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Cover Page Footnote

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The Tragedy of Alcazarquivir: The Collapse of Kingship, Empire, and Narrative

Ruth MacKay

At noon on 4 August 1578, on a sweltering Moroccan desert, “all the guns of both sides went off together with such fury and horror and hideousness that it truly seemed as if the Earth, shaking from side to side, and the heavens, with fire and lightning and the thunder of the artillery, were collapsing all around us.”¹

That was the disastrous Battle of Alcazarquivir (al-Qasr al-Kabir), in which the Portuguese army was demolished by a far more potent Moroccan force. Chronicles circulated almost at once in the aftermath attempting to explain how this possibly could have happened. In the pages that follow, I analyze the Alcazarquivir chronicles, setting them alongside classical literature and history and also alongside widely known accounts of other imperial adventures in America and in North Africa, successful and not. The point is to understand these chronicles as recycled, didactic, meaningful, and engaging rhetorical exercises that straddled historiography, prose, and poetry. They taught useful and universal lessons, reminded audiences of the past, and set stories within a known sequence of other stories full of warnings, celebrations, and stock characters. Tropes, many drawn from classical literature, helped explain catastrophe or show why triumph was preordained. Recognizability was, in and of itself, part of the narrative, with the parts and structure of the narrative a sort of microcosm of empire itself.²

At stake in this instance were the Portuguese possessions in North Africa but also the institution and traditions of correct, wise kingship, which clearly had fallen short. Good government was one in which a ruler heeded his advisers, studied well, dispensed justice, balanced prudence with bravery, and took care not to put the royal body at risk. A good monarch, according to the Spanish historian and theorist Juan de Mariana (1536–1624) and other contemporary wise men, also

¹ Fr. Luis Nieto, *Relación de las Guerras de Berberia y del Suceso y Muerte del Rey Don Sebastian*, in CODOIN no. 100 (Madrid 1891, reprint 1966), 411–58, 448. Nieto, a Spanish Dominican friar, was at the battle; his account in Spanish, probably written in 1578, was published the following year in French, and then in Latin (in Nuremberg). It was published in Portuguese only in the late nineteenth century. All translations in this article are the author’s.

² For an overview of many of the chronicles mentioned in this article see José María de Queiroz Velloso, *Estudos históricos do século XVI* (Lisbon: Academia Portuguesa da História, 1950), 137–96; he is especially concerned with a work by eyewitness Fr. Bernardo da Cruz, *Crónica del-Rei D. Sebastião...* Bibliotheca de Clássicos Portuguezes, vol. 36 (Lisbon: Escriptorio, 1903). For a huge, if disorganized, array of original documents see *Les sources inédites de l’histoire du Maroc de 1530 a 1845*, ed. Henry de Castries, Chantal de la Véronne, et al., 27 vols. (Paris: E. Leroux, 1905–1961), especially vol. III, *Espagne*, ed. Chantal de la Véronne (Paris 1961) and *Dynastie Saadienne (Archives et bibliothèques de France)*, ser. I, part I, vol. 1.

was one who ensured posterity for his kingdom. Portugal's King Sebastian, who was twenty-four when he was killed, did none of those things, and all his failings are plain to see in the chronicles, which are like the inverse of mirror books. They appeared at a moment in Iberian history, the turn of the sixteenth century, when royal instruction was of keen interest. With the new reign of Philip III (who also was Philip II of Portugal), advice-giving to a young king was a matter of public discussion. Sebastian had ignored advice; Philip III, on the contrary, heeded advice to excess (said those opposed to the new king's all-powerful favorite, the Duke of Lerma). The turn of the sixteenth century was also a time of debate regarding the wisdom of making peace with Dutch heretics (instead of with Muslim infidels). In retrospect, we know that notions of diplomacy, religious warfare, and royal authority were all at a turning point. It is thus logical to think that the lessons of kingship contained in these chronicles of Alcazarquivir were of interest a few decades later.

The events of the case are these: Sebastian of Portugal essentially would be the last of the Avis dynasty, which had ruled Portugal since 1385 and was intricately intermarried with the Spanish Hapsburgs. He was young and had no heirs and had an unhealthy attachment to the prospect of reconquering parts of North Africa that his grandfather John III had given back three decades earlier. In the words of one chronicler, he "wished to be Lord of Africa."³ Chief among Sebastian's inspirations was the triumph of his uncle, don John of Austria, over the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, a battle that Fernand Braudel pointed out was not the last Mediterranean crusade, as it is often billed; rather, Braudel said, that honor belongs to Alcazarquivir.⁴ (Before vanquishing the Turks, don John, who was King Philip II of Spain's half-brother and the son of Charles V, had destroyed the rebellious Moors in the Alpujarras mountains of Granada.) In 1574, Sebastian conducted a pointless mission to Morocco that ended after three months when the Portuguese ran out of supplies. Two years later, a coup in Morocco led the loser there, Muhammad al-Mutawakkil, to request Portuguese and Spanish aid. Philip II, another of Sebastian's uncles, declined, as he was interested in maintaining some sort of peace with the Turks in the Mediterranean while he attended to the Dutch Rebellion. Nonetheless, Sebastian seized the

³ *Jornada de África del Rey D. Sebastião Escrita por un Homem Africano. Monumento Verdico Das cousas que passaram em África quando El Rey Dom Sebastião de Portugal a ela veio...* (Lisbon: Livro Abierto, 2004), 15. This manuscript is in the Biblioteca da Academia das Ciencias de Lisboa, mss vermelhos no. 248.

⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), 2 vols, vol. 2, p. 1178. José Miguel Martínez Torrejón has shown that Sebastian authorized the writing of at least one epic poem comparing the upcoming military encounter to Lepanto: "Vispera de la Batalla. El hervidero manuscrito portugués ante la invasión de Marruecos." *Românica* no. 18 (2009), 195–216. See also Andrew C. Hess, "The Battle of Lepanto and Its Place in Mediterranean History," *Past and Present*, no. 57 (Nov. 1972), 53-73.

opportunity, armed only with the approval of Pope Gregory XIII, obviously not a secular ruler, who told him the North African adventure, the likes of which had not been seen for many decades, would be worthy of Sebastian's other grandfather, Charles V.⁵ Two years later, in the summer of 1578, Sebastian took an unwieldy mass of troops, including most of the Portuguese nobility, down the coast of Morocco and then commenced an insane inland march. On August 4, he and thousands of his compatriots were slaughtered, as the eventual Moroccan victor had warned him would happen. Depending on the source, the battle took from three to six hours. As a result of this tragic foolishness, Portugal had no real king. Sebastian's great-uncle occupied the throne for two years as a caretaker, but once he died, Spain annexed Portugal. Thus the young king's hubris cost Portugal its independence. It is a teleological account, a story whose end is known at the beginning.

Subsequent stories of the slain king rising again, which he did four times in the following twenty years, all began with this battle as their first chapter. There was something about it, the great expectations amid severe warnings followed by utter defeat, that rang true and familiar and that made it possible to construct all the subsequent tales. These chronicles amounted to a sort of poetic historiography that could be set alongside the tradition of epic or tragic poetry or, more obviously, alongside Thucydides. They became stories, severed from the events themselves, and that transformation made them especially meaningful and useful. So the Battle of Alcazarquivir provides a good opportunity to consider history and literature and the meeting of their discourses to see if we might talk about what David Quint has called a narrative teleology of disaster.⁶

In what follows I highlight five of the most inevitable features of the chronicles. These accounts were mixtures, almost scrapbooks, of documents, letters, descriptions, and didactic opinions, most of them probably copied from

⁵ Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra and Enrique García Hernán, "La muerte de D. Sebastián de Portugal y el mundo mediterráneo de finales del siglo XVI," *Hispania*, vol. 54:187 (May-August 1994): 447-65, 451. María José Rodríguez Salgado makes the important point that Charles V as Holy Roman emperor was intent upon wresting away imperial trappings from the papacy and associating them more closely with his own dynasty. See M. J. Rodríguez Salgado, "Christians, Civilized and Spanish: Multiple Identities in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, vol. 8 (1998): 233-51, 239. Elsewhere she helpfully analyzes the term *crucada* during the reign of Charles V with regard to North Africa and the Turks: "La cruzada sin cruzado: Carlos V y el Turco a principios de su reinado," in *Archivo Storico per le Province Napoletane* (Naples: Società Napoletana di Storia Patria, 2001), 201-37. In general, on Charles V's and Philip II's attitudes toward conflict in North Africa see her *The Changing Face of Empire: Charles V, Philip II and Habsburg Authority, 1551-1559* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁶ David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 45.

each other in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Virtually all were published and read outside Portugal.

First were the **omens**. There were dreadful calamities in the months when Sebastian prepared his campaign — comets, pestilence, and fires — what one writer said were “greater and more frequent mutations and strange events than had been seen in many centuries.”⁷ A comet (“*hum fatal cometa*,” according to one account⁸) appeared in November 1577 and lingered for two months, though comets could be good news or bad. Sebastian supposedly said, using a clever play on words most assuredly not his, that this comet was telling him to move ahead (*acometa, acometa*) with his plans.⁹ The comet was “*espantoso y terrible*,” according to another writer, about which there were “many judgments and opinions, with some saying that the comet was a sure announcement of the calamities and ruin that would later befall that kingdom. But none of this was enough to sway the unfortunate King don Sebastian from his objective and campaign.”¹⁰ Chroniclers benefited from hindsight when interpreting the omens, but a good ruler should be able to distinguish them. Montezuma was a great ruler but also a doomed one, and Bernardino de Sahagún’s chronicle of the conquest of Mexico, which circulated widely as the Alcazarquivir accounts were being written, begins with a list of the fantastic and inexplicable signs and omens that had preceded the Spaniards’ arrival. Montezuma repeatedly consulted with aides and sorcerors as the Spaniards approached, an indication of good kingship, but evidently they misjudged the signs.¹¹ In contrast, another king, Ulysses, who according to Luis Vaz de Camões had founded Lisbon — and, of course, destroyed Troy, which appears frequently in Alcazarquivir chronicles — was a good reader (and user) of signs.

The actual departure of Sebastian’s fleet was a sort of theater of foreshadowing, recalling Camões’s *Lusiads*, which Sebastian’s chroniclers were sure to have read. In the fourth canto of the epic, an “honorable” old man in the port delivers a ten-verse rant on vanity and hubris just as Vasco de Gama’s ships are setting off. “What new disasters dost thou now prepare/ Against these

⁷ Sebastian de Mesa, *Iornada de Africa por el Rey Don Sebastian: y union del reyno de Portugal a la corona de Castilla*. (Barcelona: Pedro Lacavallería, 1630), 48.

⁸ *Crónicas del rey Dom Sebastião, a primeira escripta pello seu confessor e el segundo pello P. Amador Rebello ...* Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. UCB banc, Fernán Nuñez col., vol. 147 [manuscript: Lisbon 1760], fol. 149.

⁹ Baltasar Gracián, *Agudeza y Arte de Ingenio*, ed. Evaristo Correa Calderón (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1969), 1:190-91.

¹⁰ Fernando de Goes Laureiro, *Breve Summa y Relacion de las Vidas y Hechos de los Reyes de Portugal ...* (Mantua, 1595), 82–84.

¹¹ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Conquest of New Spain, 1585 Revision*, trans. Howard F. Cline (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 31–33.

kingdoms and against their seed?” he shrieks.¹² Similarly, the Turks whom don John had so famously defeated also had to endure a harbor rant, at least according to the poet Pompeo Arnolfini in his poem memorializing the Battle of Lepanto: “Nereus, watching them from the barren shore, uttered these prophetic words: ‘Turn back, you wretched men.’” The Turks could not possibly defeat don John, blessed by his late father, the Holy Roman Emperor, Nereus warned: “‘His hair shines golden on his shoulders, his temples glisten like gold, and golden down only just covers his cheeks. Just so, I remember, Achilles once stood at the walls of Troy and soaked the ground three times with Hector’s blood.’ The old man finished speaking, then sank into the vast depths and sought the choruses of Tritons and Nereids.”¹³

Among the equivalent disruptions in Sebastian’s case were a misfired gun from a ship still in port, killing a sailor,¹⁴ and the careless placement of the expedition’s flag with the image of the crucified Christ and the royal coat of arms upside down.¹⁵ One rightfully could have detected “*muito adverso prognóstico*,”

¹² *The Lusíads*, trans. Leonard Bacon (New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1950). The work was translated into Spanish in 1580, the year Portugal was annexed. For more on the “epic curse” see Quint, *Epic and Empire*, ch. 3.

¹³ Cited in *The Battle of Lepanto*, ed. and trans. by Elizabeth R. Wright, Sarah Spence, and Andrew Lemons (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2014), 179–81. Here we see the conflation of Achilles, the heroic victor, and Hector, the noble, vanquished Trojan whose city would give rise to Rome; one of the descendants of Rome was, precisely don John. Both sides of the epic Trojan battle, and, perhaps also, both sides of the royal warrior are thus united.

¹⁴ Gerolamo Franchi di Conestaggio, *The Historie of the Uniting of the Kingdom of Portugall to the Crowne of Castill...* (London, 1600), 29. The best-selling book by Conestaggio, who was in Lisbon in 1578–82 working for Genoa, was published in Italian in 1589, then French, English, German, Latin, and Spanish, the latter in 1610. It was not to the liking of Philip II, who at first ordered the destruction of all copies; then he considered commissioning an amended edition; finally, he recruited others “to tell the truth about us.” On this see Geoffrey Parker, *Felipe II, La biografía definitiva* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2010), 975. Portuguese writers responded to Conestaggio’s allegations of Portuguese cowardice with direct replies; see for example the eyewitness account, Jeronymo de Mendonça, *A jornada d’Africa. Resposta a Jeronymo Franqui e a outros...* (1607), ed. F. María Rodrigues (Porto, 1878), who in his prologue refers to Conestaggio’s attempt to “*aniquilar e destruir a honra d’este reino*” (p. vii); and that by Goes Laureiro, *Breve Summa y Relacion*. After the battle Goes Laureiro became an abbot in Porto and later went to Rome; he dedicated his account, written in Spanish, to the Duke of Mantua. Many contemporaries believed and historians say that Conestaggio’s widely copied book was written at least in part by Juan de Silva, one of Philip II’s closest aides and ambassador to Portugal, who, after months of trying to dissuade Sebastian, was badly wounded at Alcazarquivir and had reason to be bitter.

¹⁵ Reported in *Crónicas del Rey Dom Sebastião ...* fol. 149, and many other sources.

in the words of someone later captured at the battle.¹⁶ The Athenian crew had set off “for the most part ignorant of the size of [Sicily] and of the numbers of its inhabitants...”; the same had been said for the men on board Sebastian’s ships in 1574, who did not know where they were going, or why, or what awaited them.¹⁷ This time probably was not much different. (Not knowing where they were going perhaps signals that this story had no good or proper end.) The departure was “so sad,” one chronicle reported, “that it pointed to the unhappy turn of events, and nowhere among all the different sorts of people who embarked was there a single man who laughed or had a happy face, unlike what usually happens at the start of a war. Rather, as if guessing the disaster that awaited them, they suffered at being taken against their will. Throughout the port there was a heavy silence, and in all the time those ships sat there not once did one hear a trumpet or a fife.”¹⁸ The whole kingdom was weeping, wrote another chronicler.¹⁹ And once the ships actually got moving, things only got worse, as Sebastian asked a musician to sing a tune and the man responded with a performance of “Ayer fuiste rey de Hespaña,” commemorating Rodrigo, the last of the Spanish Visigothic kings, whose humiliating defeat had ushered in eight hundred years of Muslim occupation.²⁰ In short, in the words of the Genoese chronicler Girolamo Franchi di Conestaggio, “if we shall give credite to signes as the ancients did, these seemed very ominous.”²¹

Second, all the chronicles point to **good advice that went unheeded**. For Conestaggio, “there was neither reason nor example could prevail against the king’s opinion.”²² Another account agreed that “with youthful brio, he wished to

¹⁶ Anonymous, *Crónica do Xarife Mulei Mahamet e d’el-rey D. Sebastião, 1573–1578*, ed., Francisco de Sales de Mascarenhas Loureiro (Odivelas: Heuris, 1987.) [Taken from BN Paris, ms 41, series 2422] The author, an aide to the prior of Crato, the leading pretender to the Portuguese throne after the annexation, wrote this angry and critical account in Fez while a captive, according to the editor.

¹⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), VI:1, 409; Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, *Historia de Felipe II, Rey de España*, ed. José Martínez Millán and Carlos Javier de Carlos Morales, 4 vols. (Salamanca: Junta de Castilla y León, 1998), 2:756.

¹⁸ *Historia de Portugal desde el tiempo del Rey Don Sebastián...* British Library [hereafter BL], Egerton, 522, fol. 26. The bibliographer Pascual de Gayangos noted in the BL catalog that this chronicle is by “Juan de Villegas,” but in many places it is obviously a rewritten or verbatim copy of Conestaggio, in this case p. 29; it also closely resembles Fr. Antonio San Román de Ribadeneira, *Jornada y muerte del rey Don Sebastián de Portugal, sacada de las obras del Franchi, ciudadano de Genova, y de otros muchos papeles auténticos* (Valladolid, 1603).

¹⁹ *Jornada de África del Rey D. Sebastião Escrita por un Homem Africano*, 16.

²⁰ *Crónicas del Rey Dom Sebastião ...* fol. 149. The anecdote is widely reported.

²¹ Conestaggio, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

fight against the opinions of the prudent.”²³ Philip II, his ambassadors, sensible courtiers, and anonymous writers of manuscript *avisos* all counseled Sebastian to stay home, reminding him that he had no heir and little money and that imperialism was a risky business.²⁴ With hindsight, chronicles and subsequent dramatic and fictional accounts pointed to Sebastian’s dangerous reliance first on his tutors and later on his sycophant friends who would not talk truth to power. One of the nicer examples of good advice falling on deaf ears came in an early seventeenth-century play by Luis Vélez de Guevara, which is not a chronicle but did incorporate many of the exact same materials that chronicles did. Its second act takes place in the great monastery town of Guadalupe, on the Spanish side of the border, where Philip II and Sebastian met in December 1576 to sort out the particulars of the Moroccan adventure. The royal gathering was widely written about, universally serving as a preface to disaster. In the play by Vélez de Guevara, Sebastian wanders around, for some reason disguised as a commoner, and encounters a nobody named Baquero with whom he strikes up a conversation. Tell the king, Baquero says, “that this campaign he wants in Africa is crazy and that the Moors have neither hurt nor insulted him.” Tell him to look at the omens, he says. Tell him to give us an heir.²⁵

The inverse of not taking good advice is listening when one shouldn’t. Sebastian is generally reported as having believed Muhammad’s inflated descriptions of his army, despite good information to the contrary from spies.²⁶ He also believed the irresponsible flatterers who surrounded him. One of Philip II’s official chroniclers, Antonio de Herrera, wrote, “the great lords who could have forced him [to see reason] did not dare contradict his will in any manner, rather they magnified his thoughts, showing how unfortunate is the Prince from whom the truth is silenced.”²⁷ Conestaggio said much the same: A wise ruler

²³ Francisco de la Penuela, *Notables suzessos del mundo...* Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, UCB banc 143, Fernán Nuñez col., vol. 72, fol. 199 [early 17th-century manuscript].

²⁴ José Miguel Martínez Torrejón, “Víspera de la Batalla.”

²⁵ “...es jornada loca/ esta que en África yntenta, /pues los moros no le an echo/ ningún agrabio, ni afrenta.” Luis Vélez de Guevara. *Comedia famosa del Rey Don Sebastián*. ed. Werner Herzog. (Madrid: Anejos del Boletín de la Real Academia Española, 1972), 105, lines 1410–14.

²⁶ Nieto, 440; Anonymous, “Los ytenes de Portugal” [or] “Respuesta que se hizo a una carta de un abbad de la Vera,” 480. This latter document can be found in many locations: RAH Salazar y Castro K-19, fols. 7–12; RAH Salazar y Castro N-454, fols. 17–23; in Portuguese in RAH Salazar y Castro K-61, also in António Sérgio, ed., *O Desejado: Depoimentos de contemporaneos de D. Sebastião sobre este mesmo rei e sua jornada de Africa* (Paris: Librairias Aillaud e Bertrand, 1924); and BL Add. 20.935, fols. 27–36v. Bunes Ibarra and García Hernán, “La muerte de D. Sebastian,” 461, fn46, cite (and transcribe, p. 463) the version at the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome, ms. 2262, fols. 42–48.

²⁷ Antonio de Herrera, *Segunda parte de la historia general del mundo, de XV años del tiempo del Sr. Rey D. Felipe II el Prudente...* (Valladolid, 1606), vol. 1, 156.

should not only solicit wisdom, he should be sufficiently discerning to detect falsehoods.²⁸ Once again, with Sebastian this was not the case.

The most important good advice Sebastian received and ignored came from the ruler of Morocco, Muley 'Abd-al Malik, whose grace and intelligence was acknowledged by many, including Cervantes. He was “good and friendly and charitable,” Nieto wrote of the man who had removed Muhammad, his nephew, from power. “In all pursuits he was gifted, and though an infidel was so fond of Christians, and of Spaniards in particular, that I cannot praise him enough.”²⁹ Malik probably wrote three letters to Sebastian: one in late 1577, a second in April 1578, and a third in July, after Sebastian had arrived in Morocco. No originals survive, and it is unclear what the original language was, but versions of the third letter appear in virtually every chronicle, published or manuscript. Malik wrote kindly, as a cultivated uncle might write to an uneducated boy. Already in the first of the three letters he had tried to instruct him in kingship: “I thought to give you this brief account because I know, as a former soldier, that one must first obtain one’s kingdom with reason, not arms,” he said.³⁰ In his third letter, he begged Sebastian to put aside his crazy plan, which was unjust and sure to end badly. “You do not bring one-tenth the number of men I have,” he warned.³¹ But the king did not believe he was outnumbered. Again, like the Athenians who ignored Nicias when he told them how many men awaited them in Sicily, the Portuguese barged onward.

The poet Francisco de Aldana, a confidant of Philip II, was another person whose advice Sebastian ignored, possibly because it served the interests of the king, whose support for his nephew was lukewarm at best. Aldana, “*el divino capitán*,” was killed at the battle, and his presence, his deep experience, and his death are constants in the chronicles.³² Shortly after the battle began, he inevitably is quoted as advising Sebastian to ride among his men and encourage them.³³ He

²⁸ Conestaggio, 30.

²⁹ Nieto 430, 454–55.

³⁰ Diogo Barbosa Machado, *Memorias para a historia de Portugal, que comprehendem o governo del Rei D. Sebastião...* 4 vols (Lisbon: Officina de Joseph António da Sylva, 1736–51), vol. 4, p. 198–99. These volumes include many transcriptions or rewrites of alleged documents, with no sources given.

³¹ Once in Morocco, Sebastian obtained the same information from a renegade and a priest, and also chose to ignore them: Barbosa Machado, *Memorias*, 351.

³² See José Miguel Martínez Torrejón, “Ánimo, valor y miedo. Don Sebastián, Corte Real y Aldana ante Felipe II,” *Peninsula: Revista de Estudios Ibéricos*, no. 2 (2005), 159–70. The anonymous chronicler cited earlier wrote that Aldana had spent six months scouting in North Africa on behalf of the Duke of Alba, “disguised in Jewish clothing.” *Crónica do Xarife Mulei Mahamet*, 139. The account devotes an entire chapter (ch. 19) to Aldana’s ignored advice.

³³ For example, *Papeles referentes al gobierno del Rey Sebastián I de Portugal ...* Biblioteca Nacional [hereafter BN] ms. 12866, fol. 38. This bound volume includes letters, documents, and accounts, probably including a version of Luis de Ojeda’s *Comentario que trata de la infeliz*

had arrived late to the campaign, showing up only on the second day of the inland march and carrying a letter for Sebastian from the Duke of Alba, as noble and experienced (and cruel) a military leader as Spain or any other European nation could offer. “May God grant you success in your campaign and a safe return,” Alba wrote, adding, “It appears you went to Africa without informing me.” The letter was a thinly disguised scolding, with military counsel and faint wishes for success, and Sebastian ignored it, as he had previously ignored similar advice from an equally high-ranking aristocrat, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, who met the king in Cádiz as the fleet sailed south.³⁴

Aldana also brought Sebastian the helmet and the white silk garment embroidered with gold that Charles V had worn when he conquered Tunis.³⁵ Here it is worthwhile to briefly consider past North African adventures, which provided both lessons and warnings in 1578. In 1535, when Charles V went to Tunis (over the opposition of some aides and the Cortes), he was the victorious hero; six years later he repeated the gesture and suffered humiliating defeat at Algiers.³⁶ So perhaps he would have understood his grandson’s insistence on defending (or reclaiming) territories captured in North Africa by Hapsburg and Avis ancestors; no less than Isabel *la Católica* in her will had urged continued defense and conquest of North Africa. María José Rodríguez Salgado has written that the Mediterranean during the sixteenth century “remained the preferred setting for tales and legends demonstrating the Spaniard’s particular blend of ideological purity and bravery.”³⁷ The setting of the Battle of Alcazarquivir itself thus signified the continuation of a long crusading tradition with warrior kings as protagonists, and the chronicles would have echoed and evoked familiar tales. Yet the familiarity was also the result of recent news; the Turks recaptured Tunis in 1574 and it never again reverted to Christian hands.

jornada que el Rey D. Sebastian hizo en la Berberia; Ojeda, a Spanish captain, was at the battle, according to Queiroz Velloso: *Estudos*, 141–142.

³⁴ Alba’s letter, dated 22 July 1578, is reproduced in several accounts; see for example, Real Academia de Historia [hereafter RAH], *Jesuitas*, vol. 188, “Floreto de anécdotas y noticias diversas que recopiló un fraile dominico residente en Sevilla...” fol. 177. On Medina Sidonia see Conestaggio, 30.

³⁵ Herrera, *Segunda Parte de la Historia General...*, 339; Penuela, fol. 200v.

³⁶ See Daniel Nordman, *Tempêt sur Alger. L’expédition de Charles Quint en 1541* (Paris: Editions Bouchene, 2011).

³⁷ Rodríguez Salgado, “Christians, Civilized and Spanish,” 242. In explaining why Charles V left the Empire in 1541 to lead the Algiers expedition when he knew he might lose reputation, Rodríguez Salgado elsewhere writes, “It is also likely that Charles V was once again scratching the crusade itch.” See “¿Carolus africanus?: el Emperador y el Turco,” in *Carlos V y la quiebra del humanismo político en Europa (1530–1558)*, vol. 1, ed. José Martínez Millán (Madrid: Sociedad estatal para la conmemoración de los centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 2001), 487–531, 517.

Along with Charles V's accoutrements, symbols of what Frances Yates called the phantom empire, Sebastian took with him a gold crown with which to proclaim himself emperor of Morocco.³⁸ No reader would have missed the bitter irony, the contrast between the great emperor, who like all Holy Roman emperors claimed descent from Troy, and his deficient descendent.³⁹ Malik himself, who knew everything, was aware of Sebastian's wish to emulate his grandfather: "They tell me that you are bringing his banner with you and that you plan to crown yourself emperor of my kingdom," he wrote. "Let us meet in a place where you are safe and you can give me your banner and I promise I will fly it from the highest walls of my cities to confirm you are emperor, as they say you wish to be; anything to avoid your perdition, which otherwise is certain."⁴⁰

Third, the chronicles of Alcazarquivir generally contain **speeches by Sebastian and his noblemen on the eve of battle**. This is an extension of the trope of counsel to the king, as the speeches by his men were, essentially, advice. Like the Athenians, the men debated which route to take. There were several gatherings of noblemen reported, both while they were still on the coast ("having spent three useless weeks camped outside the walls of Asilah," in the words of the chronicler who would later be captured⁴¹) and later when the battle was finally about to begin. At the former, while the more sensible noblemen argued for staying along the coast, as Philip II had instructed his nephew to do, the king favored the more dangerous inland march. The debates show us, literally, the road not taken, they let audiences construct what might have happened. The form is also well suited to early modern Spain's litigious, case-based reasoning, with its on the one hand, but, then again, on the other. There were similar speeches at Lepanto, and the tradition was repeated at Alcazarquivir, perhaps to emphasize how anachronistic the undertaking was.⁴² Conestaggio even transcribed a long speech by Malik on the eve of battle; interestingly, he said nothing about any speech by Sebastian.⁴³ The Lepanto speeches often alluded to past military

³⁸ Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 1–2. The crown appears in at least two accounts: Herrera, 336: "he so desired the African empire that he took a Crown to crown himself and other insignias for that same purpose"; and "Los ytenes."

³⁹ Marie Tanner. *The Last Descendant of Aeneas: The Hapsburgs and the Mythic Image of the Emperor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁴⁰ Malik's third letter, which in Spanish generally begins with the words "*un solo dios sea alabado*," appears in many bound collections in the BN (Madrid), RAH, BL, Hispanic Society of America, and other sites, along with published chronicles. Here I cite from BL Eg. 357, no. 7, fols. 92–95.

⁴¹ *Crónica do Xarife Mulei*, 125.

⁴² Quint, *Epic and Empire*, ch. 4; see also Elizabeth R. Wright, "Narrating the Ineffable Lepanto: The *Austrias Carmen* of Joannes Latinus (Juan Latino)," *Hispanic Review* 77:1 (Winter 2009): 71–95.

⁴³ Conestaggio, 43–44.

adventures by don John, that “invincible [and illegitimate] child of an unconquered father.”⁴⁴ Sebastian’s uncle stands high on the deck of his ship and orates, shouting over the waves, reminding his men of their lineage, inspiring them to glory. It is, of course, unlikely the exemplary speeches at Lepanto or Alcazarquivir took place at all, or in the manner described, but they are in the chronicles for a reason. They show us who was right, who was cowardly, who was reckless, who was there. And being there, being mentioned, became important later on, when surviving members of the Portuguese nobility took up arms to oppose Spain’s annexation.

Unlike don John, Sebastian was not the child of an unconquered father, and in fact he was a posthumous child who never knew his father. There was a gap in the imperial genealogy, in that chain that stretched back to Troy. Yet, as if on St. Crispin’s Day, he stood before his men on the eve of battle and told them, “today you may be happy, because you are opening the doors to that just and holy undertaking that my ancestors so wished for and aspired to.”⁴⁵ Some of his men voted against marching inland and for sticking to the original plan; the king ignored them. Four days later, marching in the terrible heat, with the troops dying of hunger and thirst and carrying virtually everything on their backs, the noblemen again pleaded with the king to turn back or at least move the army to a more protected site. Again he ignored them. So they went to the wrong place, another narrative device telling us this story does not work. In the words of the anonymous Portuguese eyewitness who later was captured, the king’s refusal to take advice was “something dreadful [*aborrecível*] in kings, because vassals, especially noblemen, cannot live contentedly when they are ruled harshly.”⁴⁶

In a similar and well-known example across the ocean, no one went to a more wrong place in the sixteenth century than Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who made an eight-year, transcontinental detour in America thanks largely to the inept leadership of Panfilo de Narvaez. Cabeza de Vaca’s widely-read (including by Philip II⁴⁷) account of his journey of 1527–28 from Florida to the west coast of Mexico points many times to meetings called by Narvaez at which he requested

⁴⁴ Wright, et al., *The Battle of Lepanto*, 183–85, here citing Pompeo Arnolfini.

⁴⁵ Juan Bautista de Morales, natural de Montilla. *Jornada de Africa del Rey Don Sebastian de Portugal* (Seville, 1622), fol. 38. [Also published in *Tres relaciones históricas: Gibraltar, Los Xerves, Alcazarquivir, 1540, 1560, 1578*, Colección de libros españoles raros o curiosos, vol. 19. (Madrid, 1889), 289–402.] In his prologue, Morales, a printer, says he interviewed soldiers and that one of his objectives was to praise one of his townsmen who was at the battle.

⁴⁶ “...coisa muito aborrecível nos reis, porque os vassallos não podiam viver contentes, principalmente os nobres, quando se vêem senhoreados em muita sujeição...” *Crónica do Xarife*, 80.

⁴⁷ Richard Kagan, *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 102, citing José Luis Gonzalo Sánchez-Molero.

advice he then ignored. Like Sebastian, he was counseled not to march inland but rather remain on the coast. Like Sebastian's voyage, which started with mishaps and accidents, Narvaez's ships were ruined practically before they set sail, and they clearly were off course from the start. The culmination of bad government in Florida came when "each boat was on its own, lost from the others" and Narvaez abandoned any pretence of rule: "...each one should do what best seemed to him the way to save his life, [and] this was [what] he intended to do. And having said this, he sailed on a way from us..." and was never seen again.⁴⁸ As it happened, "the last known, documented public act of his [Cabeza de Vaca's] life was his 1559 ransom of a distant relative ...who was being held captive by the king of Algiers after being captured in an expedition against the Ottoman Turk."⁴⁹ Perhaps the relative was seized during the failed expedition to Algiers by Charles V, to whom Cabeza de Vaca had dedicated and addressed his *relación*, published in 1542 and again in 1555. Or perhaps not, but in any case the scenes of imperial misjudgment are superimposed.

Before Narvaez mismanaged the Florida expedition, in 1520 he had tried to thwart Hernán Cortés in what would ultimately be one of Spain's greatest triumphs, the conquest of Mexico. Cortés, too, was a great speechifier, or least he was remembered as such by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of his men, who said he "never said or did anything [important] without first asking advice and acting in concert with us."⁵⁰ Now *that* is how one conquers.

Fourth, and returning to Alcazarquivir, **the death of Sebastian** is a set piece in all the chronicles.⁵¹ The same elements are always present: blinding dust, deafening noise, the king's uncharacteristic bravery (the topos of the vanquished dying bravely), misread signs, his best friend dying beside him, general pandemonium. A few hours into the battle, the king suddenly found himself alone, and his men could not help him. Likewise with the Athenians in Syracuse harbor who "did not know where to turn. ... everything in front of them was now in disorder, and the noise made it difficult to tell who was who. ... The Athenians were trying to find each other and taking all who came towards them to be enemies, even though they might be people on their own side, now escaping back again. By constantly asking for the watchword, which was the only way they had of recognizing each other, they caused much confusion among themselves by all asking for it at once, and at the same time revealed it to the enemy..."⁵² In

⁴⁸ Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Chronicle of the Narvaez Expedition*, ed. Ilan Stavans, trans. David Frye (New York: Norton, 2013), 26–27.

⁴⁹ Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca*, ed. and trans. by Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 4–5.

⁵⁰ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, ed. David Carrasco (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 103.

⁵¹ For example, *Papeles referentes*, San Román, Connestaggio, Morales, Goes Laurerio.

⁵² Thucydides, VII: 44, 506–507.

Morocco, the blind and murderous chaos, the culmination of the king's brief and quite pointless life, was the high point, though not the end point, of the narratives. No one on the battlefield saw anything or read anything correctly, a seemingly unanimous interpretation of Portugal's attempt to recover the shreds of its North African empire. The narrative collapses. Standard-bearers were shot down, leaving the men no signs to follow to protect their king. Conestaggio's version and the two others nearly identical to it say the king's men were looking for him in order to assist him, "but the standard carried in front, by which he was recognized, had fallen to the ground after the carrier was killed, and they were fooled by a nearly identical one carried by don Duarte de Meneses, so they followed him instead, with which the King was lost..."⁵³ Some said the Portuguese troops believed Sebastian had been taken prisoner or was someplace else, so no one bothered to protect him. The Moroccans may also have thought he had been taken or killed. (So Sebastian was alive and his enemies thought he was dead; as it happened, Malik was dead, but the Christians thought he was alive.) Three times Sebastian's horse was shot from under him, and three times he grabbed another one. Proving, at least, that he was brave, he continued on, riding in circles, trying to gather his men.

Finally, the last misread sign, which appears in all accounts: Suddenly, the Moors realized who this mad horseman really was. Then the king, or his best friend, or someone else, "put a handkerchief on the point of his sword as a sign of peace, and rode toward the Moors like an ambassador, but the barbarians captured him." According to Nieto, the enemy soldiers were not Berbers but Arabs, who did not properly understand the sign of peace.⁵⁴ Sebastian was stabbed many times and his mutilated body was abandoned on the field. At least two accounts describe his killers yanking off the helmet, though whether it was, in the end, his grandfather's is not stated.⁵⁵ Like the *yelmo de Mambrino* that Don Quixote filched from the barber, the helmet turned out not to grant invulnerability after all.

And, fifth, we have **the fate of Sebastian's body**, the element of the story that gave birth to the eventual impostors. Two days after the battle, the sharif told Sebastian's servant he could win his freedom by identifying the royal cadaver, certainly an incentive (it was said) to point out the first plausible candidate among the thousands of decomposing bodies and body parts piled and scattered on the battlefield. (Miguel Leitão de Andrade, a young Portuguese churchman and eyewitness chronicler, also viewed the body, a distinction he used to bolster the

⁵³ Conestaggio, 50; San Román, 160; BL Eg. 522, fol. 47.

⁵⁴ Nieto, 451; Conestaggio, 50–51; Penuelo, fols. 199–205v; San Román, 157–66; Morales, 49–55. On Sebastian's death in general see Bunes Ibarra and García Hernan, "La muerte de D. Sebastián."

⁵⁵ *Papeles referentes* fol. 68; Nieto, 451.

credibility of his account.⁵⁶) The remains had been stripped of clothing. Like Christ's body, some said, this one bore five gashes, though not from arrows like those suffered by Sebastian's beloved and martyred namesake. The broken corpse was carried on the back of a horse to a tent, now the final resting place of three kings: Malik, Sebastian, and Muhammad, who had drowned as he tried to escape and whose body later was flayed, salted, stuffed, and displayed to show what happens to those who betray their crown. Sebastian again was identified by a group of captive comrades who "carefully viewed" the body, in Conestaggio's words.⁵⁷ Unlike Achilles, who did not want to relinquish Hector's body, the Moroccans were perfectly happy to give up Sebastian's, but there was a price; Malik's brother Ahmad al-Mansur regarded the Portuguese offer of ten thousand ducats insulting, so Sebastian was buried with honors in Alcazarquivir on August 7. Again, two Portuguese were asked to identify the body, but by then it was completely unrecognizable.

Like Alexander the Great, writers concluded, Sebastian "had the virtues of nature and the vices of fortune."⁵⁸ And if Alexander was not a sufficiently great military model, there was always Hannibal, who also had known defeat: Sebastian de Mesa's account points out that Sebastian was not exactly the first monarch to lose a battle: "If we look back, we can see that many of those glorious Captains and great Emperors waged campaigns in which they lost credit, reputation, and honor ... Hannibal is a good example of that."⁵⁹

When the news reached Lisbon, the capital city "became Troy," in the words of at least one account, Troy being "the model of all doomed epic cities."⁶⁰ But unlike Troy, which at least retained its nobility in defeat, Portugal was simply vanquished, or so it seemed to the distressed writers who described scenes of wailing women and orphans in the years following.

The chronicles of this tragedy are a confusing lot, many of them repetitions, reworkings, translations, and summaries. Poetic and dramatic works

⁵⁶ Miguel Leitão de Andrade. *Miscellânea do Sítio de Nossa Senhora da Luz do Pedrogão Grande* (Lisbon: Matheus Pinheiro, 1629). I am indebted here to Elizabeth Spragins's paper, "Accessing the Dead at the Battle of al-Qasr al-Kabir," delivered at the Renaissance Society of America, March 2014. Leitão's chronicle appears in Sérgio, ed., *O Desejado*.

⁵⁷ Conestaggio, 51; San Román, 162; the latter said Sebastian had seven wounds.

⁵⁸ BL Eg. 522, fol. 47; the line in the English version of Conestaggio (p. 51) is "Nature had given him virtue, and Fortune vices." Mesa (fol. 82r) writes, "*naturaleza le avia prohijado [sic] sus virtudes y la fortuna los vicios, defectos y faltas de su crianza y educación...*" Alexander, as it happens, took on the mantle of Achilles, to whom don John of Austria was so explicitly compared earlier; see Quint, *Epic and Empire*, Introduction.

⁵⁹ Mesa, 82v-83r.

⁶⁰ "Los ytenes"; Quint, *Epic and Empire*, 99 and 381n1, where he refers to a 1610 account of the destruction of Acoma proclaiming, "Aqui fue Troia."

also appeared quickly, and the subject of the battle and then the miraculous second comings of the king occupied writers through the nineteenth century. Accounts — three or more of them by eyewitnesses — appeared almost immediately after the battle. Most were Spanish or from elsewhere in Europe, but in general they were not anti-Portuguese. Portugal was not the only nation to have suffered bitter defeats abroad. Indeed, Spain had had its own ill-advised North African adventure only twenty years earlier, when the Count of Alcaudete oversaw the military disaster at Mostaganem (Algeria) in 1558.⁶¹ The chronicles are concerned less with nation than they are with kingship and with history. Taken together, they are a lesson on how not to secure an empire.

Sebastian's story was historiographically significant because of how it was told. Despite the inauspicious scene in Lisbon's harbor when the ships set off, many writers pointed to the sharp and painful contrast between the great hopes and the crushing defeat; like the Athenians, "they remembered the splendour and the pride of their setting out and saw how mean and abject was the conclusion."⁶² Thus one account describes Sebastian just before the battle: "with a happy face, unsuspecting of fortune's cruelty and the great defeat awaiting him, he turned to his nearby captains and soldiers and encouraged them."⁶³ Audiences already knew what happened, but the repetitive, familiar, modular, trope-laden accounts were reminders of how events could unfold and of how nations and empires and monarchies should and should not behave. They are sad stories. Sebastian was young and badly educated, and his campaign, though unwise, was aimed at undoing John III's dishonorable withdrawal from North Africa. So punishment was unjust; some said Sebastian died for the faith. At the same time, the accounts also are an implicit salute to Malik, who defeated the Christians. The chronicles and their versions also underwent transformations, with new texts appearing and different images being deployed, to some degree a reflection of changed political circumstances.⁶⁴ But overall, their form and their parts could be understood as signifying the empire itself. The interpolation of letters and premonitions enabled writers to speed up or alter the chronology, overlaying texts and times, interrupting the narrative of an inevitable chain of events with, essentially, spoilers. Time was malleable. Parts of the chronicles were written as if before the

⁶¹ In José Ignacio Fortea Pérez's introduction to Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, *Obras Completas*, vol. 4, *Historia de Felipe II, Rey de España* (Pozoblanco, 1998), ix–lxxx, see his references to an eyewitness account by a soldier, Diego Cruzado, "Del conde de Alcaudete..." [BN ms. 20476, fols 98r–99bis].

⁶² Thucydides, VII: 75, p. 528. Paul Fussell famously wrote about the same phenomenon and World War I: *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁶³ Penuela, fol. 200v.

⁶⁴ José Miguel Martínez Torrejón, "Silencios, sigilios y sordinas: Alcazarquivir visto desde el Escorial," in *A Construção do Outro: Espanha e Portugal frente a frente*, ed. Tobias Brandenberger, Elizabeth Hasse, and Lydia Schmuck (Tübingen: Calepinus Verlag, 2008).

events, as if they were prophetic, reporting predicted results. But unlike with more triumphant epic stories in which victors can, again in Quint's words, "project their present power prophetically into the future and trace its legitimating origins back into the past,"⁶⁵ the time-play in the Alcazarquivir chronicles only sends us back to omens that were not heeded and advice that was not taken.

As these narratives found their way through libraries in the Iberian Peninsula and Europe, there was a debate in Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century about how to write history, about what sort of materials constituted history. Should it be prose or verse, should it include divine matters or only human affairs, how much primary documentation and how much invention was acceptable? Cortés's letters from Mexico, Bernal Díaz del Castillo's description of that conquest, the Cabeza de Vaca saga, the accounts from North Africa, and those from Portuguese India together offered a scrapbook of genres balancing eyewitness testimony, normative treatise, correspondence, and fantasy. And a few decades after the Battle of Alcazarquivir, when its chronicles were still being rewritten, readers could add *Don Quixote* to the pile of narrative models, with its multiplicity of voices and layering of texts, all documenting anachronism.⁶⁶

Like that other great genre of imperial collapse, the Portuguese shipwreck narratives, the Alcazarquivir chronicles leave the door open for redemption, or at least for continuation.⁶⁷ There was no bringing those ships back up, but survivors contributed to the creation of a gripping and metaphoric genre featuring sacrifice, horror, folly, and heroism, all in the context of exploration and conquest.⁶⁸ Likewise, with time, though battles are lost, prisoners of war are ransomed and return home (each with his own version of what happened), wealth is slowly recovered, the real empire turns out to be American, not African, and even the king might rise again. Despite the fractured nature of the chronicles, which pointed to the frustrated and thwarted imperial gesture ending in failure, there are other ways the story can go on, other ways to complete the narrative circle.

⁶⁵ Quint, *Epic and Empire*, 45.

⁶⁶ Susan Byrne, *Law and History in Cervantes' Don Quixote* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

⁶⁷ See Josiah Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and *The Tragic History of the Sea*, ed. and trans. C. R. Boxer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). The shipwrecks referred to took place from 1552 to 1611.

⁶⁸ Jerónimo Corte-Real, whose account of the terrible 1552 shipwreck of Manoel de Sousa Sepulveda and his family and crew was published in 1594 (a disaster recounted by Camões himself in the *Lusiads*), allegedly offered to accompany Sebastian to Morocco, but the king told him he was too old. One dead poet was enough. The story may or not be true but, like the earlier supposed link between Cabeza de Vaca and Algiers, the superimposition of imperial adventures is too good to ignore. (Corte-Real also wrote the *Austriada*, a celebration of don John at Lepanto.)

Let me propose two such forms in which the tragedy of Alcazarquivir might be continued or resolved. The first involves the impostors, the four “false Sebastians.” The first two were hermits in Portugal, the second of whom actually raised an army to try to topple the new Spanish government. The third was a Spaniard, a baker who probably was part of a convoluted plot organized by a Portuguese cleric formerly in the employ of the Portuguese royal family.⁶⁹ The fourth, the “Calabrian charlatan,” appeared in Venice in 1598 and probably was the creature of Portuguese noblemen also anxious to remove Philip II from the Portuguese throne. None was especially plausible. Tragedy might have become farce, but it needed better actors. That said, the tale of Alcazarquivir formed the necessary basis for their tales, all of which began on a battlefield strewn with dead bodies, one of which perhaps was not dead after all.

The second alternative ending, or resolution, also begins there. The deposed Moroccan ruler, Muhammad, who had sought Sebastian’s help in the first place, died at the battle, but his son survived. The son was known as Muley Xequé, and later as Philip of Africa. Philip II moved him to Spain, keeping a close eye on him, and one day the young man had a vision. As one chronicler put it, “After he was in Spain for several years, God touched him, and as he already knew the Castilian language, he said he wanted to be a Christian.”⁷⁰ His baptism was a lavish affair in the Escorial, with Philip II presiding. The king’s foolish nephew Sebastian had died, but Christ could be reborn in the soul of an infidel. Lope de Vega, in fact, chose to tell the story of Alcazarquivir through the story of Philip of Africa, whom he knew personally. Lope’s play “The Tragedy of King Sebastian and the Baptism of the Prince of Morocco” incorporates chunks of text from the well-known and widely translated chronicle by Conestaggio, including the Duke of Alba’s letter to Sebastian on the eve of battle. And some twenty years after Lope’s play was written, or cribbed, when Philip IV announced that the position of court chronicler was vacant, around a dozen individuals expressed interest; among them was none other than Lope de Vega, who did not get the job.⁷¹

A sonnet allegedly by Camões depicts “the great Sebastian” (*o grão Sebastião*) trying to cross the Acheron River to his final resting place. But he is

⁶⁹ Ruth MacKay, *The Baker Who Pretended to be King of Portugal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁷⁰ P. Fr. Jerónimo de Sepúlveda. *Historia de varios sucesos y de las cosas notables que han acaecido en España*, vol. 4 of *Documentos para la historia del Monasterio de San Lorenzo el Real de El Escorial*, ed. Julián Zarco Cuevas (Madrid: Imprenta Helénica, 1924), 148. On Philip of Africa see Jaime Oliver Asín, *Vida de Don Felipe de África, príncipe de Fez y Marruecos (1566–1621)*, ed. Miguel Ángel de Bunes Ibarra and Beatriz Alonso Acero (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2008).

⁷¹ Kagan, *Clio and the Crown*, 8.

blocked in his path by the boatman, who tells him the uninterred cannot enter.⁷² Indeed, the young king's burial was problematic. As we saw, he was first buried at Alcazarquivir itself on 7 August 1578. Later that year, the body was transported to Ceuta, where it was reinterred at the Trinitarian church. In 1582 Philip II (by then Philip I of Portugal), ordered that Sebastian's body be disinterred yet again and taken home, where it was put to rest with proper honors at the great Heronymite monastery in Belém, outside Lisbon. But still the remains of the reckless young man, his unrecognizable body, could not rest. In 1682, by which time Restoration Portugal had a new dynasty, the Braganzas, a grand new tomb was built. "*Si vera est fama*," it read, if the report be true, there Sebastian lay. (And there he lies to this day.) This was a line from Virgil, found both in the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics*, though the doubt in this case refers to the ever-present possibility that Sebastian had survived. So the story comes round, albeit obliquely, to Rome, to that long-ago first step in an epic adventure of imperial conquest that Charles V, who hovers like a ghost over Alcazarquivir, had so nobly continued and that his grandson had, most tragically, botched.

The chronicles of the Battle of Alcazarquivir provided readers with an opportunity to weigh the ingredients of good kingship at a time — the end of the long reign of Philip II and then the shorter one of his young son — when the exercise and modalities of royal power were being debated in public. In retrospect, it was a time when those practices were shifting, as were the practices of writing history. The tropes in the chronicles, the omens, the stirring speeches, the unrecognized signs, the crusade, were taken from past literature just as the battle itself was taken from the past, from a time when such gestures might have made sense. This was a story, a collection of set pieces, whose lessons and importance went beyond Portugal's borders and whose meaning was not confined to its fate as a nation. The historical chronicles of the Battle of Alcazarquivir contain tropes that are also present in mirror books, in harangues and speeches, and possibly in other familiar tales such as martyrdom and captivity narratives. The reader (or listener) recognizes the form, where history meets fiction.⁷³ There are no surprises. There are lessons, examplae, reminders of familiar codes. There are sequences of junctures at which the wise act one way and the rest do something else, but there are points at which even the wise cannot escape the dictates of Fortune or the wrath of God. Implicit in the passage from one generation of heroes to the next is a chain of learned lessons. That chain was severed amid the dismembered bodies on the battlefield at Alcazarquivir, where new stories, both true and false, would commence.

⁷² Luís de Camões, *Selected Sonnets*, ed. and trans. William Baer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 169. The author says the poem is "of somewhat disputed authorship."

⁷³ Hayden White, "Literary Theory and Historical Writing," in his *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1–26.