CHAPTER 2

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL AND QUEEN (1396–97)

The period from May 1396 to May 1397 marked a turning point in both the life of Maria de Luna and the history of the Crown of Aragon. After nine years of rule by Joan I and Violant de Bar the realm was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and invasion, and the authority of the monarchy was hitting bottom. Maria de Luna was alone, struggling with the burden of financing the Sicilian project, and forced into the role of supplicant in her brother-in-law’s court. When Joan died, Maria took the throne in her husband’s name, setting about to reassert royal authority and secure the realm. Challenged by the dowager, Violant, and threatened with conquest by a pretender, Joana de Foix, Maria marshaled her divisive subjects and defended the kingdom against two invasions. A year later, when Martí reluctantly returned from Sicily, he claimed a crown that, had it not been for Maria’s initiative, he would have probably lost. The events of these twelve months suggest both the potential for women to exercise power and the limited and derivative nature of female authority in the Crown of Aragon. But they also raise many questions. Why was it that Martí depended so heavily on Maria? Why were their subjects so ready to yield to the authority of a woman? In addition, to what degree was Maria’s capacity to act a question of gender, or personality, or circumstance?

The Crown in Crisis

On 17 May 1396 Joan I and Violant de Bar were confronted with the undeniable fact that their reign had been a disaster. Their patrimony was depleted, frittered away on their own ostentations, and embezzled by their most trusted counselors. These same courtiers had secretly mustered companies of
mercenaries, who were at Avignon awaiting orders to march on Catalonia. The city councils of Barcelona and Valencia had warned repeatedly of these developments, but the monarchs lent them no credence.

Joan and Violant’s relationship with the municipalities had been characterized by distrust and antagonism even before they reached the throne. Power in the towns was largely in the hands of the burghers, commoners whose energetic commercial ventures were the foundation of the Crown’s prosperity. It was a class that supported the institution of the monarchy, but that had a keen sense of financial responsibility and of the limits of royal power. Joan and Violant, on the other hand, had a reputation for luxurious tastes and an ample sense of entitlement. As early as 1383 at the cortes (parliament) of Monzón in the presence of King Pere, the councils had accused Joan of frittering away the royal patrimony—a public act of defiance against the heir to the throne.\(^1\) Once he was in power, they took aim instead at the couple’s closest associates.

In 1388, for example, they brought the royal scribe and literate Bernat Metge up on charges of corruption, for which he was absolved thanks only to the direct intervention of the king and queen.\(^2\) The following year at the cortes the monarchs’ opponents within the various estates took aim at the royal household again. This time the scapegoat was Violant’s favorite, Carroça de Vilaragut, who was accused of acts of moral and sexual impropriety, and expelled from court.\(^3\) The veritable laundry list of indictments against her included several cases of adultery—a typical tactic for discrediting women.\(^4\) The fact that Joan himself and other members of the royal circle appeared listed as paramours added to the couple’s humiliation.

The previous year another royal counselor, Francesc d’Aranda, had been accused by Count Joan of Prades of having poisoned the royal couple’s firstborn son and heir, Jaume, and of plotting to poison the king.\(^5\) These allegations were especially cruel, because it was precisely at this time that the little prince was dying.\(^6\) The intention was to stir up mistrust between Joan and his brother Martí, who was implied to have some connection with the plot. In the following years the smear campaign continued: Francesc was accused of being one of Carroça’s innumerable lovers, and his late father was accused of having betrayed Pere the Ceremonious. Eventually, under threat of judicial duel, Joan de Prades admitted that all of the allegations were false.\(^7\) In the face of such intrigues, Joan I and Violant closed ranks with their entourage, and regarded any accusations against them as merely another attempt on the part of the nobility and universitates (municipalities) to undermine their position.

But in early March 1396 two urgent communiqués sent by the municipal authorities of Barcelona and Valencia reached Joan at Perpignan,