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Review of: Marie A. Kelleher, *The Measure of Woman: Law and Female Identity in the Crown of Aragon*

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Kelleher, Marie A. *The Measure of Woman: Law and Female Identity in the Crown of Aragon*. Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 232 pp.

In her well-reasoned and well-researched book, *The Measure of a Woman: Law and Female Identity in the Crown of Aragon*, Marie Kelleher invites scholars to consider both the legal landscape of late medieval Aragon and how women fit into that legal landscape as actors. Kelleher, an associate professor at California State, Long Beach, covers a wide swath of legal history, from Justinian's law codes of the sixth century to fourteenth century conflicts amongst local, Roman, and canon law. Scholars of law, gender, and the Middle Ages will find this book useful, both for its delineation of how law functioned in late medieval Crown of Aragon, and, perhaps more importantly, for its theoretical framework.

The book plays out in four chapters. The first chapter reviews the literature on European law and the laws of late-medieval Crown of Aragon. Pages seventeen to twenty-four stand out for their useful summary of law in Aragon, laudable for its succinct prose and detailed footnotes. Chapter two attends to women's legal strategies in property disputes with the following chapter covering the use of sexuality by and against women in the courts. The final chapter relates women's experiences with physical abuse, including rape and spousal abuse. Each chapter begins with a legal case illustrating an element of Kelleher's overall argument and includes titled sections. A helpful introduction lays out the theoretical groundwork of Kelleher's argument and introduces the reader to the relevant legal and women's historiography. A short conclusion sums up the book's arguments nicely.

Kelleher's argument runs thus: women used lawsuits to forward their self-interests. To use the law effectively, women had "to represent themselves in ways that fit within" (xiv) established legal and gender expectations of late medieval Aragon. However, by conforming to established expectations, women "helped reify the gender assumptions (...) even if the women's own stories belied those very assumptions" (xiv). The idea that women advanced their interests by conforming to contemporary gender expectations echoes similar conclusions drawn by others. For example, Helen Nader noted in her introduction to *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain* that Mendoza women displayed skills and ambitions that challenged legal and cultural beliefs about women's inferiority. Unlike Nader's volume, however, *The Measure of a Woman* moves beyond a dichotomous discussion of patriarchy versus resistance or practice versus policy,

advancing a sophisticated argument on how women both navigated and *redefined* medieval legal culture.

In order to succeed at court, women faced what Kelleher argues were “three overlapping matrices of identity”. The first identity derived from “a set of legal assumptions about . . . women. . . that emphasized women’s incapacity” resulting in both special legal protections and restrictions (xxiii). The second matrix concerned women’s relationships to men, as daughters, mothers, wives, and widows. Such relationships framed how women reacted to contests over their property, sexuality, and persons. Finally, reputation served as the third identity matrix requiring navigation. As Kelleher shows in chapters three and four, one’s reputation constituted an essential piece of legal evidence in weighing the worthiness of competing claims, especially in cases of rape and abuse.

None of these ideas about identity are new to women’s history. However, Kelleher’s contribution lies in placing these identities within her larger argument about women’s use of law and then illustrating how such abstract concepts played out in the courts. For example, Kelleher opens chapter two with the case of a wife fighting her husband for control of the wife’s dowry. This case, along with other dotal disputes in the chapter, demonstrate “an internal contradiction in Catalano-Aragonese law, which sought simultaneously to protect women’s property rights and to enforce a patriarchal household structure” (35) that allowed men to dispose of all household property. Here we find scholarship at its best: theories of law and gender, carefully explained in clear language, backed with strong archival research.

The overall quality of this book notwithstanding, it raises several questions that are not entirely answered. First, how exactly did women’s contributions to the legal cultural dialogue change over time? Kelleher charts change over time best in sections on property and rape, but the thread goes missing elsewhere. Second, how did women know the law? Footnote 72 in chapter two wrestles with this question, yet it demands greater attention. If women navigated the law, knowing from whom or what they learned to navigate strikes this reviewer as essential and a possible avenue for future research.

These minor criticisms aside, *The Measure of a Woman* stands as an exemplary contribution to multiple fields and measures as the best book on the law this reviewer has read since Richard Kagan’s *Lawsuits and Litigants*.

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