

2012

Review of: François Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender in Early Modern Spain and Portugal: Inquisitors, Doctors and the Transgression of Gender Norms*

Allyson M. Poska  
Poska@fake.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

---

**Recommended Citation**

Poska, Allyson M. (2012) "Review of: François Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender in Early Modern Spain and Portugal: Inquisitors, Doctors and the Transgression of Gender Norms*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol37/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact [jesus@udel.edu](mailto:jesus@udel.edu).

François Soyer. *Ambiguous Gender in Early Modern Spain and Portugal: Inquisitors, Doctors and the Transgression of Gender Norms*. Leiden: Brill, 2012. 328 pp.

Some of the most interesting recent studies of the Inquisition provide us with the opportunity to see how Inquisitors struggled with the interplay between the seemingly well-defined institutional and spiritual goal of extirpating heresy and the messy complications of everyday life. François Soyer has attempted to do exactly that in his new study, which brings together a number of trials in which a person was accused of living a different gender than his/her sex, having ambiguous genitalia, or engaging in homosexual activity.

In his introduction, Soyer poses a number of questions that he hopes will frame his discussion of these trials, including what do these trials indicate about attitudes towards ambiguous gender identities? To what extent was gender identity malleable? What was the socially constructed meaning of hermaphroditism? How did the Inquisition interact with medical professionals on these issues? And finally, what was the relationship between effeminacy, homosexuality, and people of ambiguous gender? These are complicated issues and not surprisingly, in the end, he addresses some of these questions more effectively than others.

After a general introduction to issues of sex, sexuality, and gender in early modern Iberia, Soyer provides a detailed discussion of a handful of Inquisition trials whose defendants transgressed gender and/or sexual norms. Three of the cases are of men who claimed to be female or claimed to have female genitalia in order to have sex with men. In another trial, Francisco Roca was investigated for a variety of heresies including sodomy during which accusations of hermaphroditism came to the fore. The Dominican novice María Duran was accused of having made a pact with the devil to obtain a secret penis after she had sex with a number of women. In addition to the Inquisition cases, he briefly discusses a few trials investigated by other judicial institutions. The decision to include these other cases, while it provides more cases and broader context, also confounds things a bit, since the jurisdictions, the charges, the investigational processes, and the potential penalties were different. These trials reveal that both Spaniards and Portuguese were remarkably comfortable with an array of sexual activities, genitalia, and gendered

performances. Some peasant men willingly, and even eagerly, had sex with other men, and felt even better about it if the man claimed to be a woman. As has been discussed by other scholars, witness accounts indicate that these sexual transgressors engaged in such activity for quite a while and often with many partners before anyone reported them to authorities. In fact, the only reason that the Inquisition got involved in three of the trials was because the accused were clergy. The problem was not the sexual act or the gendered performance itself, but the fear that the sacramental activity had been compromised. In the case of Father Furtado, Inquisitors worried that the salvation of his parishioners had been compromised if indeed he was a woman. Indeed, although the Inquisitors wanted to sort out the gender “ambiguity” present in these cases, it was evident to them that such gender complications did not in and of themselves constitute heresy.

Soyer’s juxtaposition of these intriguing cases provides some interesting opportunities for analysis; however, many of the more complicated issues go insufficiently addressed. For instance, it is evident from his narratives that the Inquisition was interested in both a person’s biological sex and a person’s gendered performance. It would have been useful for Soyer to separate out his analysis of each and for him to provide a more in-depth discussion about where early modern ideas about sex and gender diverged and where they overlapped. Many scholars will take issue with his use of “transgenderism.” To effectively deal with that criticism, a more explicit discussion about the difference between assuming a gender identity different from one’s biological sex and the manipulation of gender stereotypes to achieve specific goals, like homosexual intercourse, would have been helpful. Finally, I was left wanting some overarching analysis. Could he tease out any differences between the Spanish and Portuguese tribunals and populaces? If there were not any, what would account for the similarity? What about change over time? We need to be careful not to read the Inquisition as a static entity unaffected by, for instance, Enlightenment ideas about sexuality and anatomy.

Soyer’s book is clearly written and it is nice to have basic narratives of these cases, particularly the less well-known cases, all in one volume. As such, the book will be a useful tool for scholars working to expand our understanding of sex and gender in early modern Spain.

Allyson Poska  
University of Mary Washington