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Eight Centuries of Portuguese Literature: An Overview

HELDER MACEDO

Portugal was a by-product of the Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. In the 11th century, Henry, a younger son of the Duke of Burgundy, joined the campaign of King Alfonso VI of León and Castile in the fight against the Moors. As a reward, he was married to the king's illegitimate daughter, Teresa, and was given as a dowry a territory then integrated into Galicia, becoming Count of Portugal in 1093. Henry's son Afonso Henriques (1109–85) conducted a series of brilliant campaigns both against the royal power of León-Castile and against the Moors. In 1139 he was proclaimed king of Portugal. León-Castile recognised the new kingdom in 1143 and a papal bull of 1179 acknowledged Afonso Henriques as the first king of Portugal. His successors consolidated the kingdom's independence, expanding its territory to what are virtually Portugal's present frontiers, in a process that culminated with the conquest of the Algarve in 1249–50. A new dynasty, the Dynasty of Aviz, which came to power in the course of a civil war of resistance to Portugal's annexation by Castile in 1383–85, initiated the European imperial expansion that shaped the modern world.

The language of this small country has become the official language of more than two hundred million people in four continents. It has a literary tradition going back some eight centuries that began in a language not yet distinguishable from its Galician roots and gave rise to a remarkable poetic flowering which lasted from the early thirteenth century to the middle of the fourteenth century. Practitioners in other areas of the Iberian Peninsula included King Alfonso X of Castile (1221–84), later known as 'the Learned' (*el Sabio*), who commissioned the famous *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. The secular *cantigas*, collected in three *Cancioneiros*, are divided into three main categories: *cantigas de amigo* (literally 'songs of the lover'), *cantigas de amor* ('songs of love'), which are often compared with the Provençal love lyric, and *cantigas de escarnho e maldizer* ('songs of mockery and slander'), which are frequently slanderous, bawdy and misogynistic.

The most original features of Galician-Portuguese lyricism are found in the *cantigas de amigo*, poems in the female voice written by male authors, in which an underlying oral and musical tradition is incorporated into a literary genre that is highly sophisticated psychologically and strictly prescribed in poetic terms. In a distinctive subgroup of these miniature masterpieces, patterns based on parallel verses, refrain and word-repetition are modulated to define metaphorical correspondences with natural surroundings and human feelings. A factual sea and the plausible ships sailing on it become metaphors for lovers' meetings; hair and fountains are emblems of female sexuality; the phallic flowers of 'the green pine' announce the arrival of the woman's beloved; the wind blows into the water the intimate garments of a nubile and amorous maiden or, in an equivalent sexual metaphor, a mountain deer stirs the waters of a fountain. The dramatic personification inherent in these poems of latent animistic significance can be understood as a narcissistic male usurpation of the female or as a male projection into the female. In either case, they transpose the subjectivity of love into an objective expression of feeling. Practitioners are drawn from all social classes, ranging from King Dinis (1261–1325), grandson of Alfonso the Learned and founder of the first Portuguese university in 1288, to enigmatic minstrels like Martin Codax. Many poets move from one genre to another, each distinguished by its different and even opposed attitudes to women (deification in the *cantigas de amor*, degradation in the *cantigas de escarnho*, and identification in the *cantigas de amigo*). Some even make poems combining the attitudes of all three genres, as when João Garcia de Guilhade uses the female voice of the *cantiga de amigo* with the tone of a *cantiga de escarnho*, to make fun of the stereotyped male attitudes of the *cantigas de amor*.

Portugal shared the European medieval tradition of chivalric literature and religious edification through adaptations and fragmentary translations. The development of Portuguese prose is largely attributable to the contribution of Dom Pedro, Count of Barcelos, the illegitimate son of King Dinis who was responsible for a genealogical work, the *Livro de Linhagens* (*The Book of Lineages*), and a Portuguese version of a chronicle of Spain, the *Crónica Geral de Espanha*. In these formative works, historical record blends with the magical and symbolic, as in the complex narrative of events leading to the fall of the last Visigothic king and the invasion of the Peninsula by the Moors of North Africa, adapted from an Arabic chronicle by Mohammed Ar-Razi (887–935?).

Historical record and literary construction were to converge in the chronicles of Fernão Lopes, a commoner who was born circa 1380 and died circa 1459. To use the term 'chronicles' to designate a vast tetralogy in which this prodigious narrator depicts the transformation of a medieval kingdom into a new nation forged by the collective will of its people is not wrong, but it is as reductive as it would be to consider Shakespeare's history plays

as dramatised chronicles rather than as dramatic representations of history. Situated in the context of the Hundred Years War and giving considerable attention to the English intervention in the Iberian Peninsula, the historical period covered by Fernão Lopes encompasses the reigns of Pedro I (1320–67) and Fernando (1348–83); the dynastic crisis of 1383–85; and the reign of the founder of a new dynasty, João I (1357–1433). Conceptually, the work centres on the dynastic crisis, which, in accordance with prevailing rules on succession, would have led to the annexation of Portugal by Castile since the heiress-apparent was married to the Castilian king. A majority of the Portuguese aristocracy sided with Castile while a large group of the population, drawn initially mainly from urban areas but later including some of the less favoured minor nobility and people from rural areas, took up arms against this technically legitimate succession. The least likely of the potential claimants to the Portuguese throne, Dom João, Master of Avis (the illegitimate son of King Pedro I and a commoner), emerged from the resulting civil war and Castilian invasion as the king legitimised by popular will, marking the beginning of what Fernão Lopes characterised as a new age.

Fernão Lopes wrote his chronicles at the behest of the future king Duarte (1391–1438), son of João I and of Philippa of Lancaster, daughter of John of Gaunt. The implicit purpose of this commission was to legitimise the anomaly of the people's election of a king who had acquired his right to govern through rebellion and the force of arms. With supreme literary mastery, Fernão Lopes transforms the factual sequence of Portugal's history up to his own time into a demonstration of its historical legitimacy: the historical outcome is legitimised in an innovative concept of justice as equity, with equity seen as the service of the collectivity, and the benefit of the collectivity as the justification of royal power. In this way Fernão Lopes gives a new dimension to the concept of royal charisma, seeing the imponderable quality that makes a man a king among men as an actuating quality whose absence deprives a king of his royalty. This was the same problem that Shakespeare confronted more than a century and a half later in *Richard II*, a tragedy on the legitimacy of power and royal charisma centred on a dynastic crisis that was contemporaneous with the crisis in Portugal and led to the accession to the English throne of the first cousin of the Avis princes, Henry Bolingbroke. The chronicles of Fernão Lopes are a foundational work: in signifying the transformation of the old feudal order into a new national order they can be seen as a pioneering example of the Renaissance epic that was to culminate in Tasso and Camões. They also have something of the quality of a *Bildungsroman*, the process of apprenticeship unfolding not so much in the development of a single hero as in that of the collectivity, represented from generation to generation by paradigmatic characters and social groups who determine the course of history. Extraordinary individual portraits are placed alongside marvellous descrip-

tions of mass movements, with a capacity for psychological analysis and visualisation of action possibly equalled only in nineteenth-century fiction.

King Duarte, whose remarkable brothers included Prince Henry the Navigator and Prince Pedro, the cosmopolitan traveller whose treatise on the virtues of benefaction, *A Virtuosa Benfeitoria*, was a forerunner of a civic humanism inspired by Cicero, left a collection of essays, *O Leal Conselheiro* (*The Loyal Counsellor*), which contains perceptive analyses of feelings and behaviour, and includes a remarkable description of the ‘melancholy humour’ from which he suffered and of how he cured it. He tackles moral issues raised by the concept of the ‘just war’ and the limits of religious freedom, and analyses a wide range of beliefs and superstitions in what can only be described as a spirit of rationalist humanism, with an emphasis on the value of experience as the basis of knowledge.

With the generation of the Princes of Avis, Portugal began its overseas expansion, at first in North Africa, in pursuit of what was essentially a policy of conquest of neighbouring territories suitable for occupation. Subsequent exploration of the African coast in search of a sea route to India initiated a policy of armed trade and development of the slave trade, particularly after the beginning of the colonisation of Brazil in 1500. The two policies were seen as complementary but if the policy of occupying lands in North Africa had been successful it could have contributed to the economic welfare of the common people whereas expansion of overseas trade led to the creation of a financial hierarchy in a domestically impoverished rural country. The negative consequences of empire building became evident only gradually, however, and in its golden age Portugal was in the vanguard of naval technology, mathematics, and geographical knowledge in Renaissance Europe.

The chronicles of Fernão Lopes mark the beginning of an outstanding tradition of historical literature, which includes accounts by some astute observers with personal experience of the Empire, like Gaspar Correia (1495–1564), Fernão Lopes de Castanheda (1510–59) and Diogo do Couto (1542–1616). The foremost chronicler of the period was João de Barros (c.1496–1570), who used the methods of a modern researcher, consulting documentary sources. Most famous for his monumental *Décadas da Ásia* (*Asia: The Four Decades*), he was the author of many other works, including a celebrated allegorical chivalrous romance (*Clarimundo*), a daring philosophical debate on religion (*Ropica Pnefma* (*Spiritual Merchandise*)), and a Grammar of Portuguese. A reader of Erasmus, whose *Praise of Folly* he admiringly mentions, and of Thomas More, whose *Utopia* he characterises as a ‘modern fable designed to teach the English how to govern themselves’, this historian of empire seems to anticipate the end of empires when he comments, as a justification for his Grammar, that the arms and stone pillars that Portugal had scattered throughout the world were material things that time could destroy, but the Portuguese language would not so easily be destroyed by time.

The works of the Portuguese chroniclers not only provide an inestimably valuable historical record of Europe's first encounters with other peoples in other continents and fill significant gaps in the historiography of these peoples – it would be difficult, for instance, to write the history of the Ottoman Empire without referring to Portuguese Renaissance historiographers – but also reflect the increasing political, cultural, religious and ethnic complexity of Portuguese society during the period of discovery and expansion. Under João II (1455–95), who consolidated royal power, the discovery of a sea route to India became a tangible reality when Portuguese caravels rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488; it was also during his reign that, with supreme arrogance, the world still unknown to Europeans was divided between Portugal and Spain by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). In the Peninsular context, the period encompassed such momentous events as the unification of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478; and, in 1492, the fall of Granada, marking the end of the long process of *Reconquista*, the discovery of the Americas by Columbus, and the expulsion of the Moors and Jews from Spain. In the rest of Europe, this period was characterised by major controversies and religious wars in Christendom consequent upon the dissident Protestant movements within the Roman Church, reformation attempts at the heart of what came to be known as 'Catholicism' in opposition to 'Protestantism', and the strict orthodoxy of the Counter-Reformation.

King João II allowed Jews expelled from Spain to enter Portugal, encouraging settlement by the wealthier among them and those with professions considered useful, while prescribing that all the others would be reduced to servitude if they did not leave the country after a short period of transit. His successor, King Manuel I (1469–1521), carried out a policy of fostering mixed marriages designed to achieve the peaceful integration of Jews into all levels of Portuguese society, but he also resorted to forced conversion and 'confiscation' of the children of those who refused to convert. The percentage of 'New Christians' increased substantially, although many continued to practise their Jewish faith in secret and, as later Portuguese Inquisition records were to show, many women of Jewish origin educated their children in their secret faith and led their Christian husbands to 'Judaise'.

The expulsion from Spain led to the intensification of the old Jewish millenarian tradition, which found fertile soil in Portugal in a Christian millenarianism of Joachimite origin in which the advent of the Age of the Holy Spirit could be understood as corresponding to the advent of the Messiah. Medieval Spanish Cabbalism, with its controversial female personification of the divine, was virtually neutralised by Jewish orthodoxy but found renewed favour among the communities expelled from Spain. In a parallel development within Spanish and Portuguese Christianity, the *Alumbrados* ('Enlightened') practised a heterodox form of worship of the female personification of

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