

THE DEAD QUEEN or THE LOVE STORY OF PEDRO AND INES

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Most stories begin with the well-known phrase "once upon a time ...". Ours will begin differently because " ... this is another story " that will take us back again to the romantic and old city of Coimbra (see NATO Bulletin OTAN, October 1995). And if we have chosen to tell such a story in February, a month dear to lovers... well, so much the better, because it is about a tale of passion we are going to write.

Don Pedro was the grandson of King Dinis and Queen Santa Isabel, and the son of Afonso IV of Portugal. In those days, most of the disputes existing between Portugal and the various kingdoms of Spain, predominantly with Castile, would take an end through marriage agreements between the Spanish and the Portuguese nobility. Not always, however, would these political alliances meet their purpose, and it is what happened from 1336 to 1338.

Under an agreement between Portugal and Castile, the Portuguese King Afonso IV would give his eldest daughter Dona Maria in marriage to King Afonso XI of Castile; in exchange, the Portuguese crown Prince Don Pedro was to marry Dona Branca, a sister cousin to the king of Castile. For political reasons, however, the marriage of Don Pedro to Dona Branca was cancelled, and a new one arranged with Dona Constança, the daughter of a Castilian noble and political opposer to the King of Castile.

Afonso XI of Castile did not like the situation and held Dona Constança prisoner, preventing her from travelling to Portugal, although her marriage to Don Pedro had already legally been concluded by proxy. This attitude was too offensive to the Portuguese King Afonso IV who, albeit very reluctantly (he had tried very hard to keep peace with the various Spanish kingdoms during his ruling), sided with Aragon in the war against Castile. Such quarrels, however, were short-lived and not very harmful to the various contenders, because a more dangerous enemy was emerging at that time from Africa: the Sultan of Morocco.

A honourable truce, with no winners or losers, had then to be hurriedly negotiated, so that they might face their common enemy; and Dona Constança was finally allowed to come to Portugal and join Don Pedro whom she had married in 1336.

And here we are, at the very beginning of our today's story, which actually begins in 1340, when Dona Constança arrived in Portugal. In her suite of nobles and ladies was the beautiful Inês de Castro, with whom Don Pedro fell madly in love.

This extra-marital liaison of the prince did not please his father, who had strongly conducted a moral crusade against similar licentious situations (Afonso IV is the only Portuguese king, at least so far as we known, not to have sired illegitimate children). Inês was therefore sent in exile from the royal Court to the castle of Albuquerque, where she lived until the death of Dona Constança in 1345, having then returned to Coimbra to live with Pedro, to whom she had already borne three sons.

In 1354, Don Pedro was offered the crown of Castile, in the context of a conspiracy

organised against its King Pedro I, nicknamed the Cruel, and the noble who came to Portugal in charge of that mission was a brother of Inês de Castro. While many aspects of this conspiracy remain somehow unclear, its main motivation no doubt was revulsion at the King's harsh persecution of the nobility, from which cruelty not even his own half-brothers were spared.

It is therefore in this environment of intrigue, quarrels and family disputes that the murder of Inês takes place on 7 January 1355. Two major political reasons have normally been invoked to explain this tragedy. First, the growing power of the Castros did not please most of the Portuguese nobility, who feared the influence they might have on Pedro once he had become king; second, the danger incurred by his legitimate son, the young Prince Fernando, should the political faction attached to the Castro family try to eliminate him in favour of installing one of Inês's sons in the line of succession to the throne.

Whatever may be the true reason of her death, the fact is that it was not difficult for the Portuguese nobility to convince Afonso IV of the need to execute Inês. Accompanied by nobles and men-at-arms, he then went to Coimbra to announce her the decision taken. Moved by her youth and by love to his grandchildren, he was about to revoke his verdict when three of his nobles - Diogo Lopes Pacheco, Alvaro Gonçalves and Pero Coelho - again insisted that the sentence be carried out. The old King Afonso IV was no longer a man of strong will and gave in to their demand. Alvaro Gonçalves and Pero Coelho promptly killed Inês, without any compassion or regard for the three innocent children, who saw their mother being brutally murdered in front of their eyes.

This is the third reason usually invoked for her murder: the three men feared the subsequent reprisals, should Don Pedro learn that they had even dared to conspire against Inês's life. This historical tragedy is, however, bathed in mists of legend, so it is held by some historians that Inês was put to death with all due forms, after a verdict having been delivered by the King. Be that as it may, not very many historical events have ever had the impact of Inês's death and turned the accomplishment of a royal sentence into a situation of such a dramatical dimension: the victim is innocent and is killed, not because of her own faults, but to quell the fear of the nobles should Inês live to testify against them.

Don Pedro's reaction was violent: he took up arms against his father, and it was not until the country was ravaged that peace was restored. The Prince had however gained some power, namely that of exercising justice and of legislating. It dates back to this period the establishment of the royal assent, a prerogative of the Portuguese royalty by which no document emanating from the Pope could be rendered public in Portugal without the King's prior approval.

When in 1357 Don Pedro was proclaimed King of Portugal, he immediately set out on the hunt for the three murderous nobles. They had escaped to Castile, and only two could be arrested. Don Pedro had their hearts torn out: one from the front, the other from the back. The third noble survived; it is rumoured that in fact he had not taken part in the murdering act and had even tried to dissuade his companions from carrying it through.

Pedro announced publicly in Coimbra that he had married Inês secretly, which was confirmed by witnesses, although again some legend persists, since no written evidence has ever been found. And we know that Rome did not recognize the marriage. He then had Inês's remains transferred from the monastery of Santa Clara in Coimbra to the monastery of Alcobaça, where he had meanwhile ordered the construction of two sumptuous tombs.

All the way from Coimbra to Alcobça, the nobility and the people, who honoured her as a Queen, accompanied the body of Inês. This was the last homage Don Pedro could render to the woman he had so passionately loved: while separated in life, they would for ever be together in death.

If a mysterious and legendary atmosphere always surrounded this love story, the historical facts however speak for themselves, and this tragedy has long been a source of inspiration to Portuguese writers, like **António Ferreira** and film producers, having crossed borders through time to feed as well the imagination of others such as the French writer **Henri de Montherlant**, who took it as the subject of his tragedy "La Reine Morte". More recently, the great English composer **James MacMillan**, again used Inês's tragedy this time as the subject of his first great opera which was first played at the 1996 Edinburgh Festival; then in London, Liverpool, Cork, South Carolina and Sydney, before being played in Portugal in 2001, during the celebration of Porto as European Capital of Culture.

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