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Review of Ruth MacKay, *The Baker Who Pretended to Be King of Portugal*

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Ruth MacKay. *The Baker Who Pretended to Be King of Portugal*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012. 300 pp.

Juana of Austria gave birth to a boy in Lisbon on 20 January 1554, eighteen days after her husband had died, the Infante João, who was only seventeen years old at the time. The Infante had been the last surviving son of Portugal's king João III (1502-1557) and queen Catarina (1507-1578), and upon the king's death the crown fell to that fatherless boy born three years earlier, Dom Sebastião. Catarina was queen regent until 1562, and the Cardinal Henrique, the boy's great uncle, was regent until 1568. At fourteen Sebastião ascended to the Portuguese throne, a throne he was ill-equipped to guard. Childhood ailments and youthful impetuosity led the young king to unwise decisions, the most serious of which was his foolish determination to conquer the Moors in North Africa. In early August 1578, thousands of Portuguese soldiers along with their king were killed by Muslim forces in Alcazarquivir, in present-day Morocco.

The death of the childless Portuguese king led to a political crisis in Portugal, and ultimately to its annexation by Spain in 1580. Philip II had a reasonable claim to the Portuguese throne, given that his mother had been a Portuguese princess, and that he in turn had married a Portuguese princess. Portugal was not without its own contenders, however, most notably Dom António, Prior de Crato, cousin of the late King Sebastião. Unfortunately for Dom António, he was considered of illegitimate birth, and although he enjoyed some following among the Portuguese, Spain's military forces proved too powerful for his varied insurgencies, and he was forced to live in exile. Still, Philip II was sensitive to any murmurs about his inheritance of the Portuguese crown, and aside from Dom António, a seemingly persistent threat to Spain's usurpation was linked to a phantom, and that in some ways was more difficult for Philip to vanquish.

Because the body of the dead king Sebastião was never recovered from the Moroccan desert, theories of his survival, heroic escape in disguise, and ultimate return to his rightful place as the genuine Portuguese king grew to mythical proportions. The circumstances were ripe for such imaginings, particularly among those who resented Portugal's loss of independence, and who blamed Spain for all of Portugal's subsequent ills. This resulted in a number of false Sebastians. One of the most fascinating examples that emerged in the late sixteenth century involved a vicar, a baker, and a nun, and their stories provide an extraordinary context through which a historian can examine questions of memory, identity, and the nebulous lines between fact and fiction. Their stories have been told and retold in several languages and in many guises, but Ruth MacKay has managed, nonetheless, to bring new life to those characters and the vagaries of life that brought them together. With the right mixture of perceptive precision and creative

inferences, *The Baker Who Pretended to Be King of Portugal* is as close to a page-turner as a scholarly book can ever be.

One of the many strengths of Ruth MacKay's new book lies in the intelligent questions she asks, and the intelligent answers she proposes. She acknowledges, however, that much remains unknown. The denouement took place in Madrigal de las Altas Torres, in the province of Avila, Spain, for which MacKay sets the scene with detailed background on people, places, and events enmeshed in the conspiracy to dethrone Spain's Philip II. Starting with the hapless Portuguese king Dom Sebastião, McKay traces how Fray Miguel de los Santos came to the Portuguese court where he provided religious services and then went on to fight on behalf of Dom António against the Spanish in 1580. For his efforts, Fray Miguel was exiled to Toledo, but ended up in Salamanca, and later in Madrigal, where he took up a post as vicar of Nuestra Señora de Gracia la Real, the convent where Ana of Austria had been living since 1575, having been placed there when she was six.

Ana of Austria was the illegitimate daughter of Philip II's illegitimate half-brother, Juan of Austria, and María de Mendoza, of the powerful Mendoza clan. According to Fray Miguel's testimony (which he changed numerous times), the conspiracy to restore the Portuguese crown to the Portuguese pretender (D. António, Prior de Catro) began sometime in August 1593, when as Ana's confessor, Fray Miguel planted a seed in Ana's head that her cousin King Sebastian was still alive, and that he (Fray Miguel) had had visions about Ana and Sebastian's union. Enter the former soldier and *pastelero* Gabriel de Espinosa, who was alternately believed by some to be either Dom Sebastião, Dom António, or Francisco, Ana of Austria's mysterious brother, or maybe even Francis Drake. His persona was further complicated by the presence of Inés Cid, the alleged nanny to Gabriel's three-year-old daughter, Clara Eugenia, a name threateningly similar to Philip II's own daughter, Isabel Clara Eugenia.

As MacKay points out, the "evidence" that emerged from the many various testimonies reveals as much as it shields about who said what to whom, and how much of it can be taken at face value. The paper trail that Philip II's investigation of 1594-1595 left behind attests to the myriad of possibilities that officials tried to unravel, and the daunting task that such unravelling entails, then and now. In the end, the validity and veracity of the surviving documents matters less than the revelations that these documents provide about what early modern Iberians believed was possible, and why. Details about the plot, real and imaginary (the difference was often indistinguishable), led to much clamour, rumour, and innuendo, and MacKay is to be congratulated for succeeding in sifting through all that noise to reconstruct a captivating account that reads like a whodunit.

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