

A Poet on the Edge

Richard Zenith

Though it is not known for certain where or when Luís Vaz de Camões was born, the documentary evidence weighs in favor of Lisbon, 1524. That same year saw the death of Vasco da Gama, the last survivor of the great Portuguese navigators. Pedro Álvares Cabral, the first European to reach Brazil (in 1500), died circa 1520, and the next year Magellan was killed in battle, while captaining the first voyage around the world. Portuguese efforts to consolidate and capitalize on the nautical achievements of these and other explorers met with mixed results. While successfully dominating and colonizing Brazil, thanks in large measure to the importation of African slaves, Portugal never appropriated its Asian territories in the same full-fledged fashion. How could it? Asia was far more heavily populated and enjoyed a relatively high cultural level; the Portuguese were few and thinly spread. The “Portuguese State of India,” which grew up in the wake of Gama’s inaugural voyage there (1497-99), continued to expand throughout the 16th century, but although Portugal’s colonial stake in Goa remained in place until 1961 (and in Timor and Macau until still later), there was already, even while the territorial expansion was in progress, a growing sense of unease at the heart of it all—an awareness not so much that the imperialistic party was bound to end, as all parties do, but that it was in many respects exactly that: a party, in which the intoxicated guests thought only of satisfying their short-term appetites and maneuvered for their strictly individual benefit, with the party’s organizer doing a poor job of conciliating between them, maintaining order, reining in excessive behavior. A “labyrinth where effort, / wisdom and nobility must beg / at the gates of greed and depravity” is how Camões described Portuguese India (in a sonnet, published here, 89), where he arrived in 1553. Corruption was rife, and Camões

himself was accused of abusing his post as Trustee of the Dead and Missing in Macau, which he probably held from about 1557 to 1559. Called back to Goa, where formal charges led to his imprisonment, he was eventually exonerated, only to be rejailed several years later for unpaid debts.

Camões's great epic poem, *The Lusiads*, recounts the heroic exploits of the Portuguese seamen who, led by Vasco da Gama, ventured "across seas never before sailed" to reach India, but the story is not just one of commendable deeds and a glorious end result. Woven into the tale are the general human failings and specific limitations of Portugal that doomed the political achievement to be in certain respects frankly inglorious. The disappointing reality of the imperial project in Asia made its affirmation and exaltation through poetry that much more timely and useful. Camões came, as it were, to the rescue, writing a prodigious work that, despite its occasionally critical stance, was bound to confer distinction on the grandiose but flawed enterprise. That he composed, not a series of celebratory lyric poems, but an overarching epic poem, strongly suggests that the maritime empire, to his way of thinking, was already history, already declining. When we turn to his vast body of lyric poetry, we find him referring to his own experiences in Africa and Asia with bitterness, and in the elegy translated here he explicitly indicts the Portuguese war machine for attacking and possessing innocent, poorly armed Indian states as well as for obliging common Portuguese soldiers to suffer privation and death on behalf of such gratuitous hostilities.

Broke and disillusioned, Camões decided to head home in 1567, using borrowed money to sail as far as Mozambique, where he lingered for two years, relying on friends for his meals, revising his *Lusiads*, and working hard on "a book of great erudition, doctrine and philosophy" to be called *Parnassus of Luís de Camões* but which was stolen from him, according to the Portuguese chronicler Diogo do Couto, who showed up there in April of 1569. He and other benefactors paid off the poet's debts and arranged for his return passage to Lisbon, where he arrived in the spring of 1570. Two years later he published *The Lusiads*, which earned him a certain renown but almost no financial recompense—only a meager pension (for the book and for "services rendered in India") paid out until his death, possibly from the plague, in June of 1580. Two months later, in consequence of the power vacuum created by a catastrophic military campaign in Morocco, in 1578, Portugal fell under Spanish domination, which was to last for 60 years. In a certain way *The Lusiads* is a twin

legacy—of the poet who wrote the epic, and of the sovereign empire whose story it told and whose sovereignty happened to expire with the storyteller. And in the same way that *The Lusiads* is a poetic apotheosis of that empire—not by virtue of the imperialistic voyage it ambiguously memorializes but because the memorial itself is sublimely universal and enduring, with translations into many languages—so too Camões’s lyric poetry is a crown of tranquil glory for the stormy inner and outer life that constituted the better part of its subject matter. In his sonnets and in his longer lyrical poems, ranging over many themes and employing a variety of registers, Camões was nearly always—though at times not obviously—personal.

It is from his poems that a fair amount of biographical information has been gleaned, much of it highly conjectural. It is often assumed that Camões, because of the considerable erudition revealed in his poetry (he also wrote three plays, all published posthumously), attended the national university, which moved from Lisbon to Coimbra in 1537, but his name does not appear in the school’s records. He might have studied at a Spanish university or, more probably, at a Portuguese monastery or diocesan school, some of which were authorized to grant academic degrees. At the very least he studied under the tutelage of one or more of the “very learned” uncles known to have been among his relations. He learned Latin and studied a wide range of literature in that language, particularly Virgil and Ovid, assiduously present in his own poetry, and he was no slouch in Greek philosophy either. Young Luís did not spend all his time reading books, however. He was lusty, a carouser, and fond of carnal pleasures. Though he learned a good deal of his poetic art from Petrarch, he had no angelicized Laura to stand as the monolithic, ever-ready object of—or pretext for—his amorous verses. He indicates in his poems that he knew many loves and that these assumed different forms, with women of various social classes. In his only surviving letter from Goa, he nostalgically recalls being able to charm the prostitutes of Lisbon by reciting verses of Petrarch and Juan Boscán, which made absolutely no impression on the women for hire in India, whose coarse, cut-and-dried speech “pours cold water on the most burning passion.” On the other hand, he fell head over heels for a dark-skinned (Asian? African?) slave, whose enchantments were so powerful that he affectively became *her* slave (see “*Aquela cativa*,” 117). Another of his great loves, cryptonymically referred to in several sonnets as Dynamene, has been linked to a Chinese girlfriend