

Małgorzata Dąbrowska

University of Łódź

A Cypriot Story about Love and Hatred

ABSTRACT

The Middle Ages have their great love stories. We owe one of them to Peter I Lusignan, King of Cyprus. Married to Eleanor of Aragon, who bore him a son and a successor, he had a mistress pregnant with his child. The queen decided to eliminate this rival by inducing a premature delivery. The incident was recorded by Leontios Makhairas, a Cypriot chronicler, who described the cruelty of Eleanor and mourned the fate of the baby. But it is not his account which keeps this tragedy alive in Cyprus even today. There is a folk song about beautiful Arodaphnousa, who suffered because of the bad queen. The song is deprived of historical context, but it is a historical source nevertheless. Its remote counterpart is the Catalan story of Eleanor, who was expelled from Cyprus and lived in Aragon for a long time. This story creates an image of a benign, calm lady who was venerated after death by her subjects. The clash between these images makes one think about the black and white PR created in every epoch. But this is not the point of this story. The point is the fate of an innocent child, both the flower and the victim of love. This is a rare motif in medieval literature; children are seldom present on the pages of its manuscripts. The emotion connected with this story deserves the reader's attention.

ABSTRACT

Peter I Lusignan (1358–1369) was the most popular king of Cyprus during the period of Frankish¹ rule on the island. His travels to the West, his Egyptian crusade and his assassination are well known to historians. We learn most of this from Leontios Makhairas, a Cypriot Greek who lived at the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century (Nicolaou-Konnari 66–67). The chronicler provides the reader with many vivid details about the political and military activities of the ruler. Peter's private life was no less colourful than his public life. He was married to Eleanor from the royal House of Aragon and was devoted to her. But he also had mistresses, and one of them was pregnant with his child. The tragic story of this baby shook the inhabitants of the island, and was preserved through the centuries in folk songs. The editors of the French translation of the Makhairas chronicle at the end of the 19th century added two poignant stories as appendices to their publication. The texts are anonymous, their versions differ a little, but the main plot is the same. There is a beautiful royal mistress, Arodaphnousa, a cruel Queen, and a King—the avenger. Without knowing the historical context, one can say that it is only a fairy tale.

Once upon a time, three sisters, Krystallo, Helena and Arodaphnousa, lived in the vicinity of the royal palace. The last was the most beautiful and the king was passionately in love with her. When his queen learnt about this secret liaison, she grew angry and asked her servants to bring the young woman to the court. Anxious, Arodaphnousa tried to postpone her arrival, but finally, elegantly robed, as befitted a woman of her status, she appeared in the palace. She paid sophisticated regards to the queen and was invited to the table where delicate dishes were served. Arodaphnousa was flattered by this reception, but at the same time she found it suspect and insisted she be told the real reason for her summons. The queen answered that she wanted to dine with her and then walk in the garden. In this way they passed the whole day, and at sunset Arodaphnousa expressed gratitude for her reception, but her hostess turned a deaf ear and did not reply. The young beauty left, but she commented on the queen's manners unkindly. This the queen did not hear, but the servants did, and so the comment reached her.

The next day she sent an envoy to bring Arodaphnousa back. The young lady said good-bye to her bedroom, to another room in which she

¹ This expression concerns the Westerners settled in the East in the Middle Ages. Their great appearance is connected with the time of crusades when they established the Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099–1292) and three other Latin states.

used to drink coffee, and last to her sleeping child. The Queen was waiting. She grabbed Arodaphnousa by her hair, saying that she would kill her as the king's mistress. In terror, the victim cried out so that her lover would hear. Though far away, he caught the cry. The king covered a thousand and a half miles on horseback and soon appeared in the castle. In the meantime the queen locked her chamber, and, holding Arodaphnousa's hair, cut off her head. The king forced the door open and, seeing so much blood, lost consciousness. When he recovered, he ordered that his consort be put into the stable as an animal and despaired over his mistress's body. He wept because he had loved her so much for eight years, and blamed himself for her innocent death. Then he proceeded to arrange a royal funeral for the lady of his heart. "May all those, who will read the song, be happy, and those who are married—resign of their love!" the anonymous author says ("Chanson sur Arodaphnousa" 400–05).

Another version of the song is slightly different. The queen questioned her servants about the identity of her husband's mistress. In reply they told her about three sisters: Rose, Anthousa, and, the most beautiful, Arodaphnousa. The first sister liked the king, the second offered him kisses, but it was the third who shared his bed. The queen demanded that the lady in question should be brought to the court. Arodaphnousa was surprised, but she put on a dress with golden and crystal ornaments, a robe embroidered with pearls, and she left for the palace. With a golden apple in her hand, moving in a coquettish way, she entered the chamber where the queen waited with excellent dishes. Seeing this, Arodaphnousa said that she did not come to eat, and asked why she had been invited. In reply, the queen asked who was her husband's mistress; Arodaphnousa feigned ignorance. Then she left, and, on the stairs out, she commented on the queen's appearance in an arrogant way. The reaction could be foreseen. The king's wife asked the servants to bring her visitor back. Arodaphnousa appeared dressed in black with a black apple in her hand. Swaying in a coquettish way, she asked why she had been summoned. The queen showed her a burning furnace. Arodaphnousa started to cry so that the king could hear. He did, even though he was listening to music at the time. Having covered a distance of two thousand miles, he appeared in the palace and found the door closed. He said that the Turks were following him and asked the Queen to open the door. His wife answered that there was a pregnant woman inside and she was assisting with the birth. The king forced the door open and saw Arodaphnousa in the oven. He caught his wife and cast her into the fire too. In this version we are not encouraged to love or to give up our sentiments ("Chanson de la Reine" 405–08).

Thus, this tragic story is a recollection of historical events which happened in Cyprus in the 14th century. From its beginnings the island was

connected with the Greeks, who shaped its history and culture. It passed through the Hellenic and Roman times, and it became an early centre of Christianity through the influence of Saint Paul and the Cypriot apostle Saint Barnabas. The island played a pivotal role in a confrontation between Arabs and Byzantium in the 7th to 10th centuries. In these insecure times of Muslim invasion, the Cypriot Church became not only a religious but also a political authority. Byzantium regained its sway in 963–64, and the island enjoyed a rich cultural development. In 1191 it was conquered by Richard the Lionheart, who then sold Cyprus to the Knights Templar, who after a short time sold it to Guy de Lusignan, the ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In 1192 Lusignan established the Kingdom of Cyprus and his family reigned there till 1489. Latin was to be an official language, but it was soon replaced by French, while Greek became its second language. With the fall of Acre in 1292 the Kingdom of Jerusalem ceased to exist but the rulers of Cyprus kept their claims and the title. The coronation of the kings of Cyprus was held in Nicosia and that of the titular king of Jerusalem in Famagusta. Many Frankish refugees from the lost territories settled on the island, which became an important trade centre in the Levant, attracting the attention of Genoa and Venice. The Lusignans introduced the Latin Church, which was a challenge to the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. This cohabitation was not easy for the Greeks (Balard 102–03; Jacoby 68–71; Luke 340–42; Kyrris 18–19).

It is time to discuss the main characters of the song about Arodaphnousa. The jealous queen was Eleanor of Aragon-Gandia, the wife of Peter I Lusignan. His mistress Joanna l'Aleman, of Frankish origin, is presented in the song as Arodaphnousa. Peter I was born in 1328. He was crowned as King of Cyprus and as a Titular King of Jerusalem in 1358. He ruled till 1369. Eleanor was his second wife, five years younger than he. She was a sister of Alfonso, Duke of Gandia (in Valencia), close to the royal family of Aragon. Their only male heir was Peter II, born a year before the coronation of his father. Peter I of Lusignan entered history as a romantic warrior propagating the idea of the crusade against the Muslims. Cyprus faced a permanent danger from the Turks and the Mamluk Egypt. Lusignan began his reign by bringing the important Turkish city Adalia (Antalya) in the southern Asia Minor under his rule. Then he began to promulgate the idea of a crusade against the Mamluks. In 1362–65, with the support of Pope Urban V, he paid visits to many European rulers, hoping to win them over to his purpose. His French genealogical ties and the attractiveness of Cyprus as a trade centre were important assets. But neither John II nor his successor Charles V of France or Edward III of England were interested in this idea, as they were waging war against each other. Peter did not give up, and he turned to Charles of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia and Louis

d'Anjou of Hungary, whom he met in Cracow in 1364, during the rally organized by Casimir the Great, King of Poland. Neither of them accepted the invitation to the crusade. The extravagant Cypriot dreamer remained in history as the participant in a feast hosted by Wierzynek for eminent figures of Central Europe (Hill 324–29; Iorga 196–97; Dąbrowska, “Peter of Cyprus” 265–67). His only support came from the Venetians who knew how they might thereby profit. The great fleet met at the isle of Rhodes in October 1365 and went on to attack Alexandria. The soldiers had no mercy towards the inhabitants, and there was no limit to their greed. The sack of the city did not change the political situation in the East, but it strengthened Peter’s ambitions (Atiya 15–18; Luke 355–58). On the strength of this victory, he turned to the Mamluk possessions in Syria and then renewed his raids against the Muslims. Devoted to his *idée fixe*, Peter Lusignan once again set off to Europe in 1367, this time looking for assistance in Italy, but he returned the following year empty-handed (Atiya 3–26; Housley 193–95; Luke 357–58). These ups and downs of his politics changed his personality; mood swings now constantly dogged him. He became unpleasant and cruel to his courtiers. The pretexts of the animosities were as banal as a conflict about greyhounds that the king wanted to get from his vassal, or a quarrel with a steward about the lack of oil for asparagus during the meal. Both men in these disputes were imprisoned (Makhairas 244). The atmosphere at the court grew tenser, the ruler even less predictable. It seemed that Peter was tempting fate. In January 1369, he was killed in his bedroom, decapitated and castrated for good measure (Makhairas 266). Along with the knights, his brothers, John and James, were involved in the plot (Edbury 220–22; Richard 108–23).

Peter was an attractive man, and his wife was supposedly jealous of him. To prove his affection for the queen, he would travel with her shifts and sleep with her underwear. This apparently intimate sign of marital fidelity did not mean that he went without affairs at court. In fact he had two other ladies of his heart: Eschiva de Scandelion and Joanna l’Aleman. The first was married, the second a young widow. Queen Eleanor tolerated this, but her Catalan temper boiled over when she heard that the second lady was pregnant. When the king set off to Europe in 1367, Joanna was in the eighth month of her pregnancy. The queen demanded that she come to the court, because she wanted to get rid of Joanna’s baby. The young woman was tortured. Maidservants prostrated her on the floor, and, stretching her body, put a great marble mortar on Joanna’s abdomen. The Queen hoped, in vain, that this would induce a premature childbirth. The next day another kitchen utensil was used; the maidens put a hand-mill on Joanna’s womb yet the rough movements of the handle again failed as an attempt at abortion. Then they forced her to sniff drugs, noisome herbs, nettle

among them (Makhairas 214). The child remained in Joanna's womb, so the queen sent her back home, where she gave birth to the baby. Eleanor told her to bring the child to the court immediately. The child's fate is not known. The unhappy mother, still bleeding, was imprisoned and treated in a terrible way (Makhairas 216). When the king learnt about this he wrote a letter to his spouse threatening her and demanding that she release Joanna. The mistress left the citadel but was sent to a nunnery, St Claire's, where she stayed for a whole year, without losing her beauty (Makhairas 218). Eleanor was hardly innocent herself. During the king's absence she had a lover, John of Morphou, Count of Edessa, and this liaison lasted for some time. When they learnt about Peter's return, Morphou made the two ladies swear not to say a word about the romance (Makhairas 226).

It is difficult to say whether Eleanor pushed others to kill her husband; however, it is probable that his end suited her. After the king's death she became a regent on behalf of their son, who was crowned Peter II two years later, in 1371. The rival maritime republics, closely connected with the Cypriot trade, sought the young king's favour. During the coronation in Famagusta, Venetians and the Genoese provoked riots in the city (Balard 87–90). The latter strengthened their position on the island, and Eleanor profited by it. She was unhappy that her young son allowed his uncles, John and James, to participate in the rule. She intrigued against her brothers-in-law and gained Genoa as a supporter in this conflict. This only provoked more hostilities between the Cypriots and the Genoese, who behaved like tyrants and mistreated the queen and her son. But this did not put an end to her machinations. In 1374, James, her brother-in-law, was taken to Genoa as a hostage. John kept his distance. But then he received an invitation to the queen in Nicosia. He was warned not to go but went nevertheless. When they sat at the table in the company of the young king, Eleanor made a sign to bring the shirt in which her husband was murdered. She asked whether John recognized it and, without waiting for an answer, her followers slit the guest's throat (Makhairas 549). Under the pretext of avenging her consort, Eleanor managed to eliminate from the court the potential rivals of her young son. A forty-year-old lady was now mistress of the situation, but not for long. In 1377 Peter II married Valentine Visconti of Milan, who was not accepted by Eleanor. Facing the choice between a wife and a mother, Peter II sent the second one to her homeland. In 1382 Eleanor reached the Catalan coast and began another chapter of her long life (Luke 366–67).

Historians dealing with Cypriot history do not pay much attention to her later vicissitudes. From the Lusignan point of view, she is not interesting either. But Eleanor spent another 35 years in Aragon, which meant more time than in Cyprus! She was a lady of strong character,

which she quickly showed. Supported with a good pension, she settled in the city of Valls, in the residence of archbishop of Tarragona, as his co-ruler. A group of Cypriot courtiers accompanied her. Eleanor's milieu quickly started a conflict with the local population as the queen refused to pay taxes connected with the import of wine. Her residence was invaded and her butler murdered. She left the city in 1394 for Barcelona, where she settled for the rest of her life. She died there and was buried in the habit of the Third Order of St Francis, though with regal dignity, in the church of Saint Francis in 1417 (Ayensa, "El recuerdo" 368–69). This could have been the end of her adventurous story but the next centuries wrote a sequel to it. In 1692 her tomb was opened and the queen's body appeared untouched by decay, intact and flexible. Pilgrimages were made to this place; miracles ensued (Ayensa, "Entre cel" 93–96). The queen's vicissitudes were commemorated in popular literature. One touching poem from the beginning of the 20th century evokes the murder of King Peter, the queen's despair and her return to Aragon to live in Valls (Ayensa, "El recuerdo" 377).²

It is interesting to observe how this gentle image of a good queen Eleanor is opposed to her commemoration in Cypriot folklore. It is like a distorting mirror. In the east of the Mediterranean nobody was interested in her Catalan life. She was remembered as a cruel queen, a symbol of jealousy and revenge, a villain in contrast to her husband's delicate and subtle mistress, treated so terribly in the eighth month of her pregnancy. Joanna l'Aleman's story appeared on the Web, and the song on Arodaphnousa is to be found there. The motif of oven is the same, and so is that of the king's grief. Joanna is buried by the monks, and the queen is thrown to the hounds.³ The reader of this story does not pay attention to the arrogant behaviour of the young woman, proud of her beauty and royal affection. The song focuses on her martyrdom. The image of her annihilation endures in memory. The most moving is the story of the baby. In one quoted version Arodaphnousa is saying good-bye to her child, in another the queen is acting as a midwife intending to kill the child. But it was Makhairas, a professional chronicler, who noted the cruel circumstances of Joanna's tortures with mortar and pestle and hand-mill on her abdomen to provoke preterm delivery. What could have happened? Placental abruption, labour

² I am very grateful to the historian of Cyprus, Dr. Łukasz Burkiewicz from Jagellonian University in Kraków, who supplied me with copies of the Eusebi Ayensa articles.

³ I am also grateful to Mr Marcin Cyrulski, a Ph.D. student in Classics at the University of Łódź, who examined for me the Web version of the Song of Arodaphnousa ("Arodaphnousa—medieval song from Cyprus" on the NOCTOC blog in Greek).

induction, premature rupture of the membranes.⁴ But the child was born—despite the determination of the queen. Therefore she decided to deprive the young woman of the baby, a crime unforgivable in any culture.

In this story of negative emotions and violence one cannot miss an important historical detail, namely, that all this happened in the family of Lusignan, a foreign dynasty to the Cypriot Greeks. Also, Joanna l'Aleman belonged to a Frankish world, and her name suggests German roots. But this is not the point. The child was killed and the inhabitants of Cyprus were shocked by the murder. Whether the specified kitchen utensils were used is beside the point. From the late Middle Ages, on through the centuries, Cypriot Greeks sang this tragic story. The Catholic context disappeared. The innocent child remains in collective memory, but not everywhere. The selectivity is characteristic. In Catalan literature there is no question of the queen-murderess, not only in connection with the death of the king's natural child but also in relation to the death of the king himself. Eleanor is not remembered as the ruler of a kingdom inhabited mainly by Orthodox subjects. She is just a queen of Cyprus, and this is her unique distinction. By way of digression, let me say that the religious identity of the island is the most important factor. The contemporary vicissitudes of its cultural monuments are a case in point (Dąbrowska, "Byzantine Frescoes" 30–31).

As a Byzantinist dealing with late medieval history I would like to add that Peter I and Eleanor's son was the object of matrimonial interest at the imperial court in Constantinople. In 1372 John V Palaiologos wanted to marry one of his daughters to the future Peter II. The offer was rejected in Nicosia, but there was no religious obstacle. From 1369, the Byzantine Emperor was Catholic as he wanted to gain the support of European rulers against the Ottoman Turks threatening Byzantium (Dąbrowska, *Łacinniczki* 37; Luttrell 103). Cyprus seemed a reliable ally, especially with its romantic tradition of struggle against the Muslims. But the Constantinopolitan mission failed and the young Palaiologina did not become Eleanor's daughter-in-law. Maybe, in contrast to Valentina Visconti, their relations would have been proper, and Eleanor would not have left Cyprus for Aragon. Whatever the alternative history could have been, the most important detail still stands: Peter I Lusignan's pregnant mistress and the tragic fate of their child mourned by Cypriot Greeks.

⁴ I am much indebted to Professor Andrzej Bienkiewicz from the Medical University of Łódź for his professional consultation.

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