

Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies

Journal of the Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies

Volume 45

Issue 1

Review 1

2020

Review of Michelle Armstrong-Partida, Alexandra Guerson, and Dana Wessell Lightfoot, eds., *Women and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*

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Recommended Citation

Earenfight, Theresa (2020) "Review of Michelle Armstrong-Partida, Alexandra Guerson, and Dana Wessell Lightfoot, eds., *Women and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 45 : Iss. 1 , Review 2.

Available at:

<https://asphs.net/article/review-of-michelle-armstrong-partida-alexandra-guerson-and-dana-wessell-lightfoot-eds-women-and-community-in-medieval-and-early-modern-iberia>

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Armstrong-Partida, Michelle, Alexandra Guerson, and Dana Wessell Lightfoot, eds. *Women and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020. xiv + 288 pp. + 4 tables.

The essays in this thought-provoking book use the idea of women and community to tackle two important “P” words—power and patriarchy. These essays clearly show that women were hardly powerless, even though their communities were not organized around guilds, confraternities, military groups, religious orders, or governance. They are inspired by Helen Nader, who cautioned scholars of gender to be alert to the slipperiness of power and to think carefully about what patriarchy meant in practice. Nader’s spirit animates the thirteen scholars whose work brilliantly reveals how women adapted to the shifting dynamics of religion, conversion, economics, cultural practices, and family arrangements.

Taken together, these essays make a strong, compelling argument: agency is powerful. Do not underestimate the ability of women to get around barriers meant to keep them from getting on with their lives. The institutional and physical impediments that were established to restrict and restrain women hindered them but did not stop them from building and maintaining powerful emotional, familial, and economic connections. The women who come to life in these essays exercised agency, and yes, power, yet it was common, not exceptional. With only a few royal exceptions, these women lived ordinary lives. Nor was their agency and power situated along a binary axis of inclusive or exclusive. These women created meaningful communities that crisscrossed conventional delineations of religion and rank to care for, comfort, protect, and provide resources for other women. In most cases, women stick together, they rally in support of one another against patriarchal institutions and practices and against the insults, gossip, physical violence, and threats of economic ruin that complicate their lives.

These theoretically informed essays cover a wide temporal frame from around 1200 to 1700, with seven essays discussing the early centuries and five taking up the later period. All argue that continuity mattered more than abrupt change. The authors are concerned with how women created community and what this meant in practice while keeping the focus on the day-to-day experiences of women.

And what fascinating lives they lived. In her conclusion to this collection, Allyson Poska notes that the authors address the “most complicated communities of Western Europe” (269). That is a profound understatement. The authors narrate vividly the lives of married, widowed, and single Jewish, Christian, Muslim, *conversa*, and *morisca* women from all social ranks across a wide geographic swath of Iberia that includes the Basque provinces, Castile (Valladolid, Toledo), Catalunya (Barcelona, Girona, Vic), Mallorca, Portugal

(Coimbra), and Valencia. The authors talk about women lending money, writing letters of advice, fleeing persecution and personal violence, and protecting dowry assets. They use a range of sources: economic records, legal records, *responsa*, notarial records, wills, charters, records of almshouses and hospitals, leases, contracts, letters, dowry documents. The narratives tell of women who made important choices across their life spans of youth, marriage and motherhood, life in cloister, widowhood, and old age. These women created wide networks in tight spaces, in cities and towns, convents and lay households, with words and gestures. They operated publicly, privately, within and outside of established norms.

Yet the effect overall is clarity, not confusion. The editors organized the essays in three sections: “Community Networks and Economic Agency,” “Challenging Communal Ties,” and “Institutional Relationships and Creating Communities.” But the essays overlap in significant ways. Four thematic threads stand out. First, all of the communities described were networks of both formal and informal solidarity. Mireia Comas-Via tells of Barcelona widows of all ranks who worked with both official and ad hoc charitable institutions to assist women in need. Rachel Stapleton describes the career of sixteenth-century Spanish-Portuguese humanist Luisa Sigea who worked at the court of Infanta María of Portugal and created a community of letters that included Pope Paul III among her correspondents.

Second, these were highly porous communities. Miriam Shadis and Michelle Herder argue convincingly that Christian convents were far more engaged with the secular communities of family, town, and crown. Shadis redefines the convent as a community that was densely connected to the secular community in her study of two royal sisters, Teresa and Sancha, who found the earliest Cistercian convents in Coimbra. Herder’s account of the canon of the local church who got a nun pregnant shows the networks at a convent in Girona that involved the secular community that knew full well what was going on. The permeable boundary of religion is even more striking in the lives of *conversas* and *moriscas* who retained a sense of their Jewish and Muslim community even after conversion as they sought to protect families and wealth. Alexandra Guereson and Dana Wessell Lightfoot reveal how women in mixed marriages of Christian, *conversa*, and Jewish couples negotiated their identities in Girona. Natalie Oeltjen recounts the efforts of *conversas* in Mallorca trying to preserve family assets after 1391. Stephanie M. Cavanaugh studies *morisca* women in sixteenth-century Valladolid who defended their community and resisted assimilation while protecting their property from confiscation.

Third, women of almost every status were able to make fiscal decisions at almost every point in life and across the centuries. Sarah Ifft Decker discusses Jewish women moneylenders in Vic in the century before the Bubonic Plague. Grace Coolidge studies the strategies of widows in late-sixteenth-century Toledo

to dispose of their property. And Amanda Scott, uses the wills of *seroras*, lay women who served as caretakers of the liturgical and spiritual objects, and practices in counter-Reformation Basque towns to consider networks of relationships between nuns and laywomen. Finally, although all the authors show how women naturally resisted, either directly or subtly, the impositions of patriarchal institutions or religious boundaries, some women faced threats to their bodies. Michelle Armstrong-Partida looks at women in Girona and Barcelona who joined together in community to help one another when faced with domestic violence at the hands of clergymen. Mark Meyerson complicates the stereotype of Valencian women as active participants in the violent neighborhood contests in Valencia over honor and shame, masculinity and femininity, arguing that they acted in defense of their sexualized bodies.

Terms like agency, power, and patriarchy come alive in these eloquent and often moving essays. They are accessible enough to teach in an undergraduate seminar, and rich enough in theory, methods, and primary sources to engage a graduate student working on a dissertation. The authors offer an array of re-imaginings and re-interpretations of themes familiar to late-career Iberianists who will relish the surprises that each chapter brings.

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