

# REPRESENTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL IDENTITY IN THE EARLY MODERN IBERIAN WORLD

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María de Aragon (b. 1403 –d. 1445),  
Queen of Castile and Leonor de Aragon  
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María de Aragon (b. 1403–d. 1445),  
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The construction of the political identity of queens consort was a long and complex process, paramount to their subsequent performance and relevance in the configuration of monarchical power (Pelaz Flores 2013: 265). In this chapter we will discuss how two sisters – María (b. 1403–d. 1445) and Leonor (b. 1405/1408–d. 1445) of Aragon – used the visual media at their disposal (clothing and attire, palace decoration, religious ritual and patronage, royal ceremony) to build different political identities in the realms of their husbands, Juan II of Castile (r. 1406–1454) and Duarte of Portugal (r.1433–1438). We will argue that to fulfil the interests of both their spouses and their original family, María projected herself as a Castilian *infanta* while Leonor built up the image of an Aragonese princess. As a result, they ruled peacefully as partners of their husbands for a few years. Yet at a certain moment of their lives the support they gave to their siblings, who had a very specific agenda, led to their Castilian/Aragonese connections being perceived as dangerous for the monarchy in both kingdoms. In consequence, they ceased to be able to exercise their political role fully and eventually withdrew from Court. This caused them to be unfavourably judged by contemporary chroniclers and modern historians alike.

Castilian sources on María are quite numerous and varied – chronicles, charters, letters, inventories – allowing us to reconstruct how this queen built her image through the riches of her dress and ornaments, the sumptuousness of her chamber, her role as mediator and many other elements. This helps to contextualize and give meaning to the comparatively scarce indications that the Portuguese sources present on Leonor's self-representation, firstly as queen consort and later as queen regent. Nevertheless, the political context in which they lived was very different and it conditioned the role they played in each of the kingdoms. Therefore, we will begin by describing the diverging conditions that

surrounded the marriages of these two Aragonese princesses to the kings of Castile and Portugal. We will then proceed to analyse how each of them attempted to build and project a strong image as queen. Finally, we will discuss the factors that led to their failure and evaluate the reasons for their bad reputation among medieval chroniclers and modern historians.

### Taking possession of the four Christian Iberian kingdoms

María and Leonor were the only daughters of Fernando (b. 1380–d. 1416), second son of Juan I of Castile and Leonor of Aragon; their mother was Leonor Urraca (b. 1374–d. 1435), countess of Albuquerque and the wealthiest heiress in Castile at her time. Their other siblings were all male: Alfonso (b. 1396–d. 1458), Juan (b. 1398–d. 1479), Enrique (b. 1400–d. 1445), Sancho (b. 14??–d. 1416) and Pedro (b. 14??–d. 1438) (Benito Ruano 2002: 95–110). Prince Fernando gained great wealth and power through his father, and his wife brought him still more wealth and vassals (Muñoz Gómez 2016: 55–65). When his brother Enrique III (r. 1390–1406) died suddenly in 1406 leaving as heir a one-year-old infant, Fernando's status and authority was greatly enhanced as he became co-regent of the realm along with Queen Catalina of Lancaster (–1372–1418), the mother of the child king Juan II (Echevarría 2002: 93–117).

During his co-regency, Prince Fernando managed to secure good marriages and positions for his children: the betrothal of María of Castile (1401–1458) to his elder son Alfonso, which had been proposed by Enrique III in his will, was solemnly proclaimed in 1408; that same year Sancho was made Master of the military order of Alcántara and, in 1409, Enrique was made Master of the military order of Santiago (Ryder 1990: 3; Porras Arboledas 2009: 43–47). Fernando also pursued negotiations with Carlos III of Navarre (r. 1387–1425) to marry his second son Juan to Isabel of Navarre (1395–1435), but this project was later abandoned in favour of a marriage to Queen Giovanna II of Naples (r. 1414–1435) (Woodacre 2013: 91).

In 1412 Fernando was made king of Aragon through an arbitral sentence known as the *Compromiso de Caspe*<sup>2</sup> and adopted the name of Ferrán I (González Sánchez 2012: 117). From then on, his children were known as the *Infantes de Aragón* (Princes of Aragon) although they had been brought up and educated in a totally Castilian environment, and the family kept many estates, titles and functions, as well as a great number of supporters in Castile. Ferrán I died in 1416 and his heir Alfonso became King Alfons V of Aragon (r. 1416–1458). Queen Leonor Urraca then returned to Castile with her younger children to help them attain positions within the Castilian nobility and further promote the interests of the lineage (Muñoz Gómez 2016: 165–173).

Once more this was attempted through a policy of marriage ties. With the death of Ferrán I, Queen Catalina of Lancaster had become the sole regent at the Castilian court and for two years she attempted to resist the pressure of the

Aragonese court faction that she should marry the young king Juan II to María de Aragón. Instead she sought an alternative bride for the king in Portugal: Princess Isabel (1397–1471), the daughter of her half-sister Queen Filipa of Lancaster (1360–1415) (Silva 2011: 287–288). Unfortunately, when she died in 1418 and the Aragonese faction became dominant, the two youngsters were immediately betrothed (Muñoz Gómez 2016: 169). The following year, Juan II turned 14 and he dismissed the Regency Council and started ruling on his own, at least theoretically (Porras Arboledas 2009: 79–80).

In fact, the influence of the Aragonese faction became stronger than ever at the Court. The Infante de Aragon, Juan, was also duke of Peñafiel and lord of Lara, and thereby the head of the Castilian nobility. Having been rejected by Giovanna II, he was still seeking a bride who could assure of him a throne and he turned once more to Navarre, despite having abandoned a former bride almost at the foot of the altar. Negotiations were concluded swiftly and in 1420 he travelled there to marry Blanca (r. 1425–1441), heir to the throne (Woodacre 2013: 91–94). Profiting from his absence, his brother Enrique undertook the so-called *atraco de Tordesillas* (Tordesillas coup): he surrounded Juan II with his own supporters and sent away the other counsellors and officials of the king. He also forced his cousin Catalina of Castile (b. 1403–d. 1439) to take him as her husband in church (Álvarez Palenzuela 2002: 46–49). At this point, the three princes of Castile were married to their cousins of Aragon.

Yet a few weeks later the king managed to escape this confinement with the help of his *privado* (favourite) Álvaro de Luna, who had not been sent away because he was initially considered harmless.<sup>3</sup> Juan II did not feel strong enough to act against Enrique immediately and searched for the support of Juan, who was outraged that his brother had tried to control the king for his exclusive benefit. Enrique was eventually imprisoned in 1422 under the accusation of conspiring with the Muslims of Granada against his king, an accusation which was later recognized as false (Álvarez Palenzuela 2002: 49–55).

That same year, King João I of Portugal (r. 1385–1433) contacted the widowed queen of Aragon, Leonor Urraca, to propose the marriage of his heir Duarte to her younger daughter, Leonor. At that time, the king of Portugal was seeking to transform the truce he had obtained from Castile in 1411 into a permanent peace treaty and he wanted to ensure he had the military support of another Iberian kingdom in case things went wrong and war broke out again. A preliminary agreement was obtained and negotiations began between João I and Alfons V of Aragon, which lasted until February 1428, when agreement was finally reached. The result was not only a marriage contract, but also an alliance between three kingdoms (Portugal, Aragon and Navarre) and their royal families as it was signed not only by the monarchs but also by all the princes of both sides: João I, Duarte, Pedro, Henrique, João and Fernando of Portugal; Alfons V, Enrique, Pedro and Leonor of Aragon; and Juan, formerly prince of Aragon but by then king consort of Navarre since his wife had become queen

regnant of that kingdom in 1425 (Duarte 2007: 143–147). At this stage, the late Prince Fernando's children ruled the four Christian Iberian kingdoms, either as kings or as the kings' consorts.

These negotiations lasted for six long years because of the political turmoil that persisted in Castile. When Alfons V heard that Enrique had been imprisoned he demanded his liberation and urged his brother the Infante Juan to help him force Juan II to free their brother. At first, Juan did not comply, not wanting to risk his position at the Castilian Court. Thus, in June 1425 Alfons V issued a proclamation against Álvaro de Luna, whom he accused of manipulating the Castilian king for his benefit and of having forged the documents that were used against Enrique. He also started preparing for war. Juan II's counselors dispatched the Infante Juan to Alfons V to negotiate an agreement that would prevent a military confrontation (Ryder 1990: 126–127). Yet, in September that year Carlos III of Navarre died and Blanca was proclaimed queen. As she sent the royal banner and surcoat to Juan for him to use as king consort, Alfons V had him proclaimed king of Navarre in the Aragonese military camp (Woodacre 2013: 95–96). Fearing that he would have to fight two kings and their armies instead of one, Juan II agreed to free Enrique and return to him and his wife their positions and possessions in Castile. Eventually he also allowed Princess Leonor, along with her mother Leonor Urraca, to travel to Aragon to prepare for her wedding to the Portuguese Prince Duarte (Muñoz Gómez 2016: 180–181).

### **Assuming an Aragonese and a Castilian identity**

In May 1428 Leonor of Aragon, while en route to Portugal to meet her husband, travelled to Valladolid to visit the king of Castile. Juan II organized a feast in her honour that lasted for almost three months. The celebration was described in detail by the chroniclers of the time because it provided an occasion for Juan II of Castile, Juan of Navarre and Enrique of Aragon to compete in displays of magnificence and chivalric bravery (Ruiz 1988, 1991). We know that their wives – María of Aragon, Blanca of Navarre, Catalina of Castile – as well as the Princess Leonor of Aragon were also present at the banquets, jousts and other festivities. Regrettably, almost nothing is said about their attitude or attire.

When Leonor eventually left for Portugal, Juan II presented her with a number of gifts – jewels, precious fabrics and three thousand gold florins to pay for her travel expenses – as well as providing her with a new escort of 150 mounted men whose expenses were also paid by him (Pérez de Guzmán 1877: 447). Apparently, neither Juan nor Enrique accompanied her to her new kingdom. Yet we know that Alfons V had insisted to his brothers that their sister's wedding had to be arranged 'by their hand', meaning by the Aragonese (Duarte 2007: 156). Letting her enter Portugal with a Castilian escort meant taking the risk of allowing her to be seen by her future subjects as a Castilian, i.e. an

enemy and this is exactly what happened: a conflict arose between some of the Castilians and the Portuguese who joined the escort once it crossed the border. Antipathy from the conflict that had ended in 1411 was still strong and some of the local inhabitants exacerbated this situation by coming to help their fellow countrymen. Peace was only restored with some difficulty (Pérez de Guzmán 1877: 447–448).

Alfons V was not the only one who wanted his sister to be perceived as an Aragonese princess, as Duarte did too. When plague struck the city of Évora where preparations for the wedding were underway, Prince Duarte had to find another location for the wedding. He chose Coimbra and the monastery of the Poor Clares that had been founded there by Queen Isabel of Aragon (1270–1336) to highlight the family tie between the two women, although they were, in fact, very distantly related.<sup>4</sup> When Prince Henrique – better known today as Henry *the Navigator* – described the ceremony in a letter to his absent father, he highlighted how Leonor's quarters were the royal palace that Queen Isabel had built next to the monastery. He wrote that

it seemed as if she was getting married from inside the household of Queen Isabel who came from Aragon. And we all understood that, because of the sanctity of the said Queen Isabel, this was done as well and as honourably as if from her household.

*(Monumenta Henricina 1961: 258)*

Leonor herself was evidently conscious of the necessity of being perceived as an Aragonese and acted accordingly. In her first Christmas at the Portuguese Court, she was finally received by King João I with a series of festivities. At the same time, a Burgundian embassy arrived to propose the marriage of Duke Philippe *le Bon* (the Good) (r. 1419–1467) to Princess Isabel of Portugal. A member of this embassy recorded how Leonor and her ladies-in-waiting arrived at Estremoz, where the Court was in residence, dressed 'according to the Aragonese fashion' (Paviot 1995: 512). However, it is not clear exactly what this meant. Carmen Bernis Madrazo, who studied Spanish dress during the Middle Ages, did not differentiate between Castilian, Aragonese or Navarrese dress (Bernis Madrazo 1955). In turn, Juan Vicente García Marsilla, a specialist on the history of Aragonese dress during the reign of Alfons V, states that this king followed 'cosmopolitan fashion', having French tailors and shoemakers, and Italian embroiderers and goldsmiths. However, his wife, María of Castile, employed mainly local craftsmen, and it was to one of them – Joan de Verges – that Alfons V entrusted the manufacture of a *cota* (kirtle) in scarlet velvet for his sister Leonor in March 1426, when she arrived in Aragon to make preparations for her wedding (García Marsilla 2007: 366–372).<sup>5</sup> We may assume that Leonor took to Portugal in her trousseau a few of these luxurious dresses to impress her new subjects.

For her part, María of Aragon never had to endorse an Aragonese identity at the Castilian Court or before foreign visitors. She had married Juan II not to strengthen the bonds between Castile and Aragon but to promote her lineage's interests in Castile. Therefore, she identified herself and was perceived as a member of the Castilian senior nobility in the same manner as her brothers, despite their common designation as *Infantes de Aragón*. For example, among the objects that she used to decorate her chamber there was a carpet that bore her mother's coat of arms as countess of Albuquerque (Pelaz Flores 2012: 113, n. 10). María did not have these arms erased and replaced by hers; she did not feel the need to hide her Castilian origins. Yet most of the fabrics and silver plate in her treasury that were adorned with coats of arms displayed those of María: half Aragonese half Castilian (Pelaz Flores 2012: 115, n. 19).

Given that a selection of objects that had unquestionably belonged to her mother were to be found amongst María's possessions, it might be assumed that the same was the case for Leonor, but we have no sources to certify this. Her matrimonial contract referred to the 'jewels, fabrics and pearls, gems and liveries of her household and officials' that she would take to Portugal and would always be considered her own property, meaning that she would be able to leave them in her last will and testament to whom she pleased (*Monumenta Henricina* 1961: 188–189). No list of these possessions survived but we know that some of them came from the part of her mother's treasury that had been kept at the Monastery of Guadalupe following Leonor Urraca's return to Castile after the death of her husband. The widowed queen of Aragon had left them there as security for a loan raised circa 1424 to help free her son Enrique from prison. In 1426, the jewels and other items that were destined for Leonor were redeemed and sent to Aragon (Nieto Soria 1997: 45–47). None of these alluded to the Castilian origins of the family, while a few were decorated with the arms of Barcelona and had probably been gifts of the city council to the former queen (Nieto Soria 1997: 59–60). This was undoubtedly a conscious choice, made to underscore the Aragonese facet of Leonor's identity, rather than the Castilian one that was stressed in María's case.

## Performing queenship

While the circumstances of their marriages were quite different and led them to assume distinctive identities from the very outset of their reigns, during their life as consorts María and Leonor adhered to a similar model of queenship, one they had learned from their mother. The most important function of a queen was to provide the kingdom with males to inherit the throne and females to make alliances with other realms, and the two sisters complied by giving birth to as many children as they could. Married in 1420 at the age of seventeen, María had three children almost in a row: Catalina (b. 1422), Leonor (b. 1423) and Enrique (b. 1425), but only the future king survived early childhood (Pelaz Flores 2017:

301–303). Yet the growing interference of the king's favourite Álvaro de Luna in her conjugal relations with Juan II – he was accused by chronicler Pérez de Guzmán of preventing the king from sleeping with his wife – eventually drove them apart (Pérez de Guzmán 1998: 171).

In contrast, only death kept Leonor away from her husband. Married between the ages of 20 and 23, she had her first child less than a year after the wedding and she was pregnant when Duarte was struck by the plague. Of her nine children, five reached adulthood: the future King Afonso V (r. 1438–1481); Fernando (b. 1433); Leonor (b. 1434), who became empress by marrying Friedrich III Habsburg (emperor 1452–1493); Catarina (b. 1436), who remained single and Joana (b. 1439), who became queen of Castile by marrying her first cousin Enrique IV (r. 1454–1474), María's son (Rodrigues 2012: 84, 105–107).

Leonor's affection for and fidelity to her husband were never put in doubt, not even during the fight for the regency that followed Duarte's death, when all sorts of arguments were used to delegitimize her and exalt Prince Pedro. As for María, her reputation was called into question during the struggle for royal authority that marked Enrique IV's last years of reign. A contest for power broke out between his half-siblings Alfonso (b. 1453–d. 1468) and Isabel (the future *Catholic Queen*, r. 1474–1504) on one side, and the king and his daughter Juana of Castile (b. 1462–d. 1530) on the other. Defamation was one of the weapons used and both Enrique's and Juana's legitimacy was questioned.<sup>6</sup> The Chronicler Alonso de Palencia, one of Isabel's supporters, did not hesitate to defame the king's mother in order to question his right to rule and transmit his royal authority to his progeny, however no one else continued with this false accusation (Pelaz Flores 2017: 107–108).

In fact, both queens' reputations appear to have been untainted while they acted solely as the dedicated partners of their husbands without interfering in the governance of their kingdoms. Leonor remained very close to Duarte throughout his reign. Even if her itinerancy (as the court moved around the country) was much more restricted than his, they were never apart for too long (Rodrigues 2012: 111–118). This was also the case with María during the first part of Juan II's reign (Pelaz Flores 2017: 124–130). The joint itinerancy of the royal couple and their children projected the image of a loving and cohesive royal family that was very important for the stability of the kingdom. But even when the two sisters travelled separately from their spouses, María and Leonor still represented the monarchy and through their visits to urban communities, sanctuaries and noble houses they contributed to strengthen the bonds that linked the three estates of the realm – People, Church and Nobility – to the Crown. This courtly role was paramount and following their arrival at their respective kingdoms everything possible was done to exalt the new queen consorts through ceremonial, thereby signalling that their position was higher than anyone else's in the realm except for the king himself.

Because of the special circumstances that surrounded María's wedding to Juan II – the king was compelled to marry her by Enrique de Aragón during the already mentioned Tordesillas coup – no records were kept of the ceremony, but in Leonor's case we have a detailed description not only of the religious ritual performed at church but also of the secular celebrations in town. The latter included customary courtly amusements, such as hunting parties, jousts, bullfights. The wedding itself took place in the church of the Poor Clares in Coimbra, which was decorated with precious wall hangings of crimson brocade and cloth of gold. Both the bride and the bridegroom wore *opas* (houpellandes) but Leonor's was so heavy that she passed out due to its weight and the effect of the heat produced by the candles and the crowd; she regained her senses having been refreshed with water.<sup>7</sup> After the Mass, a nocturnal procession was organized to take the royal couple to their residence. Leonor was mounted on a mare whose gold harnesses had been a gift from her husband; two of her brothers-in-law escorted her on foot, one at either side of the mare. Her ladies-in-waiting followed on mules, escorted by walking noblemen. The route taken by the royal entourage was illuminated by sixty squires carrying torches (*Monumenta Henricina* 1961: 256–258).

Similar parades were organized a few months later, when Leonor was received at Court in Estremoz by King João I, in December 1428, and on her first entry into Lisbon, in May 1429. It was on the former occasion that she and her ladies were dressed as Aragonese, as stated above. When Leonor met the king for the first time, she tried to kiss his hand, but he did not allow it; on the contrary, as a sign of deference for her, he ordered a cord of silk and gold to be attached to the bridle of her mare so he could lead her to Estremoz himself. However, he was not able to do so because several noblemen dismounted and offered to take his place. On reaching the town, Duarte's brothers also dismounted, and all the men except for the king accompanied the future queen on foot. On the following day, a new parade was organized. Leonor's mare was dressed in crimson gold cloth decorated with pearls and, to mount her steed, the princess used a gilded silver tablet held by two of her brothers-in-law; again, they took the mare's bridle and accompanied her, walking by her side as a sign of deference (Paviot 1995: 512–513). For her first reception in Lisbon, Leonor arrived in the city mounted on a mule dressed in gold cloth and with a rich saddle. As usual, her brothers-in-law accompanied her on foot on either side, but on this occasion, she was also under a canopy of gold cloth carried by lesser members of the royal family (Paviot 1995: 209). Through this ceremonial, the Court and the people acknowledged the existence of a new queen-to-be, while through her appearance and demeanour Leonor showed that she deserved the eminent position she was going to occupy in the realm.

Unfortunately, we do not have any more information on Leonor's possessions, but the records that exist for her sister's treasure and wardrobe allow us to have a glimpse of what they could have looked like and how rich they were.

María's riding paraphernalia was no less impressive than her sister's: her mules were covered with rich fabrics and the harnesses, split reins, bits and halters were made in silver or in copper, which were also used for her saddles as well (Pelaz Flores 2012: 115). When participating in ceremonies or while travelling, she also knew how to project an image of greatness through her dress and attire. The inventory made after her death shows that her clothes were manufactured in precious fabrics such as damask, silk and brocade, which were embroidered in silver and gold, and decorated with furs – ermine, marten, sable, and pearls and gems. María also wore a variety of jewels – necklaces, earrings, rings and bracelets – made of gold, pearls and precious stones such as rubies, sapphires and diamonds; she even possessed some jewels that had particular names relating to their colour or curious shapes. Yet neither crowns nor other symbols of the monarchy were found among her belongings at her death (Pelaz Flores 2012: 114–115). Few of Castile's kings and queens were crowned in a solemn ceremony and she was not among them.

María's tableware – composed of cups, bowls, plates and sauce boats – was made of silver, often gilded or enamelled, on occasions both. Her tableware would be used for banquets, but its main function was to be displayed to express the wealth and power of its owner. As such, many of the objects presented the queen's arms. The magnificence of María's chamber was also patent for the happy few who could admire it. Her rooms were decorated with embroidered canvases, canopies and French tapestries representing savage men, unicorns and dogs holding the arms of the queen. 'Skies' covered the ceilings, made in Arras cloth with motifs of birds and trees; there were carpets to cover the floor and coloured cushions to sit on in the Iberian fashion (Pelaz Flores 2012: 115–116). To cheer up the evenings she possessed a game of chess and other board games, as well as musical instruments such as a lute, a monochord, several harps and organs (Pelaz Flores 2012: 121–122). She might well have known how to play the monochord herself; her sister Leonor did and she would also sing, to Duarte's delight, in the days before their wedding (*Monumenta Henricina* 1961: 256).

Even in her most private acts of devotion, performed in her chapel, María was surrounded by precious fabrics and objects manufactured with the richest materials. The altar was covered with a fine cloth displaying her arms. Her chaplains used liturgical vestments made of brocade and damask with gold embroidery, pearls and gems. She possessed Flemish altarpieces, sacred images made of gilded silver and amber, and reliquaries, the most important of which contained the arms of St Luke the Evangelist and St Louis (Pelaz Flores 2012: 117–119). Similarly, the objects that Leonor presented to the convent she founded, Santa Maria da Piedade de Azeitão – and that had probably belonged to her own chapel – were splendid. The altar fronts were made of linen and silk and displayed her arms. The liturgical vestments were made of black satin and gold cloth; a white veil was decorated with small silver gilded plates. Her donation

also included two paintings on wood – one of the Virgin, and the other of the scenes from the life of Saint Gregory – a gilded book stand and a breviary (Rodrigues 2012: 136).

The two sisters were considered pious not only for their renowned acts of devotion – attendance at religious services, pilgrimages – but also because of the material support and protection they provided to the deserving poor, *mulieres religiosas* (religious women), monasteries and convents, and individual nuns and monks. Yet their religious patronage did not consist only of giving alms and granting privileges to the Church and its members. María founded a hospital in Madrigal de las Altas Torres and pursued the construction of the Dominican monastery of Santa María la Real de Nieva which had been started by her predecessor Catalina of Lancaster; in both buildings, stone inscriptions and the arms of the queen still record her role as founder (Pelaz Flores 2017: 264–278). As we have already said, Leonor also founded, albeit with the support of her husband, the Dominican convent of Santa Maria da Piedade de Azeitão with a hospital annexe (Rodrigues 2012: 134–137). Regrettably, as this architectural complex no longer exists, we do not know if the queen also inscribed her identity on the buildings with her arms, as her sister did.

Yet these two queens' political intervention went far beyond their protection of the Church, their perambulation across the kingdom and their participation in courtly rituals, ceremonies and festivities, exhibiting the magnificence of the monarchy. María was the queen of Castile, but also sister of the leaders of one of the noble factions that competed to control the king. For many years, she remained loyal to her husband and, just as a good wife and queen was supposed to do, she used her influence to promote peace and reconciliation following the dissent caused by her brothers, such as Enrique's Tordesillas coup in 1420 and during the conflict with Aragon and Navarre in 1429–1430 (Pelaz Flores 2017: 54–55). Nevertheless, as Álvaro de Luna's increasing influence over Juan II grew and he grew more powerful, the situation changed. The turning point occurred in 1437 when Juan II forced María to hand over the town of Montalbán, which she had inherited from her family, to his favourite. Even though she received a great amount of money and many rents as compensation, she never forgave this humiliation. In 1440, she used her status as queen – 'the nearest person to the king', as she said in her proclamation – to denounce the division that Álvaro de Luna was causing in the kingdom and to promote a coalition against him that brought together the Crown municipalities, the Aragonese faction and other nobles harmed by the favourite; she even managed to attract her son Enrique, the heir of the throne, to this coalition. When war broke out between the two factions, she and Prince Enrique were chosen as mediators to bring peace among them. At that time Leonor of Aragon was in Castile and she also intervened (Pelaz Flores 2017: 75–80; 211–212).

In fact, Leonor's political role had changed radically in Portugal following her husband Duarte's death from plague in 1438. In his last will and testament, he had entrusted her with the guardianship of their children and the regency of the

realm. Part of the Portuguese nobility supported her government, but she also met with opposition from those who claimed that no woman should rule, especially if she was not a native of the kingdom. Amongst this opposition faction were two brothers of the deceased king, Princes Pedro and João. As a result, at the *Cortes* (Parliament) of 1438 the representatives of the main towns and part of the clergy and the nobility forced the queen to share the regency with Pedro (Rodrigues 2018: 100). Her foreign status, which had secured her position as queen at the beginning of her husband's reign, had now become a liability. Her family connections, not so much to the Aragonese Crown but instead to the faction that opposed the king of Castile and his favourite, started to be strongly emphasized so as to provoke fear that she would involve Portugal in Castile's internal disputes.

For a year Leonor and Pedro governed together with growing mutual dissatisfaction and distrust. Eventually, Pedro took advantage of a popular riot against the queen in Lisbon to be elected as sole regent in the new *Cortes* of 1439. Leonor stayed in Portugal for a further year attempting to rally her supporters and calling for help from her brothers and her cousin to recover the regency. Having met with no success, towards the end of 1440 she left for Castile and joined her sister at Court (Rodrigues 2018: 100–101).

There, as could be expected, Leonor was incorporated as a member of the Aragonese faction and participated in many of the political discussions and events of the time. The Chronicler Rui de Pina states that she had to sacrifice a considerable part of her jewels and silver tableware to cover the costs of fleeing to Castile and later to help her brothers and sister in their struggle against Álvaro de Luna. It was assumed that in the event of their triumph they would help her regain her status as queen of Portugal (Pina 1977: 673, 680). Indeed, 'Portuguese affairs' were discussed at the Royal Council and embassies were sent to Portugal to demand the restitution of the regency to Leonor, without success. Yet Castilian internal affairs demanded increasing attention as the coalition started disintegrating because of the diverging interests of its different members. In the middle of 1444, seeing no solution for her problem, Leonor left the Castilian Court and retreated to the Monastery of Santo Domingo el Real in Toledo. She died there on February 19, 1445 (Rodrigues 2012: 217–236).

María, who had also left the company of her brothers and retired to her estates, died some time later.<sup>8</sup> The fact that their two deaths were both sudden and swift, and that the two sisters presented the same symptoms (red and tumid stains on their skin) led the chroniclers to say that they were both poisoned by order of Álvaro de Luna. However, more recently, drawing on medical diagnosis, it has been suggested instead that they both suffered from meningococcal meningitis (Álvarez Palenzuela 2006: 370). As María visited Leonor in Toledo before going to Villacastín where she exhaled her last breath, she might have been infected by her sister (Pelaz Flores 2017: 144–145).

## Projecting an image for eternity

Because of the danger of contagion, both queens were buried in haste without any solemnity, Leonor in Santo Domingo el Real in Toledo and María in the church of Villacastín. Only later did their sons have them removed to a proper tomb. María's last will and testament survived and we know that her instructions for her burial were not fulfilled: her funerary monument does not represent her as queen and does not stand in the cathedral of Toledo, as she had asked (Pelaz Flores 2013: 285). It rather shows her as an uncrowned widow and was set up at the right-hand side of the main altar of the church of the Monastery of Guadalupe, opposite the funerary monument of her son Enrique IV who had her entombed there. Enrique IV also left property and rents to the monks to cover the expense of masses to be said for his mother's soul.

Leonor's final will has not been traced so we do not know what instructions she left for the burial. But her son Afonso V had her bones brought from Castile in 1456 and entombed them with the bones of his father in a double funerary monument that presumably Duarte had commissioned for them. It was placed at the base of the main altar of the monastic church in Batalha that served as pantheon for the Avis dynasty, and later transferred to the "Unfinished Chapels". (Rodrigues 2012: 352). On it, the two spouses are holding each other's right hands while in their left, Duarte holds the baton of command and Leonor a book.

Due to their atypical activity in the political affairs of their kingdoms – María as the symbolic leader of a faction of the Castilian nobility and Leonor as a regent faced with the animosity of her male co-regent – these two queens consort were criticised by the chroniclers of their time and are still poorly viewed by modern historians who adhere to the chroniclers' opinions without any critical analysis. Yet, in their political actions they fought for an idea of monarchy that was close to the concepts of their sons, the future kings: a monarchy in which the monarch could not be constrained by the will of a single man but would instead govern with the assistance of the nobility and the prelates as corporate bodies. Their sons acknowledged their efforts to ensure that monarchy was based on these principles by honouring their memory and perpetuating it in graven metal and stone.

## Notes

- 1 Translations are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 This controversial event has generated endless bibliography. For some recent approaches, see Sesma Muñoz (2011a, 2011b) and Casals (2013) among many others.
- 3 On this fundamental figure of Juan II's reign, see Round (1986) and Calderón Ortega (1998).
- 4 Santa Clara de Coimbra had been founded in 1283 by a rich lady, Mor Dias. As she faced a strong opposition to her plans, she appealed to the queen who helped her to build the monastery church and replaced her as patron of the monastery after her death (Santos 2000). Isabel de Aragon is known in Portugal as the Saint Queen. Her

- cult started immediately after her death in 1336, but she was only beatified in 1516 and canonised in 1742.
- 5 According to Bernis Madrazo, the *cota* was a rich dress lined with fur (1955: 38).
- 6 On the delegitimization of this princess, see Villarroel González (2014).
- 7 The *houppelande* was, at that time and especially in ceremonies, a very wide sleeved overcoat that fell loosely from the shoulders and was fitted around the waist with a belt (Martínez 2003: 45). Prince Duarte's was tied with an emerald brooch instead.
- 8 The chroniclers do not agree on the days María and Leonor died. Landim and Pina say Leonor died on the 18th February, Zurita on the 19th. As for María, Pérez de Guzmán says it was a few days after her sister, Pina a fortnight later (Rodríguez 2012: 234–236).

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