

Women and Authority  
in Early  
Modern Spain

*The Peasants of Galicia*

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## *Contents*

<i>List of Maps and Illustration</i>	viii
<i>A Note on Currency and Measures</i>	ix
Introduction: Gendering Peasant Society	1
1. Women without Men	22
2. Single Women and Property	41
3. Sex and the Single Woman	75
4. 'A married man is a woman': Gender Tensions in Galician Marriages	112
5. Widowhood	163
6. Modelling Female Authority	193
7. Beyond Finisterre	228
<i>Bibliography</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	267

# Introduction: Gendering Peasant Society

During the reign of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE), the Greek geographer Strabo made an astounding assertion about the gender norms of the native peoples of north-western Spain: ‘it is the custom among the Cantabrians for the husbands to give dowries to their wives, for the daughters to be left as heirs, and the brothers to be married off by their sisters. The custom involves, in fact, a sort of gynaecocracy.’<sup>1</sup> Strabo went on to note that the female members of the Callaïci (or Gallaecians), Astures, and Cantabri, ferocious tribes that had recently been conquered by Rome, were remarkably courageous, killing their children rather than allowing them to be taken captive by the Romans, and hard-working, giving birth while toiling in the fields.<sup>2</sup>

Historians know little about gender norms in ancient Spain, but it appears that, far from characterizing tribal cultures, Strabo may have had his own reasons for portraying the people of north-western Spain in these highly gendered terms. Classicists have long since demonstrated that tribes ruled by women were a common trope in ancient literature and that the Greeks insulted conquered peoples by describing them as having been ruled by women. In fact, Strabo goes on to say that the power of women in these tribes ‘is not at all a mark of civilization’.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, his depiction has not held up to historical scrutiny. There is no evidence of a

<sup>1</sup> Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, III-4.18, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949). Scholars disagree on the meaning of the term gynaecocracy. Although Simon Pembroke acknowledges the essential validity of Strabo’s statements on female inheritance, he also argues, on the basis of Aristotle’s definition of gynaecocracy, this was ‘more of an evaluative than a descriptive term’ and that Strabo did not mean ‘anything more technical than women getting out of hand’. Simon Pembroke, ‘Women in Charge: The Function of Alternatives in Early Greek Tradition and the Ancient Idea of Matriarchy’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 30 (1967), 20, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Strabo, III-4.17.

<sup>3</sup> Strabo, III-4.18. Classicists have ascertained that Strabo acquired his knowledge of northern Spain not from an actual visit, but from the commentaries of earlier Greek writers, including Posidonius. Alain Tranoy offers an analysis of Strabo’s commentary in

truly matriarchal society in Iberia or anywhere else in the Western past, despite tenacious investigations by scholars from a variety of disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Strabo's words struck a chord with me as I completed my first book on the religious beliefs of early modern peasants in Galicia, the descendants of the Gallaecians whose customs he so provocatively described. Paging through tattered books in dank archives, I found early modern Galician husbands bringing dowries to their wives, parents choosing daughters as heirs, and mothers and sisters marrying off sons and brothers more than a millennium and a half after the Greek geographer made his remarkable observations. With every testament and dowry contract, I was coming to an understanding of Galician peasant women that had more in common with Strabo's attempt at a cultural insult than with traditional portrayals of Spanish women.

In sharp contrast to Strabo's vision of courageous, hard-working women in control of familial inheritance, scholars have formulated their understanding of gender in early modern Spain around the seemingly univocal depiction of women presented by the theological and prescriptive literature of the period, Golden Age drama, and modern anthropological studies. According to these sources, Spanish society viewed women as inherently weak, easily deceived by the devil, and prone to religious excess. They were vulnerable to sexual temptation and in need of constant protection. As a result, Spanish society demanded that women live according to an unyielding culture of honour based on strict chastity and modesty. Transgressions of the culture of honour, whether real or imagined, harmed not only the reputation of the woman involved, but also that of her family. In order to prevent humiliation, men had to supervise women carefully, even to the point of complete seclusion.

Early modern moralists promoted this highly sexualized and deeply distrustful view of Spanish women. Although Spanish defenders of women existed, the ideas of authors whose works echoed the conservative political and religious discourse of the period proved to be much more

*La Galice Romaine: Recherches sur le nord-ouest de la péninsule ibérique dans l'Antiquité* (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1981), 106–7.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the historical search for matriarchal societies, see Joan Bamberger, 'The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society', in *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 263–80. A good discussion of the issue of matriarchy in the West is Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

pervasive. Indeed, Spaniards composed two of the most frequently cited prescriptive texts of the early modern period, *The Education of a Christian Woman* by Juan Luis Vives (1523) and *The Perfect Wife* (1583) by Fray Luis de León. Fundamental to nearly all discussions of gender in Spanish society, these works provide vivid examples of this restrictive vision of women. According to Fray Luis, ‘woman is by nature weaker and more fragile than any other creature, and by inclination and habit frail and finicky’.<sup>5</sup> According to both men, women were easily overcome by a desire to dominate, possessed by a tendency to anger, pride, and idleness, and having a propensity to sin and lust. As a result, the social and behavioural standards advocated by these authors were uncompromising. They emphasized complete female submission to male authority.<sup>6</sup> Chastity was the highest virtue, and without it a woman faced social ostracization. According to Vives,

a girl who has lost her chastity will find through her own fault everything sad, unhappy, mournful, hateful, and hostile to her. What will be the sorrow of her relatives when they sense that they are all dishonored because of the base conduct of one girl? What will be their grief? What tears will be shed by parents and those who nurtured her? . . . What hatred will this arouse in the members of your household! What will be the talk of neighbors, friends, and acquaintances in denunciation of this wicked girl, what derision! What gossip there will be among girls of her own age, what loathing her girl friends will have for her! How she will be avoided wherever she goes!<sup>7</sup>

Fray Luis went further, stating that ‘a woman’s chastity . . . is the basis upon which the whole edifice [of the perfect wife] is founded and, in short, it is the very being and substance of the wife, because, if she does not possess this, she is no longer a married woman but a perfidious harlot and the dirtiest mud, and the most foul-smelling and repulsive dirt’.<sup>8</sup> According to this discourse, sexual purity was the defining characteristic of a Spanish woman; the loss of it meant the loss of her very humanity.

<sup>5</sup> *A Bilingual Edition of Fray Luis de León’s La Perfecta Casada: The Role of Married Women in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, ed. and trans. John A. Jones and Javier San José Lera (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1999), 31, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Mary E. Giles (ed.), *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth-Century Manual*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Luis de León, *A Bilingual Edition of Fray Luis de León’s La Perfecta Casada*, 41.

Since women were feeble by nature, they were to be subordinated in marriage in order to protect both their own virtue and male honour. According to Vives, within marriage, women were to submit completely to the will of their husbands: 'Not only the tradition and institutions of our ancestors but all laws, human and divine, and nature itself, proclaim that a woman must be subject to a man and obey him.'<sup>9</sup> Marriage was so important to the control of women that Vives praised the widows of antiquity and myth who committed suicide at the death of their husbands.<sup>10</sup>

This negative view of women was perpetuated by portrayals of women in early modern Spanish drama. Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *The Surgeon of His Honour* (1629) is probably the most famous of the Golden Age plays in which a man restores his honour by killing his wife over her rumoured infidelity. In the play, prior to Doña Mencía's marriage to Don Gutierre, the King's brother, Prince Enrique, had eagerly pursued her. When Prince Enrique attempts to rekindle his relationship with Doña Mencía, she steadfastly rejects him. However, Don Gutierre believes that he has found evidence of their encounters and is gradually overcome by rage and jealousy. Finally, in order to restore the perceived loss of honour from her supposed intimacies with Prince Enrique, Don Gutierre has Doña Mencía murdered by a bloodletter. In his final speech before carrying out the murder, Don Gutierre lays out the social imperative that he faced according to the most stringent application of the Spanish code of honour. 'I am the surgeon of my honour | called upon to bleed my wife to death | If honour's life's to be restored. | For honour asks of us this price: | That precious blood be sacrificed.'<sup>11</sup> The message was clear. For all concerned, a woman with a compromised reputation was better off dead.

In addition to the texts of early modern elites, scholarly work on gender in early modern Spain has been deeply influenced by the research of Mediterranean anthropologists, whose descriptions of the Spanish honour code have become almost sacrosanct. Although

<sup>9</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 189.

<sup>11</sup> Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *The Surgeon of Honour*, in *Calderon. Plays: One*, trans. by Gwynne Edwards (London: Methuen Drama, 1991), 90. In Spanish, Don Gutierre says, 'Médico soy de mi honor, | la vida pretendo darle | con una sangría; que todos | curan a costa de sangre.'

the notion dates back to the mid 1960s, the work of Julian Pitt-Rivers<sup>12</sup> in particular encouraged scholars to view gender relations in Spanish society through a paradigm of honour and shame in which women derived their honour from their chastity and men derived theirs from the maintenance of the chastity of the women in their care.<sup>13</sup> This set of social norms helped men ensure the paternity of their children and thus the continuation of their lineage. In fieldwork in one village after another, anthropologists found concerns about honour integral to a broad array of interpersonal interactions.

When one juxtaposed the anthropological research with early modern texts, the social and sexual subordination of Spanish women seemed complete. This construction of gender roles based on sexual honour has become so central to the historical research on gender in early modern Spain and its American colonies that the historians Lyman Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera recently claimed that, in colonial Latin America, ‘The culture of honor provided a bedrock set of values that organized their society and their individual lives.’<sup>14</sup>

However, many scholars, myself included, are less convinced by the pervasiveness of that culture of honour. In fact, the neatly packaged set of social norms that seemed to clearly express the gender expectations of early modern Spanish society have recently undergone significant revision as scholars have reconsidered the relationship between the texts, early modern society, and the theoretical construct of honour.

Rather than being descriptive of broader social norms, most scholars now read early modern theological and moral texts as reflective of the centralizing impetus of the Spanish monarchy and the unifying programme of the Catholic Reformation, both of which relied on the rhetoric of social discipline to consolidate authority among Iberian and conquered populations.<sup>15</sup> Promoting the dangers of women and female

<sup>12</sup> Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent overview of the research on honour and shame, see Abigail Dyer, ‘Heresy and Dishonor: Sexual Crimes before the Courts of Early Modern Spain’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2000), 13–17.

<sup>14</sup> Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera (eds.), *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>15</sup> I have discussed the issue of social discipline more extensively in ‘Confessionalization and Social Discipline in the Iberian World’, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 94 (2003), 308–18.

sexuality helped to reinforce the hierarchy that both secular and ecclesiastical authorities saw as the ‘natural order’ of society—God, Man, and Woman. As Mary Elizabeth Perry has pointed out, this anti-female discourse presented a framework for the implementation of a variety of ‘order-restoring’ measures that increased central authority at the expense of individual autonomy and local culture.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars have also reassessed the place of prescriptive literature in early modern culture and the pervasiveness of the patriarchal and often misogynist ideas espoused by those authors. First, these men did not write their works for broad consumption and implementation. Both Vives and Fray Luis composed their texts for particular women to address issues specific to those women’s classes and circumstances. As humanists and clerics, they conceptualized their works within paradigms that had little to do with actual women.<sup>17</sup> Instead, their sources were the great thinkers and clerics of antiquity and early Christianity, part of a long tradition of scholarly and religious treatises that were decidedly anti-feminine in both tone and content. They did not base their discussions on Spanish social norms or even Spanish law. Moreover, Vives left Spain as a young man and never returned. He composed *The Education of a Christian Woman* for Catherine of Aragón as a guidebook for her young daughter, Mary Tudor, both of whom lived in England.<sup>18</sup> Fray Luis’s reputation as a scholar and theologian was tarnished by his notorious run-ins with the Inquisition. As a result, there is little to indicate that the authors’ misogyny necessarily reflected broader anti-female sentiment in Spanish society.

Certainly some women, particularly aristocratic women, were not only held to these expectations but willingly subscribed to them and cultivated them within their social circles. However, the fact that some

<sup>16</sup> Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 177.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent and much more extensive discussion of humanist views of women and marriage, see Isabel Morant, *Discursos de la vida buena: Matrimonio, mujer y sexualidad en la literatura humanista* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2002). For more on the views of Spanish moralists, see Marie-Catherine Barbazza, ‘L’Épouse chrétienne et les moralistes espagnols des XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles’, *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, 24 (1988), 99–137.

<sup>18</sup> The translation of Vives’s text into English in 1529 by Richard Hyrde under the title *Instruction of a Christian Woman* greatly expanded its audience. For a discussion of Vives’s text in England, see Betty S. Travitsky, ‘Reprinting Tudor History: The Case of Catherine of Aragón’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 50/1 (Spring 1997), 164–74.



men and women willingly embraced these restrictive notions of female behaviour does not indicate that the Spanish population or even the Castilian aristocracy generally accepted such notions. This gap between prescriptive literature and individual behaviour was not a uniquely Spanish phenomenon. Feminist historians have revealed similar discrepancies between the prescriptive literature of the period and women's lives across the continent and in England.<sup>19</sup> The exact reasons for this gap are difficult to unravel. It is not clear whether few people actually knew about the prescriptions or whether they were common knowledge but largely ignored by the populace.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever the case, with increasing frequency historians have exposed significant differences between the ideal woman championed by men like Vives and Fray Luis and the lives of actual Spanish women. As we will see, recent research reveals that although sexual purity might have been applauded by clerics, intellectuals, and the male members of aristocratic families, for many women it was only haphazardly pursued. In fact, even the archetype of the macho Spanish male who would rather kill his wife than suffer a loss of honour seems to have been more prevalent in literature than in reality. While the murder of Doña Mencía still leaves audiences shocked, in reality such harsh acts, while not unknown, seem to have been rare. As I will explore in more detail later, the Castilian legal system provided women and their families with a variety of mechanisms to restore their impugned reputations, none of which involved murder. Indeed, the violent responses to transgressions of male honour depicted on stage and in literature may have been popular exactly because they presented the extreme consequences of inflexible sexual standards. They fed early modern imaginations much like Hollywood movies feed modern minds with unrealistic and often unappealing portrayals of sex and violence in American society.<sup>21</sup>

Historians' understanding of the role of honour in Spanish society is further complicated by the issue of class. To whatever degree they found

<sup>19</sup> Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10–11, 68. See also Amy L. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Boyer has come to a similar conclusion about the relationship between literature and society in 'Honor among Plebeians: *Mala Sangre* and Social Reputation', in Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (eds.), *The Faces of Honor*, 153–4.

an audience, early modern prescriptive literature and drama spoke almost exclusively to and about aristocratic Spanish women. Despite the fact that 75–80 per cent of early modern Spaniards were peasants and that Spanish society was rigidly divided along class lines, we know little or nothing about the gender norms of the Spanish peasantry.<sup>22</sup> For more than three decades, scholars have painstakingly teased out the distinguishing features of Europe's diverse agricultural communities. Their work has revealed the complex interplay of family structures, land tenure, and labour systems under which the majority of the European population lived.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the scholarly assumption has generally been that Spanish peasant families, like their upper-class counterparts, were patriarchal, hierarchical, and structured around the maintenance of female honour. In addition, cultural misogyny and a lack of rights and resources severely limited peasant women's social and economic opportunities.<sup>24</sup> These assumptions fail to acknowledge not only the significantly different social and economic conditions facing peasant women in Spain and across Europe, but also the varying kinship structures and traditions among European ethnic groups and the ways that those structures affected gender relations.<sup>25</sup> Quite unwittingly,

<sup>22</sup> I have based these figures on the Catastro of 1752. For more on the extent of the peasantry, see Teófilo F. Ruiz, 'The Peasantries of Iberia, 1400–1800', in *The Peasantries of Europe from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Tom Scott (London: Longman, 1998), 53.

<sup>23</sup> Certainly the most important works on the early modern peasantry have been produced by French scholars, including Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc*, trans. John Day (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The French Peasantry, 1450–1660*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and Pierre Goubert, *The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). The contributors to Scott, *The Peasantries of Europe* provide good overviews of the current research.

<sup>24</sup> Exceptions to this trend have been the works of Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Judith Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), both of which have made substantial contributions to our understanding of medieval peasants and gender relations.

<sup>25</sup> For excellent examples of and reflections on the heterogeneity of household systems in the Italian peninsula, see Marzio Barbagli, 'Three Household Formation Systems in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Italy', and William A. Douglass, 'The Joint-Family Household in Eighteenth-Century Southern Italian Society', in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

historians have introjected the classist views of peasant society expressed by their early modern counterparts. A striking example is the way that modern scholars, like early modern intellectuals, frequently describe powerful women in peasant culture (witches, healers, holy women) as marginalized from the rest of society and as aberrations in need of repression by patriarchal authorities—a view of peasant women which, as we will see, was not necessarily held by peasants themselves.

Finally, for more than a decade, the honour and shame paradigm has come under intense scrutiny by some scholars, especially feminist anthropologists who have described it as the product of Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism and anthropological androcentrism.<sup>26</sup> These critics emphasize the fact that during the 1960s, mainly English-speaking anthropologists used this framework to explain what they viewed as the deviant sexual norms of Mediterranean societies. Moreover, many scholars have fallen into the same error when discussing northern European women. In her research on early modern English women, Laura Gowing has also noted that scholars have tended to ignore more complex understandings of honour employed by early modern people.<sup>27</sup> Although many anthropologists have moved beyond such an essentializing description of social behaviour, for the most part historians have remained narrowly focused on honour based on female chastity, ignoring the other possible social and cultural norms that might have structured gender relations. Early modern Spain was not a unified society, but instead a patchwork of many social classes and regional cultures. Honour may have been only one of many factors that defined the actions and interactions of Spanish men and women.

## GENDER RELATIONS IN PEASANT SOCIETY

Focusing on the peasant women of Galicia, this study examines how other factors, including demography, economy, inheritance, and local

<sup>26</sup> Sally Cole provides an excellent discussion of this issue in *Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 77–9. For a brief explication of this critique, see Sharon R. Roseman and Heidi Kelley, 'Introduction', *Anthropologica*, 41/2 (1999), 92.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 113.

cultural norms, may have been more important to defining gender norms than honour based on female chastity. In formulating my analysis, I have based my understanding of alternative constructions of gender roles on the work of theorists and feminist anthropologists who have reconceptualized traditional notions of power and authority, in particular female authority.<sup>28</sup> An analysis of power is not outside the scope of peasant studies. Certainly, peasants in early modern European society had less power than their aristocratic counterparts, they were exploited economically, and they were excluded from all but local decision-making processes. Yet anthropologists have demonstrated that if one narrows the analytical focus to the household as the primary social and economic unit in peasant societies, it is much easier to examine how peasants exercised authority over themselves, their families, their friends and neighbours, and their property.

Of course, within varying cultural and economic frameworks, peasants exercised different forms and degrees of agency. For instance, household authority may have played a more central role in the lives of peasants in peripheral areas of Europe, where secular and ecclesiastical institutions were weak. Those peasants may have had more opportunities for independent decision-making than their peers living in central areas where the nobility and/or the clergy exerted more effective authority over village and household decisions. Similarly, wealthier peasants had a wider array of choices than landless labourers. Nevertheless, on a daily basis, each peasant and peasant family exercised some power and authority as they made decisions about their interpersonal relationships, their social and economic circumstances, their futures, and the futures of their children.

In the context of analysing peasant authority, anthropologists have argued that in many societies, peasant women wielded significant 'domestic power' that was often masked by the social prestige afforded to men's activities by scholars and other outsiders.<sup>29</sup> Women with 'domestic power' have some autonomy in key decisions concerning sexual relations, marriage, residence, divorce, and the lives of children.<sup>30</sup> They do not

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the definitions of power, authority, and influence, see Jill Dubisch (ed.), *Gender and Power in Rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 16–20.

<sup>29</sup> Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1984), 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

make all decisions or even dominate the decision-making process; however, they have enough authority within the family to have a reasonable possibility of prevailing in domestic decision-making.<sup>31</sup> In addition, women's domestic power that allows them to interact on a relatively egalitarian basis with their husbands and other family members may have implications for relationships and decisions made outside of the home. For instance, the anthropologist Joyce Riegelhaupt's research demonstrated the degree to which Portuguese women's domestic power influenced local politics despite their official exclusion from formal political participation.<sup>32</sup>

Women's domestic power derives from a variety of sources, the most important of which is access to and control of economic resources.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, anthropologists have demonstrated that the household's reliance on land, livestock, or other resources brought to the family by the woman through dowry, inheritance, or independent accumulation increases women's domestic authority.<sup>34</sup> However, in terms of the exercise of authority, merely having resources is insufficient. Cultural norms must exist that support and value women's independence and their ability to use those resources to influence their own futures and those of other people. In this way, access to resources encourages female economic independence and creates scenarios in which women and men must negotiate household decisions.<sup>35</sup> Women do not necessarily

<sup>31</sup> David D. Gilmore, 'Men and Women in Southern Spain: "Domestic Power" Revisited', *American Anthropologist*, 92 (1990), 955.

<sup>32</sup> Joyce Riegelhaupt, 'Salio Women: An Analysis of Informal and Formal Political and Economic Roles of Portuguese Peasant Women', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 40 (1967), 122–5.

<sup>33</sup> Friedl, *Women and Men*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Scholars like Peggy Sanday who have studied female status in non-European societies found that women 'achieve economic and political power and authority when environmental or historical circumstances grant them economic autonomy and make men dependent on female activities'. Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 114. For an overview of the relationship between women and property, see Jack Goody, 'Inheritance, Property, and Women: Some Comparative Considerations', in *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800*, ed. Jack Goody, Joan Thirk, and E. P. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 10–36. For a discussion of French inheritance practices and gender, see Julie Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy. Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), esp. ch. 3. For England, see Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy Tanner, 'Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and among Black Americans', in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere

consciously seek out these points of negotiation nor do they engage in them merely for self-advancement, but their control of resources implicates women in these interactions none the less.<sup>36</sup>

Anthropologists often refer to societies in which women have considerable domestic power as matricentric (woman-centred) or matrifocal (woman-focused), but such descriptions of women's authority in north-western Spain have engendered considerable controversy.<sup>37</sup> The anthropologist Carmelo Lisón-Tolosana has called women's authority in Galicia 'absolute', noting that 'Not only does the woman dominate in social life and social relations, but the submission of the husband to his wife and/or mother in economic, agricultural, and family decisions is absolute.'<sup>38</sup> Lisón-Tolosana goes on to say that the marriage and inheritance customs of the area created what he called a 'semiamazonian regime' in which mothers and daughters dominated sons-in-law and

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 131–2. For a related discussion, see Marsha Prior, 'Matrifocality, Power, and Gender Relations in Jamaica', in *Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Caroline B. Brettell and Carolyn F. Sargent, 2nd edn. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 331.

<sup>36</sup> Dubisch, *Gender and Power*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Although I have chosen not to refer to early modern Galicia as matrifocal, the research on matrifocal societies is also highly relevant to this discussion. The term matrifocal, mother-focused, was originally used by R. T. Smith in 1956 to describe the kinship structure of lower-class families in British Guiana. On the basis of their economic relations, he concentrated on the central role of mothers and the marginal role of fathers in the families that he studied. *The Negro Family in British Guiana* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956). In 1961, Hildred Geertz made an attempt to broaden the definition beyond economics in order to describe the familial relationships that she encountered in Java. According to Geertz, 'For kindred to be matrifocal means that the persons of greatest influence are women, and that relationships of greatest solidarity are those between women, or those between persons linked by a woman.' *The Javanese Family: A Study of Kinship and Socialization* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 79. This definition moved significantly away from Smith as it explored the possibilities of female power outside of the domestic setting and the family. Then, in 1974, Nancy Tanner proposed an even more inclusive definition of matrifocality. She expressed interest in '(1) kinship systems in which (a) the role of the mother is structurally, culturally, and affectively central and (b) this multidimensional centrality is legitimate; and (2) the societies in which these features coexist where (a) relationship between the sexes is relatively egalitarian and (b) both women and men are important actors in economic and ritual spheres'. This definition allowed scholars to examine the breadth of gender relations in a community, studying the different contexts in which men and women interact, and analysing the ways that those contexts interrelate. Tanner, 'Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa', in Rosaldo and Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture, and Society*, 132–3.

<sup>38</sup> Carmelo Lisón-Tolosana, *Antropología cultural de Galicia* (Madrid: Akal, 1979), 249.

husbands.<sup>39</sup> David Gilmore and Jan Brøgger echoed Lisón-Tolosana's assurance, stating, 'the power and independence of women is more than pronounced, it is absolute'.<sup>40</sup> However, as Sharon Roseman, Heidi Kelley, and others working in the region have shown, female authority is rarely absolute. Rather, it is a product of relationships and subject to constant negotiation. Terms like matrifocal overly homogenize what is a more complex array of interpersonal interactions.<sup>41</sup>

Contributing to the complexity of gender expectations in peasant societies, villagers often present the appearance of male control. Many peasants perpetuate what the anthropologist Susan Carol Rogers has referred to as 'the myth of male dominance'. This myth 'gives [men] the *appearance* of power and control over all sectors of village life, while at the same time giving to [women] *actual* power over those sectors of life in the community which may be controlled by villagers'.<sup>42</sup> The need for an appearance of male authority might be the result of gender tensions within the community or may be a product of the interaction between local culture and broader European norms that refused to acknowledge either egalitarianism or female authority.

This difference between the appearance of male power and an actual or desired egalitarianism often creates tensions in peasant society. As Heidi Kelley has shown, peasants can both believe that women can do anything that men can do and value women's contributions and decision-making as much as men's, while still expressing traditional hierarchical notions of masculine superiority.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Sharon Roseman's fieldwork in the region has demonstrated that 'discourses of hierarchy and egalitarianism are *both* mobilized as strategic resources by household members of both genders and all ages'.<sup>44</sup> Different villages and

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 255.

<sup>40</sup> Jan Brøgger and David Gilmore, 'The Matrifocal Family in Iberia: Spain and Portugal Compared', *Ethnology*, 36/1 (Winter 1997), 15.

<sup>41</sup> Sharon R. Roseman and Heidi Kelley, 'Introduction', and Heidi Kelley, "'If I Really Were a Witch': Narratives of Female Power in a Coastal Galician Community', *Anthropologica*, 41/2 (1999), 134–5.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Carol Rogers, 'Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: A Model of Female/Male Interaction in Peasant Society', *American Ethnologist*, 2 (1975), 728–9.

<sup>43</sup> Heidi Kelley, 'Unwed Mothers and Household Reputation in a Spanish Galician Community', *American Ethnologist*, 18 (1991), 573.

<sup>44</sup> Sharon R. Roseman, '¿Quen Manda? (Who's in Charge?): Household Authority Politics in Rural Galicia', *Anthropologica*, 41/2 (1999), 118.

even families negotiate these issues differently. Indeed, Rogers's subsequent test of her hypothesis on another village revealed that the 'myth' of male dominance did not hold true of gender relations in all peasant families. Nevertheless, her work highlights some of the ways that gender hierarchies and norms play themselves out differently in seemingly identical communities.<sup>45</sup> Thus, these works encourage historians to explore the many ways that gender expectations are constructed in different communities, rather than merely projecting the norms of one class, region, or community onto another.

## METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

Such a study of peasant women's lives requires a broad-minded, multi-disciplinary approach. The sources are disparate, uneven in quality, and rarely, if ever, produced by the women themselves. Thus, social history's traditional reliance on documentary evidence provides only partial access to these women's experiences. However, feminist scholars, particularly those working on Native American and African women, have successfully used the methods and sources of ethnohistory to explore the lives of non-European women. In order to better understand women in societies for whom the documentary record is weak and/or created by outsiders, they have expertly mined a variety of non-documentary sources, including oral histories, folklore, and origin myths. They have also relied on anthropology to help them assess historical structures and relationships and formulate questions about gender norms in those societies. As the historian Nancy Shoemaker has noted, scholars of Native American women have used ethnohistory to examine not only the complementary and relatively egalitarian nature of indigenous women's power, but also the sources of that power, including differing kinship systems, women's economic contribution, and women's reproductive capability.<sup>46</sup> Ethnohistorical analysis provides

<sup>45</sup> Susan Carol Rogers, 'Gender in Southern France: The Myth of Male Dominance Revisited', *Anthropology*, 9 (1985), 65–86.

<sup>46</sup> Nancy Shoemaker, *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Introduction. In my opinion, one of the best examples of the use of ethnohistory to examine women's lives is Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,



depth as well as breadth to our understanding of women's experiences worldwide.

In many ways, the people of Galicia are ideal subjects for ethnohistorical study. Although ethnohistory has generally been confined to the study of non-Western peoples, most of whose extant documentation was created as a result of European and/or American conquest, Eric Wolf's 'people without history' were not exclusively non-Europeans. Much like other colonized peoples, Galician peasants were economically and culturally subordinated by members of the Castilian upper classes.

Although extensive documentation for the lives of peasant women exists, male scribes and functionaries of non-Galician institutions, especially the Catholic Church and the Castilian legal system, produced nearly all of those records. During the seventeenth century, and until recently, literacy rates in the region were very low;<sup>47</sup> however, the Spanish system of notaries provided women with regular access to literate culture. Spanish peasants, both male and female, used notaries to record some of the most important decisions of their lives: whom they would marry and under what conditions, who would care for their ill or ageing bodies and their belongings, and how those things would be dispersed at their deaths. Spanish notarial archives are filled with testaments, dowries, wills, and other mechanisms of property transference, all manifestations of the social and economic connections between people and property.

These legal documents are multivocal. They are both executions of the Castilian legal code as well as vivid explications of the priorities and

1998). Edna G. Bay has done groundbreaking ethnohistorical work on women in Dahomey in *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998). Latin Americanists have also used ethnohistory as a fruitful approach to understanding the issues facing women. One excellent example is *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, ed. Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

<sup>47</sup> Gelabert González found that in the sixteenth century whereas nearly 53% of men could sign their names, fewer than 3% of women in Galicia's primary city, Santiago de Compostela, could do likewise. Juan Eloy Gelabert González, 'Lectura y escritura en una ciudad provinciana del siglo XVI: Santiago de Compostela', *Bulletin Hispanique*, 84/3-4 (Juillet-Décembre 1982), 268-9. My investigation of literacy rates based on Galician testaments from the seventeenth century produced only slightly different results: 9% of female testators could sign their names and 35% of the men. Based only on signatures, both Gelabert González's work and my own do not take into account literacy that included reading only.

decisions of early modern people. While it is important to remember that dowry contracts, marriage contracts, property transfers, and wills are all formulaic documents, historians generally agree that despite the constraints of the notarial formulas, those employing the notaries made clear expressions of their beliefs, affections, and desires. Moreover, many documents include stories and other autobiographical information that provide insight into the daily lives of quite ordinary people. They contain not only a variety of essential demographic information, including the place of origin of the parties and often the ages of the participants, but also discussions of familial relationships, occupations, living situations, and the ownership and prioritization of goods. Within certain legal parameters, Spaniards had significant freedom to dispose of real estate, family wealth, and personal items, and those decisions provide considerable insight into gender expectations. Of course, there is no doubt that not all the provisions of every document were carried out as the individual or individuals might have wished, an aspect of the documentary record that can be particularly problematic for the social historian. Parties renegotiated, altered, and even reneged on contracts, and the complexity of the Castilian judicial systems and the litigiousness of early modern Spaniards makes it nearly impossible to know with any certainty the final outcomes of these interactions. However, for my purposes, the actual fulfilment of each contract as written is significantly less important than the priorities and expectations that it conveys.

As descriptive as notarial records may be, they are limited in scope. First, as notaries charged for their services, they were unavailable to the poorest members of society. In addition, the majority of transactions delineated in notarial records involve property, and the poorest members of society did not own significant pieces of moveable property to lease, sell, or pass down to their descendants. Of course, legal norms and interpersonal relationships both worked to ensure that many transactions were not officially recorded by notaries. For instance, as Castilian law delineated the basic division of property post-mortem, not everyone made testaments and some contracts may have been sealed with a handshake rather than the signature of a notary. In contrast, the extant summaries of trials, the *relaciones de causas*, from the Inquisition in Galicia offer the opportunity to glimpse expressions of feeling from even the poorest Spanish peasant who came into its orbit.

Although I will discuss the role of the Inquisition in Galicia more in Chapter 3, for now I would merely like to address some of the basic issues involved in using Inquisition documentation. In their pursuit of heresy, Inquisitors were as interested in an individual's motivations and beliefs as they were in the commission of the heretical act. Inquisitors used intense interrogations to probe the accused's knowledge and mindset at the time of the heretical act, thought, or conversation. However, the desired result of the interaction between the Inquisitor and the accused was not merely to dispense justice or punish inappropriate thoughts and deeds. Instead, Inquisitors sought the accused's confession and eventual reconciliation with the Church. Although it was rare, Inquisitors used torture purely as a means to elicit a confession, without which a person could not be reconciled.<sup>48</sup> As a result, the *relaciones* often include relatively detailed explorations of the accused's thoughts and feelings as the Church probed the inner workings of Spaniards' minds.

In Galicia, the full trials records do not remain extant, only the summaries of each case, known as *relaciones de causas*. The *relaciones* are of varying lengths, yet all provide some basic information: the name of the accused, his or her place of origin, usually some record of the accused's age and occupation, and the charge. From that point, the record varies depending on the complexity of the case. Sometimes, the summary just states the charge, that the accused was repentant, and the punishment. In other cases, in addition to the basic information, the *relación* includes summaries of the witnesses' testimonies, the defence of the accused, the results of Inquisitional enquiries, and even comments on the health and intellect of the accused.

These records can be quite problematic. As the prodigious literature on the Inquisition has demonstrated, in addition to the acute power differential, the accused often differed from the officers of the Inquisition in terms of class and language.<sup>49</sup> In the Galician tribunal, the class difference between Inquisitors and defendants was acute. The historian

<sup>48</sup> Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), chs. 8, 9. This is not to say that the Inquisition was completely benign. Prosecutions were often processed very slowly and many died during the cumbersome, yet methodical, investigations.

<sup>49</sup> Many scholars have addressed this issue. For an excellent discussion of the problems with court documentation, see Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 45–8.

Jaime Contreras has classified approximately one-third of those brought before the Galician tribunal as peasants, another 9.3 per cent as artisans, 2.7 per cent as 'poor', and 1.9 per cent as servants. The majority of those Contreras classified as artisans would also have been engaged in agricultural production and were socially and economically identifiable as peasants.<sup>50</sup> (Clergy, businessmen, bureaucrats, and those involved in the maritime industries made up most of the rest of the accused.)

Language also may affect our reading of Inquisitorial documentation. All of the *relaciones* are in Castilian, although most of the accused probably made their statements in the local language, Galego, which is more closely related to Portuguese. Although it is difficult to know exactly how these linguistic differences may have altered the information conveyed in the *relaciones*, one must be mindful of the distortions, misunderstandings, and misinformation that may have resulted from both the conversations themselves and the transcription of those conversations.

In addition, Inquisition records are problematic in much the same ways as most legal documentation. There were certain formulas involved in their creation. The accused worked to produce a narrative that would exonerate him or her rather than give an undistorted account of either feelings or actions. Scribes often did not provide word-for-word transcriptions of the proceedings, but instead schematic descriptions of testimonies. And, finally, there is the nagging question of using trial records of accused heretics to understand broader societal norms. Nevertheless, as illiterate peasants attempted to explain their words and deeds to men who had the power to dramatically change their lives or even end them, witnesses and defendants seem to have spoken with remarkable candour about their lives and opinions. However problematic, thus far historians have no other documentary record of ordinary people's words, making Inquisition records an important, if imperfect, window into the mentalities of early modern peasant women.

Finally, the Catholic Church was the primary creator and collector of documentation about Galician peasant women. The Catholic Reformation Church's attempt to force all parish priests to keep good, clear records of parishioners' participation in the sacraments of baptism,

<sup>50</sup> Jaime Contreras, *El Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en Galicia, 1560–1700 (poder, sociedad y cultura)* (Madrid: Akal, 1982), 582–3.

confirmation, marriage, and last rites met with only sporadic success, as I have shown elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the institution produced a substantial amount of documentation. These records are useful for a study of women's lives because, at the moment of the administration of the sacrament, the Church cared almost exclusively about the state of the soul of the person involved, not his or her gender. In that respect, it is difficult to detect any particular gender bias in the parish documentation. Parish priests recorded the births, deaths, and marriages of both men and women with equal conscientiousness, or lack thereof.

That being said, parish records in Galicia have a chequered past. As Galicia was the most densely populated region in Spain, and one of the longest continually Christian areas, there are thousands of tiny parishes. Over the centuries, the damp Galician weather, wars with Portugal, the Napoleonic War, and the Spanish Civil War all took their tolls on the documentary record. In addition, the continued isolation of many parts of Galicia meant that, as recently as 1990, episcopal archivists were still finding early modern parish books scattered among the ruins of old churches and in the chicken coops of poor rural rectories. Beyond their tattered state, parish records often suffer from the inconsistencies of only semiliterate priests, thus making large-scale statistical analysis nearly impossible. Moreover, parish records are also problematic in that they do not normally convey much in terms of the feelings and direct expressions of parishioners. The Catholic Church avidly collected information about the physical and spiritually created relationships between parishioners, not their emotions.

To complement the documentary record, ethnohistory encourages the use of non-documentary sources taken from living members of that culture and the technique of direct historical analogy in which scholars use information collected from a modern culture to understand past cultures.<sup>52</sup> The idea of historical analogy often makes historians, with their dependence on the written record and emphasis on the specific historical context, uncomfortable. However, it has been used quite successfully by many historians, especially those studying Native

<sup>51</sup> See my *Regulating the People: The Catholic Reformation in Seventeenth-Century Spain* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> According to one ethnohistory textbook, direct historical analogy draws 'an analogy from a group that is the direct historical descendant of the group in question'. Russell J. Barber and Frances F. Berdan, *The Emperor's Mirror: Understanding Cultures through Primary Sources* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998), 265.

American peoples, and offers another tool for scholars to bring depth and meaning to the experience of early modern Galician women.

Since the early twentieth century, the inhabitants of Galicia and northern Portugal have been the subjects of extensive anthropological study. Scholars have identified these two regions as culturally connected. According to the anthropologist Caroline Brettell, 'northwestern Portugal and the coastal regions of the province of Galicia in Spain should be considered together as a single demographic region. Not only are they alike geographically, but they also share similar socioeconomic conditions and migration traditions. The roles of women in these two regions are also somewhat similar.'<sup>53</sup> I would extend that region to include most of the interior of Galicia as well (with certain exceptions that I will indicate as necessary).

These anthropologists have bequeathed a wealth of interviews with Galegos, especially women, whose lives were often minimally impacted by the economic modernization that transformed many peasant societies during the twentieth century. Although they clearly present a perspective from the recent past on female roles in the region, they lived in a world that bore some critical similarities to early modern Galicia. In particular, Galicia's demographic situation, which I will outline in Chapter 1, only intensified over the next two centuries. Thus, until quite recently, modern Galegas shared much in common with their early modern counterparts. In addition, anthropological and ethnographic study has also compiled a rich collection of songs, legends, and folklore upon which the historian can draw.

Although neither I nor other ethnohistorians argue that gender norms in the region remained unaltered over the centuries, the evidence does suggest that many of the broader aspects of Galician culture, including gender expectations, have shown remarkable permanence as deep structures of society.<sup>54</sup> With care and consideration for differing historical circumstances, we can use materials from the recent past to help refine, validate, or even reject our interpretations of the past.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Caroline B. Brettell, *Men who Migrate, Women who Wait: Population and History in a Portuguese Parish* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 265.

<sup>54</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>55</sup> Anthony H. Galt, 'Marital Property in an Apulian Town during the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 320.

This ethnohistorical examination of women in early modern Galicia explores the complex interactions of gender, demography, sexuality, economy, and family structures in the formulation of gender norms in Galician society. The single most important factor in the lives of women in early modern Galicia was the very high rate of male migration from the region. Chapter 1 sets the stage for this study by describing the reasons behind that migration and its role in determining family structures and gender norms. Chapter 2 analyses the lives of the large numbers of single women and their access to property. Chapter 3 explores how single women's economic viability affected their notions of love and sexuality and their status in the community. As the majority of Galician women eventually found spouses, Chapter 4 discusses women's transition from singleness to married life, relations between parents and adult children, the role of the husband in his bride's family home, and married women's use of property. Widowhood in Galicia came in two forms, spousal death and spousal abandonment. Chapter 5 examines this stage in peasant women's lives and how they used their age, experience, and possessions to care for others and to protect themselves as they aged. Chapter 6 describes the rich array of cultural models that Galegos could draw upon when socializing their daughters to regional gender expectations. The final chapter discusses the ways in which the experience of Galician women may or may not have been unique in early modern Spain and the implications of this analysis for our understanding of gender norms in early modern society more broadly.

Let me be clear. I am not arguing for the existence of a matriarchal society in north-western Spain or saying that women in any way ruled men. This was not an ideal world of sexual harmony or gender equality. Men, even these women's husbands, did not always approve of or feel comfortable with the authority of women in Galician society. Nevertheless, the convergence of a number of factors, including demography, economy, and cultural traditions, produced gender norms and relationships that made women central to Galician society, and women recognized the degree to which Galician culture revolved around them. As one Galician folksong succinctly asserts, 'the men count for nothing where we women are'.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Marisa Rey-Henningsen, *The World of the Ploughwoman: Folklore and Reality in Matriarchal Northwest Spain* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1994), 140.