchs in recent times, dominated by his two wives, Maria Luisa de Saboya and—above all—Isabel de Farnesio. Felipe's insecurity and sexual appetite was commented on at the time—Felipe, it is said spent his time between the couch (or marital bed) and the confessional—and continues to shape perceptions of him, not least because of the political consequences, and remarkable political leverage enjoyed by Felipe's wives.4 The pursuit of ultimately unsuccessful ambitions in Italy, largely driven by Isabel's desire to pursue her own dynastic claims, in order to secure for herself a haven in the event of Felipe's death and to find thrones for sons who were not expected to succeed in Spain, diverted Spanish resources between 1713 and 1748 into a series of Italian adventures.5 It was not until

---

