

Research Project
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Impostors: Shadows in Enlightened Spain

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The present study, a book about impostors (people who adopt a fake identity), aims to reflect on the boundaries of law and society in a transitional period such as the end of the Early Modern Era. Transcending anecdotic approaches, and alongside its obvious possibilities in relation to social history, this topic has many other implications regarding such research fields as the exercise of power and the history of administration.

In the first place, we will address the subject of identification. In the second half of the Long Eighteenth Century (1750-1850), European states (still in development) made an effort to improve their mechanisms in the identification of foreign visitors and natives. The growing use of the passport and the increasing complexity of this document, together with an increase in police controls, certainly prove this. On the other side of the law, impostors used to steal or forge passports, nobility titles and official letters to support their new identities.

In the second place, we will focus on legislation. Laws against impersonation and forgery reflect the historical concern of *Ancien Régime* rulers on this subject. Until the 18th century, Spanish legislation on the topic had been based on Alfonso X's medieval *Partidas*. An analysis of the changes carried out by enlightened (i. e. *Novísima Recopilación*, 1805) and liberal jurists (until the Penal Code of 1848) perfectly summarise the judicial spirit of each period.

Along these lines, the application of this legislation will be another relevant object of study (the authorities' attitude when dealing with an impostor). Impersonation had a potential subversive power which jeopardized the status quo, threatening Catholic conformity with the fate that God had assigned to each individual. In this respect, one may observe two main concerns during all the Early Modern period: a *modus operandi* that aimed to proceed with the trials as discreetly as possible, in order to hide these dreadful instances; and a profound interest in the restoration of the social order. In the case of transvestite women, as long as they did not participate in “inappropriate” sexual relations, authorities tended to forgive them on condition that they returned to their “womanly clothes” and habits.

In the third place, the study of individual cases of impostorship related to public administration or, in a broader perspective, to power will provide us with a general idea of what authority should look like in order to be recognisable in the eyes of the people. Which were the indispensable elements of a successful disguise as a lord, an inquisitor or a justice officer? Which were their expected manners? How did the people finally unmask the impostor? Since we only know of the cases in which the impersonator was discovered, which mistakes led to the failure of each disguise?

Finally, it is also important to highlight the significant role that Royal administration and inquisitors have in the investigation of this particular topic. Most of the cases we know of are those who were unmasked and reported to the authorities, who subsequently prosecuted and/or judged them. Consequently, a considerable proportion of the sources are administrative or judicial. Some of these lawsuits, those performed during significant political changes (i.e. absolutism to liberalism), are particularly interesting, as they reflect the different methods and procedures of both political systems.