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.


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