What Leonor López Left Unsaid

O que Leonor Lopez deixou de dizer

Marina S. Brownlee
Princeton University
ORCID: 0000-0001-7660-4263

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Thanatology — the study of death — finds fertile ground for research in the Middle Ages given the precariousness of life due to war, disease, and the rudimentary knowledge of medicine. Much more than the counting and recounting of dead knights, and women and children who die during childbirth, the focus on the details of death in a wealth of genres, from epics and chronicles, to autobiographies and spiritual accounts is very revealing of the expectations, emotions and symbolic values of death and dying (see *Death Studies*).

Leonor López de Córdoba (born in 1362 or 1363 — died in1420), a prominent political figure in 14th-and early 15th-century Iberia, has left us a compellingly enigmatic document called *Memorias* (i.e., memories, memoir). This 9-page document covering nearly 40 years of her experiences has been dated at 1410 (toward the end of her career as a courtier) or the early 1400's (before she joins Catherine's court 1403), and it constitutes the only extant example of her writing.[2] It is a puzzling text, legalistic in style, of spiritual interest in connection with Leonor's self-presentation, and, more recently, viewed by some for its gynocritic focus on women. There are those who see it as the work of a notary who recorded her words (Deyermond, 1971), while others see it as her own unmediated account (Mirrer, 1991). Debate also continues as to whether it was finished or the possibility that Leonor's narrative lacks a conclusion since it omits her rise to political power. The authorial identity and the issue of whether the *Memorias* remained unfinished are the two major scholarly issues that this essay addresses.

Her decision to write about her life resonates with some of Europe's first female autobiographers, among them Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416), Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438), and Christine de Pizan (1364-c.1430). There is a significant difference, however, between their texts and Leonor's. The difference lies in her choice of the memoir genre rather than autobiography. The enigmas in her text stem from her choice of memoir — rather than autobiography — the memoir

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being a form that is characterized by selectivity, discontinuity and fragmentariness, as Felicity Nussbaum observes in writing of the genre in 18th-century England (Nussbaum, 1995, 165), but equally applicable to Leonor's work. While the autobiographer seeks to give a full picture of his or her life, "The diarist [or memorialist] pretends to simply transcribe the details of experience" (165). And as Virginia Woolf explains "A memoir is not what happens, but the person to whom things happen." In Leonor's case, the text conforms to the discontinuity and fragmentariness of the memoir genre to communicate episodes of a tumultuous life.

This memorial document is selective and contrary to the majority of its modern interpreters, I would assert that this one is finished although, paradoxically, it does not contain the most significant information about Leonor's life, namely about her illustrious and powerful influence during the reign of Catherine of Lancaster, Queen regent of Castile. The most prominent chroniclers justifiably comment on Leonor's unusually influential presence at Court. Yet why, then, does she not include this chapter of her life in the *Memorias*? Furthermore, given that She dwells on the Virgin Mary as mother figure, why does she fail to mention that she has three sons and one daughter — only mentioning the one son whom she sacrifices by forcing him to care for a plague-ridden servant?

This text, at its inception, is written in the notarial style of legal discourse — of the oath or "relación jurada": After a prayer to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary, she writes as follows:

> Sepan quantos esta Escriptura vieren, como yo Doña Leonor Lopez de Cordoba, fija de mi Señor el Maestre Don Martin Lopez de Cordoba, é Doña Sancha Carillo, a quién dé Dios gloria y Parayso. Juro por esta significancia de t en que Yo adoro, como todo esto que aquí es escrito, es verdad que lo vi, y pasó por mi, y escribolo á (f. 195v) honrra, y alabanza de mi Señor Jesu Christo, é dela Virgen Santa María su Madre que lo parió, por que todas las Criaturas que estubieren en tribulación sean ciertos, que yo espero ensu misericordia, que si se encomiendan de Corazón a la Virgen Santa María, que Ella las consolará, y acorrerá, como consoló a mi (Ayerbe-Chaux, 1977, 11).

> May all who see this testament know how I, Doña Leonor López de Córdoba, daughter of my lord, Grand Master Don Martín López de Córdoba and Doña Sancha Carrillo, may God grant them eternal glory, swear by this sign [of the Cross] that I worship, that all that is written here is true, for I saw it, and it happened to me, and I down for the honor and glory of my Lord Jesus Christ and his Mother, the Holy Virgin Mary, who bore him so that all creatures in tribulation might be assured that I believe in her mercy and that if they commend themselves wholeheartedly to the Holy Virgin Mary she will console them and succor them as she consoled me. (Katz-Kaminsky, 1995, 21).

This notarial style has led to considerable controversy. María Jesús Lacarra considers the possibility that a notary penned the *Memorias*, however she notes both the omission of a notary's name and also any indication of the date of composition or the signatures of witnesses (Lacarra, 2007, 733). In another insightful remark that questions the status of the text as the work of a notary, Louise Mirrer remarks that "the initial phrases of the *Memorias* look like a caricature of

the notarial style" (Mirrer, 9). The use of notarial discourse at the beginning of the text is interpreted by her as Leonor's way of appropriating male authority, as other female authors do.

Leonor writes: "Sepan cuantos esta Escriptura vieren, como yo Doña Leonor López de Córdoba, fija de mi Señor el Maestre." The narrative soon changes tone, however — there is also a lot of colloquial language included, with "ands, commas, and semi-colons." Moreover, "the chronology and narration is broken by frequent shifts into the past, and there are hiatisus of years at a time in the action," as Amy Katz Kaminsky and Elaine Dorough Johnson have accurately noted [Katz Kaminsky and Johnson, 78]. This is the stuff of memoir, not autobiography.

Leonor — Castile's first memorialist and first female prose writer — was well connected in terms of lineage: She was born in the home of King Peter I of Castile and León (who reigned from 1350-69) in a violent century. He was controversial for his indulgent attitude toward Jews (for which he was called the Just — *El Justo o Justiciero*), yet by others he was known as The Cruel (*el Cruel*) for such actions as boiling his victims. Leonor was the goddaughter of King Pedro I's daughters, while her own mother, Sancha Carillo, was the niece of King Alfonso XI. Her mother's untimely death prompts her father, Martín López de Córdoba, to betroth her at the age of seven to Ruy Gutiérrez de Henestrosa, son of King Pedro's head valet and mayordomo of Queen Blanca (Blanche de Bourbon). Betrothed at the tender age of seven and incarcerated at the age of nine — she spent eight years in a plague-ridden prison because of politics — namely, the lethal rivalry of King Pedro I and his illegitimate half-brother Enrique II. Later in life she chronicles the gruesome deaths of her relatives and staff when the family was imprisoned, a fate which only she and her problematic husband survived.

In terms of trauma and death studies, it should be noted that Leonor references at least thirty-five deaths in her very brief text, fatalities that stem either from politics or plague; her father, Martín López is decapitated by Enrique II, though he had vowed to release him unharmed, the death of brothers, sisters, and brothers-in-law, of Martín's chamberlain, Sancho Míñez, who died in prison, having vowed to protect Leonor and her siblings, but, unfortunately, succumbed to the plague. Thirteen knights also die in the prison. Her eldest son, also died of the plague — along with twelve other people who cared for a plague victim at her insistence, as well as a maid who conspired against her. Leonor explains that: "perdi la paciencia, é la que me hizo mas contradicción con la Señora mi tia se murió en mis manos, comiéndose la lengua"(21) [the one who did most to set my aunt against me died in my hands, swallowing her tongue (27-28)]. Does this somewhat ambiguous declaration suggest that she died not by natural causes, but by strangulation at Leonor's hands? As we shall see, after her traumatic losses as a political victim, however, Leonor gains unexpected and notable political power, rising to become the *camarera mayor* (chief councilor and confidant) of Catherine of Lancaster. In this capacity, Leonor's power is formidable. It is important to note, however, that she dictates her text once she is again out of royal favor, suffering political and social ignominy — being definitively banished by Catherine. And yet, the historical postscript to this period is surprising and unexpected, as she ultimately recovers considerable wealth and stature.

The trauma of her life begins as Enrique de Trastámara, illegitimate half--brother of King Pedro I, murders him in 1369. This puts Leonor's father, Martín in a dangerous position since he was a staunch supporter of Pedro, as a result of which he is beheaded in 1371 by Enrique after this murderous monarch gives him assurances that he will guarantee safe passage to Martín and his family. The family, minus the father, is cast into prison with the servants, a suffering that lasts for eight years for Leonor and her husband — who are the only survivors of the imprisonment and the plague. Heart-rending descriptions of her suffering family abound at the beginning of her memoir. For example, in describing the jailers' treatment of her husband, Leonor writes:

> Á mi Marido en especial ponianlo en el Algive dela hambre, é tenienlo seis, ó siete días que nunca comia, ni vebia por que era Primo delas Señoras Ynfantas, hijas del Señor Rey Don Pedro. (19).
>
> They singled out my husband to be put in the hunger tank, where they held him six or seven days and never gave him food or drink because he was a cousin of the princesses, daughters of King Pedro (25).

Likewise, focusing on her young brother she adds:

> Nuestros Maridos tenian sesenta libras de hierro cada vno en los pies, y mi hermano Don Lope Lopez tenia una Cadena encima delos hierros en que havia setenta eslabones; El era Niño de treze años, la mas hermosa Criatura que havia Enel mundo (18-19).
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> Our husbands each had sixty pounds of iron on. Their feet, and my brother, Don Lope López, had a chain of seventy links on top of his irons. He was a child of thirteen, the most beautiful creature there was in the world (24-5).

In 1379 Enrique II dies of poisoning, at which point Leonor and her husband — the only survivors — are released from the Arsenal of Seville. Upon her release from prison Leonor's husband leaves for seven years, attempting to recover his wealth and social standing, as she is housed by her Aunt, María García Carrillo. However, he ultimately fails, returning to his wife on a mule — after which Leonor never speaks of him again, though they spend nearly twenty years at the Aunt's house, a detail that is not emphasized. Yet the political danger of her family's genealogical alliance with the *petrista* lineage will pursue her even at the height of her career as the first lady to Catherine of Lancaster, daughter of John of Gaunt, and co-regent of Castile.

Leonor's narrative has been aptly termed a "gynocracy" by some scholars given that men are virtually absent or figure negatively in the *Memorias* (Hutcheson, 2001). Her father, Martín, whom she honors in her thoughts and words, is out of the picture from the start of her narrative, as is Pedro I. Enrique II is monstrous in his behavior, as are the friars who steal the gold chains off the bodies of Leonor's three deceased brothers-in-law, and the abbots who did not want to sell her the parcel of land on which she planned to build. Leonor's Aunt will be a positive influence in her life, though her female cousins envy their mother's generosity

to her so that Leonor will, ultimately, be forced to leave her Aunt's house. By contrast, the female who will never abandon her is, of course, the Virgin Mary.

When John of Gaunt marries Costanza of Castile in 1371, he becomes the de facto monarch of Castile and León by extension of his wife's identity, going so far as to sign documents with the Spanish identification of himself as, "Yo, el Rey" [I, the King of Castile]. His ambition led him to attempt an Iberian takeover, however it was not until he teamed up with the Portuguese King João in 1386, but his longed-for invasion failed. After that, he signed a treaty with King Juan of Trastámara in which he and his wife forfeited their claim to Castile in exchange for annual emoluments and the marriage of his daughter, Catherine of Lancaster, to Juan I's son, Enrique II.

In theory, this union seemed to be a splendid one, uniting the two enemies — the Trastámaras and the Petristas — peacefully. Yet, Spain's toxic political atmosphere during Leonor's lifetime was notorious, and her sympathies with the supporters of the deceased Pedro would continue to cause problems for her when she is at the height of her political power as not only Catherine's adviser, but because of her overbearing and meddlesome presence — if the chroniclers who mention her are to be believed [e.g., Fernán Pérez de Guzmán in his *Crónica de Juan II* and his *Generaciones y semblanzas*]. Once Enrique III dies after only a three-year reign, Catherine and Fernando de Antequera become reluctant co--regents because her son is too young to assume the throne. Again, we wonder whether male chauvinism and support for Fernando de Antequera, Catherine's co-regent and Leonor's enemy may contribute to the negative portrayal of Leonor, whose power is remarkable. After getting Leonor to help him gain funding from Catherine for a successful venture, Leonor assumes that he will look favorably on her, but he does the opposite, totally undermining her. His words written in 1408 are, as we might expect, very incriminating: He writes: "ha cohechado e cohecha a quantos son en este regno que alguna cosa han de librar con la dicha señora reina, que ninguna persona de ningunt estado e condición que sea non puede librar con la dicha senora reina cosa alguna" [She has bribed and received bribes from all those in the kingdom who need to transact business with the queen, so that no one, no matter their rank, has free access to the queen (Piera, 2019, 246)].

Nonetheless, Catherine favored her as revealed in an affectionate letter she writes to Leonor in 1409 (Severin, 1996). And as Montserrat Piera notes, it was not just Leonor, but also "Leonor's daughter, son in law and Leonor's brother (Alvaro de Córdoba, confessor to the queen) who were all still living at court and were members of Catalina's entourage" (Piera 247). However, when Leonor was banished by Catalina in 1412, they were all summarily dismissed as an added level of familial rejection and suffering for Leonor. The reason for her banishment is unknown, and Catalina indicates that if Leonor dare return, she will be burned.

One of the foremost mysteries surrounding the dismissal of Leonor and the composition of the *Memorias* is the cause of the dismissal — which is not spelled out in any surviving documents written by Catherine or anyone else. However, given Fernando's relentless machinations not only toward Leonor and Catherine, but anyone else who stood in his way as co-regent or as King of Aragon (reigned 1412-16), it is plausible that he drove a wedge between Catherine and

Leonor. Then again, as Byron Warner III cites the chroniclers who mention her, Leonor seems to have been perhaps detestable in her own right (Warner, 2010).

In any event, the *Memorias* and the reasons for its composition continue to intrigue modern readers. Chelo De Andrés sees the text as the product of her mourning: "Her beloved son's demise became the anamnesis of past bereavements by acting as a catalyst and reawakening previous losses" (De Andrés, 2005). Byron Warner writes about her as the product of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. He points out that she is "oblivious" and "dispassionate" about the deaths of those who cared for her adopted son who had been stricken by the plague, including her eldest (twelve-year old) son, Juan Fernandez, who implored her not to be a caregiver to him since he would die as the others had. Nonetheless, Leonor insists, and he does die, while the adopted boy survives him.

While Leonor, no doubt, was traumatized by the experiences she witnessed, the *Memorias* display a confident belief that she is one of the Virgin Mary's "chosen." When the servant who interferes with Leonor's plans dies in her hands, swallowing her tongue (either the result of an epileptic fit or murder), she interprets this as a sign of the Virgin's approval of her sentiments and plans. When she experiences a mystical dream vision, it involves Leonor gathering flowers by a church, where she contemplates a beautiful blue sky. She interprets this as a prophetic dream — as proof that the Virgin will grant her wish to build a house on that very site. And when Leonor's son died, the villagers, who had previously served her deceased father — now, in defiance of their masters — joined her in her grieving. Leonor had the belief in and ability to transform everyday occurrences into divine patronage. She prayed for a house, for death to her enemies, and for the health of herself and her family. Thereafter, continuing her upward financial trajectory, we know that after Leonor was banished from Catherine's court, she regained her wealth to the point that she had considerable real estate as well as commissioning a familial mausoleum.

As to the reason for and dating of the *Memorias*, she may have written the text either before or after her years as Catherine's confidant. She could have been prompted to write it in order to solicit funds from Catherine once she was rejected by her Aunt and impoverished, before joining Catherine's court in 1403. Or she may have written it even earlier as therapy for the numerous traumas she has experienced, right after the death of her eldest son. Or a third possibility, the text has a clearly confessional dimension in which she does beg forgiveness for her sins, as any devout Christian would do. Of course, the drive to honor the family and especially her father's memory is evident throughout the work (Ghassemi, 1989-90). None of these motivations, however, suggest that the text remained unfinished. It is a completed memoir which, we recall, is all about the selectivity of events that the writer chooses (Piera, 260).

To me it seems equally credible that she could have written the text after the expulsion from Catherine's court in 1412, not wanting to refer at all to that ignominious episode in the life of a proud and capable woman. And, when all is said and done, it does not much matter. This text is an intriguing and enigmatic document — as fascinating for what it doesn't reveal as for what it does. The study of death in this memoir foregrounds the historical realities and expecta-

tions, the personal emotions, and the symbolic values of each fatality, at the same time showcasing its intrepid female author.

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Resumo

A Tamalogia - o estudo da morte - encontra terreno fértil para pesquisas na Idade Média, dada a precariedade da vida devido à guerra, às doenças e ao conhecimento rudimentar da medicina. Muito mais do que a contagem e recontagem de cavaleiros mortos, e de mulheres e crianças que morreram durante o parto, o foco nos detalhes da morte numa riqueza de géneros, desde épicos a crónicas, a autobiografias e relatos espirituais é muito revelador das expetativas, emoções e valores simbólicos da morte e do morrer. As "Memórias" de Leonor López de Córdoba são um documento convincentemente enigmático escrito por um autora politicamente influente que reflete a precariedade da sua vida.

Abstract

Thanatology — the study of death — finds fertile ground for research in the Middle Ages given the precariousness of life due to war, disease, and the rudimentary knowledge of medicine. Much more than the counting and recounting of dead knights, and women and children who die during childbirth, the focus on the details of death in a wealth of genres, from epics and chronicles, to autobiographies and spiritual accounts is very revealing of the expectations, emotions and symbolic values of death and dying. The *Memorias of Leonor López* (b. 1362 or 1363) is a compellingly enigmatic document written by a politically influential author. The paradoxical conflation of autobiography and memoir in her historical writing about the murder of Pedro I of Castile and León by his half- brother Enrique II de Trastámara (known as The Fratricide), is a narrative of war, trauma, and death, and their consequences — but also, surprisingly, of transcendence. Leonor — Castile's first memorialist and first female prose writer — was incarcerated at the age of eight, spending eight years as a prisoner because of Enrique's perfidy against Pedro, with whose family she was aligned. Enrique was the first King of Castile and León from the House of Trastámara. He became king in 1369 by murdering his half-brother Pedro (known as both The Just or the Cruel, depending on the opinion of political allies or foes). After numerous rebellions and battles as king, he was involved in the Fernandine Wars and the Hundred Years' War. Leonor chronicles the gruesome deaths of her relatives, a fate which only she and her problematic husband survived. After her traumatic losses as a prisoner of war, however, Leonor gains notable political power, rising to become the Queen Regent of Catalina de Lancaster. The postscript to this position is both tumultuous and unexpected.