Ruth MacKay


In _The Baker Who Pretended to Be King of Portugal_, Ruth MacKay uses the strange case of the _pastelero de Madrigal_ to explore news networks, political culture, and how people shaped their understanding of the world through tales in sixteenth-century Iberia. Drawing on a variety of print and manuscript sources—including letters, court records, chronicles, pamphlets, and the reports of ambassadors—MacKay provides a nuanced account of this unusual case of early modern deception and treason. Fray Miguel de los Santos, a Portuguese Augustinian and later the vicar of the convent of Nuestra Señora de Gracia la Real in Madrigal, and Gabriel de Espinosa, a sometimes-soldier and bad baker of pastries, committed a daring plot of imposture. Before they were arrested in October of 1594, they managed to convince Ana of Austria, a cloistered nun who was the illegitimate daughter of Don Juan of Austria and Maria de Mendoza and the niece of Philip II, that the baker was her cousin Sebastian, the King of Portugal. The author argues that the conspiracy required the existence of established networks of correspondence and that it could not have occurred without the rapid circulation of tales and news in Spain and Portugal in the 1590s. Certainly, the rumors that circulated about the imposture’s perpetrators and their judges during the ensuing investigation give credence to this thesis.

This study makes compellingly clear that visions, rumors, and news played important parts in weaving these fantastical tales together as well as in the political culture of late sixteenth-century Iberia. In the first chapter, the author traces Sebastian’s young life and untimely death. In spite of bad omens and good council, the Portuguese king raised troops, outfitted ships, and led an army into the African desert, dying at the Battle of Alcazarquivir in August of 1578 with no witnesses who survived to tell the tale. As MacKay observes, “[h]ere died the king, but here too were born myths that arose from older myths and memories” (29). Soon, related myths and rumors began to circulate about Don António, the prior of Crato, who attempted to claim the Portuguese throne after the death of Sebastian, and who was later suspected by some to be involved in imposture perpetrated by Espinosa and Santos.

MacKay examines the unlikely possibility that the infamous Antonio Pérez was also involved in the Madrigal case. She scrutinizes the complicated testimony of the witnesses such as Fray Miguel de los Santos, who attempted to prolong his own life through a series of false confessions and retractions, the
letters directed to the authorities leading the investigation, and other correspondence circulating about the Madrigal case. While some readers might be frustrated that the author largely avoids trying to ascertain the true history and identity of the enigmatic and “quintessentially picaresque” (141) Gabriel de Espinosa, this book is more concerned with early modern perceptions of kingly credibility. MacKay asserts that “Madrigal formed part of a physical and discursive world of disguises and adventure, politics and diplomacy, and that correspondence and messengers traced the lines connecting the parts” (88). Millenarian beliefs, fueled in the 1590s by population decline, heavy taxes, and poor harvests in Castile and by rumors and simmering discontent in Portugal, converged with ideas about hidden kings, fears about dynastic fragility, and nascent nationalist sentiments.

Real kings, false ones, and churchmen take up significant space in this work. The true protagonist, though, is not the infamous baker or the Augustinian friar but their stooge: Ana of Austria. MacKay’s portrayal is sympathetic. She contends that the nun fell for the imposture because she longed for family. MacKay’s treatment of Ana and the nuns with whom she shared conventual life is also something of a sophisticated microhistory of the complicated nature of Counter Reformation enclosure. Ana of Austria tried to claim during the investigation that she was not a nun, but then later admitted that she had been advised to do this as part of the defense strategy. Linens, news, letters, and visitors came in and out of the convent with relative ease and sometimes surprising frequency and rapidity. As the Madrigal investigation continued to unfold, the nuns of Nuestra Señora de Gracia la Real wrote letters complaining about the way the case was being handled by the inquisitor and apostolic judge, Juan Llano de Valdés, who ordered the nuns to stop writing. When they did not, he excommunicated the whole convent only to find himself under investigation for mismanagement. MacKay also gives Ana of Austria the last word, tracing her trajectory from humiliating exile to competent prioress of two important convents. Thus, she ensures that Ana was not “simply eliminated” after all (216).

The case of the baker of Madrigal and the events that allowed it to take place involved a myriad of clashes and conflicting interests between the kingdoms of Castile and Portugal, between relatives, between claimants to thrones, and between civil and ecclesiastical authorities. These conflicts and the layers of falsehoods, misinformation, and disguises involved in the conspiracy to dupe Ana of Austria and place a false Sebastian on Portugal’s throne might have left the reader as confused as the judges and agents who sought to unravel the tangled threads of the imposture. However, MacKay handles the material deftly and includes maps, a family tree, and a brief who’s who of the important historical personages involved in the case. She credits the historical actors