

Hercules and the King of Portugal: Icons of Masculinity and Nation in Calderón's Spain. Dian Fox.

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Dian Fox opens her *Hercules and the King of Portugal* by posing the question of “how do representations of masculinity figure in the fashioning of Spanish national identity” in the Iberian Peninsula during the seventeenth century (xiii). This monograph brings together Fox’s broad range of research interests in a study that combines historical research, literary criticism, cultural studies, and theories of gender and sexuality to analyze the way in which Golden Age dramatists, predominantly Calderón de la Barca, negotiated social and cultural constructs of gender, honor, and nationhood in baroque Spain. In particular, Fox’s study shines a spotlight on a pair of markedly iconic characters that appear as recurring lightning rods for these concerns in the plays of Calderón and his contemporaries: the mythological hero Hercules and Sebastian of Aviz, the king of Portugal from 1559 to 1578.

Considered something of a “native son” (xiv), Hercules was seen as having a wide range of connections with Iberia. According to legend, the Greek demigod accomplished two of his twelve famed labors in the Iberian Peninsula, and during his time there he was credited as the founder of cities such as Barcelona, Cádiz, Seville, and Toledo. Indeed, his Iberian connections were strong enough to lead Habsburg kings to claim him as a direct ancestor, and the likeness of the son of Zeus frequently adorned their palaces. Charles V went as far as to add the *columnas de Hércules* [pillars of Hercules] to flank both his personal and the Spanish coats of arms, where they remain today. Evidently, Fox’s choice to place *Hercules Hispanicus* at the center of her project analyzing depictions of masculinity and nationhood in Golden Age Spain is unimpeachable. Her other subject of study, though (and as she admits), requires more explanation. After King Sebastian of Portugal died in 1578 in the Battle of Alcázarquivir, his uncle Philip II of Spain took advantage of the fact that the young monarch left no direct heir in order to bring about the unification of the Iberian Peninsula under his rule. Thus, in 1580 Portugal became part of the Habsburg Empire, even though the fact that the body of Sebastian was never recovered from the battlefield left many Portuguese hopeful of their missing king’s eventual return. Much has already been written about the iconicity and quasi-mythological status of Sebastian in early modern Portuguese culture and literature, most famously as the dedicatee of Luis de Camões’s *Os Lusíadas*. Fox focuses here instead on depictions of the young king in the works of Castilian poets and playwrights. Her Spanish-centric exploration of the figure of Sebastian reveals how dramatists such as Lope de Vega or Calderón de la Barca used the tragic history of the Portuguese king, and

quite specifically his apparent disinterest in marrying or in producing an heir, as a foil for more virtuous and virile characters, as well as to vindicate the absorption of Portugal by its more powerful neighbor.

Fox interweaves solid historical contextualization with close reading, always informed by theories of gender and sexuality, to analyze a collection of Spanish Golden Age *comedias* that feature these two iconic characters. She opens her book with a historical survey of particular value to newcomers to the study of early modern Spanish history and literature, as it summarizes the main features of Golden Age society without ever falling into overly simplistic routines of Otherization. Fox succinctly explains how concepts such as honor, blood purity, heteronormative sexuality, and patriotic sentiment were closely woven together in seventeenth-century Castilian culture. This opening salvo sets the scene for the remainder of the monograph, which then splits into two separate and distinct blocks of three chapters each: chapters 2 through 4 focus on Hercules and his myths, whereas chapters 5 through 7 revolve around the consolidation of legends regarding King Sebastian.

The first section concentrates on four Calderón plays that feature or describe two prominent events in the Herculean saga: the episode in which the demigod served as a cross-dressed slave to Queen Omphale of Lydia (as depicted in *Las manos blancas no ofenden* and *Fieras afemina amor*), and his death after donning the poisoned Shirt of Nessus (*Los tres mayores prodigios* and *El pintor de su deshonra*). Fox analyses how these Calderonian representations depict Hercules as challenging normative notions of gender and honor, while keeping in mind the unique symbolic stature of the Greek hero in the collective Spanish imaginary. That this involved, as Fox convincingly argues, an effort at introspection turned out to be the exact opposite of what the Sebastian chapters describe. Whereas Portuguese and Brazilian lore construed the fallen king as hypermasculine and militantly chaste, and Spanish poets and playwrights (including Lope de Vega, Vélez de Guevara, Francisco de Villegas, and Calderón) portrayed Sebastian (either directly or tacitly) as “tragically flawed” despite his unquestionable bravery. They moreover intimated that he was “inflected with irregular masculinity” (205). In these only partially veiled jabs at the virility of the Portuguese king, the dramatists sought to link the valued normative traits of the period to other characters whom they wished to promote at the expense of the failed Portuguese monarch (and, metonymically, the now-vulnerable Portuguese nation).

Readers will find *Hercules and the King of Portugal* a valuable addition to the growing number of studies that explore how Golden Age dramatists sought to contribute to the cultural and social debates of their day, especially regarding issues of gender and sexuality. Fox’s monograph draws attention to hitherto undervalued aspects of these plays and characters, as well as offers new and fresh perspectives on contemporary debates of considerable import.



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