Conclusion

...the dread of death, ..., which, while it afflicts and mortifies the individual, guards and protects the society.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

On 23 September 1603 the Spanish brought the trial in Sanlúcar de Barrameda to a conclusion. Several of the Charlatan’s suspected accomplices and associates – both Portuguese and Calabrian – received sentences ranging from death to freedom, depending upon how closely they could be linked to the conspiracy to wrest Portugal from Spanish rule.² For playing the central role of King Sebastian, Marco Tulio Catizone suffered the harshest fate. His right hand was cut off; he was hanged; his body was drawn and quartered and the pieces were strewn in the roads; finally, both his head and right hand were put in a prominent place, on public display.³ The charade was ended.

This was exemplary justice exemplified. Yet where were those meant to see the spectacle, to learn from it? As an object lesson, the supposed Sebastian should have been condemned and punished in Lisbon. There, those who wagered on the Hidden One’s return, those who furtively gossiped of the king’s appearance in Venice, and those who spread the rumors telling of Sebastian’s survival at Ksar-el-Kebir might have glimpsed the possibly gruesome consequences of such speculations. Instead, the drama of justice executed took place far away in southern Spain, before an irrelevant Spanish public. Any lesson was lost. For most Portuguese the impostor’s fate thus became another item of questionable news, yet another rumor among many
clamoring for attention. So what was the point of playing out the public execution? Perhaps the Spanish simply had a restricted audience in mind: one who was in need of instruction, but did not necessarily have to witness the proceedings in person. Certainly, for the conspirators – even those fortunate enough not to be in Sanlúcar – the news from southern Spain was real and the lesson all too clear.

Nonetheless, it seems odd that the Spanish chose to limit their audience so drastically. After all, in early modern Europe exemplary justice was seen as a bulwark against the disorder inherent in the fallen descendants of Adam. By instilling in everyone, not just the guilty, a healthy fear of the consequences of criminal behavior, this ordinary public spectacle supposedly helped maintain order. However, the case of the Calabrian Charlatan was extraordinary and demanded special treatment. For most Portuguese, the matter had never moved beyond the realm of rumor; and although Portugal’s restless nobles, fractious priests, and hopeful millenarians avidly gossiped of King Sebastian’s return, the speculations had inspired little action. As the Spanish seem to have realized, a public execution in Lisbon could have upset the relative calm in Portugal by substantiating at least part of the Sebastianist illusion. Even worse, people might then have reasoned that if some of the story was true, why not the rest? It was preferable by far for Spain’s rulers to forgo the possible benefits of exemplary justice. Why help transform rumor into reality? Order was better served by quietly eliminating the conspiracy and the conspirators, then letting the gossip run its course and fade away.

Throughout the entire affair, from the Calabrian Charlatan’s appearance in 1598 to his death in 1603, the Spanish faced the same sort of dilemma. How did one fight a rumor, especially a rumor that fed an all-too-real discontent? Ignoring it would only allow it to spread and deepen. Attacking it would focus attention on it, marking it as important news. Anything the Spanish did or did not do could be ‘spun’ against them: a failure to challenge the rumor could be seen as tacit acceptance; an attempt to silence it could be seen as an effort to conceal its truth. Realizing that they could not control the situation through the direct application of their power, the Spanish dealt with the seditious gossip indirectly. For example, when Íñigo de Mendoza in Venice publicly expressed the Spanish doubts about the matter, he also insisted that he only wished to ascertain the truth; in
fact, he assured the Venetians, should the supposed Sebastian prove genuine, he would of course immediately be restored to his throne.\textsuperscript{5} Thus the Spanish very carefully neither confirmed nor denied the news from Venice. Instead, in the guise of seeking the truth, they quietly unleashed the diplomatic and legal machinery of the state. Without fanfare the Spanish found, rounded up, and tried as many conspirators as they could. In doing so, they eliminated the ultimate source of the rumor, without directly attacking the rumor itself.

For the Spanish this was probably the wisest course; they knew all too well the dangers of disorder. Simply put, the early modern state was fragile. A powerful state like Spain certainly commanded the military might to crush any internal opposition. However, applying that force came at a price. First, the hierarchical nature of early modern power made it costly to gather and focus resources, whether military or political. Any extraordinary action required negotiation, a give and take that demanded expensive favors and privileges. Second, and more important, resources were limited. This meant that concentrating power to deal with one problem created opportunities for others. While attention and resources were focused elsewhere, enemies and opportunists – both external and internal – were only too willing to exploit the situation. Thus, for the early modern state, disorder of any sort represented a grave danger. For the Spanish this was the inherent menace of the Calabrian Charlatan, for he threatened to inject a dose of chaos into Portugal.

For João de Castro and his fellow conspirators, on the other hand, a bit of chaos was exactly what they wanted. By 1598 they had fought Spanish rule in Portugal for nearly two decades, but had accomplished nothing. Armed resistance, international diplomacy, and a foreign invasion had all failed. They had always challenged Spain where it was strong – militarily and diplomatically – and had been overwhelmed. Nonetheless, these Portuguese rebels were determined to fight on. This time, however, realizing their own lack of strength, they sought to attack where the Spanish were weak. By adopting the prophecies and legends of Sebastianism, the rebels invoked the popular millenarian dream of \textit{O Encuberto}, the hidden hero-king who would usher in a lasting reign of peace, prosperity, and justice after defeating the forces of evil. This, they hoped, would draw the Portuguese people into political action and help weaken the Spanish hold on Portugal.
As we have already seen, the matter of the Calabrian Charlatan can be broken into two phases. In the first phase, before the nobles’ oath to Philip III, the conspirators tried to take advantage of the shaky transition of authority from one king to the next. Since the hierarchy of early modern power depended on personal oaths of fealty, the death of Philip II temporarily severed the link tying Portugal to Spain. By introducing the story of King Sebastian’s miraculous return, the rebels sought to tap into the popular appeal of Sebastianism and thus inspire – or perhaps force – the nobles of Portugal to declare their support for their former king and thus break with Spain. Here the rebels’ dose of chaos took the form of injecting, at a carefully selected moment, an alternative path for Portuguese politics to follow and the popular pressure to do so. When this plan failed, Castro and his compatriots eventually turned to a second, more desperate phase of their plot. In this phase the conspirators continued to spread the alleged King Sebastian’s story in Lisbon. News of his long pilgrimage and penance, his unjust imprisonment in Venice, the Spanish efforts to usurp his rights by labeling him an impostor and charlatan, and his treacherous capture in Florence, served – the rebels hoped – to tap into the endemic anti-Spanish sentiments of the Portuguese. Ideally, the level of popular unrest in Portugal would rise to the point where a national rebellion would be sparked. Again, since they could not take on the Spanish directly, the Portuguese rebels relied on social chaos to open up new possibilities.

As we have seen, the efforts of João de Castro and the other Portuguese rebels ultimately failed. Although – like modern nationalists – they discerned the potential power inherent in popular politics, they never could inspire the widespread nationalist revolt they wanted. Should we interpret this, as have so many students of modern nationalism, as evidence that national sentiment did not exist in the early modern period? We should not.

In the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries there was certainly an imagined Portuguese community. This was not a new community, some new nation arising spontaneously on the back of a change in the mode of production; instead it represented the almost haphazard accumulation of centuries of history: unique, idiosyncratic, complex, thick. Bound together by their language, the Reconquista, the decades of exploration and expansion overseas, and the prophecies of Sebastianism, the Portuguese people were a self-
identifying, modern nation. At the same time, nationalists like João de Castro sought to take advantage of this sense of nation for their own political purposes. In this sense, early modern nationalism did exist. Furthermore, Castro and his Spanish opponents viewed this sentiment as a political force to be used or feared; it certainly was not to be ignored.

If this was the case, then why does nationalism seem to be so muted as a political force in early modern Europe, especially when compared to Europe in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? Although this question is beyond the scope of this work, we can suggest a few possibilities. First, while the sentiment of nationalism did exist in the early modern period, political manipulators (that is, nationalists) had not yet learned to exploit that sentiment systematically nor developed the organizational mechanisms to do so. They only called upon it by chance or out of desperation, not as part of a long-term, coherent, and organized political plan. Second, in the early modern period, political sovereignty was vested in the elites. Until the state invented (and was trapped in) the fiction of popular sovereignty and the idea that it worked in the interests of the people, it was an alien imposition that served merely to preserve the privileges of the elite. It was only when the nation absorbed the state that the people of the nation had any practical reason to care which state ruled over them. Third, paralleling the transition in sovereignty – from God, to king, to people – was a transition in salvation. The inherent promise, and appeal, of nationalism is that once the nation has removed its foreign oppressors and established its sovereignty, a new era of social justice will begin; thus will the nation be saved. Finally, the modern period saw the introduction of abundant, cheap, and effective firearms which undermined the elites’ monopoly on organized political violence. If large enough, modern national groups could make ruling them a very costly proposition. What is different about modern nationalism is not the “tribal” sentiment itself, but rather the context in which it acts.

For whatever reason – missing elements in the nationalist equation or deft Spanish handling of the situation – João de Castro and his compatriots were not able “to awaken Portugal…. [to] open its eyes.” Nevertheless, the Portuguese rebels were the precursors of the modern nationalists who later called upon the same kinds of sentiments and successfully created their own nation-states.