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Female Genealogies. Scenarios and spaces of female power in 15th century Castile through nobility wills

Genealogias no Feminino. Espaços e cenários do poder da mulher na Castela do século XV, através de testamentos da nobreza

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Introduction

In recent decades, publications concerning women in medieval societies have proliferated markedly, thereby consolidating a distinct and enduring avenue of research within the historiography of the Middle Ages. Within this broader corpus, there has been a notable expansion of studies addressing the exercise of power by medieval queens, often framed through the theoretical lens of Queenship¹. Since its emergence in the 1990s, Queenship has constituted a recognised field of inquiry, providing a shared framework for exploring the exercise of royal female power in the medieval and early modern periods². However, by its own definition, such a concept encompasses a relatively limited group of women, thereby excluding many others who, despite sharing a similarly privileged social status, have not been the focus of sustained scholarly attention. Consequently, their individual life trajectories remain underexplored, and comprehensive analytical frameworks that might illuminate their roles are largely lacking. Such is the case with noblewomen in the European Late Middle Ages, who constitute the primary focus of the present study.

This study centres on a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the last wills of nine women from the Castilian noble lineage of de la Vega, spanning the period from 1367—the year in which Leonor de Cornado composed the earliest known testament—to 1515, the year of Mencía de la Vega’s death, which, occurring without

¹ The foundational publications in scholarship on European Queenship are DUGGAN, Anne (ed.) – *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997; and PARSON, John Carmi (ed.) – *Medieval Queenship*. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1998. This work is a clear example of the analytical break in the study of the royal figure in recent decades: while in traditional studies the queen's power was legitimated on her husband's, this new paradigm insists on the need for a generalization of the instruments on which the power of queens was based. From this perspective, the queen's power is not understood as a “loan” received from the male members of her family, but rather as the intrinsic possession of a broad spectrum of powers through which the queen is capable of exercise authority and sustain her position as a member of the monarchical institution. However, we also find earlier studies that already used this term in collective works that reflected on the capabilities of queens and their sovereignty, such as FRADENBURG, Louise O. – “Rethinking Queenship”. In FRADENBURG, Louise O. (ed.) – *Women and Sovereignty*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992, pp. 1-13; VANN, Theresa. A. – “The theory and practice of medieval Castilian Queenship”. In VANN, Theresa, A. (ed.) – *Queens, Regents and Potentates*. Dallas: Crampton and Sons, 1993, pp. 125-147.

² In an immeasurable integrative effort, one of the world's leading specialists in Queenship, Elena Woodacre, recently edited WOODACRE, Elena (ed.) – *A Companion to Global Queenship*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018. This work brings together various papers that explore the capabilities and limitations of using this term in different historical contexts.

issue, effectively marked the extinction of the family line. Beyond reconstructing the largely overlooked personal histories of these noblewomen within medieval scholarship, the extended chronological scope of the study enables a *longue durée* approach. This perspective facilitates the identification of numerous recurring patterns across six generations of women, patterns that proved instrumental in shaping and sustaining a shared lineage-based identity and collective memory—what may be termed an ‘identitarian lineage’.

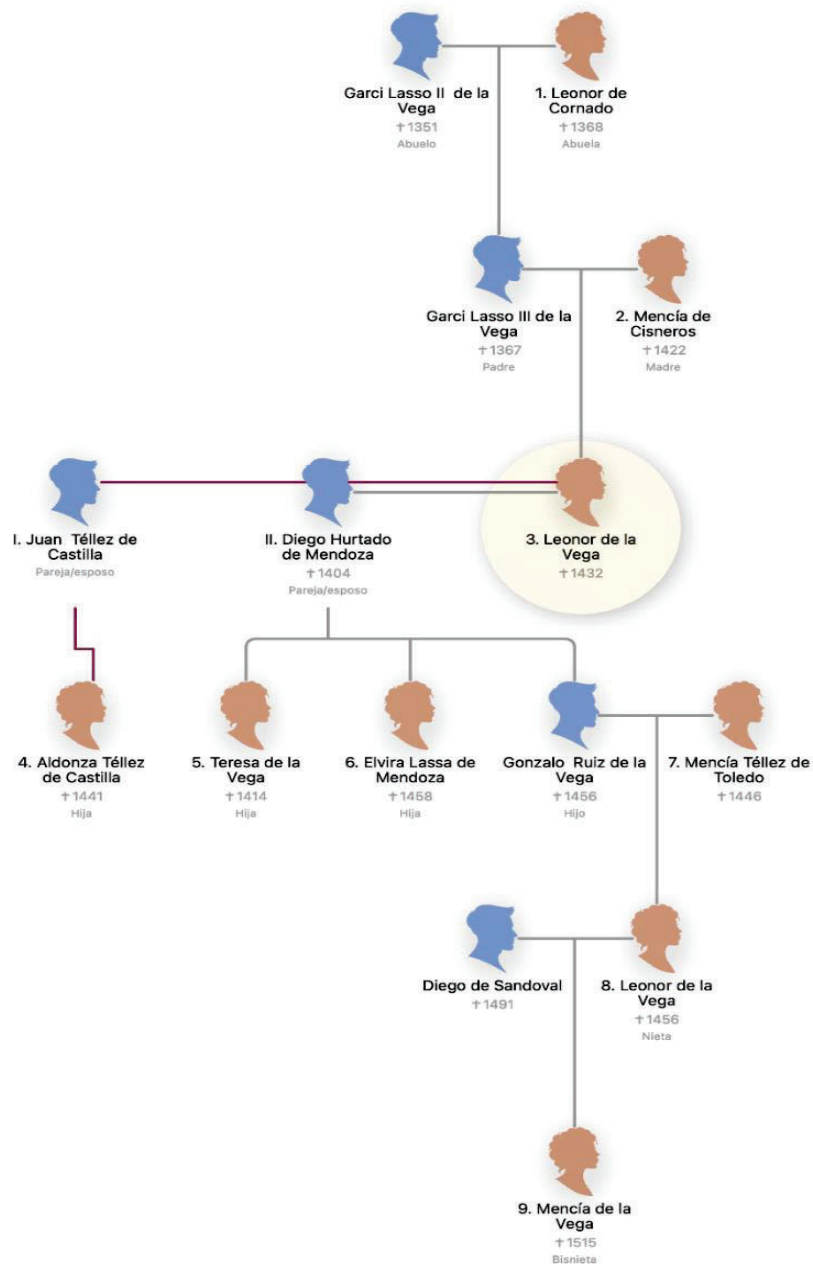


Figure 1 – Genealogical group under study.

Sources

The documentary basis of this study comprises the nine extant wills of the women constituting this genealogical line, along with the accompanying codicils appended to several of these instruments. The majority of these documents are preserved in the Osuna Collection of the *Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza* in Toledo³. These sources have been supplemented by a wide array of documentary materials drawn from various Spanish archives, which have enabled a more nuanced reconstruction of the life histories of each of the women under study, as well as a more precise interpretation of the testamentary texts themselves. Among these supplementary records are dowry letters, marriage contracts, royal decrees, legal proceedings, chronicles, and items of personal correspondence.

Although the use of last wills as historical sources is virtually intrinsic to the discipline, scholarly approaches to these documents have evolved in accordance with shifting historiographical priorities. In this context, the emergence and subsequent consolidation of the New Political History—with its emphasis on the power relations that shape ‘political culture’, as well as on the attitudes and behaviours of social groups and political actors—has exerted a significant influence on the conceptual framework of the present study. With regard to scholarship specifically addressing the wills of noblewomen, which remains relatively limited, particular attention must be paid to the contributions of Miguel García Fernández. His extensive body of work has substantially advanced our understanding of the power dynamics and agency of some of the most prominent Galician noblewomen of the period, primarily through the analysis of their testamentary records⁴. Beyond

³ The will of Aldonza Téllez de Castilla, Countess of Castañeda (c. 1380–c. 1441), has been consulted in the *Salazar y Castro* Collection, part of the archive and library of the *Real Academia de la Historia* (Madrid). The codicils of Teresa de la Vega and Elvira Lasa de Mendoza, half-sisters of Aldonza Téllez, have also been located in the same archive.

⁴ Among his abundant scientific output, these recent works stand out: GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ, Miguel – “Vivir y morir en femenino en la Galicia de los siglos XIV y XV”. In PARDO DE GUEVARA Y VALDÉS, Eduardo (ed.) – *Mujeres con poder en la Galicia Medieval (ss. XIII-XV). Estudios, biografías y documentos*. Santiago de Compostela: Instituto de Estudios Gallegos Padre Sarmiento, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2017, pp. 71-239; GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ, Miguel – “Mujeres y transmisión de la herencia en las *Partidas* de Alfonso X: un marco normativo para la práctica testamentaria bajomedieval”. In FRADEJAS RUEDA, José Manuel; JEREZ CABRERO, Enrique; PICHEL, Enrique (eds.) – *Las Siete Partidas del Rey Sabio. Una aproximación desde la filología digital y material*. Frankfurt am Main-Madrid: Vervuert-Iberoamericana, 2021, pp. 223-249; GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ, Miguel – “Las mujeres en las estrategias familiares de las élites urbanas bajomedievales: un ejemplo compostelano”. In SOLÓRZANO TELECHEA, Jesús Ángel; HAEMERS, Jelle y LIDDY, Christian (eds.) – *La familia urbana: matrimonio, parentesco y linaje en la Edad Media*. Logroño: Instituto de Estudios

the Spanish context, several studies have likewise centred on women's wills, approached, on the one hand, from perspectives grounded in the spiritual and religious dimensions of these documents, and on the other, from more innovative angles that emphasise women's agency in the medieval period. Particularly noteworthy is the Italian historiographical tradition, which has developed along lines broadly comparable to those of Spanish scholarship. Certain Italian scholars have interpreted the will as a space of relative autonomy for women—a locus wherein they could exercise the *power to decide*, a prerogative conferred by the act of testamentary disposition⁵. Moreover, these documents have been viewed as 'concentrated' biographies, encapsulating essential aspects of the women's identities, values, and lived experiences⁶.

These theoretical precepts have facilitated the development of a methodology aimed at achieving two principal objectives: firstly, a thorough analysis of the full content of these wills, in contrast to studies that restrict their focus to a single thematic domain—most commonly, the religious dimension⁷. Secondly—and of even greater significance—is the serial analysis undertaken in this doctoral thesis: the systematic examination of a sequence of wills belonging to women who were closely related by blood and lineage. This approach has unquestionably revealed a rich multiplicity of recurring themes and patterns that transcend the confines of lineage *sensu stricto*. It has further enabled a more nuanced understanding of these women's lived

Riojanos, 2021, pp. 263-294; GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ, Miguel – “Familia, poder e relixiosidade dunha aristócrata baixomedieval galega. As últimas vontades de dona Xoana de Castro (1467)”. *Madrygal. Revista de Estudos Gallegos* 21 (2018), pp. 133-156.

⁵ These are the words of Patrizia Mainoni in “Il potere di decidere: testamenti femminili pugliesi nei secoli XIII-XIV”. In MAINONI, Patrizia (ed.) – “*Con animo virile*”. *Donne e potere nel Mezzogiorno medievale (secoli XI-XV)*. Rome: Viella, 2010, pp. 197-262. In Italian studies, we can also highlight ROSSI, Maria Clara (ed.) – *Margini di libertà: testamenti femminili nel Medioevo. Atti del convegno internazionale, Verona, 23-25 ottobre 2008*. Verona: Caselle di Sommacampagna, 2010, and from the same author, “Religiosità e scelte testamentarie femminili”. In ALBERZONI, Maria Pia et al. (eds.)—*Vita religiosa al femminile (secoli XIII- XIV)*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2019, pp. 257-278.

⁶ This is the definition of a will proposed by BARTOLI LANGELI, Attilio – *Noles intestatus decedere. Il testamento come fonte della storia religiosa e sociale. Atti dell'incontro di studio (Perugia, 3 maggio 1983)*. Perugia: Editrice Umbra Cooperativa, 1985, p. XV.

⁷ These kinds of studies are usually part of the *History of Mentalities*, and more specifically in research focused on *ars moriendi* and attitudes towards death in medieval societies. Johan Huizinga's classic work *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, published in 1919, is considered the study that initiated the interest in medieval death, as is Alberto Tenenti's *La vie et la mort à travers l'art du XVe siècle*, published in 1952. A magnificent bibliographic review of the historiographical tradition of the so-called *History of Death* can be found in AZPEITIA MARTÍN, María – “Historiografía de la ‘Historia de la muerte’”. *Studia Histórica. Historia Medieval* 26 (2008), pp. 113-132.

experiences and identities, allowing for a more precise reconstruction of the extensive networks of relationships they cultivated. Moreover, this perspective sheds light on the mechanisms through which they contributed to the shaping and transmission of a collective memory across generations.

Objectives

With the subject of study and the primary sources now clearly defined, the research has pursued three principal objectives. Firstly, this thesis seeks to deepen historical inquiry into Castilian noblewomen—a field that, despite notable growth in recent years, particularly in the area of queenship studies, remains insufficiently explored and lacks the robust theoretical and conceptual frameworks necessary for the development of comprehensive analytical models. Achieving this objective necessitates the adoption of a research perspective that positions gender as a central analytical category. This study recognises gender as the sociocultural construction of behaviours, attitudes, and competencies attributed to the binary sexes, male and female—constructions that undoubtedly shaped the lives of these women but did not entirely determine them. The analysis thereby highlights their capacity to challenge and, at times, subvert the rigid gender norms characteristic of the medieval period. In line with the work of scholars such as Diana Pelaz, this research approaches noblewomen, akin to queens, through a hybrid model that moves fluidly between the paradigms of masculinity and femininity⁸. This perspective allows us to observe the wide range of roles played by these women, as well as the strategies they employed both individually and collectively.

Secondly, in light of the limitations inherent in more traditional conceptual frameworks for the historical study of women, key notions such as *power* and *lineage* have been reinterpreted through a renewed lens, tailored to the specific objectives of this thesis. This reconfiguration seeks to generate broad analytical structures capable of transcending the confines of individual case studies. Methodologically and conceptually, the research is grounded in the theoretical

⁸ PELAZ FLORES, Diana – “‘Con ánimo viril’. Expresiones de una feminidad plural a través la figura de la reina en la historiografía castellana (ca. 1252-1474)”. *E-Spania: Revue électronique d'études hispaniques médiévales* 42 (2002).

construct of Queenship, which is here extended to the domain of noblewomen—on the premise that the queen, as *prima inter nobiles*, served both as a model of personal comportment and as a political actor. This transfer of conceptual paradigms enables a more nuanced exploration of noblewomen's roles within their sociopolitical contexts. Furthermore, the study adopts an inherently interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from history and sociology, and drawing upon methodological tools such as genealogy, historical biography, and network analysis.

Lastly, proceeding from the premise that these women conceived of themselves as subjects endowed with intrinsic power, this thesis undertakes a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the wills of nine noblewomen, interconnected through various familial ties across six generations. This genealogical continuity imposes two fundamental constraints on the project: first, its inherently intergenerational character; and second, its inter-lineage dimension. The latter is of particular significance when considered within the context of the dual familial affiliation characteristic of noblewomen in late medieval Castile, and the specific positioning of these women within the lineage of de la Vega.

Theory and Method

The construction of a coherent theoretical and methodological framework represents one of the most intricate challenges in research concerning noblewomen. This complexity arises primarily from the enduring androcentrism of historiographical traditions, which have long shaped the so-called 'master narrative'⁹—a dominant interpretative paradigm that has privileged male agency in historical analysis while frequently marginalising or overlooking women's capacities to wield power. In response to these methodological limitations, recent scholarship has increasingly adopted terms such as *agency*, *autonomy*, and *soft*

⁹ As Jo Ann MCNAMARA points out, historical narrative has consisted of an account of the evolution of governments and institutions, apparently indifferent to the fact that the only protagonists of this type of evolution were male. Care, a task associated with women, has always been understood as a 'minor' activity, unrelated to 'active' male action, which generated 'progress'. McNAMARA, Jo Ann – "Women and Power through the Family Revisited". In ERLER, Mary C.; KOWALESKI, Maryanne (eds.) – *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. New York: Ithaca, 2003, p. 18.

power, which constitute a relatively novel lexicon developed to meet the analytical demands of studies on Women and Power. While these concepts aim to capture the informal and often subtle forms of influence exercised by powerful women—whether queens or noblewomen—they may inadvertently obscure the broader, more substantive notion of power that underpins them. This tendency to generate new conceptual terminology has been critically examined by Theresa Earenfight, who refers to it as ‘gender semantics’: a phenomenon that reflects the ways in which the definition of power is modulated according to the sex of the historical subject under consideration¹⁰. In a similar vein, scholars such as Jana Sawiki argue that terms like *agency*, while valuable, impose a limiting frame, insofar as they highlight the constraints rather than the extent of women's power¹¹. In essence, the use of such terminology often appears to reflect a persistent need to justify or legitimise the authority historically exercised by women—an interpretive stance that continues to use male power as its implicit benchmark.

Given that research on women should not be principally oriented toward establishing comparisons with male agency—what men could or could not do—but rather toward analysing what women actually did and could do, it becomes essential to interrogate the very notion of power as it is employed in this study. Recognising that formal and informal expressions of power frequently coexist within a single decision or action, it was neither analytically productive nor relevant to the aims of this research to impose a rigid classification along those lines. Instead, it became necessary to expand the conceptual framework, for which the sociology of domination offered a particularly fruitful lens.

Starting from the premise that the women examined in this study conceived of themselves as agents of power—an assertion clearly articulated in their last wills and testaments through the deliberate use of authoritative verbs such as *mando* (‘I command’) and *ordeno* (‘I order’)—this research adopts a theoretical orientation centred on the concept of dominance. Here, dominance is understood as the capacity

¹⁰ EARENFIGHT, Theresa – “A Lifetime of Power: Beyond Binaries of Gender”. In TANNER, Heather J. (ed.) – *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100-1400. Moving beyond the Excepcionalist Debate*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 278.

¹¹ Cit. ERLER, Mary C.; KOWALESKI, Maryanne – “A New Economy of Power Relation: Female Agency in the Middle Ages”. In ERLER, Mary C.; KOWALESKI, Maryanne (eds.) – *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. New York: Ithaca, 2003, p. 4.

of an individual to issue a directive and have it effectively executed by others. This interpretive shift is regarded as a foundational aspect of the study, allowing for a more precise evaluation of how power was conceived, enacted, and legitimised by noblewomen in late medieval Castile¹².

The second major methodological challenge encountered in the course of this research concerns the concept of lineage, particularly as traditionally defined within the field of nobility studies. Scholarly analyses of lineage structures and the sociogenesis of the nobility have tended to overlook the role of women, seldom incorporating them into broader discussions of lineage formation and reproduction. Yet noblewomen were undeniably integrated into these systems, which were predominantly agnatic in nature and structured around the principle of male primogeniture¹³. This posed a significant difficulty in formulating a coherent analytical framework capable of systematically addressing the position and agency of women within such lineage-based configurations.

For these reasons, the methodology adopted in this research is grounded in the structural logic of late medieval lineages, which decisively shaped the roles and positions of women within them. At the same time, it incorporates two critical elements that pertain specifically to female members of such lineages. The first is the condition of dual affiliation that characterised noblewomen in the Crown of Castile during the late Middle Ages. Whereas men typically belonged to a single lineage—into which they were born, within which they married, and in which they remained until death—the analysis of noblewomen must consider both the natal

¹² For Max Weber, the concept of power is 'amorphous', given the many different forms that an individual's attempt to impose their will can take. For this reason, the German sociologist preferred to focus on the concept of *Herrschaft*, 'domination' or 'authority', since, as Stefano GUZZINI points out, "el hecho de que 'una voluntad expresada' —'una orden'— de los actores dominantes pretenda influir la acción de los subordinados y que realmente [lo haga] en estos hasta tal punto [...] que pareciera que aquéllos, por su propia voluntad, convirtieran la conformidad con la orden en una máxima de su propia acción —'obediencia'—. "Power in Max Weber". *Relaciones Internacionales* 30 (2015), p. 103.

¹³ On the gradual transformation of the social structures of the nobility in medieval Castile, we point out QUINTANILLA RASO, María Concepción – "La renovación nobiliaria en la Castilla bajomedieval. Entre el debate y la propuesta". In *La nobleza peninsular en la Edad Media. VI Congreso de Estudios Medievales*. León: Fundación Sánchez Albornoz, 1997, pp. 255-296; BECEIRO PITA, Isabel; CÓRDOBA DE LA LLAVE, Ricardo – *Parentesco, poder y mentalidad. La nobleza castellana. Siglos XII-XV*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de investigaciones Científicas, 1990, especially pp. 35-108; PASTOR DE TOGNERI, Reyna (ed.) – *Relaciones de poder, de producción y parentesco en la Edad Media y Moderna*. Madrid: CSIC, 1990; CASEY, James; HERNÁNDEZ FRANCO, Juan (eds.) – *Familia, parentesco y linaje*. Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 1997.

family from which they originated and the marital family into which they were incorporated. This dual status not only complicates genealogical analysis but also reveals the multifaceted ways in which women navigated and mediated between distinct lineage structures¹⁴. At the same time, this dual affiliation carries significant implications for the strategic behaviours of these women, as they are frequently found acting in support of one family group or the other—or serving as mediators between the two—according to the shifting interests and circumstances they navigated at a given moment.

Secondly—and posing an even greater challenge to the formulation of a systematic methodological approach for a group of women linked by various kinship ties—is the question of their mode of access to the lineage of reference, in this case the de la Vega lineage. Women could belong to a lineage through both endogenous processes—by birth—and exogenous ones—through marriage. Consequently, a woman's affiliation to a particular lineage is contingent upon the analytical perspective adopted, depending on the referential family unit.

Taking these complexities into account, the development of a methodological framework aligned with the objectives of this study necessarily required a conceptual move beyond traditional understandings of lineage, which privilege the male line and thus fail to provide a structural basis for connecting women to one another. To address this limitation, the present research introduces the concept of identitarian lineage: a structure of social belonging that runs parallel to and diverges from formally recognised lineages. Like lineage *sensu stricto*, it encompasses social, patrimonial, and economic ties, but it further incorporates emotional, subjective, and symbolic dimensions unique to the individual. The findings of this study support the utility of this concept in constructing broader comparative theoretical frameworks that more adequately capture the complexity of noblewomen's social positioning and interrelations.

¹⁴ From the perspective of kinship anthropology, the family of origin is referred to as the 'family of orientation,' while the family acquired through marriage is the 'family of procreation.' Although in modern Western societies every individual generally has these two families of reference, lineage structures limited this ambivalent position of the *ego* solely to women. In this regard, see GOODY, Jack – *La evolución de la familia y el del matrimonio en Europa*. Barcelona: Herder, 1990.

Results

This research is structured around two principal axes. The first comprises a detailed analysis of the last wills and codicils of the nine noblewomen who form the core of this study. This analysis is preceded by a contextual framework that investigates both the familial origins and life trajectories of these women. This contextualisation has been constructed through an exhaustive examination of extant documentary sources, which has not only enabled the placement of these women within their respective lineages of orientation—with the exception of Mencía Téllez de Toledo, whose origins remain undetermined—but has also provided critical insight into the decisions later articulated in their testamentary documents. Through the incorporation of these biographical profiles, the research offers a more nuanced understanding of the instructions and mandates expressed in the wills, as well as the silences and omissions that speak to issues of varying degrees of personal and social importance. Contrary to traditional assumptions that frame the will as a predominantly formal and formulaic instrument, the analysis has revealed a marked variability in both the form and content of the testaments studied. This diversity can be largely attributed to the specific personal circumstances of each individual within the sample. Factors such as age at death, marital status, number of marriages, presence or absence of offspring, nature of relationships with natal and marital families, and potential familial conflicts have all been systematically taken into account. By focusing on the wills as specific 'snapshots'—moments of decision-making crystallised in legal form—the serial analysis undertaken here yields a dynamic portrait. It captures not only the diversity among these women over a span of 150 years but also the multiple threads of continuity that wove their experiences into a collective historical narrative.

The second part of this thesis, entitled *Mujeres en relación: la genealogía femenina de la Casa de la Vega*, brings together the individual case studies within a unified analytical framework shaped by the research objectives outlined earlier. This section argues, first and foremost, for the demonstrable applicability of the concept of dual status in the study of noblewomen in late medieval Castile. The concurrent affiliation of these women to two distinct lineages—their natal families and the families into which they married—has proven instrumental not only in situating

them within diverse socio-familial contexts, but also in enabling a more nuanced interpretation of the decisions articulated in their last wills and testaments.

These decisions, whether considered individually or as part of a broader pattern, may be interpreted as expressions of loyalty or strategic alignment with either the lineage of origin or the lineage of procreation. The application of a dual-affiliation framework thus offers a more sophisticated analytical lens through which to examine the intersection of personal agency, familial allegiance, and social strategy in the testamentary practices of Castilian noblewomen.

In addition to adopting the aforementioned methodological perspective, this study has developed a ‘cartography of last wishes’ for each woman, mapping the funerary arrangements, pious bequests, and properties mentioned in their wills. This spatial approach has served to substantiate several preliminary hypotheses—most notably, that the strategies surrounding funerary planning, charitable donations, and the distribution of personal assets were conditioned by a range of factors, among which the status of dual lineage affiliation emerges as particularly significant.

Among the individual cases, the testamentary cartography of Leonor de Cornado (†1368), the earliest figure in the genealogical group under analysis, proves especially illuminating. As illustrated in the map of her last will (see Figure 2), two principal zones of influence and activity can be discerned, reflecting the enduring ties she maintained throughout her life. These zones correspond directly to her two familial affiliations: on the one hand, her natal family, the Cornado lineage, rooted in the southern regions of the Iberian Peninsula, particularly in cities such as Écija and Seville—areas in which she owned various properties (marked in yellow) and directed numerous pious bequests (blue); on the other hand, her marital family, the de la Vega lineage, associated with the north of the Peninsula. It is in this latter region that Doña Leonor chose to be buried, instituted funerary rituals (purple), and acquired further estates, thus demonstrating a dual spatial and symbolic orientation in her final testament¹⁵.

¹⁵ These maps have been elaborated through *Google MyMaps*. To access the interactive map, click into the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/bj98h4zx>



Figure 2 – Cartography of the will of Leonor de Cornado.

In further exploring the notion of dual belonging among Castilian noblewomen, it is noteworthy that the majority of the women analysed in this study were born into the de la Vega lineage. Particularly compelling, however, are the cases in which the individuals entered this focal lineage through marriage, a perspective that sheds light on the complexities and potential tensions inherent in such a position. Of particular relevance is the case of Mencía Téllez de Toledo, who became affiliated with the de la Vega family through her marriage to Gonzalo Ruiz de la Vega.

The familial and legal disputes surrounding Mencía's first marriage—prior to her union with Gonzalo Ruiz—proved highly consequential. As a lady-in-waiting to Queen María of Aragon (r. 1420–1445), Mencía's social standing was already notable; however, uncertainty regarding the annulment of her initial marriage profoundly shaped not only her own trajectory but also that of her descendants, namely her daughter Leonor and her granddaughter Mencía. Archival documentation consulted for this study confirms that the Mendoza lineage, throughout much of the second half of the fifteenth century, actively sought to dispossess Mencía's heirs by casting doubt on their legitimacy. This conflict

underscores the legal and social vulnerabilities faced by women who entered a lineage through exogamous ties, as well as the broader implications such disputes held for succession, property rights, and lineage identity.

For several decades, both women were compelled to engage in a sustained struggle to retain possession of their patrimony and to devise strategies aimed at safeguarding the family inheritance—an estate rooted in the holdings of Mencía de Cisneros and significantly augmented by the extensive wealth accumulated by Leonor de la Vega. A particularly illustrative example of such strategic foresight is found in the last will of Mencía de Toledo daughter, Leonor, who explicitly stipulated that, should her daughter—likewise named Mencía—be prevented from inheriting due to insinuations regarding her legitimacy, the entirety of her estate was to pass to her husband, Diego de Sandoval. This clause was clearly designed to ensure that, in time, the property would ultimately revert to her daughter, thereby preserving the integrity of the family's patrimonial legacy¹⁶. Therefore, what emerges from this testamentary provision is a deliberate pre-emptive strategy based on the anticipation of conflict—one which, as the historical record confirms, did in fact materialise.

Another key dimension of the analysis—both at the individual and collective levels—has been the construction of memory through testamentary bequests. In her 1515 will, Doña Mencía de la Vega articulated a clear sense of collective identity and familial belonging through specific provisions, such as the following:

“Item mando que en la dicha capilla (in the Santiago Church of Tordehumos) y en el servicio della ayan de estar y estén dose capellanes, que continuamente digan misas y sacrefiçios por las ánimas mía y del dicho don Pedro de Mendoça mi señor, e de los señores Gonçalo Ruis de la Vega e donna Mencía Télles su muger mis abuelos, y del señor Almirante don Diego Hurtado mi visabuelo e de su muger mi visabuela doña Leonor de la Vega, y de doña Teresa e de doña Mencía de Cisneros, e por el ánima de doña Leonor de la Vega mi señora madre, e del señor don Diego de Sandoval mi padre, e por todos los otros mis finados

¹⁶ Toledo, Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, Osuna, C. 1765, D. 5.

de quien yo tengo e puedo tener cargo e de quien los bienes que yo poseo e tengo dependieron”¹⁷.

As this testamentary provision reveals, the testatrix ordered a series of masses to be celebrated in honour of all those whom she regarded as constituting her lineage—individuals upon whom her own status and identity as a noblewoman were fundamentally predicated. Notably, however, the lineage invoked in this act of commemorative piety did not trace its origins to the de la Vega family on her mother’s side, nor to the Sandoval family on her father’s. Rather, it centred on the Cisneros lineage, and more specifically on Mencía de Cisneros—the second of the women examined in this study—and her sister, Teresa de Cisneros. This choice reveals a deliberate and meaningful act of genealogical and affective alignment, underscoring the significance of select ancestral figures in the construction of noble identity and collective memory.

Throughout the analysis, numerous instances of symbolic, spiritual, and patrimonial connection emerge among the nine women examined in this doctoral thesis. Among these, the construction and ongoing preservation of the Chapel of San Francisco in Carrión de los Condes stands out as a particularly significant focal point. Established during the time of Mencía de Cisneros and her sister Teresa—the familial origin explicitly invoked by Mencía de la Vega in her 1515 testament— in the last half of 14th century, the chapel served as the burial site for many of the women in this study. Even in cases where burial did not occur there, the wills consistently contain mandates or legacies—monetary, material, or spiritual—dedicated to the chapel’s upkeep and continued relevance.

These repeated gestures, articulated across generations, support the argument for the existence of a form of group identity or shared consciousness of belonging, distinct from the traditional lineages of origin or marriage. This sense of affiliation, expressed through commemorative acts and testamentary devotion, allows us to trace connections among the protagonists that transcend lineage *sensu stricto*. What emerges, therefore, is the articulation of a collective identity rooted in what this study defines as an *identitarian lineage*—a structure of belonging most clearly

¹⁷ Toledo, Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, Osuna, C. 1765, D. 10.

embodied in the secondary branch of the Mendoza/de la Vega family initiated by Gonzalo Ruiz de la Vega and Mencía Téllez de Toledo (see Figure 1).

Another dimension that this study has been able to examine in greater depth—despite the inherent difficulty of identifying it in the sources—is the web of interpersonal relationships among the women analysed, as well as their interactions with individuals in their immediate social milieu. The testamentary documents reveal a wide emotional spectrum, encompassing expressions of affection and loyalty, but also instances of disdain, resentment, ambition, and, at times, conflict that escalated into various forms of violence. Particularly illustrative in this regard is the fraught relationship between Leonor de la Vega—the third protagonist in this study—and her eldest daughter, Aldonza Téllez de Castilla. In her *carta de poder* authorising her successors to execute her will, Doña Leonor articulated sentiments that shed light on this complex dynamic, as evidenced in the following passage:

“Otrosí mando e es mi voluntad e quiero que doña Aldonza, mi hija, mujer del Conde don García Fernández Manrique, que no aya ni herede cosa alguna de mis bienes. Ca yo la hago ajena e la desheredo de todos mis bienes, así muebles como rayses e semovientes, por quanto la dicha doña Aldonça, mi hija, me fue muy desagradada en mi vida, que me hizo muchas e graves e atroses ynjurias e desonras, asy de fecho como de dicho; e por quanto la dicha doña Aldonça e el dicho Conde su marido, aviéndolo ella por bien e por firme, e plasiéndose de ello e en nombre de ella, me quisieron deseredar en mi vida e me tomaron por fuerça e contra mi voluntad muchos de mis bienes e heredamientos, e me movieron e me fisieron mover sobrellos muchos pleitos maliçisos por me faser pesar e enojo segund lo hisieron, e por me dar segund fisieron gastar mucho de mi fasienda por otras muchas razones que se pueden probar e al pronto no puedo declarar por mi dolencia”¹⁸.

This attempted disinheritance—ultimately unsuccessful, as Doña Aldonza succeeded in securing a portion of her mother’s estate by contesting the will—and the severe language employed against her daughter were not the only contentious issues arising from the inheritance of Leonor de la Vega. The documentation also reveals instances of economic violence, a form of coercion frequently employed against noblewomen by members of their own families, particularly in the case of

¹⁸ Toledo, Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, Osuna, C. 1762, D. 2.

widows¹⁹. Such practices, which ranged from the withholding of rightful property to the obstruction of testamentary autonomy, illustrate the structural vulnerabilities faced by women even within elite lineages and underscore the contested nature of female agency in the realm of patrimonial transmission²⁰. A particularly illustrative case is that of Elvira Lassa de Mendoza, half-sister of the aforementioned Aldonza, who was deliberately excluded by her brothers from participating in the execution of their mother's will. In response, she was compelled to initiate legal proceedings in order to assert and defend her rights to a share of the maternal estate²¹.

This thesis has also placed particular emphasis, insofar as the available documentation permits, on the configuration and administration of the patrimony held by the women under study. Special attention has been given to their management of both personal assets and those shared with their spouses under the regime of *gananciales* (community property). The testamentary texts frequently reference *libros de cuentas* and *libros de hacienda* (account books), suggesting a sustained concern with financial documentation and estate management. Moreover, the research has identified a number of sites—primarily religious institutions situated in proximity to both natal and marital lineages—that functioned as centres of administration.

These spaces operated not only as repositories for physical assets but also as custodians of documentation such as inventories, financial accounts, and transactional records. This body of evidence has enabled a more comprehensive reconstruction of these women's roles as effective stewards of their estates. A particularly illustrative example is provided by Elvira Lassa de Mendoza, who included in her will a detailed inventory of the assets she possessed and had already transferred to her children. This inventory encompassed both movable and immovable property, monetary assets, and even jurisdictional rights, offering a rare

¹⁹ On this regard, we want to point out the recent paper GUERRERO NAVARRETE, Yolanda – “*Porque es duenna biuda e bive onestamente: El ‘privilegio de las viudas’ y su aplicación en la Castilla de finales del siglo XV*”. In LÓPEZ GREGORIS, Rosario; MÓ ROMERO, Esperanza; GUTIÉRREZ VEGA, Clara; PAGÈS POYATOS, Andrea (coord.) – *Imaginario y espacios de las violencias políticas contra las mujeres*. Madrid: UAM Ediciones, 2023, pp. 115-140.

²⁰ GUERRERO NAVARRETE, Yolanda – “*Porque es duenna biuda e bive onestamente*, pp. 115-140.

²¹ This is demonstrated by the agreement reached within Elvira Lassa de Mendoza and her brothers, in which a new distribution of the inheritance of their mother Leonor de la Vega was agreed upon. Toledo, Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, Osuna, C. 1840, D. 2 (6).

and valuable insight into the scope and structure of a noblewoman's estate in late medieval Castile²².

It is also essential to consider the social networks that this thesis has been able to reconstruct through in-depth analysis of the last wills of the women studied, complemented by related documentation. One of the most significant contributions of this research lies in the development of a model for understanding the noblewoman's household. While inspired by the established structure of the queen's household—as proposed in earlier scholarship²³—this space of authority diverges from the royal model due to the specific needs and circumstances of noblewomen, who operated within less institutionalised and more flexible frameworks.

Based on the documentary evidence, the noblewoman's household may be conceptualised as composed of three concentric nuclei, each centred on the figure of the lady. The first and most intimate circle consisted predominantly of women, who attended to the noblewoman's daily life and domestic affairs. The second circle comprised individuals responsible for the patrimonial and administrative management of her estates—roles typically held by men—including stewards, notaries, and financial agents. The third and most peripheral circle encompassed all those who, at various points, maintained occasional or situational ties with the noblewoman, whether through legal, economic, religious, or personal interactions.

This tripartite structure has enabled the identification and mapping of the extensive and dynamic social networks these women cultivated over the course of their lives, networks that reveal both the scale and complexity of their social agency within the noble milieu of late medieval Castile.

Across six generations, this study has identified a series of enduring commonalities among the women analysed—patterns that emerge in their management of landholdings, expressions of spirituality, navigation of familial conflict, and, most significantly, in their use of testamentary documents as instruments of memory-

²² The will that contains the inventory is located in Toledo, Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, Osuna, C. 1767, D. 4. An edition of the document, RUBIO MASA, Juan Carlos – “Testamentos de la Casa de Feria (2). Últimas voluntades de doña Elvira Laso de Mendoza, primera señora de Feria (1459)”. *Cuadernos de Çafra. Estudios sobre la Historia de Zafra y el Estado de Feria* 8 (2010), pp. 199-235.

²³ PAGÈS POYATOS, Andrea – “El Queenship como modelo teórico de poder formal e informal aplicado a la nobleza: apuntes para una propuesta metodológica”. *Journal of Feminist, Gender and Women Studies* 5 (2017), pp. 47-56.

making. A particularly evocative example is the chapel of San Francisco in Carrión de los Condes, chosen as the final resting place by five of the women studied. This collective decision reflects not only spiritual devotion but also a consciously articulated female identity that transcended individual natal or marital lineages. Mencía de la Vega, the last of the nine protagonists, explicitly invoked and honoured this legacy in her will, weaving together influences from the Cisneros, Mendoza, Toledo, and Sandoval families. In this gesture, she gave full expression to what this thesis has defined as an *identitarian lineage*.

This broader, more personal conception of lineage has proven essential for understanding the motivations and actions of these women. The testamentary sources, in particular, have revealed not merely patterns of reward and loyalty, but also a striking commitment to protecting other women from the vulnerabilities imposed by patriarchal structures. Many of the wills include allocations for dowries or even ransoms for female captives—acts of tangible solidarity. Mencía de la Vega's directive that, in the absence of captives, her funds be used to support orphaned girls stands as a testament to this enduring concern for female welfare and continuity.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that the field of Women's History continues to evolve, expanding the analytical frameworks through which we understand female agency and power. By placing noblewomen of late medieval Castile at the centre of historical inquiry, the research has offered new interpretative models—particularly the conceptualisation of the *noblewoman's household* and the *identitarian lineage*—that promise to enrich future studies of gender, lineage, and authority. Above all, this work has sought to honour the legacy of these nine women, recovering and preserving their lives as integral components of our shared historical record.

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