

2011

Review of: Lisa Vollendorf, *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain*

Jessica Fowler

University of California, Davis, jjfowler@ucdavis.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Fowler, Jessica (2011) "Review of: Lisa Vollendorf, *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol35/iss1/15>

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.

Vollendorf, Lisa. *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005. 192 pp.

In the preface to her latest book, Lisa Vollendorf asks, “What did it mean to be a woman in Spain’s early modern period?” (xi). Arguing that the stories of women have been largely overlooked, the author delves into an analysis of documents ranging from testimony before the Spanish Inquisition to women’s own literary works to uncover the coping mechanisms women employed to elude some of the worst excesses of a society that sought to subordinate them. Ultimately Vollendorf argues that the commonalities she highlights “suggest that women had particular means of interacting with each other and the world – that early modern women shared, to varying degrees, similar priorities and similar strategies for survival and self-representation” (7).

In order to support her argument she uncovers the lives of women from varied social stations through close readings of a wide range of documents. In Part One, ‘Defining Gender: The Inquisition,’ Vollendorf takes on two cases from the Spanish Inquisition that illustrate alternative understandings of gender and femininity. While the first, the trial of the transgendered Eleno/a Céspedes, reveals the “flexible nature of sex and gender”(14), the second demonstrates that even conforming to gender norms was not enough to save Bernarda Manuel from accusations of judaizing. Part Two moves from defining gender to imagining it by focusing on women authors (primarily María de Zayas, Ana Caro, and Mariana de Carvajal) and their readers. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on women’s literary works in prose and drama. Works by female authors foreground women in a way that male authored works seldom did, and in so doing, highlighted not only women’s friendships but also their occasional homoerotic desire. Vollendorf argues that, in producing fiction, the “women writers of Spain’s early modern period provided a framework for imagining gender differently” (89). It remains unclear, however, how successfully audiences received this message. In the third part, ‘Women’s Worlds: Convent Culture,’ Vollendorf shows how religious women’s writing reveals their relationships with each other as well as Catholicism more generally. Chapter 5 focuses on the fictional works of three nuns while Chapter 6 explores the life of the beata Sor Catalina de Jesús y San Francisco as portrayed in a *vida* authored by her own son. In the two chapters that make up the final section, ‘Women’s Networks: Leadership and Community,’ Vollendorf shows how single women created and maintained networks of influence through forms of leadership and educational activities. Moving from stories of individuals to the female

community at large, she seeks to demonstrate how women interacted with each other, especially in the spiritual realm. The final chapter on women's education insists that despite the existence of sources for study, a definitive history of female education, both formal and informal, remains unwritten.

Given its contents, the book's subtitle is a bit puzzling. Defining any period by a single institution tends to be problematic, and, given that Vollendorf focuses on Spain's long seventeenth century, a period which fails to encompass the longevity of the Spanish Inquisition, the subtitle becomes misleading. Early modern Spain's misogynist culture was not a product of the Inquisition, though at times this institution did serve to reinforce such beliefs and practices. However, only the first part of the book deals explicitly with the ways that the Spanish Inquisition handled questions of gender and thus the institutional emphasis of the title does not quite fit with the content of the work.

Vollendorf supports her argument with careful, close readings of both well-known and understudied documents that capture a variety of exceptional cases. However, the parts never quite come together as an integrated whole. While the histories united here are likely to make the reader reconsider his or her preconceptions about the role and place of women in early modern Spanish society, to what degree can these lives be taken as typical? The problem of exceptionality is, as Vollendorf concedes, inherent in the sources, even for researchers who are as resourceful as she in uncovering new ways of approaching women's history. Though she cannot fully answer the very question she poses of what it meant to be a woman in early modern Spain, Vollendorf does offer new approaches to the problem and valuable insights into possible new avenues of study. Her discussion of the largely ignored texts of female writers outside the ranks of the famous reminds us of how much work remains to be done on these and other such authors, while her final chapters on women's networks suggests another potentially fruitful field of investigation.

Jessica Fowler
University of California, Davis