

backgrounds and one would wish every book in economics to be as accessible as Deaton's *Great Escape*.

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Dana Wessell Lightfoot, *Women, Dowries and Agency: Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Valencia* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013) 220 p. ISBN 978-07-1908-946-6.

One of the more interesting trends in recent medieval women's history has been the publication of a number of local studies that have cumulatively upset received notions of women's legal and economic status. Earlier studies, such as the work of Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, emphasized women's disadvantages in the Roman law legal systems and dowry regimes of southern Europe. Most of these studies focused on legal codes and sources from Italy, particularly Florence. Since many saw the imposition of Roman law as the crucial feature that limited women's agency, they concluded that in southern Europe women faced special disadvantages, legal invisibility, and family victimization. However, in the last decade, historians have analyzed women's legal and economic status in many locations outside of Italy, and they have relied less on legal prescriptions and more upon sources of actual practice. The cumulative weight of their studies have begun to overturn the view that the imposition of Roman law resulted in women having the same limited status in every city and state of southern Europe as they did in Florence.

Dana Wessell Lightfoot's monograph, *Women, Dowries and Agency: Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*, is a welcome addition to this important series of local studies. Examining the city and province of Valencia in the Crown of Aragon from 1419-1439, her study focuses on the interaction between the Valencian legal code, the *Furs*, and legal cases involving labouring-status women contracting marriages, acquiring dowries, and seeking restitution of those dowries from improvident husbands. Coming from two archives in Valencia, her sources are notarial and court records including dotal contracts, testaments, and dowry restitution litigation. Lightfoot argues that non-elite women exercised agency in the "projects of marriage," such as providing all or part of their dowries and contracting marriages without supervision of a male family member, and after the marriage, in protection of their dowry and *creix*, a gift by the husband for his wife's virginity similar to the *morgengabe*. Despite the restrictions on married women in the *Furs*, Lightfoot contends that labouring-status wives "were still able to negotiate a measure of control," as they took advantage of legal protections. (p. 1)

One of the outstanding characteristics of Lightfoot's study is its focus on women from artisan and *llaurador*, or farming, families. The sources Lightfoot uses allow her to distinguish this population from women of elite families who were much more subject to family pressures stemming from concerns about property, lineage, and status. Since similar distinction does not exist in most sources from this period, Lightfoot makes a huge contribution to the wider field by statistically demonstrating that working-status women often immigrated to the city, married later, many after their fathers were deceased, and worked as servants to earn part or all of their dowries, and by connecting these factors to women's legal activities. Women from artisan families in many cities of Europe, both south and north, were immigrants to the city, married later, and worked as servants to accumulate their dowries. Lightfoot's quantitative analyses of central actors in marriage contracts and the origins of dotal assets thus provide convincing support for the often impressionistic conclusion that artisan women experienced more freedom in marital choice and more economic partnership in their marriages than did elite women. In a similar manner, she differentiates the experiences of urban (artisan) and rural (*llaurador*) women, which provides interesting comparisons of women's experience in urban and rural legal, economic, and social environments.

Those more familiar with gender and inheritance customs from northern Europe will be interested in Lightfoot's discussion of the contrast between the Roman law dotal regime of the *Furs* and the *germanía* regime, based on "customary tradition." (p. 97) Following a similar evolution to the *frèreche* contracts of France, *germanía* contracts created a community of property for the married couple. In 20 percent of Lightfoot's cases, *germanía* contracts were used by agricultural workers to pool small plots of land and other resources to create a viable property for the household. Lightfoot argues that they were not more egalitarian, as others have claimed, because they offered none of the protections of the dotal regime. At this point, the reader wishes for a wider discussion of similar patterns elsewhere in Europe.

Although some might find Lightfoot's focus on "agency" problematic, she is careful to define the concept precisely and to place the activities of her subjects within the limitations of existing patriarchal structures and socioeconomic factors such as poverty. The contribution this book makes to our understanding of labouring-status women's marital strategies and legal activities is invaluable, while, along with other local studies, Lightfoot's analysis of Valencian women shows that southern European women were not merely victims of Roman law, but used local legal systems to protect their assets and advance their strategies.

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