Epilogue

Some six weeks before the Calabrian Charlatan’s execution in Sanlúcar de Barrameda took place, a minor Portuguese official brought an egg to Cristóvão de Moura, the Spanish viceroy in Lisbon. Prominently displayed on the eggshell were the five shields of the Portuguese coat-of-arms. What made this egg extraordinary and worthy of the viceroy’s attention was, as the official explained, the fact that it had been laid that way.¹

In itself, this was a minor incident. The Milagro Gallinero – as Moura called the episode in his report to Philip III – caused a slight stir in the Portuguese capital, was briefly investigated, and then officially forgotten.² Nonetheless, the Milagro Gallinero was emblematic of the tangled political, religious, and personal currents in Portugal during the first years of the seventeenth century.

Upon examining the egg, Cristóvão de Moura noted that the coat-of-arms on the eggshell appeared to have been hand-painted. Consequently he ordered the arrest of the official who had brought him the egg. Questioned, the man revealed that he had purchased the mysterious item from a poor woman who told him of its extraordinary origins. Wondering what this marvel might mean, he had taken the egg to Lisbon’s monasteries for an interpretation. The Portuguese friars with whom he spoke agreed that a miracle had occurred and that it was an omen of things to come. After showing it to various people and explaining its portentous nature, he had brought it to the viceroy. Moura’s investigation apparently stopped here and the minor official was declared guiltless. As with the many incidents related to the Calabrian Charlatan, the viceroy’s inclination was to
ignore the whole episode; rumors, gossip, and other popular rumbling were best left to fade away. This must have required a great deal of forbearance on Moura’s part, for the Milagro Gallinero was a cleverly encoded assault on the viceroy himself and his position.

For someone like the viceroy, well versed in royal Portuguese iconography and recent events, the personal attack would have been obvious. The miraculous egg had the five shields of the Portuguese coat-of-arms adorning its shell,

...five shields in bright blue... And within the five shields, disposed in the form of a cross, [were depicted] in a different colour the thirty pieces of silver for which Christ was betrayed, five in each shield, the shield in the centre counting twice.4

With the egg’s delivery, Don Cristóvão de Moura – Portuguese nobleman and Spanish viceroy – had received his thirty pieces of silver for his central role in the annexation of Portugal some twenty-five years earlier.

While the symbolism within the coat-of-arms cast Moura (and a whole generation of the Portuguese nobility) in the role of Judas, the egg itself encoded a different story. As the traditional Easter symbol of rebirth and resurrection, the egg was meant to remind Moura that, like Judas’s betrayal of Jesus, his betrayal of the Portuguese nation was in vain. The messiah – O Desejado, O Encuberto, or Sebastian – might be missing, but he was not dead. Portugal would be reborn. And, nearly half a century later, it was. On 1 December 1640 a noble-led uprising in Lisbon began the rebellion that ended Spanish rule by placing the native Portuguese Duke of Braganza on the throne as King João IV of Portugal.5