

The Portuguese Connection and the Significance of 'the Holy Princess'

BARRIE WILLIAMS

IN THE last months of King Richard III's reign, negotiations were in progress for a marriage alliance with Portugal. These negotiations are not so much as mentioned by most English writers on the reign, but in the opinion of the present author, their significance is far-reaching. The purpose of this article is to explore their implications.

The Lancastrian Succession

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, married three times: Blanche of Lancaster, Constance of Castile, and Catharine Swynford. His children by Catharine Swynford, the Beauforts, were born while he was still married to Constance. They were subsequently legitimised, but it was questionable whether their legitimising gave them any claim to the throne.¹ Obviously, Henry Tudor's supporters thought he had such a claim, but if the Beauforts be discounted, who in 1485 was John of Gaunt's heir?

Henry of Bolingbroke (later King Henry IV), the son of Blanche of Lancaster, was John's only surviving son by his two earlier marriages. The Lancastrian succession seemed not to be in danger, however, for Henry's first wife, Mary Bohun, bore him four sons and two daughters. His second wife, Joan of Navarre, mother of eight children by John IV Duke of Brittany, bore him no children. Henry's eldest son and heir, Henry V, married Catharine, daughter of King Charles VI of France. Their only child, later Henry VI, was born within a year of his father's death in 1422. Henry VI's only child by Margaret of Anjou was Edward of Lancaster, Prince of Wales, killed at Tewkesbury in 1471. Edward was married to Anne Neville, but they had no children; Anne was later Richard III's Queen.

Henry IV's other three sons—Thomas, Duke of Clarence, John, Duke of Bedford and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester—all married, John and Humphrey twice, but none of their marriages produced children. Two illegitimate children, a boy and a girl, were attributed to Duke Humphrey, but these of course had no claim to the succession.²

Henry IV's elder daughter Blanche was married successively to the Count Palatine, the King of Aragon and the Duke of Bar, but had no children by any of her husbands.³ Henry's younger daughter Philippa married Eric IX (of Denmark) and XIII (of Sweden). She displayed worthy statesmanship as Queen of Sweden, but her marriage produced no children.⁴ When, therefore, Edward of Lancaster died in 1471, the succession to John of Gaunt must be sought from his eldest daughter Philippa.⁵

The House of Avis

As part of her father's complex ambitions in the Peninsula, Philippa was married to King John I of Portugal at Oporto in February 1387. This was not the first marriage between the two royal families. At this time, the ruling houses of Portugal and Castile were enmeshed in a network of interrelations and claims to the other's kingdom.⁶ The marriages of John of Gaunt and his brother Edmund of Langley to the sisters Constance and Isabel of Castile brought them and their descendants into relationship with both the Portuguese and Castilian royal families.⁷

John I secured Portuguese independence and his own place on the throne by his decisive victory over the Castilians at Aljubarrota (14 August 1385). The following year, the alliance of England and Portugal was established by the Treaty of Windsor (17 May 1386), many times renewed, and the basis of Anglo-Portuguese relations for two centuries. The marriage of King John and Philippa consummated the alliance. Before taking the throne, John had been Master of the Religious Order of Avis, and he and his descendants are known as the House of Avis. Philippa bore John five sons, the most famous of whom, in England at least, was the third, Henry 'the Navigator' who inspired the Portuguese voyages of discovery. Isabel, daughter of John and Philippa, married Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, in 1429. Through this marriage, Philip's son Charles the Bold and granddaughter Mary had a stake in the Lancastrian succession, but one inferior to that of the male branch of the House of Avis.⁸ John I was succeeded in 1433 by his eldest son Duarte (or Edward), who has been described as more of a scholar than a statesman.⁹ After a reign of only five years, Duarte was succeeded by his six-year-old son Alfonso V (Portuguese Afonso). Alfonso reigned until 1481. He was an ineffective ruler, and allowed himself to be dominated by the powerful aristocratic House of Braganza. He wasted much effort in the last Portuguese attempt to secure the throne of Castile. One of his more successful ventures was to capture Tangier in 1471, opening the way to Portuguese ambitions in North Africa. He and his Queen, Isabel, had one son who succeeded his father as John II (1481-95). John II was a true Renaissance prince and one of the most successful rulers of his age. He established the authority of the Crown over the nobility and prepared the way for Portugal's Golden Age under his cousin and successor, Manuel 'the Fortunate' (1495-1521).

The Holy Princess

The interest of this article centres on John II's sister, Princess Joanna. Joanna was born on 6 February 1452. She was her parents' eldest child, and

until the birth of her brother John was officially recognised heir presumptive.¹⁰ Their mother, Queen Isabel, died when Joanna was three years old, and this bereavement seems to have had a profound influence on the child, inclining her from her earliest years to the religious life.¹¹ In her early 'teens, she was sought in marriage by King Louis XI of France for his brother Charles, Duke of Orleans. King Alfonso favoured the match, but Joanna dissuaded her father, pointing out with a shrewdness beyond her years that if her brother died, the throne would pass to foreigners.¹² She grew up at court, but devoted herself to prayers, penances and works of charity. As her personal emblem, she chose the Crown of Thorns. Joanna combined piety, beauty and political ability to the extent that when King Alfonso went on his expedition to North Africa in 1471, it was his nineteen-year-old daughter Joanna who was entrusted with the regency. She arranged great festivities to celebrate her father's return, and for her reward pleaded to be allowed to enter a convent. King Alfonso was inclined to consent, but was dissuaded by the great nobles who realised her importance to the succession.

The following year (1472) the Emperor Frederick III sent ambassadors to seek a marriage between Joanna and his heir, the Archduke Maximilian.¹³ Joanna's response was to retire to the convent of Odivelas for two months. Between 1472 and 1485, she spent most of her time in the cloister, settling down at the house of Dominican nuns at Aveiro. It was her preference for the life of a nun rather than that of a queen which earned her the title, 'the Holy Princess'. She did not take vows. She was clothed as a novice in January 1475, but her forceful brother Prince John and members of the Cortes intervened, going to the convent and threatening if necessary to take the habit from her by force. She was still too important for the continuation of the royal house, and only Prince John's marriage and the birth of his children lessened the political pressure on her.¹⁴

Marriage negotiations

Joanna emerged from the convent in 1480 and again, for a longer period, in 1485, on both occasions because an epidemic had broken out. During her re-appearance 'in the world' in 1485, she received at least one, and possibly three, offers of marriage from neighbouring kings. Accounts in older Portuguese histories are sometimes confused, and details seem to have been transposed from one suit to another. But the whole matter has been carefully examined and assessed by Domingos Mauricio Gomes dos Santos in *O Mosteiro de Jesus de Aveiro*.¹⁵

Early in 1485, a commercial treaty was signed between France and Portugal, and Joanna's hand is said to have been sought by the young King of France, Charles VIII.¹⁶ There are some grounds for scepticism here in that Joanna was 32-33 years old, Charles only 15-16. Charles, however, had dreams of becoming a latter-day crusader, and Joanna's saintliness may have appealed to the mystical side of his character. In more practical terms, Portugal offered a counter-weight to the rising power of Castile-Aragon, with which French interests already clashed in Navarre and were to do later in Naples. But it is best to suspend judgment on such an offer in the absence

of positive evidence,¹⁷ though an informal 'sounding' from the French ambassadors at this time is by no means impossible.

There is no doubt, however, that between March and August 1485, negotiations took place for a marriage between Joanna and Richard III. In a previous article,¹⁸ I noted that on 22 March 1485, only six days after the death of Queen Anne Neville, Richard sent Sir Edward Brampton to Portugal to open negotiations.¹⁹ It is not difficult to suggest why Richard should have been eager for this marriage. The idea of a 'union of the roses' had been in the air ever since on Christmas morning 1483, Henry Tudor had solemnly sworn to marry Elizabeth of York. The scheme is often attributed to Bishop Morton, and it was certainly worthy of his shrewd mind. Between December 1483 and March 1485, Richard had ample opportunity to consider the advantages of such an arrangement with its prospects for peace and reconciliation. The death of his Queen, however much it may have distressed Richard, offered the possibility of a rival and better scheme. Princess Joanna was not exactly the heir of the House of Lancaster; even if the Beauforts be discounted, John II and his children came first. But Joanna was sufficiently senior among the descendants of Queen Philippa to offer some hope that, as Queen of England, traditional Lancastrian loyalties might become attached to her rather than to Henry Tudor. She was just eight months older than Richard. At thirty-three, she was above the age at which queens usually marry, though not too old for a king's second marriage. Nor was she too old to bear her first child—an important consideration for Richard after the death of Edward of Middleham the previous year.

In my previous article, I followed Morse Stephens²⁰ in supposing that Joanna declined Richard's offer as she had already declined those from France and Austria. In fact, older Portuguese historians and original source material make it clear that Richard came far nearer to winning Joanna's hand than any of his rivals.²¹

Brampton brought a double proposal to Portugal—for Richard to marry Joanna, and for Elizabeth of York to marry John II's cousin Manuel, Duke of Beja (later King Manuel I).²² In return, Richard offered, if necessary, to send an English army to help the King against dissident members of the aristocracy, who were being supported from Castile.²³ Brampton's overtures were followed up by a visit from someone described by the Portuguese authorities as the 'Earl of Scales (or Scalus)'. It is not clear which of Elizabeth Woodville's surviving brothers is meant. Richard Woodville had been attainted when his family fell from power, but significantly, was pardoned in March 1485.²⁴ He assumed the title Earl Rivers under Henry VII, and may have been allowed to use both that title and that of Baron Scales, formerly borne by his father and elder brother, under Richard III. It may, however, have been Edward Woodville, who had received the Scales lands and who appears to have been known as 'Count (or Earl) of Scales' when he was in Spain in 1486, though he never had any real claim to the rank of earl. Whoever exactly he was, Scales disguised his purpose under cover of passing through Portugal to fight for Ferdinand and Isabella in the war against Granada.²⁵ His visit to Spain enabled him to put considerable pressure on Portugal when he returned there: the possibility

that if Joanna turned him down, Richard would marry instead the Infanta Isabella, eldest daughter of the Catholic Monarchs. Negotiations were brought to a climax in August 1485. The Portuguese Council of State urged the King in the strongest terms to accept Richard's offer. King John bullied and brow-beat his sister, but also employed their aunt, Philippa, to try more feminine means of persuasion.²⁶ A dramatic dénouement followed. Joanna retired for a night of prayer and meditation. She had either a vision or a dream of a 'beautiful young man' who told her that Richard 'had gone from among the living.' Next morning, she gave her brother a firm answer: If Richard were still alive, she would go to England and marry him. If he were indeed dead, the King was not to press her again to marry.²⁷ It is not necessary to believe in the supernatural to accept that Joanna may have had a premonitory dream of Richard's death. Within days of her decision, news of Bosworth reached Portugal.²⁸ Scales left Portugal soon afterwards. According to Portuguese authorities, he sailed to Brittany, where he was killed at the Battle of St. Aubin du Cormier in 1488.²⁹ Both Portuguese and Spanish historians seem to be confused over the identification of the brothers. It was Edward Woodville who was killed at St. Aubin. Two years previously he had been in Spain, where he distinguished himself at the siege of Loja. Richard Woodville secured the favour of Henry VII, and died in England in 1491.

According to some Portuguese authorities, Bosworth was followed by an offer for Joanna's hand from Henry VII. In the absence of direct contemporary evidence, it is safest, as with Charles VIII, to suspend judgment. One authority, Fr. Luis de Sousa, mistakenly thought that Henry Tudor himself was of Portuguese descent.³⁰ He may have overlooked that Henry was descended from John of Gaunt by Catharine Swynford, not by Constance of Castile. He may, however, be attributing an offer to Henry which was really made by Richard. There is nothing inherently improbable about such an offer. Even before Bosworth, there is evidence that he considered dropping Elizabeth of York for a daughter of Sir William Herbert.³¹ Princess Joanna would have been a more dazzling prospect, and at least an informal 'sounding' from Henry, offering the same terms as Richard, cannot be entirely ruled out. It would shed further light on Henry's delay in marrying Elizabeth of York, though he showed clear wisdom in consolidating his own position first. If the voyage between London and Lisbon took about a fortnight in 1485, Henry had ample time to sound out the Portuguese between Bosworth (22 August) and receiving the petition from Parliament to marry Elizabeth of York on 11 December.

Joanna returned to her convent at Aveiro early in 1486. But she received at least one more offer of marriage. The Archduke Maximilian's first wife, Mary of Burgundy, died in 1482. In 1486, his father the Emperor sent an embassy to Portugal to seek financial support, and again offered a marriage between Maximilian and Joanna. King John, however, seems to have respected his sister's wishes, and the matter was dropped.³² Joanna fell ill in December 1489, and died in the convent at Aveiro on 12 May 1490. She was only thirty-eight. She was beatified by Pope Innocent XII in 1693 and commemorated by the Catholic church in Portugal on the anniversary of her

death. Her remains were translated to a magnificent tomb built by King Pedro II in 1711.³³

Some comments

The silence of English historians over Richard III's negotiations for a Portuguese marriage is deafening. I have remarked elsewhere³⁴ that for this period, English history is too heavily dependent on Polydore Vergil. Whether he knew of the negotiations is doubtful; if he did, he kept silence, realising perhaps that they undermined the picture he was trying to paint of Richard III. English historians of Portugal, familiar with Portuguese sources, at least mention the negotiations, and there has been a reference in a popular English history of Portugal since 1891.³⁵ But although these negotiations extended over five months of a twenty-six month reign, they receive no mention in Paul Murray Kendall's biography. In Charles Ross's more recent work, Portugal is not even mentioned in the index despite a whole chapter devoted to Richard's foreign policy. This, surely, is carrying English insularity to absurd lengths.

Secondly, the Portuguese marriage negotiations raise some serious questions over the interpretation of Richard III. The Portuguese were under considerable pressure in 1485; John II could be a ruthless monarch, a worthy contemporary of Ferdinand of Aragon.³⁶ But it strains credulity that the King and his Council of State should have tried to coerce Joanna into marrying a blood-stained usurper; still less that she, albeit under pressure and conditionally, should have accepted him when she had already refused Maximilian of Austria and Charles, Duke of Orleans. It was not that the court in Portugal could have been unaware of events in England. Portuguese ambassadors were in England in the summer of 1484 when they renewed the Treaty of Windsor with Richard III.³⁷ Nor is it difficult to speculate on Joanna's motives. Apart from her country's needs, urged by her brother, there was the opportunity of being an instrument of peace in war-scarred England.³⁸ There was Richard's reputation for piety which Charles Ross acknowledges 'there is no good reason to doubt.'³⁹ Finally, her aunt may have put in her mind the example of Joanna's saintly great-grandmother, Queen Philippa.⁴⁰

Whatever pressure was upon Portugal in 1485, no such constraint was on Spain. Yet apparently Ferdinand and Isabella were as willing that Richard should marry their eldest daughter as John II that he should marry his sister. The attitude of the Kings of Spain and Portugal is the best testimony we have to Richard's character. It should carry far more weight than the gossip and rumour circulating in England and France which has been unduly regarded by historians.

Further, the employment of Richard or Edward Woodville on these delicate and confidential negotiations shows that the rapprochement achieved by Richard III in 1485 extended beyond the former Queen. Elizabeth Woodville's reconciliation with King Richard has always been difficult to square with the tradition that he murdered her sons, but the behaviour of their maternal uncle must also be taken into account.

Thirdly, if Henry VII also made a proposal for Joanna's hand—and this

must remain doubtful—it raises interesting questions as to why he should have been prepared to abandon the advantages of the York marriage, unless between December 1483 and August 1485 he had discovered a real snag to it, such as that one or both of Elizabeth's brothers was still alive. As the husband of Joanna, Henry would have greatly strengthened his claim as the representative of the House of Lancaster, but his dynasty would have been the House of Lancaster restored, not the union of the roses.

Finally, Joanna, 'the Holy Princess' deserves to be much better known in England, particularly among Ricardians. Gomes dos Santos remarks that if she had married Richard, Christendom would have lost a saint and literature a pungent tragedy of Shakespeare.¹¹ Both propositions are doubtful. As Queen of England, Joanna might have been another Margaret of Scotland or Elizabeth of Hungary; Shakespeare could have found another subject for his genius—perhaps one which distorted history less. The loss at Bosworth was real enough, for not only did England lose one of the most remarkable of her kings but also, almost certainly, one of the noblest of her queens.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Richard III's proclamation against Henry Tudor in 1485 described him as of 'bastard descent'. See Charles Ross, *Richard III* (London 1981), p.208.
2. Duke Humphrey's illegitimate daughter Antigone married Henry Grey, Earl of Tankerville, and left descendants. For the younger sons of Henry IV see the *Dictionary of National Biography*.
3. Francis Sandford, *A Genealogical History of the Kings of England and Monarchs of Great Britain* (London 1677), p.269.
4. *ibid.* Sandford incorrectly calls Philippa's husband John. For a good modern account of Eric and Philippa see Ingvar Anderson, *History of Sweden* (English translation by Carolyn Hannay, London 1956), pp.71-90.
5. John of Gaunt had a younger daughter by his first marriage, Elizabeth who married John Holland, Duke of Exeter. By Constance, he had a daughter, Catharine, who married Henry III, King of Castile.
6. The reader is referred to Table 24 (a) of *The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. C. W. Previte Orton (Cambridge 1952), p.902, (The House of Castile 1252-1504) for a fairly simple presentation of their interrelationship.
7. Edmund of Langley's descendants included the entire House of York.
8. See articles by Michael Hicks and Isolde Wigram in *The Ricardian*, nos. 72, 73, 74 (March, June and September 1981) on George, Duke of Clarence's interest in Mary of Burgundy.
9. H. V. Livermore, *History of Portugal* (Cambridge 1947), p.193. Livermore gives an excellent account of Portugal in this period.
10. Antonio Caetano de Sousa, *Historia Genealogica* (Coimbra 1946), vol. 3, p.47.
11. *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa Brasileira*: Joana (Santa).
12. *ibid.*
13. She could not have received a higher offer of marriage since the Holy Roman Empire ranked as the first among European monarchies. Maximilian's mother, the Empress Eleanor, was a Portuguese princess.
14. Joanna's importance to the succession was demonstrated posthumously by the death of John II's only legitimate son Afonso in a riding accident. The succession passed to Manuel, Duke of Beja (Manuel I).
15. Lisbon 1963. The title is the correct name of Joanna's convent.
16. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, pp.90-2.
17. *ibid.*, p.92.
18. *The Ricardian*, no. 73 (June 1981), pp.341-5.
19. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, p.95.
20. A. Morse Stephens, *Portugal* (London 1891), pp.164-5.

21. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, pp.92-6.
22. *ibid.*, p.95.
23. *ibid.*, p.92.
24. See *DNB* under his brother Anthony Woodville; also *The Complete Peerage*, Vol. XI (ed. Geoffrey H. White, London 1949) under Rivers, which notes the confusion between the brothers.
25. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, p.95.
26. *ibid.*, p.92.
27. Antonio Vasconcello, *Anacephalaeoses* (Antwerp 1621), pp.250-1.
28. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, p.93. Allowing for the fortnight's voyage of the ship carrying the news from London to Lisbon, the news probably reached the King about 8 September 1485.
29. *ibid.*, p.95.
30. *Primeira Parte da Historia des S. Domingos* (Lisbon 1767), p.363. Fr. Luis, known in the world as Manoel de Sousa Coutinho, was a Dominican friar who lived from 1555 to 1632.
31. Gladys Temperley, *Henry VII* (London 1914), p.14. Miss Temperley notes that the Earl of Northumberland was married to another of Sir William's daughters, and his prevarications at Bosworth may have been influenced by hopes of becoming royal brother-in-law.
32. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, pp.96-7.
33. *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa Brasileira*: Joana (Santa).
34. *The Ricardian*, no. 79 (December 1982).
35. A. Morse Stephens, *supra*. See also V. M. Shillington and A. B. Wallis Chapman, *Commercial Relations of England and Portugal* (New York 1970 reprinting the London edition 1907), p.22. Arthur Noel Kincald in his edition of Sir George Buck's *History of King Richard III* (Gloucester 1979), p.306, notes these negotiations.
36. When the Duke of Viseu plotted to overthrow John II in 1484, the King killed him with his own hand.
37. *Foedera*, XII, p.228. I have argued (*The Ricardian*, no. 73, June 1981) that it was probably in the summer of 1484 that Rui de Sousa saw Richard, Duke of York. If so, he would have been able to report back to Lisbon that the rumours circulating in England and France that King Richard had murdered his nephews were false.
38. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, p.93.
39. Ross, *op. cit.*, p.128.
40. Queen Philippa was famed for her piety, an example of which is her beautiful poetic prayer published in *The Oxford Book of Portuguese Verse* (Oxford 1952), p.79. The present author's translation was published in Arthur H. Stockwell's *Collected Poems, 1967* (Ilfracombe).
41. Gomes dos Santos, *op. cit.*, p.96.