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Women and gender

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CHAPTER EIGHT

WOMEN AND GENDER
Structures and roles (1400–1820)

Allyson M. Poska and Kirsten Schultz

GENDERED LEGAL AND POLITICAL REGIMES

Between 1400 and 1820, Iberian legal norms, politics, imperial strategies, religious activity, and cultural life both shaped and were shaped by gender roles and the expectations and actions of women. Although a pervasive cultural rhetoric that emphasised women’s inferior and sinful nature led to some restrictions on women’s activity, in general Iberian structures and institutions prescribed active roles for women and allowed for extensive female autonomy.

During the early modern period, Iberian culture perpetuated long-held negative stereotypes of women. Drawing on Roman and Patristic sources, male clerics and intellectuals, including Juan Luis Vives in his *De Institutione Feminae Christianae* (1523) and Fray Luis de León in *La Perfecta Casada* (1583), advocated for harsh restrictions on women’s behaviour, emphasising women’s submission to male authority, as well as female obedience, humility, and silence. They argued that female weakness made women susceptible to sinfulness, especially idleness, pride, and lust. Men’s honour was predicated on maintaining the virginity of daughters and sisters, who were expected to remain virgins until marriage and chaste thereafter (Morant 2002). The pervasiveness of this cultural trope is most evident in Spanish Golden Age theatre, whose plots often centred on men who, upon hearing rumours of their wives’ infidelity, committed uxoricide as a means to preserve their own honour.

In Portugal, Rui Gonçalves’ *Dos Privilegios e Praerogativas que ho Genero Feminino tem por Direito comum e Ordenações do Reyno mais que ho Genero Masculino* (1557), dedicated to Queen Regent Catherine of Austria (1507–1578), enumerated women’s property and civil rights yet viewed them as circumscribed by chastity, devotion to God, and the broader legal agency of men. *Carta de Guia de Casados* (1651) by the historian and poet Francisco Manuel de Melo similarly affirmed male authority, asserting that, in its best incarnation, marriage sustained women’s submission to men, serving as a bulwark against social, economic, and moral disorder (Hespanha 1995; Almeida 1992).

Despite their pervasiveness, these rigid sexual and behavioural expectations had little resonance in the lived experience of most Iberian women. Although some
women may have aspired to cultivate chastity as the basis of their personal or family honour, there was little social stigma attached to nonmarital sex. Local norms varied considerably, but in some parts of the peninsula, illegitimacy rates were as high as 15% (the European average was 2–3%) and an additional 10% of brides may have come to the altar pregnant (Dubert 1991; Poska 2005; Carvalho 2011). Even among aristocratic women, sex outside of marriage was not unheard of. Luisa de la Cerda, the daughter of the second Duke of Medinaceli, bore an illegitimate daughter as the result of her relationship with one powerful nobleman, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, and in 1547 married Antonio Arias Pardo, who would become one of the richest men in Castile. In fact, some noble families used mistresses as a strategy to ensure the existence of male heirs (Coolidge 2007).

Cultural assertions of women’s natural inferiority were more clearly reflected in legal norms that restricted elite women’s opportunities. In Portugal, the “Lei Mental” (1434) affirmed male primogeniture for the succession of crown goods (bens da coroa) which could encompass judicial, fiscal, and military duties that were regarded as beyond women’s abilities (Hespanha 1995). In both kingdoms, laws allowed aristocratic families to create entailed estates (mayorazgos/morgadios) with royal permission, in which one heir inherited the majority of the estate. Most often these estates were bequeathed to the eldest son, thus diminishing the inheritance of any daughters. Although women were not legally excluded from inheriting entailed estates, they generally did so only in the absence of male heirs. More often, widows managed these estates as guardians for their minor children.

Beyond the aristocracy, Iberian legal codes promoted women’s access to economic resources by stipulating partible inheritance, in which all children inherit equally regardless of sex (Lewin 2003). Thus, although inheritance regimes differed somewhat from region to region, nearly all women could expect to come into some property at the death of their parents. In addition, families usually provided daughters with a gift at the time of their marriages, a dowry, and husbands provided their brides with a token gift, the arras (Nazzari 1991; Poska 2005). Although a husband had the right to administer his wife’s property during the marriage, this property remained hers for life. If she believed that he was dissipating her property, she could go to a judge and have his right to manage it taken away. When her husband died, a woman had the right to half of everything accumulated during the marriage. Finally, all single women and widowed women, and even most married women, could purchase property with their own funds (Poska 2005). Widowed women and daughters could also inherit offices, enjoying the wealth and prestige attached to them even if they could not exercise the position (Candido and Rodrigues 2015; Abreu-Ferreira 2005; Sperling 2007).

Iberian law also allowed women to use their property as they wished. During their lifetimes, they could support favoured friends and relatives and provide for their spiritual well-being by funding masses for their souls and for the souls of deceased relatives. Women established orphanages, funded benefices, and supported other pious works. Women’s property rights also allowed them to conduct all kinds of business, and thus attain some degree of economic self-sufficiency. Although married women legally gave up their rights to contract business to their husbands, they could, and often did, waive the rights and laws “in their favour” that prohibited them from engaging in contracts and taking on any legal responsibilities. By renouncing those
rights, they could buy and sell their property without legal constraint (Poska 2005). This access to property was particularly important in Iberia’s maritime and imperial economies, where the extended absences of men engaged in fishing, trade, and conquest frequently left wives as de facto heads of households charged with acquiring and managing assets on the family’s behalf (Cook 2012; Abreu-Ferreira 2005, 2012).

In addition to property rights, women in Iberian societies had extensive access to both the secular and the ecclesiastical court systems and families clearly expected women to use those systems to protect both their interests and those of their families. Widows and single women over the age of 25 could use the legal systems without the assistance of a man, although married women and minor daughters generally had to be represented by their husbands or fathers. Neither illiteracy nor poverty were obstacles to pursuing court cases, as the courts provided poor women with legal assistance and public notaries generated legally binding documents. As a result, women of all classes effectively employed the courts to resolve an array of grievances. They took legal action against one another over insults and petty jealousies and used the courts to protect their reputations. If a man reneged on a marriage promise, the woman could sue him, demanding financial compensation for her lost virginity. If the relationship had produced a child, she could request child support. Although divorce was not an option according to Catholic law, women could petition ecclesiastical courts for permanent separations from abusive husbands (Silva 1984, 209–252; Premo 2017).

During the late Middle Ages, until the forcible conversion and expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the Iberian peninsula, women of these faiths lived circumscribed both by Christian law and by the laws of their own communities, which also emphasised female chastity, marriage, and motherhood. Yet, as Jewish communities gradually adopted Christian inheritance practices, Jewish widows came to exert significant authority in their communities, often becoming prosperous businesswomen. Muslim women living under Christian rule also inherited property and received dowries. Recent research indicates that both Jewish and Muslim women had much more extensive interactions with Christian society than we used to believe, including litigating in both Christian and their own communities’ courts (Melammed 1998; Shatzmiller 2007).

Women were among those forced into bondage in Iberia and Iberian territories, working in households, including as wet nurses, as well as in retail and agriculture (Phillips, Jr. 2013). While slavery in Iberia was an ancient, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious practice, following fifteenth-century expeditions along the coast of Africa, the Portuguese developed a trade in sub-Saharan slaves, first to Iberia and then to the Americas, where enslaved Africans supplied the labour for plantations. Although the Iberian Crowns forbade the enslavement of indigenous peoples in America, many were forced into servitude nonetheless, especially in areas far from the scrutiny of royal officials. African and indigenous women were thus part of all colonial labour regimes. Despite their status, enslaved women also regularly used the legal system to their advantage. At times, enslaved women secured manumission for themselves and their children, employing coartación/coartação, an appraisal of value and agreement to earn freedom by paying off that price (Higgins 1999; Dantas 2015). They also used the courts to confront abusive masters, although judges rarely enforced prohibitions against rape and such litigation was easier for women living in urban
areas than for plantation slaves (Landers 1999; de la Fuente 2004; Premo 2017). Native women in the Americas also learned the benefits of the Spanish legal system. Soon after the conquest, Mexica women used the court system to become guardians of minor children and to protect their access to property (Schroeder et al. 1997; Kellogg 1998). In the eighteenth-century Amazon, when shifting labour and indigenous policies meant that many indigenous peoples, including those living as free people outside official indigenous villages, were forcibly relocated and drafted into harsh rural labour regimes, indigenous women engaged the legal system to defend their autonomy, their domestic arrangements, and their legal status (Sommer 2013). Indeed, across the Iberian world, women’s access to property and the legal system defined their place in society more than the negative cultural tropes espoused by intellectuals. These rights situated women as central, independent actors in Iberian society, able to exercise extensive authority on behalf of themselves and their families without the assistance of men.

While for the most part women were excluded from the official spheres of politics and diplomacy in early modern Iberian monarchies, the porous boundaries between these spheres and elite households allowed women to shape both domestic and international politics. As partners in marriages that were intended to fortify alliances or resolve conflicts within and beyond their kingdoms, royal and aristocratic women were expected to do whatever was necessary to preserve family power and privileges (Nader 2004). For example, the Portuguese king João II’s (1481–1495) struggle to consolidate his authority was influenced by the wives of his opponents as they navigated court politics to preserve their families’ patrimonies (Humble Ferreira 2005). This political engagement also included female rule; Catherine of Austria (1507–1578), Luisa de Gusmão (1613–1666), and Catherine of Braganza (1638–1705) briefly ruled as regents of Portugal on behalf of sons, grandsons, or brothers. After female succession to the Portuguese throne was affirmed in the seventeenth century, the oldest daughter of King D. José I (1750–1777) succeeded him and ruled as Maria I (1734–1816) until her mental illness forced her son D. João to act as regent beginning in 1799.

Isabel of Castile (1451–1504), the only queen to rule the Spanish kingdoms in her own right during the early modern period, often promoted her marriage to Ferdinand of Aragon (1452–1516) as a joint monarchy; however, their marriage contract explicitly denied him most authority in her kingdoms and he was not her designated heir (Boruchoff 2003; Weissberger 2004). Unfortunately, after Isabel’s death, Ferdinand and his son-in-law, Philip of Burgundy conspired against her daughter, Juana, spreading rumours that she was mentally unstable and eventually confining her to a royal residence in Tordesillas (Aram 2005). Although she remained in forced seclusion for the rest of her life, she never abdicated the throne, and officially, her son Charles I (1500–1558) ruled jointly with her until her death in 1555.

In the late Middle Ages, queens and queens consort played active roles in Castilian politics and the kings of Aragon regularly left their kingdoms in the hands of their wives. For instance, following in the footsteps of her predecessors, María of Castile (1401–1458), the wife of Alfonso V, served as his Lieutenant General during his military campaigns in Italy with complete and independent power to govern (Earenfight 2010). Later, both the Habsburg and the Bourbon dynasties relied heavily on royal women’s political knowledge and experience. Charles I twice left his wife, Isabel of
Portugal, as regent (1529–1532 and 1535–1539), and his daughter, María, served as regent for him between 1548 and 1551. Philip II followed suit, appointing his sisters as regents during the early years of his reign and entrusting the Spanish Netherlands to his daughter, Isabel Clara Eugenia (van Wyhe 2012). During the reign of Philip III, his grandmother Empress María, his wife, Margaret of Austria, and his aunt, Margaret of the Cross, all housed at the convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid, politicked energetically on behalf of their Austrian relatives and often against the powerful Lerma (Sánchez 1998). Later, Mariana of Austria (1634–1696) ruled as regent for her infant son, the soon to be Charles II, sparring with both her husband’s illegitimate son, Juan José, and members of the aristocracy in an effort to maintain power for both herself and her son (Oliván Santaliestra 2006; Mitchell 2013).

Thus, Iberian queens and queens regent governed within a well-developed tradition of female rule. Moreover, women’s political participation was not limited to elites. Spaniards expected a reciprocal relationship with their rulers and royal officials, and ordinary women regularly petitioned the crown for favours. Sometimes, when they felt ignored or rejected by royal authorities, they participated in anti-government riots and other popular protests, hurling stones and hiding conspirators (Corteguera 2002). In 1736 in Brazil, Maria da Cruz, a widowed rancher with extensive properties in the hinterland between the mining region and Bahia, assumed leadership of a rebellion against fiscal reform (Botelho and Anastasia 2012). Although the preference may have been for male rulers, women were expected to engage in politics and govern when necessary.

GENDER IN THE EMPIRES

Gendered understandings of politics, society, and economics shaped the creation of the Iberian empires. Following fifteenth-century Portuguese conquests and encroachments in Africa and its Atlantic Islands, the crown sent men to populate new fortified trading outposts such as São Jorge da Mina (now in Ghana). Yet in successive centuries, small numbers of women, primarily of low status, found their way aboard the ships that sailed from Lisbon. The crown also met the need for domestic labour in trading forts by hiring servants known as “castle women” (mulheres de castelo), and by providing slaves to those sent to Africa (escravos/as de ordenança). Although rape was a serious crime and religious authorities discouraged concubinage, Portuguese men engaged in sexual relations with these women with impunity. Moreover, some Portuguese traders married into matrilocal African families. While Portuguese authorities viewed these men, known as lançados, as perilously beyond the scope of European authority, they also conceded that Luso-African trading communities bolstered the viability of the Portuguese African enterprise (Elbl 1996) In the Estado da India too, royal officials came to view the unions of Portuguese men and local women, sanctified in Christian marriage, as an important tool in the consolidation of Portuguese claims in Asia while as new settlements and administrations were established, some high-ranking officials took their wives and children to new postings (Xavier 2008).

The Portuguese enterprise in South America also depended on establishing enduring contacts with local people. Settlers had both short- and long-term relations with women including the daughters of indigenous leaders, such as the Tupinambá
Paraguaçu who married the castaway settler Diogo Álvares and travelled with him to France, where she was baptised and given the name Catarina, and then returned to Brazil. Their offspring, as was case with other Portuguese-indigenous unions, formed the core of early coastal settlements (Metcalf 2005).

To effectively secure and exploit territories at home and across the globe, the Portuguese Crown sought to manage its demographic resources with both restrictions on migration and forcible relocation. Non-elite men and women convicted of both violent and nonviolent crimes could be sentenced to punitive banishment in Africa or Brazil. By the seventeenth century, the Inquisition routinely banished to
Brazil women found guilty of bigamy, heresy, blasphemy, and witchcraft, among other challenges to moral order and religious orthodoxy. The crown and charitable institutions, in turn, promoted the relocation of widows, prostitutes, and orphaned girls to imperial outposts, especially those with small European populations (Coates 2001). In some cases, the crown recognised girls, especially those whose fathers had died in royal service as “orphans of the king” and provided dowries in the form of imperial administrative offices. In the Zambezi (Mozambique), the crown awarded grants of land and slaves (prazos) to Portuguese orphans and widows that could be bequeathed to eldest daughters. While the crown sought to use these grants to bolster the European population, women of South Asian, African, or mixed ancestry also received or inherited these grants. Indeed, matrilineal inheritance, common in Africa, may have helped bridge Portuguese and African cultures at the local level. The Donas da Zambezia, as grantees came to be called, contracted marriages with men who brought additional resources to the family. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several outlived their husbands and accrued substantial local social authority and economic power in maritime trading networks (Rodrigues 2015). Other women willingly participated in royal colonisation schemes. When the Portuguese transported the city of Mazagão from the west coast of Africa to Brazil in the 1770s, the transatlantic move included more than 300 women and their families, as well as 51 widows (Furtado 2012).

Although by the second half of the sixteenth century, royal officials had grown sceptical of the long-term cultural and economic consequences of mixed unions, marriage, including marriage between local women and Portuguese men, and its presumptive reproductive ramifications, remained crucial to the success of Portuguese settlements. As a result, royal policies exempted married men from military service and sought to prevent women in colonial settlements from entering convents. It was only in 1677 that the crown allowed the foundation of a convent in Brazil’s political capital, Salvador, Bahia, setting aside fears that access to the cloister would reduce the growth of European families (Soeiro 1978). Similarly, the convent of Santa Clara in Macao was limited to only 33 nuns, so that it could not drain the limited population of European women from the marriage market (Coates 2001). In the Estado da India, Christianised local elite women viewed marriage to Portuguese men as a way to maintain their status in the face of colonisation. Across the empire, marriage and dowries were also crucial to the consolidation of new social hierarchies and fortunes, especially for families of mixed ancestry.

Women were central to Spanish colonisation from the beginning. Peninsular women accompanied Columbus on his second voyage and, as early as 1502, the crown urged women to move to the Caribbean along with their husbands, as authorities believed that women’s presence would provide stability for the new settlements and their reproductive ability was critical to increasing the Spanish population (Altman 2012). Women, particularly from the south of Spain, eagerly answered the call. By the late sixteenth century, peninsular women made up at least one-third of the emigrants to the Americas, usually undertaking the journey accompanied by other family members (Jacobs 1995). Later, Spanish and Portuguese efforts to manage white settler populations converged in schemes to relocate families to peripheral regions of their empires (Poska 2016). Portuguese women moved with their families to the far reaches of the empire, including Angola, Mozambique, and the
Amazon, while Spanish families founded Montevideo, and reinforced the Spanish presence in places like San Antonio and New Orleans.

Despite the presence of peninsular women in many newly conquered American territories, Iberian men did not constrain their sexual activity to white women. During conquest and settlement, European men both imposed European ideals of sexual propriety and female honour on indigenous and African women and acted in ways that disregarded those ideals (Socolow 2000; Powers 2005). The sexual dimensions of conquest led to unions between Iberian men and indigenous and African women (Presta 2005; Furtado 2009). Initially, in Spanish America, some conquistadors attempted to integrate into indigenous social hierarchies by marrying the widows and daughters of elite local families and local rulers. Some even took their mixed-race children away from their indigenous wives and sent them back to Spain to be raised (Mangan 2016). More often, indigenous women were raped by and/or lived with European men in unofficial relationships.

Illicit sexual activity became a regular feature of American societies and resulted in very high illegitimacy rates, especially in urban areas (Mannarelli 1993). At the end of the seventeenth century in Guadalajara (New Spain), 39% of white children were illegitimate, 42.8% of mestizo (of mixed parentage, usually Indian and European) children, 60.5% of mulato (of African and European parentage) children, and 50% of Indian children (Calvo 1984). In eighteenth-century Santa Fe de Bogotá, half of all mestizo and Indian births were illegitimate and in one parish, 35% of all white children were born out of wedlock (Dueñas Vargas 1997). There were few negative consequences for illegitimate sexual activity, and the law encouraged parents to provide for all of their children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. Insufficient religious instruction, the cost of having a priest administer the sacrament, male migration, and the inability to divorce may have been factors in the decision not to marry.

Although canon law required evidence only of free will and the absence of religious impediments for a couple to marry, in the late eighteenth century, the Royal Pragmatic on Marriage (1776) required parental consent for marriage and moved the jurisdiction over marriage disputes from ecclesiastical to secular courts. In the increasingly mixed-race societies of Spanish America, this legal change allowed families to prevent their children from choosing partners of “unequal” status. Indeed, families used the Royal Pragmatic to prevent marriages to potential spouses based on factors including race, ethnicity, illegitimate birth, wealth, occupation, and public reputation (Seed 1988; Carballeda 2004; Twinam 1999). In the Portuguese empire, the crown and elites confronted mixed-race relationships in different ways. In the second half of the eighteenth century, legislation challenged the nobility’s endogamy by ending the legal distinctions between New and Old Christians. Although new laws stipulated that Asian Christians could enjoy the same privileges as their European counterparts and marriage to an indigenous Brazilian no longer implied the acquisition of “infamy”, African ancestry continued to be regarded as a “defect of birth” that could impede social mobility.

Because women of all races had extensive legal and property rights, they quickly became central to the expansion of colonial economies. Although the ideal European division of labour restricted women to the home while men engaged in hard labour and public activity, the exigencies of survival forced women into all types of work
Domestic service drew women from small villages to larger cities across the Iberian world (Sarasúa 1994). Generally, upper-class white women did not engage in manual labour; however, they often worked as owners and administrators of large landed estates. In the sixteenth century, women could inherit *encomiendas*, grants of Indian labour, from their husbands, and administer them until they remarried. In the Viceroyalty of Peru in 1583, 60 women held more than 230,000 Indians in *encomienda* (Powers 2005).

Other women used the wealth that they acquired through inheritance and marriage to invest in businesses. The Spanish made textile production into women’s work (Graubart 2007). While indigenous women produced textiles, women often owned textile mills, running them in their homes and overseeing all aspects of production. In colonial Quito, doña Leonor Carxatigua, a wealthy Indian widow, provided both small and large loans to other women and formed a partnership to sell the wheat that she grew on her estate (Gauderman 2003). Women of modest means also provided credit to other women, and pawning provided even poor women with access to financial resources when they were unable to make ends meet on wages alone. In late eighteenth-century Minas Gerais in Brazil, almost 30% of households were headed by women, including free women of African descent, who engaged in farming, ranching, and mining. Across Spanish and Portuguese America, markets were filled with Indian, African, and mixed-race women selling produce, beer, and a wide array of cooked foods (Mangan 2005; Dantas 2015).

While these practices reveal continuities across local Iberian, American, and transatlantic economies, colonial settlements also disrupted indigenous gendered divisions of labour. In many sedentary indigenous cultures, agriculture was primarily women’s work and among nomadic and seminomadic peoples, women were generally responsible for collecting food while men hunted and fished. However, Catholic clergy insisted that men work in the fields and that women remain within the confines of the mission. As one mission manual noted, “the women should be in their homes grinding grain and preparing meals for their husbands and not be going through the fields doing men’s work” (Barr 2007, 139). Such ideals created a clash of gender cultures. For instance, among the Pueblo, men spun, wove, hunted, and protected the community while women cared for the home and “undertook all building construction”. According to Fray Alonso de Benavides, “If we compel any man to work on a house, the women laugh at him … and he runs away” (Gutiérrez 1991, 76). In general, attempts to change the gendered division of labour met with resistance, and the reality of subsistence farming meant that both men and women had to engage in fieldwork to ensure their survival.

In sharp contrast, slave owners were highly ambivalent about the role of the traditional gendered division of labour when it came to their workforces. In plantation agriculture, women engaged in hard labour, cultivating and harvesting crops alongside men, while in urban areas a gendered division of labour predominated, as enslaved women were either used as domestic help, or as wage labourers whose income was the property of their masters. For example, a slave owner might send a female slave out to work as a laundress or a seamstress, in addition to or instead of completing her domestic tasks. Skilled slaves could also earn money to put towards their freedom. This work connected enslaved women to both the local and the broader imperial economy (Higgins 1999; Castillo 2005; Amussen and Poska 2012).
Although the creation of the Iberian empires began as mostly male endeavours, women were central to the expansion of imperial societies. As Spanish and Portuguese men engaged in exploration and conquest, they often used sexual relations as a form of domination, but women of all races quickly learned how to take advantage of imperial legal structures. Moreover, throughout the colonial period, women’s labour, both free and enslaved, was central to the expansion of the imperial economies.

**RELIGION**

Across the Iberian world, the Catholic Church created spaces for all types of women to cultivate piety and exert authority in the public sphere (Pérez González 2005). Midwives administered baptisms for infants in danger of dying when priests were not available. As godmothers, female friends and relatives provided children with spiritual guidance and physical care. They embroidered the cloths for the altars, made communion wafers, and cleaned and maintained religious ornaments. Thus, lay piety was grounded in the participation of women.

In fulfilment of their spiritual obligations, women also played crucial roles in devotional and charitable institutions. Queen Leonor of Portugal (1458–1525) sponsored the foundation of the Misericórdia, The Holy House of Mercy, in Lisbon in 1498 (Sá 2004). Although late in the sixteenth century, Portuguese women were excluded from membership in this prestigious institution, across the Iberian world women of all ranks and races joined other single-sex and mixed-sex confraternities that held festivals for holy days, participated in burial rituals, and provided charity. Confraternities also allowed Indian and African women to take on leadership roles and gain access to communal resources. In 1657, the Confraternity of the Humility and Patience of Christ our Redeemer in San Luis Potosí in New Spain (Mexico) was founded by a group of parishioners that included a free mulata, a mestiza, four mulatas of unclear status, and a black woman. Even enslaved women found solace and community in confraternities, taking advantage of the association of slavery with holiness in Iberian societies (von Germeten 2006).

However, for many non-European women in the empires, conversion to Christianity was difficult. African and indigenous women were often forcibly baptised and given Christian names. Women in polygynous relationships were wrested from those families and forced into monogamy. Whereas their polytheistic religions often emphasised female fertility and gave women important liturgical roles, early modern Catholicism, with its masculine Trinity and male priesthood, left native women without a female gendered avenue to spiritual leadership. As a result, despite pressure from authorities, many African and indigenous women resisted conversion and worked to maintain their traditional beliefs, even acting as leaders of outlawed “idolatrous” cults (Silverblatt 1987). In response, clergy configured missions to ensure their ability to control Native women’s activity. In Alta California, Indian girls lived in sex-segregated dormitories known as monjeríos from adolescence until they were married and left the mission with their husbands. Among the first buildings constructed at the missions, these enclosures traumatised women by removing them from their families and prevented them from engaging in traditional courtship traditions (Voss 2000). When the Jesuits began their missionary work in Brazil, they sought to convert indigenous women and women of mixed ancestry.
known as *mamelucas*. Following conversion, these women were also expected to reconcile their relations with Portuguese men with Christian marriage. Those marriages destabilised concubines’ place in the community. Some ended up in Jesuit missions where they often served as interpreters.

Female monasticism was a prominent part of the Iberian world’s spiritual landscape (Sánchez Lora 1988; Bellini 2005). As convents required entrance dowries, only women of means could profess, and many convents, including Santa María de las Huelgas in Burgos, were founded by or for the female members of royal and noble families. In many of these convents, women lived in luxury, surrounded by servants, not always taking vows and unwilling to follow the expectation of clostration. In fact, convents frequently resisted early modern attempts to enforce religious discipline, often blocking episcopal visits and asserting their right to self-rule (Lehfeldt 2005).

Many women who were unable or unwilling to take monastic vows became *beatas*, pious laywomen who dedicated themselves to prayer and charitable work, sometimes taking vows as lay members of religious orders. They lived alone or in small groups in private homes, known as *beaterios* or *casas de recogimiento* (Muñoz Fernández 1994; van Deusen 2002; Weber 2016). In addition to housing young women involved in marriage disputes and victims of domestic violence, *beaterios* in Spanish America served as temporary boarding schools where *mestizas* could be Christianised, educated, Hispanised, and their virginity protected until marriage. Andean elite women in Cuzco sometimes founded *beaterios* as a means to counter stereotypes of Indian moral weakness and assert their own Christian respectability (Burns 2007).

Around the empires, local elites, eager to set themselves apart from the rest of the population and to practice the female seclusion advocated by male intellectuals and Church officials, enthusiastically embraced female monasticism (Ramos Medina 1995). In many cities, convents came to dominate socially and economically. In the seventeenth century, Lima’s 13 convents housed more than 20% of the city’s female population, some of whom were nuns, but most of whom were servants and students. Renowned for their piety and home to the daughters of powerful families, these institutions acquired substantial financial reserves, which they then used to provide loans and credit that were critical for their cities’ expanding economies (Algranti 1993; Burns 1999).

As the sole providers of women’s education, convents produced some of the Iberian world’s most important female intellectuals. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) founded the Discalced Carmelites as a way to bring the Order back to its roots in poverty and asceticism, promoting prayer and withdrawal as women’s contribution to the defence of Catholicism. In Mexico’s convent of Santa Paula, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695) amassed a library of more than 4,000 volumes and wrote dozens of plays, poems, and other works including *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (1691), a cogent defence of women’s right to learn and write. Unfortunately, religious authorities were often threatened by women’s intellectual independence and both women faced intense criticism from ecclesiastical authorities. Teresa’s mystical revelations and emphasis on internal prayer attracted the attention of Church officials who worried about the dangers of such unsupervised religious activity by women (Bilinkoff 1989; Weber 1990). Nevertheless, Teresa’s reformist vision
spread to Portugal, where a Discalced Carmelite convent was founded in the 1580s (Morujão 2003). The widespread dissemination of Teresa’s autobiography and her canonisation in 1622 further inspired women of all classes to emulate her pious practices.

Some of the earliest convents in Spanish America were founded by conquistadors to Christianise and Hispanise their mixed-race daughters; however, convents quickly came to reflect the racialised priorities of Spanish elites. As “purity of blood” limpieza de sangre was a central requirement of a religious vocation in Spain, no woman of Jewish, Muslim, African, or Indian descent could take final vows. Nuns also had to be of legitimate birth. Thus, black, Indian, mestiza, and mulata women who were attracted to the monastic life were only able to participate as convent servants or sometimes lay sisters, donadas (Burns 1999). In rare cases, a woman’s intense spirituality helped mitigate at least some of the discrimination that women of colour faced. Despite being of African descent, both Juana Esperanza de San Alberto in New Spain and Ursula de Jesús in Peru became renowned for their religious piety and mystical experiences, although Esperanza’s biographers described her as exceptional, having overcome the handicap of her race to achieve Christian virtue (Bristol 2007; van Deusen 2004).

Around the Iberian world, some women experienced Tridentine Catholicism through mystical experiences and extraordinary visions and dreams. Most of the Portuguese beatas who reported their visions were unmarried and relatively poor. In some cases, their ties to the institutional church took the form of membership in a Third Order and residence in a convent. The few who were literate appear to have been familiar with mystical tracts published in Portugal with the support of Queen Leonor. While visions and mystical experiences were not exclusive to women, the ways in which beatas were scrutinised by religious authorities were informed by ideas of female danger articulated in the prescriptive literature of the period. Inquisitors found that beatas’ claims of spiritual knowledge and their ability to attract both male and female followers contradicted expectations of female humility. Although beatas’ visions gave them credibility among the masses, as they reconciled Christian doctrine with their own lived experiences of motherhood, sexuality, and family life, they often prompted the distrust of ecclesiastical officials who saw them as blasphemous and heterodox. As they interpreted their prophecies and offered spiritual guidance to both women and men, female mystics were perceived by many as subverting the Church’s gender hierarchy (Giles 1999). Such was the case with María de Macedo who, in the 1660s, appeared before the Lisbon Inquisition answering questions about her visionary travels to meet King Sebastião, whose death at the battle of El Ksar-al-Kebir in 1578 set off a succession dispute that led to Spanish Habsburg rule over Portugal from 1580 to 1640 (Givens 2011). Famously, María de Santo Domingo and Lucrecia de León became engulfed in court politics when their mystical revelations transgressed the often-blurred lines between politics and religion (Bilinkoff 1992; Kagan 1995).

Established to ensure religious orthodoxy, the Inquisition in both Spain and Portugal took particular interest in the activities of conversas, women who had converted from Judaism to Christianity, and moriscas, converts from Islam. Christian society was highly suspicious of these women’s conversions. Both conversas and moriscas were frequently denounced to the Inquisition as a result of domestic
activities viewed as maintaining Jewish or Muslim traditions, including refusing to cook pork, doing the wash on Fridays, not keeping the Sunday sabbath, or maintaining households according to Koranic law. Although it is impossible to know exactly what they believed, it is clear from the testimonies that many of these women were maintaining Jewish and Muslims traditions within the home (Melammed 1999; Perry 2007; Barros 2013).

In Spain, some pious laywomen were caught up in the Inquisition’s prosecution of the Alumbrado heresy of the early sixteenth century. The Alumbrado movement, which drew its name from its participants who believed that they were “illuminated” by the Holy Spirit, was led by a beata associated with the Franciscan order, Isabel de la Cruz. The alumbrados encouraged the practice of dejamiento or abandonment, in which they surrendered themselves to the love of God and denied the need for the ceremonies or sacraments of the Church. Their beliefs not only implied a rejection of key Catholic doctrine, but the group was particularly troublesome as it became associated with the leadership of vibrant, outspoken women (Alcalá 1999).

Women were also implicated in other heretical activities pursued by the Inquisition. Although it was not technically a heresy, the Aragonese and Portuguese tribunals (but not those in Castile and its jurisdictions) investigated cases of sodomy, or non-reproductive sex. While men found guilty of sodomy often received severe punishments, it appears that because same-sex relations among women often confounded inquisitors—they were “dubious matters” in the words of one inquisitor - their punishments were less severe (Marcocci and Paiva 2013, 104; Velasco 2011). Inquisitorial records also shed light on the roles that women played within complex, popular cultures of magic and healing that were subjected to scrutiny and repression throughout the early modern period (Walker 2005; Calainho 2008). The Spanish Inquisition revealed surprising scepticism when it came to witchcraft (although witchcraft prosecutions were more common in other Spanish courts). Prosecutions of crimes involving superstition and witchcraft accounted for only 7.9% of the total number of cases between 1540 and 1700 and the witch hunts that characterised much of early modern Europe were remarkably rare in Spain (Contreras and Henningsen 1986; Tausiet 2014). Rather, early modern anxiety about female power manifested itself most assertively in the prosecution of love magic, in which women tended to be both the purveyors and the consumers of the magic (Sánchez Ortega 1992). Some women wanted fulfilment of unrequited love; others merely wanted to end abuse or adultery by their husbands. Love magic seemed exceptionally dangerous in the empires, as it brought women of all races and classes into contact. Authorities were suspicious of the orthodoxy of women of colour, whom they believed were particularly susceptible to heretical influences. As a result, black, mestiza, and Indian women were more likely than their white counterparts to be denounced to the Inquisition, especially for crimes like witchcraft (Few 2002). As on the peninsula, Inquisitors also focused on accusations of clandestine Jewish practice, investigating conversas and their families in Mexico City and Lima (Alberro 1988). In Brazil, an inquisitorial visitation heard similar allegations regarding Ana Rodrigues, the widowed matriarch of a New Christian family who had come to Bahia from Portugal in the 1550s (Assis 2002).

Finally, the Inquisition was interested in reforming the erroneous practices and beliefs of Old Christians. Although men overwhelmingly outnumbered women in
the prosecution of all heresies, from time to time, women were charged with blasphemy for asserting heterodox ideas including that the Virgin Mary could not have been a virgin after giving birth to the baby Jesus and for the heresy of simple fornication, asserting that sex between single people is not a sin. In general, women who were brought before the Inquisition for these “minor heresies” received light sentences or were reprimanded and sent home without punishment (Alberro 1988; Sánchez Ortega 1992; Poska 2005).

The Catholic Church provided the opportunity for all races and classes of women to participate in religious and communal life and thus was often a site of racial integration, cultural assimilation, and assertions of female autonomy. However, Church anxiety about women’s ability to influence others and their susceptibility to sin also led to attempts to suppress religious activity that the clergy perceived as transgressive.

**CULTURAL LIFE**

Despite the limited access to education and opposition from some male intellectuals, women were enthusiastic participants in the dynamic cultural life of both the peninsula and the empires. Some royal women, like the Infanta Maria de Portugal (1521–1577) and her teacher Joana Vaz, possessed a remarkable knowledge of
Latin (Castro 2014). In addition to the most well-known women writers like Teresa of Avila and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, scholars have rediscovered written works by dozens of other women on both sides of the Atlantic (Vollendorf 2005; Arenal and Schlau 2009). As centres of learning, convents were particularly important in the production of devotional literature that circulated both within the cloister and among Iberian elites (Vollendorf 2005; Howe 2008). However, secular women writers also found large audiences. The works of María de Zayas y Sotomayor (b. ca. 1590), including Desengaños Amorosos (1647), were best sellers, even as they offered sharp critiques of the male sexual double standard and a strong corrective to the misogynist tropes of the time. Among others, the works of Spanish dramatist Ana Caro (b. ca. 1600), who may have been born enslaved, and Portuguese playwright Angela de Azevedo (b. ca. 1600) challenged traditional gender expectations by focusing on women’s sexual desire and the constraints imposed on women (Vollendorf 2005; García-Martín 2012). Oliva Sabuco (1562–ca. 1622) composed important works on medicine and philosophy. But women’s contributions to the peninsula’s cultural life extended beyond authorship. Between 1540 and 1710, 11% of all commercial theatrical performances were managed and directed by women (Sanz Ayán 2015, 115) and women played a critical role in the expansion of the printing industry in both Spain and Spanish America (Bouza 2005; Garone Gravier 2008; Cabrera 2014).

In the eighteenth century, women’s roles in secular literary life expanded together with debates about women’s authority and capacities. The publication of Benito Feijóo’s Defensa de las mujeres (1726) sparked a contentious debate over the role of women in Spanish society (Bolufer 1998). Among others, Josefa Amar y Borbón (1749–1833) argued that women were equal to men, advocated for women’s education, and worked for their acceptance into the Madrid Economic Society (Lewis 2004; Smith 2006). In addition, elite Spanish women both on the peninsula and in the Americas held salons, known as tertulias, in which they cultivated favourite writers and artists and participated in the critical intellectual debates of the day. These tertulias could generate transformative ideas. In Santa Fe de Bogotá, Doña Manuela Sanz de Santamaría hosted a weekly salon that discussed independence from Spain (Socolow 2000). Women also participated in the dynamic scientific community of the eighteenth century. Manuela Tomasa Sánchez de Oreja was one of a number of women who authored astrological almanacs and María Andrea Casamayor y de la Coma (ca. 1700–1780) became a well-known mathematician.

In Portugal, an expanding print culture included an array of pamphlets that re-examined “the woman question”. While some returned to formulaic enumerations of women’s virtues and capacities, women (or anonymous authors assuming a feminine voice) entered the debate. Paula da Graça’s Bondade das Mulheres (1715) addressed women readers directly and challenged misogynist tropes by citing both female virtues and challenging the significance of gendered difference. In the second half of the eighteenth century, women played important roles in literary-minded social gatherings while female voices and debates about women’s virtue, honour, and roles gained even greater prominence in both anonymously-published pamphlets, as well as in literary correspondence and manuscripts that circulated among intellectuals (Marques 2005; Anastácio 2010, 2015). The first Portuguese-language novel written by a woman, Brazilian-born Teresa Margarida da Silva e Orta’s
Maximas de Virtude, e Formosura, was published in 1752 and circulated in subsequent late eighteenth-century editions as Aventuras de Diófanes. The reign of Maria I (1777–1816) reinvigorated the public defence of women’s education and “reason”. Among the queen’s courtiers, D. Mariana de Arriaga (1748–1820) distinguished herself for her learning and a literary salon that she hosted. The most celebrated woman writer of the later eighteenth century was D. Leonor de Almeida Portugal, 4th Marquesa de Alorna (1750–1839), imprisoned as a child in a convent as punishment for her grandparents’ alleged involvement in a plot against José I (1750–1777). Freed by Queen Maria in 1777, in her lifetime she became well known as a poet and for translations of Horace, Alexander Pope, and Chateaubriand. Her Recreações Botânicas, published posthumously in 1844, urged Portuguese women to cultivate scientific knowledge of the natural world. By the turn of the nineteenth century, an increase in elite women’s literacy further bolstered auto-didacticism and women’s increasing participation in literary circles and salons that included writing and reading prose and poetry and performing plays (Anastácio 2015; Costa 2016).

Most of Iberia’s female artists of the early modern period who were famous during their lifetimes later fell into obscurity and their cultural contributions are only now being studied. In fact, the most well-known female artist in early modern Spain was not Spanish: Sofonisba Anguissola (1532–1625), an Italian who became court painter to Philip II. Anguissola’s life-like images were praised by Vasari in his Lives of The Artists. During her residence in Spain, she painted most of the royal family and instructed the queen, Isabel de Valois, in painting and drawing. In Portugal, Josefa de Óbidos (1630–1684), who was trained to be a painter by her father and lived in an Augustinian and then a Cistercian convent, achieved professional success in the 1670s with a number of commissions from local churches and convents, including a series of paintings of Saint Teresa for the male discalced Carmelite Convento de Nossa Senhora da Piedade in Cascais (Andrews 2015; Pimentel 2015). Luisa Roldán (1652–1706), known as La Roldana, also achieved great fame and was lauded by her contemporaries. Her small-scale painted terracotta vignettes and life-sized carved wood statues brought her to the attention of the Spanish king Charles II, who named her court sculptor (García Martín 2012). Engravers Anna Heylan, María Eugenia de Beer, and María Luisa Morales also achieved prominence in the seventeenth century (Lizarraga 2010). By the middle of the eighteenth century, and in contrast to its counterparts in France and England, the new Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando also enthusiastically recognised the talents of female artists. The Royal Academy appointed 24 women as “academics of merit” and regularly presented works by female artists in the academy’s public exhibitions (Smith 2006, 53).

Convents and churches remained primary sites for the production and consumption of art by women. Nuns created devotional works for their communities and laywomen embroidered altar cloths and clerical robes, while wealthier women commissioned artworks for private chapels. Artistic talent could be a mechanism for women to enter convents whose families might otherwise not be able to afford it. Convent artists like María de la Santísima Trinidad and Estefanía de la Encarnación produced works as a stipulation of their profession and female musicians were often recruited and given dowry waivers by convents eager for their skills (Taggard 2000; Baade 2005). Although many of their names have been lost to modern scholars, female writers and artists were active participants in the vibrant cultural expansion.
of the early modern Iberian worlds, frequently using their art to undermine the double standards that attempted to curtail their intellectual development, and deny their creative capacities.

Thus, despite the often negative cultural discourse about women, recent scholarship has vividly demonstrated that Iberian legal, political, imperial, religious, and cultural institutions created spaces for women’s participation and that Iberian societies expected women to be active participants in all aspects of life.

WORKS CITED


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