

WOMEN IN THE HISTORICAL WRITINGS OF PEDRO LOPEZ DE AYALA*

Pedro López de Ayala was the official Castilian chronicler from 1350 to 1406, a period which included the reigns of Pedro I, Enrique II, Juan I, and Enrique III. Himself a first-hand witness to most of the major events he recorded, Ayala was eminently qualified for the task.¹ Soldier, statesman, scholar, he distinguished himself in each of his careers. As a soldier, he was a member of the *Orden de la Banda* and on the vanguard at the battles of Nájera and Aljubarrota; as a statesman, he was twice Ambassador to France and was ultimately appointed *Canciller Mayor* (Chancellor) of Castile; as the author of the *Chronicles* and other works**, he has earned the respect of modern critics and has been referred to as the Castilian precursor of Renaissance essayism.***

He projects himself strongly in his writings. Not simply content to record data and recount events ceremoniously (he clearly had a strong sense of what constituted a sound political order), he frequently makes judgments as to the morality, advisability and rationality of the actions of his characters. Typical of his age, however, he has an overwhelming tendency to treat history as the result of the behavior of a limited number of significant individuals; yet, in good part, he is able to compensate for this rather myopic approach by portraying these individuals with great flair and sensitivity. Even when he is writing with a strong political bias,² as when

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¹ Pedro López de Ayala was born in 1332 in Victoria, the patrimonial seat of his mother's estates. His father, at the time of his birth occupied the post of *Adelantado* (frontier governor) at Murcia. His record of service at court, as a page, began in 1353. By 1359, he had risen to the rank of captain in the Castilian navy. See Luis Suárez Fernández, *El Canciller Ayala y su tiempo*, (1332-1407), (Vitoria, 1962); Franco Meregalli, *La vida política del Canciller Ayala*, (Varese: Instituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1955); Helen Nader, *The Mendoza Family*, (Rutgers University Press, 1979)

** In addition to his *Crónicas de los Reyes de Castilla Don Pedro I, Don Enrique II, Don Juan I, Don Enrique III*, Ayala wrote the satiric poem *El Rimado de Palacio* and a book on falconry, *Libro de las aves de caça*. He also translated works by Titus Livius, St. Gregory and Boccaccio.

*** This is the conclusion of Helen Nader, in her soon to be published study of *The Mendoza Family in the Spanish Renaissance, 1350-1550*.

² For reasons that we need not go into here, Ayala offered his support to Enrique de Trastámara in 1366, thus abandoning the cause of the legitimate king, Pedro I. His *Crónica del Rey Don Pedro* is,

recounting the events of the Castilian civil war of 1366-69, he is obviously making an effort to understand the motives of the various participants.

Unfortunately, these special insights do not appear when he is writing about women. He offers his readers very little about them beyond the cursory listing of conventional biographical information such as lineage, marriage alliances, and the like. Though Ayala is no more guilty of this than other contemporary writers, his omission is particularly lamentable in this case: not only could one have expected more from an observer with his perspicacity and intuitive perception of human nature, it just so happens that women play an exceptionally critical role in the events he recounts. What follows, then, is a short survey which attempts to compare Ayala's treatment of several female figures with what we know (or can surmise) to have been their veritable historical influence.

The author begins his narrative of the reign of Pedro I with the death of Alfonso XI —an early victim of the Black Death— in the siege of Gibraltar in 1350 and the coronation of his sole, legitimate heir, Pedro.³ The young King's right to the throne was indisputable; nevertheless, the deceased had left behind an extremely messy and explosive family situation, fraught with ill-will and suspicion, which were to haunt the new reign and result in one of the bloodiest chapters of Castilian history.

Two women were prominent in Alfonso's life: his lawful wife María daughter of the king of Portugal and Pedro's mother; and Leonor de Guzmán, his mistress of twenty years, constant companion, and mother of his ten illegitimate children, three of whom preceded Pedro into the world. The latter's influence on Alfonso cannot be over-emphasized; they lived together and, given the peripatetic nature of the Castilian court, it is remarkable to note how frequently Leonor and her children accompanied the king.⁴ She was at his side during the seige and witnessed his death.⁵ During their long relationship, Leonor received enormous grants and privileges from her consort; her children spent more time with the king than did his heir, Pedro, and they received more honor and patronage than was customary for bastards of that era. The oldest, the future Enrique II was named Count of Trastámara (he will be the founder of the royal dynasty by that name); Fadrique, his twin, though a child, was appointed Master of the Military Order of Santiago, and so on down the line.

therefore, an account written by a disenchanted man, who was officially branded a traitor. He deliberately omitted certain relevant facts and, in his account, Pedro emerges as a rather misguided, vindictive and bloodthirsty ruler. For specific omissions in Ayala's narrative, see J. B. Sitges, *Las mujeres de Don Pedro I de Castilla*, (Madrid, 1910), p. 17-18; P. E. Russell, *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal in the Time of Edward III and Richard II*, (Oxford, 1955), p. 18-19.

³ Pedro López de Ayala, *Crónica de Don Pedro I*, *Biblioteca de autores españoles*, (Madrid, 1953), vol. 66, p. 401.

⁴ There was no permanent court in Castile at this time; a fixed seat of government will not be established until the reign of Felipe II in the mid-sixteenth century. Given the dangers of a seige, it was most unusual for a woman to be anywhere near the frontier.

⁵ *Crónica de Pedro*, p. 408ff.

Yet, after the death of the king, Ayala wants us to believe that Leonor was hapless and forlorn, abandoned to the goodwill of others.⁶ He maintains that only through her children and powerful relatives could her continued prestige be assured. When these same children and powerful relatives decided on the fateful course of withholding homage from the new king, Leonor is nowhere implicated. But it is hard to picture this dynamic woman as nothing more than an innocent bystander, watching as her children (the oldest of whom was then seventeen) began to practice revolution. Apparently someone in the court of Don Pedro thought so as well, since the first act of suppression by the new regime was to have Leonor imprisoned and then killed. Ayala blames Pedro for this deed and its consequences; and it may very well have been done directly on his orders, but it is interesting to note that more than one modern historian has assumed that it was his mother, María of Portugal, the jilted wife and protective mother, who engineered Leonor's death.⁷ It is a fact that María and her powerful cousin, the Duke of Alburquerque, held sway over Pedro for the first few years of his reign; but what is important, in either instance, is that Leonor was marked as a threat to the royal family while none of her children was harmed in any way. On the contrary, despite a reputation for summary justice that was to earn Don Pedro the sobriquet of the cruel, he was constantly forgiving his half-brothers and trying to effect reconciliations with them. It would be most enlightening, in that case, to have been given a more complete treatment of Leonor, as the full political *persona* we know she was and not simply mistress, mother, and woman with powerful friends and relatives.

Another significant chapter of Pedro's reign began with his marriage to the French princess Blanche de Bourbon. He had been betrothed, as a minor, to Joan Plantagenet, daughter of Edward III of England, but she had died en route to Castile of the plague in 1348. That first marriage had been designed to cement relations between Castile and England, primarily at the instigation of the English who wished to have Castilian naval power on their side (or neutralized) during their prolonged war with the French.⁸ The marriage to Blanche, therefore, represented a complete turnabout in Castilian foreign policy. While Ayala admits that Pedro's mother, Queen María, gave her blessings to this union, it is accepted by historians that she was actually the driving force behind it. Ayala puts the blame (or credit) for this move on María's cousin and advisor, Alburquerque, but there is little doubt that she participated in the decision and was not merely a conduit for the strategems of that nobleman.⁹

⁶ *Crónica de Pedro*, p. 412.

⁷ This is the opinion of Russell, *The English*, and of Joseph O'Callaghan, *Medieval Spain*, (Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 419.

⁸ P. E. Russell, "Una alianza frustrada. Las bodas de Pedro I de Castilla y Juana de Plantagenet", *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* II (1965), p. 301-332.

⁹ *Crónica de Pedro*, p. 434.

When Pedro abandoned his French wife after two days in favor of his mistress and had Blanche put under house arrest, it was his mother who pleaded with him to return to her, to honor his marriage vows. Her commitment to this marriage, to the diplomatic alliance with France, is demonstrated amply by the fact that she joined with royal critics, including the Trastamarans, in humbling Pedro at Toro and coercing him, by force of arms, to return temporarily to Blanche. Openly criticizing her only son, risking his royal wrath, is not the course of a passive, maternal figure. In any event, Pedro reacted seriously to her opposition; she was forced to flee for her life to her ancestral lands in Portugal.¹⁰

Of Blanche, meanwhile, Ayala tells us very little. She was sixteen years old, beautiful and of the lineage of the kings of France (grand-daughter of Jean II and niece of Charles V). She is always referred to as the unfortunate princess, not much more than a piece of human baggage moved about from one luxurious prison to another until her death (presumed murder at the hands of Pedro) in 1359. Her most important role, according to the *Chronicles*, is as a symbol of the mounting opposition against the tyranny of Pedro. We know less about her, for instance, than about her escort on one of her peregrinations, a certain Juan Fernandez de Henestrosa. According to Ayala, he was a good knight, stable and sensible, and very much aware of the fears of the citizens of Toledo because he knew what a heavy burden it was on them the imprisonment of the Queen. At the same time, Blanche is afraid and confused, an unfortunate creature caught up in a swirl of events she could not comprehend.¹¹

Although she never did succeed in winning her liberty, she was not exactly the hopeless creature that Ayala would have us believe she was. Through bribery or some other artifice, she was able to smuggle letters out on a regular basis to her family and allies in France. It was in great part because of this correspondence that Pope Innocent VI personally took up her cause. In the end, he excommunicated Pedro for betraying his marriage vows and for his treatment of Blanche; and he urged all Castilians (and Christians), since they no longer owed vassalage to their excommunicated lord, to take up arms against him.¹² Unhappily for Blanche, it was not until after her death that the Pope and the French supplied the gold necessary to finance a successful campaign, under Enrique's banner, to overthrow Pedro's regime.

¹⁰ *Crónica de Pedro*, p 444.

¹¹ Pedro's behavior with regard to Blanche is currently attributed to the fact that the French princess did not bring with her to Castile the agreed upon amount of money (200,000 gold doblas) set in the dowry clause of their marriage contract. Given the political nature of the alliance (and the fact that Pedro was in desperate need of funds), his conduct seems less reprehensible. Ayala, of course, makes no mention whatsoever of the dowry issue. See *Crónica de Pedro*, p. 448ff.

¹² This extensive correspondence is collected in Georges Daumet, *Etude sur les relations d'Innocent VI avec le roi Pedro I de Castille au sujet de Blanche de Bourbon*, (Rome, 1897) and Jose Zunzunegui, *Monumenta Hispaniae Vaticana*, (Rome: Instituto Español de Estudios Eclesiásticos, 1970).

According to the mores of the times, including the precedent of his own father, what Pedro did in abandoning his political wife in favor of his first love was neither unusual nor worthy of such a furor. Part of the response, therefore, must be credited to the persistent lobbying efforts of Blanche. Had she been content to accept her assigned role, or willing to bide her time for revenge as María had, it is extremely unlikely that her case would have become such a *cause célèbre*.

As for the other party in this triangle, it is another María, María de Padilla. Described by Ayala as a "small, beautiful and sensible woman," he tells us that she was introduced to Pedro at an earlier date by that same bad counselor, Alburquerque, for the purpose of increasing his hold over the king.¹³ Be that as it may, María must have had something to do with the affair. They were both about sixteen when they met and they were to stay together devotedly until her death in 1361. She was to bear five children for the king and they were placed in line of succession by an act of the Cortes in 1358 when Pedro made the claim, supported by witnesses, that he and María had secretly been married before the ceremony with Blanche.¹⁴

During those eleven turbulent years that Pedro and María were together, she must have had a great deal of influence on her husband; but her role as advisor of the king is overshadowed by the maneuverings of her brothers, cousins, and uncles. María is merely seen as the connection between Pedro and those bitterly resented, low-born courtiers.¹⁵ To Ayala, María's relatives are the decision-makers, never María herself. Thus, while being spared any responsibility for Pedro's decision to abandon Blanche and the tragic events which would emanate from it, she also receives no credit for any of the positive aspects of Pedro's reign (some of which have prompted later commentators to rename him Pedro the Just). She is something of a non-person in Ayala's account, an object and not a subject, a blood-link with the bad counsellors, but not a bad counsellor herself.

Perhaps the most complete female profile given to us by Ayala is that of Leonor, Queen of Navarre, in an incident of relative unimportance, in that it never transcends the purely domestic. In 1375, her father, Enrique II of Castile, arranged her marriage to Carlos, heir to the Navarrese throne. Her name begins to appear frequently in the chronicle of her brother, Juan I, fifteen years after her wedding. In 1390, we are told, Leonor ignored her

¹³ *Crónica de Pedro*, p. 428.

¹⁴ See "El testamento del Rey Don Pedro de Castilla" in *Crónica de Pedro*, p. 593-598.

¹⁵ Even before Pedro's wedding, the presence of his mistress' relatives at court had become evident. From 1353 onward, Ayala refers to the Padillas as "los muy privados del Rey". Juan Fernández de Henestrosa, María's maternal uncle, became *Canciller Mayor* the the King's *Camarero*, serving Pedro well until his death in 1351. Diego García de Padilla, María's brother, was to occupy a post in the royal chamber (*Camarero*) from where he was promoted to the Mastership of Calatrava in 1354. Her bastard half-brother, Juan García de Villagera, received from a reluctant Master of Santiago that Order's *encomienda mayor* in February 1353; a year later, he was appointed by Pedro to the Mastership of that Order. Lastly, Juan Tenorio, another relative, was made *Repostero* in 1353; *Crónica de Pedro*, pp. 430, 499, 500.

husband's orders that she leave Castile, where she had spent the previous two years, and return to Navarre. At this point, for reasons not entirely clear, Ayala recounts in delicious detail the offers and counter offers of the feuding pair. We find out that Leonor had been allowed to travel to Castile with her four daughters and members of her household to recuperate from a recent illness, "in the air of her native land which, in the opinion of her physician, would be beneficial to her health." But, her husband claimed, since she had recovered completely and was enjoying excellent health, she must return to her lonely, "sad and disconsolate husband."¹⁶

Juan, who was the reluctant intermediary in this affair, promised the Navarrese that he would speak to his sister. So he did. To make her return more agreeable, he even promised Leonor an entourage that would accompany her during the journey and would stay on to serve her. Her reply was a lengthy one. She thanked her brother for his concern and reminded him of her past loyalty to her husband and his father, of how her goodwill, support and wealth (as well as Castile's) had been placed at their disposal and how they had abused the trust and generosity the Castilians had offered them so willingly. At this point, particularly in her assessment of the behavior of her father-in-law, Charles the Bad, she is revealed to us as a well-informed and politically sensitive individual. But this argument did not persuade her brother.

Continuing her complaints, she added that though she was sorry to admit it, her stay in Navarre had been most unpleasant. She was not received, nor had she been treated properly. The promised monthly allowance had failed to materialize and she had been forced to pawn her jewels to take care of her needs and those of her household. And if that were not enough, when she first became ill, she had been given toxic herbs by the king's personal physician and these almost had caused her death. Although she did not blame her husband for having a part in the misguided prescription ("God forbid that I should even think that"), she did have a grievance against him for "he did not do all he could to find out why the physician had ordered that cure." She seemed willing to return to Navarre only if Juan could guarantee her safety and well-being.

Moved by his sister's fears, Juan decided to consult with the Royal Council. Their conclusions were as follows: on the one hand, they could not recommend her return for they feared for her safety; on the other hand, if they refused, the king of Navarre could complain to the Pope and charge them with interfering in his legitimate rights as a husband, in which case the whole of Castile would be liable to excommunication!

After several days of deliberations, the Council determined that Leonor should return and that Carlos should agree to honor and protect his spouse and place in surety with Castilians several fortresses and towns to assure

¹⁶ Ayala, *Crónica del Rey Don Juan I*, BAE, vol. 67, p. 134.

compliance. When informed of this, an apprehensive Leonor replied that all the oaths and securities gave her little comfort; for what good would they do her if she were dead? Nevertheless, she appeared willing to resume conjugal life if the properties in question were placed in the hands of *her* relatives.

When informed of the Council's opinion, Carlos agreed to take any necessary oaths to bring his wife back, but he adamantly refused to compromise any of his territory. What would happen to Navarrese lands, he exclaimed, if his wife were to falsely accuse him of mistreatment?

Eventually Leonor surrendered her daughter and heir to Carlos, but she remained in Castile into the reign of her nephew, Enrique III, when, in 1395, she was expelled for meddling in political affairs. Ayala, who has showered us with great detail in his treatment of the marital difficulties of Leonor, tells us almost nothing about her political activities vis-a-vis Enrique. We know Leonor, the sister and reluctant wife; but Leonor, the political trouble-maker, remains unexplained.¹⁷

The last significant example is that of Catalina de Lancaster, Queen of Castile from 1390-1418. She was the daughter of the union of John of Gaunt and Constanza of Castile, herself the daughter and declared heir of Pedro I and María de Padilla. Thus, Catalina's marriage to Enrique de Trastámara's grandson represented a merger of the two lines of Alfonso XI, of the legitimate heirs and the bastard usurpers. On the Castilian side, this would breed legitimacy into the Trastamaran dynasty and end the claims of John of Gaunt to the throne; and, for the English, it would be a way of wooing a valuable ally away from France.

Catalina, at age fourteen, was betrothed to the nine-year old Enrique III later known as *El Doliente*, because of his sickly constitution. Ayala describes her as "handsome, tall and fair, of well-proportioned waist and graceful body..." but has little else to say about her. From other sources, chiefly her correspondence, we get a somewhat different image of her. She reveals herself as assertive and decisive, qualities which earned her the resentment of a significant segment of the Castilian nobility. During the course of a long, drawn-out custody battle, which focused on the question of who should have primary responsibility for the education of her son and heir, the future Juan II, Catalina defied her husband and tradition by insisting on dismissing his appointed tutors and supervising his education personally. Similarly, after her husband's death in 1407 she assumed her functions as co-regent of Castile with both seriousness and independence which often frustrated the designs of the other co-regent, the heroic Fernando de Antequera, future king of Aragon.*

Pedro López de Ayala died in 1407 and thus did not witness Catalina's

¹⁷ *Crónica de Juan I*, p. 232ff.

* This relationship has been given a fuller treatment in another paper devoted to Catalina.

audacious attempt to have a team of *letrados* under her employ prove her son's legal right to a claim on the throne of Aragon (and thus unite the two peninsular kingdoms of Castile and Aragon under one monarch), an idea whose time had not come. But it is likely that this bold step would have been criticized, if not ignored, by that chronicler. His nephew and successor Fernán Pérez de Guzmán, author of the *Chronicle of Juan II*, consistently portrays Catalina in the most unflattering and unfavorable light, choosing to concentrate his remarks on the Queen's fatness, masculinity and rather unpleasant physical appearance.

Ayala, a product of the last year of the chivalric age, spares us such harsh judgements by always being gallant. And this is one of the primary reasons why he fails as a portrayor of women. Prone to have an idealized sense of womanhood, and a severely limited and traditional idea of the role of women in society, he was unable to perceive them as they really were. Living in an age of plague, civil war, fratricide, subterfuge and assassination, a time when life could truly be described as nasty, brutish and short, Ayala remained true to the standards of the age: it would have been unthinkable to attribute a generous portion of those ills to the deeds and character of women—their rivalries, their ambitions, their greed, their loyalty, their valor and their sense of power.

Among the other sources that have been used in this paper for comparison with the official *Chronicles* of Ayala are letters and other personal documents. Although his works are an indispensable tool for the study of this period, it is only through the use of supplementary materials that one can update his rather narrow approach. This effort is just beginning; as new evidence is introduced, the role of women and other neglected subjects will be reassessed. Ayala's version, thorough as it is, will thus be greatly enhanced.

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