

“O homem na praça, e a mulher em casa”: Gender in the Lusophone World

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Bethencourt, Francisco (ed.) (2021), *Gendering the Portuguese-Speaking World. From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

“O homem na praça, e a mulher em casa” (a man’s place is out and about, a woman’s place is at home) (Bethencourt 2021: 112). The proverb, found in the 1651 publication of *Adagios Portugueses reduzidos a logares communs*, is not only characteristic of the societal expectations in seventeenth-century Portugal, but also long before and after the early modern period in all parts of its empire. In the volume *Gendering the Portuguese-Speaking World: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (2021), edited by Francisco Bethencourt, sixteen authors reflect on gender in the Lusophone world across time and space. This is a well-needed contribution, according to Bethencourt, because although women’s and later gender studies have been part of historical research since the 1970s, these topics are still relatively unknown in Portuguese historiography. To spark the conversation, *Gendering the Portuguese-Speaking World* is “a contribution that reflects on the state of the art, identifies problems, experiments methods and suggests new perspectives” (Bethencourt 2021: 5).

One of Bethencourt’s main critiques is that the historiographies dealing with the role of gender in the Lusophone world have led to fragmentation. Therefore, there “needs to be comparative research and productive dialogue between different regions, disciplines, and methods” (Bethencourt 2021: 8). I propose, however, that we take this one step further. In what follows, I take a closer look at four recurring themes in the volume and, moreover, question how the history of gender in the Lusophone world as described by Bethencourt and the other authors relates to that of other empires, considering that empires were not enclosed spaces, but, as emphasized in Amélia Polónia and Rosa Capelão’s chapter “Women and Gender in the Portuguese Overseas Empire,” areas of contact where peoples and ideas circulated and crossed.

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Depatriarchalizing the Archives

The first theme deals with how we study gender in history. In her chapter “Negotiating Patriarchy in Early Modern Portugal,” Darlene Abreu-Ferreira slightly points to the patriarchal structure of the archive by stating that “men’s transactions as recorded by a notary, even if seemingly between men only, would have had—for the most part—an impact on women’s lives” (2021: 32). In other words, the marks left by men in archives affected the lives of the women around them, even if we do not see them.

But the problem is more compelling than this. The archive is gendered in principle and replicates the dichotomy between “We”—often the white, heterosexual male—and “the Other”—anyone else not belonging to or identifying with this group. This patriarchal structure of the archive results in the invisibility of large groups of people. On the one hand, their identities are hidden behind the names of male figures, for instance, those of their husbands, making it a hazardous task to locate them. On the other hand, they are simply left out because of certain structures in place.

The implications of this for historical research are visible in the volume, too. It is no coincidence that in her chapter “Gendering Libraries and Reading (a Glimpse at Three Generations of Portuguese Readers),” Vanda Anastácio studies women’s reading practices in eighteenth-century Portugal by analyzing the library of Leonor de Almeida Portugal (1750–1839) and her female relatives. Despite her family’s alleged participation in the attempted assassination of King José I, Leonor¹ enjoyed a good education (she learned more than four languages) and had access to books from all over Europe. The case of Leonor may be representative of other women of her social class in Portugal, and perhaps even Europe, but does not tell us anything about women’s readership in general. How should we deal with this problem of unequal representativity in the archives? Moreover, how do we make sure not to replicate the structure of the archives in our research?

Looking at colonial and slavery studies is particularly helpful in finding solutions to these issues. Building on the works of Deborah Gray White, Jennifer Morgan, Camilla Townsend, Natalia Zemon Davis, and others, for instance, Maria Fuentes gives a voice to enslaved women in eighteenth-century Barbados in her book *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. She argues that “by changing the perspective of a document’s author to that of an enslaved subject, questioning the archives’ veracity and filling out

¹ I refer here to Leonor de Almeida Portugal as Leonor to avoid confusion.

minuscule fragmentary mentions or the absence of evidence with spatial and historical context our historical interpretation shifts to the enslaved viewpoint in important ways” (2016: 4). Interacting with this strand of historiography and employing the aforementioned strategies to study gender can be particularly helpful in overcoming the problems encountered in the archives.

Property and Wealth as an Indicator for Success?

The second theme observed in the volume is that of property and wealth in relation to power and success. In their study on women in the early modern Portuguese empire, Polónia and Capelão point out that

we do find women described as *manly*, occupying a space that does not fit their “nature,” according to the gender assigned to them. In these cases, women emerged in the spaces of culture, war, politics, commerce, and knowledge production, where they embraced what is proper to the “nature” of man, improving their social standing by shedding the image of emotional passiveness and dependence. (2021: 77)

Occupying spaces of power, as evident throughout the volume, often was and is seen as “manly” or masculine and directly related to property and wealth. Indeed, as Abreu-Ferreira explains, when we find women in the archives, it is often in documents relating to property transactions (2021: 32).

Are successful women those who are considered “manly?” If property is a proxy for power, does this mean that being a successful woman requires wealth? And conversely, does it mean that less wealthy women were not successful?

It is not what the authors claim, but it is the aftertaste you get after reading the volume. In a sense, by looking mostly at wealthy women, the authors are reciprocating the archive’s bias. In her article “Gendering Practices and Possibilities in Portugal and Its Empire during the Early Modern Period,” Isabel dos Guimarães Sá looks at the “judicial and social structures implemented across the Portuguese world to keep women in their place, and the possibilities that existed to escape from these” (2021: 49). Sá argues that “women were the weaker gender in all social groups during the early modern period”; they were excluded from power and most occupations (2021: 51). That this is a recurring and continuous issue is

evident from reading Philip J. Havik's chapter "Gendering Public Health: Shifting Health Workforce Policies and Priorities in Portugal's African colonies, 1945-1975," in which he demonstrates how in this period African women in Angola and Mozambique were excluded from the labor market.

While this view is not incorrect, it is too narrow. There were many exceptions to the rule. In the early modern Dutch Republic, some women held administrative positions, for instance, the *regentessen* of the Burgerweeshuis (Orphanage) in Amsterdam. But also in the Lusophone world, we find women in administrative functions, as demonstrated by Ben James in his chapter "Convents in Lisbon: Practices against Seclusion." Despite their seemingly secluded lives, these Lisbon nuns maintained connections with the wider world, holding "a distinct position in urban society," something also touched upon by Ana Maria S. A. Rodrigues in her chapter "Gendering Medieval Portugal" (2021: 15).

Women furthermore made use of the maritime character of the empire. Sá shows how the absence of husbands who had maritime careers strengthened women's autonomy, as they now controlled the family's property and decision-making (2021: 67). We also see this in other empires, for instance, the Dutch Empire, but here the role of women in the maritime sector was more encompassing. An illustrious example is the presence of *zjelverkopers* and lodgekeepers. These were men and women who roamed maritime cities offering accommodation for job-seeking migrants. Often poor, these migrants spent their money quickly, seeing no other option than to enlist with the Dutch East and West India Companies (VOC and WIC). Unable to pay their debts, they often granted the *zjelverkopers* the right to claim their wages from the Companies. In the Dutch archives, we find many women as *zjelverkopers* and also in many other occupations.

Women furthermore fulfilled central roles in the public space and information and knowledge circuits. Sá puts forward that "gossip constituted a source of empowerment for women" (2021: 55), although she argues this in the context of the sexual purity required of women in Portugal, whereas in other empires we see that the mechanisms of honor and reputation had similar workings for men. Nonetheless, it shows how women in history were not just passively part of chains of information, but actively participated in them. We also see this in Anna M. Klobucka's chapter "Wily Homosexuals: Notes on the Circulation of Queerness and Homophobia in the Luso-Brazilian Nineteenth Century," who shows how Libaninho and Albino, two homosexual characters in fiction, were "intermediaries or go-betweens in the human environment" they inhabited (2021: 177). It affirms that success is not necessarily defined by access to property and wealth and is not stagnant nor strictly

defined. If studying gender through the lens of property means contrasting gender with masculinity, we remain blind to a large group of people who bent the patriarchal system to their will in other ways.

Separating Motherhood from Sexuality

The last theme that is touched upon in most of the chapters in the volume is that of motherhood. Studying transgender experiences in Nampula and Maputo in 2016 and 2017, Maria Judite Chipenembe, Gily Coene, and Chia Longman show in their chapter “‘Eu sou ela/ele’: ‘Transgender’ and Gender Fluidity in Mozambique” that transgender people often feel oppressed by traditional norms of marriage and motherhood (2021: 241). It bears resemblance to the women living centuries ago, who experienced societal pressure to marry and procreate. In her chapter “The Motherhood and LGBTQI+ Reproductive Dissidence in Contemporary Portugal,” Ana Cristina Santos, therefore, suggests that “sexuality and reproduction should remain autonomous spheres, considered separately in their own specificities and historicity” (2021: 252).

But how should we do this? Especially in the pre-modern world, where divorce was often almost impossible, separation complex, and contraceptive options limited, sexuality and reproduction are difficult to separate. One way to look at sexuality is through the lens of adultery. Sá explains that in the Portuguese world, “female adultery was severely punished, whilst for men adultery did not exist as a juridical feature but only as a vague moral transgression” (2021: 57). Whereas women were generally punished more severely in other empires too, it does not mean that adultery committed by husbands had no implications for them, however. Moreover, we see women using their husbands’ adulterous behavior as an opportunity to separate from them. While this meant that they remained officially married, in practice it sometimes meant that they started romantic relationships with others.

Yet, even if women are not defined by their reproductive capability, they sometimes used it as a powerful mechanism to reverse dominant power structures, especially in the case of illegitimate children. In the Dutch Republic, for instance, single mothers forced the fathers of their illegitimate children to recognize and financially care for them. They would baptize their children with the same names as the fathers or let neighbors or relatives testify in front of a notary about the fathers’ identities. In the colonial world, marrying and having children with colonizers sometimes allowed local women to reverse the dominant role of males, becoming very powerful themselves (Sits 2020: 63). In her chapter “Centring Women or

Rehabilitating Masculinity? Gender, Literature and Late Nineteenth Century Angola,” Dorothée Boulanger also points to the importance of motherhood and childlessness for Angolan women in the nineteenth century but also denotes dehumanization and objectification of the African body (185–186). It follows the more recent line of works of historians such as Sowande M. Mustakeem (2016) who center their research around the body to understand the past. Is that perhaps the solution? To not make a distinction between sexuality and reproductivity, but sexuality and the body instead?

Closing Remarks

In his chapter “Language and Gender,” João Paulo Silvestre shows how the Portuguese language “preserves information on the negative characteristics of various social groups” (2021: 116). The proverb “o homem na praça, e a molher em casa” is among the examples provided by Silvestre. While this proverb has been the daily reality of many women in history until today, we should pay more attention to how people not only in the Lusophone world but elsewhere dealt with the patriarchal system imposed upon them and how some actively bent it to their will. Moreover, we should remind ourselves not to generalize gender across time and space. As Klobucka denotes, we study people “through the full spectrum of their complex textuality, locational and communal belonging, and the pathways of circulation that propel and define their . . . identity” (2021: 178).

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Bionote/Nota Biográfica

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