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Florence, Naples, and Sanlúcar: Descent into Purgatory

But, reader, I would not have you turned from good resolution for hearing how God wills the debt shall be paid. Heed not the form of the pain: think what follows, think that at the worst beyond the great Judgment it cannot go.

– Dante Alighieri, Purgatorio, Canto X, verses 106–11

Initially at least, the Calabrian Charlatan’s incarceration in Florence probably seemed as if it would be much like his spell in Venice. Except for the occasional interrogation he would probably be left alone. Meanwhile others would dispute, make deals, and decide his fate. However, this time was different. Whatever the beginnings, this time the impostor was destined to end up enmeshed in the legal machinery of the Spanish state, a central and full participant in the process. For Spain’s officials this was a welcome turn of events. Instead of facing millenarian yearnings, nationalist sentiments, or vague rumors – amorphous foes who melted away at the first sign of trouble but never fully disappeared – the Spanish could focus on a concrete and captive opponent.

In spite of its many institutional deficiencies and structural weaknesses, the early modern state’s legal processes worked fairly regularly. Lawyers questioned. Witnesses testified. Judges weighed the evidence and pronounced their verdicts. Through it all, the system produced written documents which recorded the proceedings in detail. In the end, early modern trials revealed crimes, unmasked criminals, and discovered accomplices. While they failed to guarantee the culpability of those declared guilty, they generally provided
the state with a salutary tale intended to preserve and promote order. This result was all the more important when, as with Sebastianism in Portugal, the crimes appeared to be communal and individual criminals could not be identified, held accountable, and punished. The supposed Sebastian had fallen into just this sort of legal machinery.

Florentine politics and Spanish diplomacy

For the Calabrian Charlatan’s Portuguese supporters, the news of his capture in Florence must have been a shock. After all, the Grand-Duke of Tuscany – Ferdinando I – was famously anti-Spanish. Unlike his predecessor, Ferdinando pursued a vigorous foreign policy intended to counter Spain’s imperial designs in northern Italy. He worked to end the petty disputes between the remaining independent Italian states that the Spanish had so capably exploited; he stopped his predecessor’s practice of making irredeemable loans to the ever-bankrupt Spanish state; he revoked a long-standing agreement to clear all Florentine alliances with the Spanish king. Ferdinando even went so far as to ally himself with Henri IV of France, providing the French king with financial and political support in his civil war against the Spanish-backed Catholic League. In fact, on 5 October 1600 (only three months before the capture of the Calabrian), the grand-duke’s niece had married Henri, cementing Florentine-French ties. Nonetheless, despite his normally anti-Spanish politics, the grand-duke had the supposed Sebastian arrested.

The apprehension of the Calabrian Charlatan in Florence was probably due to the efforts of Francisco de Vera y Aragón, the Spanish ambassador to Venice. In early December, upon learning of the prisoner’s imminent release, de Vera had alerted the rulers of the surrounding Italian states that Spain would view with great favor anyone who turned the man over. Later, perhaps apprised by his Portuguese informant of the impostor’s intended itinerary, the ambassador wrote to the grand duke requesting assistance. De Vera may even have had the help of the supposed Sebastian’s guide, Fray Crisóstomo da Visitação. According to João de Castro, the Portuguese conspirators suspected that the friar had betrayed his compatriots. Not only had Crisóstomo illicitly taken charge of the purported
Portuguese king and slipped out of Venice, he had not gone directly to Leghorn, nor had he maintained secrecy for long; it was almost as if he were inviting arrest. Worse, Castro claimed, Crisóstomo had literally turned in his king in Florence. Further suggesting the friar’s guilt was his quick release from Florentine custody even though he too had supposedly been arrested. In spite of the conspirators’ suspicions, it seems more likely that the Portuguese friar simply miscalculated, believing that he and his companion were safe in pro-French Tuscany. He had no reason to suspect that Ferdinando would fail to support an anti-Spanish cause. In any case, whoever was ultimately responsible for the Calabrian’s capture the fact remained: the Grand-Duke of Tuscany held someone desperately wanted by Spain.

For Ferdinando the Charlatan’s arrest was a stroke of fortune. Suddenly the grand duke found himself in a position to do Philip III of Spain an important favor at little cost to himself. After all, Portugal was far away – the impostor and his claims were irrelevant to northern Italian politics. Detaining him neither increased nor diminished Spanish power in the adjacent states. But in Florence itself this act made the self-proclaimed imperial master beholden to the former servant. Even if only symbolically, Spanish power was weakened. The grand duke’s order was not a shift in policy: instead it was a subtle, unexpected twist that reaffirmed Florentine independence.

Ignoring the entreaties of João de Castro and his compatriots for an audience, Ferdinando instead focused on an arrangement with Philip. After some three months of discussions the Florentines agreed to hand their captive over to the Spanish. (During this same period the Portuguese scrambled for political support in the courts of northern Europe and spread rumors that the man released in Venice had not been detained in Florence but had arrived in France.) In exchange Ferdinando requested only Spanish “protection for [his] house, state, and children” – implicitly, absolution for his past sins against Spain.

Trapped in the legal machinery of the Spanish state

Absolution was not the fate in store for the Calabrian Charlatan. Tardy French efforts to secure his release and a failed attempt at suicide did nothing to alter Ferdinando’s program. Sometime in late March or early April the Florentines remanded their prisoner
into Spanish custody. And so, on 1 May 1601, the supposed Sebastián, erstwhile king of a captive Portugal, arrived in Naples.\(^\text{13}\) His descent into a Spanish purgatory had begun.

The Calabrian Charlatan was now caught in the machinery of the Spanish state. His story would be examined from every angle and the seemingly endless resources of the state would be invoked to build the case against him. From this point forward our story is not one of conspiracy, rebellion, and incipient nationalism but of patient, relentless efforts to reveal the impostor's true identity, purged of all lies and fabrications.

Shortly after the Calabrian Charlatan arrived in Naples a curious event took place. While this incident only briefly intersected with the case of the supposed Sebastian and only temporarily diverted the Spanish viceroy – Fernando Ruiz de Castro, the Count of Lemos – from his investigation, it helps show part of the context for the impostor's career.\(^\text{14}\) On 6 May a man calling himself António Jorge de Cruz came before the viceroy, apparently at his own request. De Cruz (described by Lemos as tall, dark, his beard speckled by age, and very Ladino) presented himself as an Armenian merchant acting as courier for the Portuguese viceroy of India;\(^\text{15}\) to prove this, de Cruz had in his possession a viceregal dispatch. Upon examination, the packet of letters – although dating back to 1593 – proved genuine; in fact, one letter had been written by a secretary who, eight years later, was working for Lemos in Naples and could identify his own handwriting. Pressed by the count for more details, de Cruz told the following story. Although he had received the dispatch in 1593, various troubles had delayed him and he had departed from (Portuguese) Hormuz for Italy only the year before.\(^\text{16}\) He had traveled through Persia where the king, hearing of his mission, had given him a letter for the King of Spain. (As with the dispatch, de Cruz produced this letter, but Lemos could find no one in Naples who could read it.) Finally, only two months before, he had made his way to Constantinople. From there he had gone through Malta, Palermo, and Messina before arriving in Naples to discharge his duty and deliver the dispatch.

Nonetheless, instead of rewarding the man for his service, Lemos had him detained.\(^\text{17}\) As he wrote in his report to the king, the count suspected that de Cruz was a Turkish spy; after all, the supposed merchant's itinerary from Constantinople to Naples had touched
every location south of the viceregal capital where Spain had galleys. Furthermore, a brief investigation had revealed that seven years earlier de Cruz had delivered a similar dispatch to the then viceroy in Naples, but – apparently – that time had received his reward and gone on his way.\textsuperscript{18} It was at this point, while being escorted to his cell, that the Armenian’s path briefly crossed that of the Calabrian Charlatan. Reportedly de Cruz caught sight of the supposed Sebastian and burst out laughing, claiming to have known the real Sebastian in Lisbon. Unfortunately, although the Count of Lemos noted this incident, he seems not to have pursued any possible connection between the two prisoners.\textsuperscript{19}

This brief encounter between the Armenian and the Calabrian appears inconsequential, ephemeral. Yet, if the Spanish assessments of both men – Turkish spy and royal impostor – were correct, did that burst of laughter reveal more than simple amusement? Had the two men, perhaps in other guises, crossed paths before? We can only speculate; however, as we watch the viceroy unravel the Calabrian’s story and piece together his past, this possibility seems increasingly likely. Juxtaposed with the Armenian, the Calabrian Charlatan seems only one of a multitude of early modern impostors, spies, and swindlers who exploited the inefficiencies of the state and preyed on the gullible. Was the laughter that of one confidence man seeing another’s game gone awry? Was this a glimpse into a world where the players knew each other, boast of their own successes and laughing at another’s failures? Perhaps.

One wonders what role such an underworld might have played in early modern politics. Was these a political stratum of spies, informers, and con-men who trafficked in information of any kind, whether genuine, rumor, or forged? How often, and to what extent, did the state act on the basis of such material without substantiating it with more reliable sources? Were many of the players ensnared by their illusions uncovered, or – perhaps worse – their illusions become reality? As we shall see, the Calabrian Charlatan was certainly trapped in just this way.

From the outset the supposed Sebastian’s initial interview with the Count of Lemos went badly.\textsuperscript{20} Upon seeing his prisoner, the viceroy was shocked to discover that the man bore absolutely no resemblance to the real King Sebastian; in fact, this difference was so striking that the count ordered a portrait made and sent to Philip III in Spain.
Speaking with the man did nothing to dispel the viceroy's conviction that he dealt with a fraud. He noted that the Charlatan spoke Portuguese very badly and would occasionally slip and use a Calabrian word. Furthermore, while the purported King of Portugal knew much general information about his kingdom, when pressed for detail he revealed only his ignorance. Lemos quickly concluded that the Calabrian Charlatan was “a mad-man bereft of reason” and that someone had been filling his head with stories of Sebastian, his African adventure, and his miraculous return. After reaching this conclusion the viceroy confronted the impostor with one fact: that he, the Count of Lemos, knew the real Sebastian, having visited him in Lisbon before the Battle of Alcazar. According to Lemos this revelation left the man dumbfounded. Perhaps playing for time and a chance to think, the Charlatan asked to confess to “a learned person.” Agreeing to the request the count sent for his confessor. However, instead of admitting to any crime the man informed the confessor that he would beg God to reveal his true identity, that he was indeed King Sebastian of Portugal.

With this the formal legal process against the supposed Sebastian began. Since the man was apparently Calabrian, the viceroy sent some officials to Calabria – to the towns of Rossano and Taverna – to search for anyone who might know the prisoner. One way or another, Lemos intended to discover the man’s true identity and figure out who was behind the imposture. However, instead of waiting for news from Calabria the viceroy pressed on. On 8 May he appointed a prosecutor for the case. In addition he found various Portuguese who had known the real Sebastian. The prisoner was shown to these witnesses; each declared him a fraud. Nonetheless, throughout this early stage of the investigation against him, the Calabrian Charlatan persisted in his claims and insisted on signing his name as “Don Sebastian of Portugal.”

So, who was the prisoner? Was he an impostor, as claimed by the Spanish? Or was he Sebastian, as claimed by the exiles? Having the man in their custody certainly gave the Spanish and their contention the upper hand. Logically, however, the two views were at an impasse. After all, both sides could supply – and at various points had supplied – apparently credible witnesses in support of their arguments. Worse, the early modern state simply had no unambiguous means, other than the testimony of such witnesses, to identify a
person. Political realities only complicated the issue. In the question at hand, the Spanish knew perfectly well that their witnesses would appear unreliable to the eyes of the restive Portuguese. Consequently, something more was needed to make their case.

This logical impasse did not last. As a result of the viceroy’s inquiries another man turned up at the viceregal court. He identified the Calabrian Charlatan as one Marco Tulio Catizone, a native of the village of Magisano in the area of Taverna. Furthermore, the man informed the count, Catizone was married to a woman in Messina named Paola Gallardeta. Also, contrary to the viceroy’s belief, the man claimed that the impostor was no simpleton. With this information, Lemos obtained the tool to begin chipping away at the impostor’s façade.

As things turned out Lemos did not need his chisel. When, on the morning of 9 May 1601, he brought Catizone face to face with the man who had identified him, the Charlatan was once again dumb-founded. Obviously, the two men knew each other. The man asked Catizone who had tricked him into making his claims and received in reply only a stutter. At this point the viceroy intervened, promising to spare the Calabrian Charlatan’s life if he confessed. Thereupon the purported King of Portugal threw himself at the Count of Lemos’s feet, begging for mercy. The supposed Sebastian confirmed that he was indeed Marco Tulio Catizone from the village of Magisano, adding that his father was Ipolito Catizone and his mother was Petronia Cortes. Three years before he had left Messina and traveled north, eventually reaching Venice. There people began to tell him that he looked just like Sebastian: during mass one day an Italian soldier (who said that he had fought for Sebastian in Africa) told Catizone “that he was the [Portuguese] King or the Devil in his form,” another person had a portrait of Sebastian and declared that Catizone could be no other. In fact, the more Catizone denied that he was the King of Portugal, the more people insisted that he was: several Portuguese came to him and forcibly kissed his hands; a Venetian noblewoman offered to marry him; some unknown Portuguese gave him money to support himself. Finally, a very old hermit with a long white beard and wearing a brown habit came to Catizone, telling him that God had revealed that he was indeed King Sebastian of Portugal. Marco Tulio Catizone finally gave in. He decided to claim the identity of the long-lost King of Portugal.
Undoubtedly the Count of Lemos did not accept all the details of Catizone’s confession. After all, he had noted that the man from Magisano looked nothing like Sebastian, and there might have found it hard to believe that anyone would have spontaneously identified the man as the King of Portugal. Nonetheless, the confession was a start. To build his case further – and strip away any remaining lies and half-truths – the viceroy despatched an official to Magisano to retrieve the record of Catizone’s baptism and find more people who knew him; he also sent for Catizone’s wife, brother-in-law, and mother-in-law, ordering that they be brought from Messina. In addition to establishing the Calabrian Charlatan’s true identity, the count intended to prove that this was the same man who had been incarcerated in Venice for two years; Lemos was concerned that someone might claim that the Spanish did not have the real purported King of Portugal and that the whole investigation was a charade. Consequently, the viceroy wrote to the Spanish ambassador in Venice, asking him to send witnesses who could identify the Venetians’ former prisoner.\textsuperscript{32} Once all of these details were pinned down and the process completed, the Count of Lemos intended to sentence Marco Tulio Catizone to the galleys for life.\textsuperscript{33} However, as the viceroy informed Philip III, care would be taken to ensure that the rigors of galley life did not result in the supposed Sebastian’s premature death; the count knew well that it might serve the king’s purposes to take the living impostor to Portugal and unmask him there.\textsuperscript{34}

A month later the Count of Lemos was still waiting for the arrival of Catizone’s wife and her family. In the interim, the Duke of Maqueda had obtained two letters – both dated 5 September 1598, written in Italian, and supposedly penned by King Sebastian of Portugal – and sent them to the viceroy.\textsuperscript{35}

The first letter was addressed to Paola Catizone [Gallardeta] in Messina. In this missive, Sebastian asked Signora Catizone not to be angry at her husband’s delayed return, for he served the Portuguese king in a very important matter. Sebastian went on to tell her that he had encountered Marco Tulio at the papal court in Rome and been so impressed that he asked the Calabrian to become his ambassador to the King of Spain. As a consequence of this vital mission Signor Catizone might well be occupied for some time. Nonetheless, Sebastian had heard from her husband and could pass on the news that he was well and, undoubtedly, would finish his task soon. Once this was
done, the king assured her, Marco Tulio would return and be well rewarded, both financially and with an important place in the Portuguese court.\textsuperscript{36}

The second letter – addressed to a nobleman named Raymon Marquet – was written in a similar vein. Here too the King of Portugal told of finding Marco Tulio Catizone in the papal court and appointing him ambassador to Spain. As in the letter to Paola Gallardeta, Sebastian left the details of Catizone’s diplomatic mission sketchy, only hinting as to its nature by briefly recounting how he had not died in Africa and had recently come to Italy in secret. Again, the Portuguese king praised the Calabrian for his exemplary service and promised future rewards.\textsuperscript{37}

Unfortunately we do not know how the Spanish obtained these letters or why they surfaced three years after they apparently had been written. One might suspect Spanish forgeries intended to build the case against Catizone; but that seems unlikely since nothing in the letters identified the Calabrian as the man posing as King Sebastian of Portugal (the main charge against him).\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, given the content of the letters, it seems almost certain that Catizone himself wrote them. If so, we can – speculatively – begin to reconstruct the early history of the Calabrian Charlatan, from the perspective of Marco Tulio Catizone.

According to Catizone, he left Messina about three years before his encounter with the Count of Lemos, probably in late 1597 or early 1598. Exactly why he abandoned his wife and traveled north remains unclear. The emphasis on future financial rewards in both letters, however, suggests a strong financial motive. Perhaps he was escaping his creditors or had not proven able to meet his wife’s financial expectations; perhaps he simply sought means to support his family. In addition, there appears to have been an element of pride involved. Had he been told that he would never amount to anything? After all, as described in the letters, the man from the village of Magisano had become a figure of some importance, for he was now moving in papal and royal circles. In any case, he left Messina and eventually reached Rome.\textsuperscript{39}

Marco Tulio Catizone probably encountered the story of the Portuguese king in the papal capital. Was it in this cosmopolitan city of churchmen, pilgrims, merchants, and other travelers that he first heard the tale of Sebastian’s disappearance at Ksar-el-Kebir? Did
someone tell him the rumors of the king’s heroic escape from captivity? Did the Calabrian hit upon the idea of claiming to be one of King Sebastian’s retainers, serving a master who was intent on remaining hidden? Whatever the details of exactly where and when, it seems that this was how the charade began. Initially at least, Catizone did not impersonate Sebastian himself. Instead, he posed as one of his faithful servants. One can imagine the Calabrian approaching Portuguese merchants in Rome, spinning a tale of how King Sebastian was now in Italy and sought a contribution – whatever could be spared – from any loyal Portuguese; how this was but the first step towards the restoration of Portugal’s independence and prosperity; how the Spanish would intervene should the whole matter not be kept secret. Such a story could not be told too often in one place. Overly curious contributors and ever-scarcer donations probably drove Catizone to move on in search of a new audience. He wandered north, doubtless seeking out Portuguese wherever he went, repeating and refining his tale, and living off any proceeds. By July 1598 the Calabrian was in Venice, already well versed in (and writing sonnets about) the legend of the unfortunate King of Portugal.

Like so much else in this case, why Catizone shifted to claiming that he was Sebastian himself remains uncertain. This step was dangerous. He might – as happened with Lemos – encounter someone who had known Sebastian, be cornered by his lack of knowledge about Portugal, or fail to speak Portuguese like a native. In contrast, as a mere servant he escaped these dangers; and, his ignorance only heightened the furtive mystery of the whole matter. For Catizone and his game, playing the servant was a much better position. Therefore, something external probably pushed him into impersonating the Portuguese king. Did the Calabrian happen to tell his story to a Portuguese rebel, someone like Fra Estêvão de Sampaio, someone all too eager to make contact with Sebastian? With some persistence such a person could have uncovered the charade and realized that, by redirecting it a little, it might serve his political purposes. After all, according to Catizone, various people in Venice had tried to persuade him that he looked just like Sebastian; in addition, he claimed that someone gave him a book on the events at Ksar-el-Kebir, as if to prime him with knowledge of events that the Portuguese king should remember. If true, was there a concerted effort to convince the Calabrian that assuming Sebastian’s identity was perfectly reasonable
and not as hazardous as it seemed? An apparently minor risk, perhaps coupled with promises of great rewards, may have been what induced Marco Tulio Catizone to shift his charade. In any case, by the fall of 1598 the Portuguese king’s supposed return had attracted the attention of both Venetian and Spanish authorities. Once the Charlatan found himself under arrest on 25 November 1598, it was too late for him to find a fresh audience or to change his story. The die was cast. Ascent to royalty or descent into purgatory were the apparent stakes.\textsuperscript{41}

In Venice Catizone seems not to have realized that the odds tilted against him. Even if nothing else had by then, his time in Naples certainly brought this realization. As each successive interview with the viceroy stripped away another layer of falsehood, the man from Magisano probably sank ever deeper into despair. Nonetheless, once he had abandoned the charade, he clung steadfastly to his new story: he was Marco Tulio Catizone, a petty confidence man who had been tricked into the charade for which he was being held. Did he hope to show that his intentions, while criminal, had not been political? By denying that he intended to occupy the Portuguese throne or even create unrest in Portugal, did he hope to suffer a milder form of justice? If so, Catizone probably rejoiced at the arrival (in July 1601) of his wife, her mother, and her brother – they helped confirm his latest claims.\textsuperscript{42}

At Catizone’s brief reunion with his family his mother-in-law took center stage. As the count wryly noted of the encounter, she “told [her son-in-law] a thousand things.”\textsuperscript{43} It seems that even the Calabrian’s marriage was based on deceit. With an accomplice, Catizone had arranged to be introduced to his future mother-in-law as a principal nobleman with lands yielding 500 ducats annual rent. In this guise he had asked for her daughter’s hand and had been gladly accepted. Now, as his mother-in-law fumed, they discovered that he was a “vile and shameless trickster.”\textsuperscript{44} Apparently this was his profession. He had probably remained in Messina, enjoying his marriage and living off of his wife’s family, only until his façade began to crumble. Unable to produce his rents or lands, he left. Perhaps he claimed that he had to investigate why the rents had not been collected or that he had suddenly been called away on very important matters. Maintaining a charade was hard work: one had to keep it in motion, constantly adding embellishments that would explain
unfulfilled promises and expectations. Each new angle had added layer upon layer of falsehood – layers that the Count of Lemos stripped away.

With this last confrontation, the viceroy was satisfied. On 17 July 1601 he reported to Philip III that the Calabrian Charlatan’s trial would soon be finished and that the prisoner would be sent to Spain as soon as possible. In the interim he was to spend his days chained to an oar, serving his life sentence in the galleys. Nevertheless, a year later Catizone remained in Naples. Had he convinced the Spanish authorities in Naples that his claim to be King Sebastian of Portugal was more the result of “insanity and ignorance” than of political designs? While not exactly pleasant, life in the galleys was better than death by hanging. Besides, compared to his fellow convicts Catizone had it easy: the commander of the galleys had orders to ensure that the Charlatan ate well and did not over-exert himself while rowing. Still, when the galleys left for Spain that year, Marco Tulio Catizone went with them. His descent into purgatory had not yet reached bottom.

The Calabrian Charlatan’s arrival at Sanlúcar de Barrameda in southern Spain on 23 February 1603 marked the beginning of the final stage of his long journey through the machinery of Spanish justice. Once again a court bombarded Catizone with questions: Who was he? Where was he from? Why had he impersonated King Sebastian? Who were his accomplices? The questions were the same. And, for the most part, so were the answers – even those elicited under torture. While this phase of the trial dragged on for months and generated hundreds of pages of documents, it added little new to Marco Tulio Catizone’s story. Satisfied for the most part with the results of the investigation in Naples, the officials in Sanlúcar focused instead on uncovering and prosecuting any of the Portuguese conspirators in the affair. Nonetheless, for our purposes a few added details are worth noting.

During his several imprisonments – in Venice, Florence, Naples, the galleys, and even El Puerto de Santa María in Spain itself – the Calabrian had been in contact with the same group of Portuguese rebels. They frequently sent him messages by various means (once one was hidden in a loaf of bread) and sometimes even found it possible to visit him. On each occasion they encouraged him to persist in his claim to be King Sebastian of Portugal. During the rare
visits they coached him in Portuguese and gave him books filled with information about Portugal and Sebastian. They even provided him with funds.⁵⁴ Although this may help explain why Catizone maintained his charade so long, it only raises questions about the Portuguese rebels. While visiting the impostor during his imprisonment in Naples or later, could they have been unaware of his confession to the Count of Lemos? This seems unlikely. Yet, some Portuguese continued to see him and encourage him. Perhaps some of the rebels refused to accept that the game was over. Did they latch onto the impossible hope that – if they kept the charade going – by some chance they might get lucky, arrange for their alleged king’s escape and triumphal return to Portugal? Two friars – Fra Estêvão de Sampaio and Fra Boaventura de Santo António – even visited Catizone in El Puerto de Santa María and soon found themselves imprisoned and undergoing their own trials in Sanlúcar de Barrameda.⁵⁵

Throughout his trial, the Calabrian insisted on his constant reluctance to adopt the persona of Sebastian. Nonetheless, he had done so since he had been beset at every turn by Portuguese pressuring him into continuing the charade. Even its beginnings had not been his responsibility. In fact, according to Catizone, the same sort of thing had happened to him before. As he recounted, during his travels in Italy he spent a few months in Verona. While there he was told that he looked just like a nobleman named Don Diego de Aragón; since the Veronese persisted in calling him Don Diego, he adopted the man’s name and status. If Catizone was to be believed – and he was not – he was apparently plagued by people forcing another’s identity upon him.⁵⁶

As we saw from his confession in Naples, the impostor claimed that this was exactly what had happened to him in Venice; however, in Sanlúcar he altered the details of his story. This time Catizone maintained that he was in church one day when three or four Portuguese and a Venetian approached him. They told him that he looked like King Sebastian of Portugal and, in fact, that he was Sebastian. In spite of the Calabrian’s protests to the contrary, they insisted. Later the same group came to his inn and persisted in their claims. Catizone relented; thus began the charade.⁵⁷ As before, Marco Tulio Catizone sought to cast his story in such a way as to minimize his own guilt. Yet, to be approached by some such group, he must have
done or said something to arouse their attention. After all, in spite of what the man from Magisano said, it could not have been his swarthy features that marked him as a potential King of Portugal. As we inferred from Catizone’s letters to his wife and the nobleman in Messina, he was probably posing as one of Sebastian’s servants and with this guise attracted the interest of the Venetian and the three or four Portuguese. Perhaps these men had heard the Calabrian’s story and – hoping to contact Sebastian – tracked him down in church. There they may have discovered that there was no former King of Portugal to be found and left disappointed. However, did they subsequently decide that, if they could not find their king, they could produce him? Was the second encounter at the inn their successful attempt to convince the Calabrian con-man that he could play for higher stakes and win?

While much of this is speculation, one small detail of Catizone’s confession in Sanlúcar lends credence to this reconstruction. Although he did not name the three or four Portuguese whom he met, he did identify the Venetian as a Captain Febo. And we know from Cristóvão de Moura and a Portuguese chronicler that one of the major sources of the news in the Portuguese capital about King Sebastian’s return was a Venetian captain called El Febo. This detail brings us full circle – through Captain Febo we can connect the rumors and unrest in Lisbon directly to a Portuguese conspiracy in Venice which had begun at least by the summer of 1598.

Reconstructing the conspiracy

We now have all the pieces: a Calabrian con-man posing as King Sebastian of Portugal; his Portuguese supporters – primarily João de Castro, Estêvão de Sampaio, and José Teixeira; the mysterious Captain Febo; the failure of the movement in favor of Dom António with its attendant lack of popular support; the long-standing sense of a separate Portuguese identity as demonstrated in The Lusiads and the anti-Spanish unrest in the streets of Lisbon; a series of prophecies announcing the imminent arrival of the Hidden One and the ensuing salvation of Portugal; the previous false Sebastians and the widespread enthusiasm for any rumor of Sebastian’s return; and – perhaps most important – a critical moment in Spanish politics: the death of Philip II. Some of these pieces we have examined in detail; others,
unfortunately, remain obscure. Still, we now have enough to begin puzzling out the nature of the Portuguese plot.

From this collection of people and events we could piece together several interpretations. If we were to take the published writings of Castro, Sampaio, and Teixeira at face value, we might conclude that the Portuguese rebels really thought that they had found Sebastian and simply sought to restore their sovereign to his rightful place. Yet, as we have seen, there are strong reasons to doubt that these men really believed that the swarthy Calabrian was their king. While João de Castro may have been the “St. Paul of the Sebastianist religion,”

this St Paul had never been on the road to Damascus. If not believers, should we argue that the conspirators were merely opportunists? Perhaps by chance they encountered Marco Tulio Catizone and his claims and decided to see what they could make of them. This interpretation certainly fits the course of events following the imposter’s arrest in Venice on 25 November 1598. After this point the Portuguese seem not to have followed a well-conceived or prepared plan. Like everyone else – whether Spanish, Venetian, or Florentine – they made the best of what fate and their adversaries handed them, reacting to each twist and turn in the matter as it unfolded. Yet, what happened prior to 25 November? In his testimony in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Catizone insisted that he had been recruited to play the part of Sebastian by Captain Febo and a group of Portuguese; if true – and it seems likely – this event took place no later than early July 1598. This was an opportunity created, not just grasped.

We can trace the first stirrings of the Sebastianist plot as far back as 1588 when João de Castro wrote of his intention “...to devote all of my ability and life to awaken[ing] Portugal by some means, [to] opening its eyes.” Over the next ten years the course of events in Spanish-occupied Portugal and Castro’s own pursuits helped lay the ground-work for the conspiracy. Key in this period was the failed English invasion of Portugal in 1589. This taught the Portuguese – and everyone else – two important lessons: first, that Spain’s enemies lacked both the resources and the will to drive it from Portugal by military means alone; second, that Dom António, despite his belief to the contrary, commanded little popular support. While Dom António’s closest followers may not have realized or accepted it at the time, the aborted raid effectively spelled the end of António’s rebellion. On that front at least, the Spanish could rest easy.
In contrast to many of Dom António’s other supporters, João de Castro recognized the futility of António’s efforts early on. Given his determination to “awaken” Portugal from at least a year before the failed invasion, the lessons of 1589 seem to have confirmed Castro’s conclusion that only a widespread popular revolt stood any chance of restoring Portuguese independence. Castro apparently hoped that a rising would radically reorient Portuguese politics. Noblemen who had made their peace with Spain and remained in Portugal would be inspired, with some prodding from the exiles, to realign their allegiances. Building from a base of popular politics, the high politics of diplomacy and intervention might then succeed. First, however, João de Castro needed to find the spark that would ignite the passions of the Portuguese people; this he sought in the millenarian yearnings revealed by the appearance of the first two false Sebastians (the third, who appeared in Spain, generated little interest).

Over the next decade Castro studied the prophecies associated with Sebastian and tried to determine how best to exploit them. This long-term dedication reflected not only Castro’s commitment to the Portuguese cause, but also his failure to convince Dom António and the other Portuguese exiles that utilizing Sebastianism would prove fruitful. Thus António’s death in 1595 removed a major obstacle. At some point afterwards Castro apparently convinced his compatriots to give his ideas a chance and they began to prepare the plot. By July 1598, their Sebastian was in place in Venice, ready to act.

Before we accept this version of events, we need to answer three simple questions: Why 1598? Why Venice? Why Catizone? The answer to the first of these questions is fairly straightforward. In 1598 King Philip II of Spain was old and infirm; his death was only a matter of time. By acting in the liminal moment between Philip II’s passing and the oath of allegiance to his heir, the conspirators probably hoped to change the transition of power in their favor. As we have already seen, in Lisbon the first rumors of Sebastian’s escape from captivity coincided with the news of Philip’s death. Mere coincidence? Perhaps. More likely, a conspirator placed in the Portuguese capital waited for just that news and, when it arrived, began to spread the rumors. This had the desired effect of arousing popular enthusiasm for Sebastian and casting doubt on the political legitimacy of Philip’s son. Nonetheless, popular pressure proved insufficient to derail the Portuguese nobles’ oath to Philip III.
While we cannot say with certainty, having the Charlatan make his claims in Venice may have been a carefully thought-out choice. Having him make his first appearance in Portugal was, in all likelihood, not even considered. After all, the first two false Sebastians had turned up there and, although they had quickly drawn a following, they had just as quickly attracted Spanish attention. Before anything could really happen both men had been arrested, tried, and sentenced. Consequently the supposed King of Portugal needed to return elsewhere, beyond the reach of Spain. This way, a popular movement in support of the man might have time to gather momentum. For this, France and England may have initially seemed good choices. However, they were less than ideal. Due to the political alignments at the end of the sixteenth century, any plot in either kingdom would probably appear to be just that: an anti-Spanish plot, instigated by Spain’s enemies. João de Castro and his compatriots may have reasoned that it was best not to raise any unnecessary questions about their Sebastian. Furthermore, the internal logic of the prophecies and stories about the missing King of Portugal made an appearance in northern Europe improbable at best.67 Therefore, the ideal location would not be openly anti-Spanish, would fall outside of areas of Spanish control and influence, and lie near enough to North Africa to be a logical destination for an escaping Sebastian. Venice met these requirements.68 It had two additional advantages as well. First, a sizable Portuguese merchant community provided a strong base of support as well as a conspiratorially clean conduit for the news of Sebastian’s return to reach Portugal. Second, the political rivalry in Venice between the “Old” and the “Young” (and, in particular, the anti-Spanish stance of the “Young”) worked in the conspirators’ favor. If nothing else, the “Young” could be expected to resist any kind of cooperation with the Spanish, giving the conspirators some room to maneuver. In fact, there probably was active “Young” involvement in the plot; this would explain the participation of El Febo, the Venetian captain.

In contrast to the selection of locale, the choice of Marco Tulio Catizone seems senseless. He spoke no Portuguese, looked nothing like Sebastian, and had never even been to Portugal. Surely the conspirators could have found an unknown native Portuguese of the right age who at least looked somewhat like the missing king. Yet they did not. Why? Perhaps they never intended their returned
king to leave Venice, much less go to Portugal to claim his throne. They may have thought that to provide Castro’s spark, all they needed was a rumor, one with all the trappings of truth but never to be examined closely. For this, Catizone – Calabrian con-man and willing Sebastian – was convenient, adequate, and disposable.

If so, the crux of the conspiracy took place between 20 and 23 September 1598. During the fragile period between the news of Philip II’s death and the oath to Philip III, fellow conspirators in Lisbon publicized and fanned the rumors already trickling out of Venice. With the failure to create anything beyond a stir, the plot collapsed. In Venice, apprised now of the dangers posed by the Calabrian Charlatan, the Spanish ambassador worked to have him arrested. If the Venetian “Young” had been actively involved, they found it wise not to interfere too much in the dealings with the Spanish; with the scheme derailed, there was little point. Among the Portuguese plotters only a few, it seems, wished to continue with the charade. They probably argued to their compatriots and any Venetian accomplices that the plan was still viable, that the rumors simply needed more time to work. Thus, these few men continued to insist that the man in Venice was the Portuguese king. In this confused aftermath of move and counter-move, the Spanish won the key battle: on 25 November 1598 the Venetians imprisoned the supposed King Sebastian of Portugal.