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Review:

The Fruit of her Hands: Jewish and Christian Women's Work in Medieval Catalan Cities, Iberian Encounter and Exchange

Nina Caputo^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: ncaputo@ufl.edu

¹University of Florida, USA

The Fruit of her Hands: Jewish and Christian Women's Work in Medieval Catalan Cities, Iberian Encounter and Exchange 475–1755, vol. 7, Sarah Ifft Decker (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022), ISBN 978-0-271-09330-7, pp. 250, \$104.95.

Discerning women's voices and actions in medieval historical sources can be vexingly difficult. While women often appear tangentially in medieval sources, sometimes as subjects of rules or restrictions, sometimes as metaphors for values or vices, it can be difficult to recognize women's actions, much less the emotions, social pressures, or ambitions that motivated them. The challenge of recovering how women conducted themselves as daughters, mothers, wives, property owners, or business people increases exponentially when studying medieval women across religious communities and social classes. In *The Fruit of her Hands: Jewish and Christian Women's Work in Medieval Catalan Cities*, Sarah Ifft Decker has admirably and deftly met the myriad challenges facing medieval women's historians. Building on the work of Rebecca Winer, Elisheva Baumgarten, Avraham Grossman, and Elka Klein, who laid a solid foundation for research into the roles played by Jewish women in the economic and legal framework of medieval Jewish society, Ifft Decker maps a terrain of women's activity in economic and public life in Catalonia from the late thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth century. Relying primarily on Latin notarial records from Barcelona, Girona, and Vic, and to a lesser degree theological or prescriptive legal sources, she argues that Christian and Jewish women stood as independent agents in a variety of urban occupations. Comparing women across religious communities, she shows that Jewish and Christian women developed different strategies to manage their assets because their respective religious traditions and communities made distinctive demands on their time, money, and expertise.

The Fruit of her Hands opens with a brief introduction that situates the work methodologically and geographically. Ifft Decker presents this as an intersectional study that takes into consideration how a variety of incidental conditions – the city in which the women resided, the normative gender roles that developed there, their religious affiliation and social class – determined the extent to which women could act as independent economic agents. Since the notarial records preserve contracts, this book

focuses on women's access to and control over property and liquid wealth. Consequently, the book is largely skewed away from the behaviours of lower-class women, whose work would not have been legally contracted and would thus leave no notarial record.

The book unfolds in three parts. The first, "Family Law", lays out the broad social and legal norms regulating women's status in medieval society. Chapter One examines the circumstances under which Christian women could legally acquire wealth or property. It is already well known that in most circumstances, a woman only attained sole legal responsibility for her property and financial wellbeing with the death of her male guardian – usually a father or husband, but sometimes a brother, uncle, or brother in-law. However, Ifft Decker's survey of marriage contracts leads to the perhaps more important finding that some women were active and legal partners in managing family assets. Because dowries effectively produced community property, women were occasionally drawn into family business deals as signatories on arrangements that tapped into dowry assets. Chapter Two turns to the practice of Jewish family law in late medieval Catalonia. Here Ifft Decker investigates how women navigated the space between rabbinic law (Halakhah) and legal protections available to them via Christian notarial offices. Using talmudic sources, Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, and *responsa* by contemporary Catalan authorities like Solomon ben Avraham ibn Adret, this chapter demonstrates that Jewish Catalan women's access to Christian legal institutions pushed rabbinic authorities to adapt Jewish practices to fit more neatly with local custom. Building on earlier scholarship that drew similar conclusions, she uses several case studies to illustrate the intersection between Jewish and Christian legal cultures. The availability of notarial legal apparatuses was an especially important tool for Jewish women navigating the technicalities of divorce, inheritance, and widowhood, since Christian legal traditions offered women slightly more expansive inheritance rights than Halakhah did.

In the second part of the book, "Notarial Culture", Ifft Decker uses a case study involving a wealthy female Jewish moneylender and newly-wed Christian couple to frame a comparison between Jewish and Christian women's experiences conducting business in notarial offices. In Chapter Three, she presents an overview of how the notariate functioned, who served as notaries, and what kinds of contracts they recorded and preserved. Because the notarial office was by default a masculine space,

she argues, women would probably have experienced it as a threatening or at least uncomfortable environment. A survey of the contracts in which the main actors were women who were either accompanied or represented by men, leads her to suggest that using men as chaperons may have been a strategy to help shift the power dynamic in their favour. In Chapter Four, she shows that Jewish women, as members of the minority faith, encountered an additional level of marginalization in the context of notarial culture. The majority of Jewish women who regularly needed the service of a notary were, like the woman Ifft Decker brings for her case study, very wealthy and lent money at interest to Christians who did not control sufficient resources to cover their business or life expenses. Their interactions with the notaries, witnesses, and clients were thus likely to be fraught with anxiety because “Jews in the Crown of Aragon never normalized social and economic contact between Jewish women and Christian men” (p. 94).

In the three chapters that comprise Part Three, “Women’s Work”, Ifft Decker demonstrates that women played a vital, if subsidiary role, across the wide swathe of urban economic life in medieval Catalan urban settings. As is the case throughout the book, this section treats Jewish and Christian activities and experiences separately to emphasize that religious tradition and social class shaped how women from each community navigated the public sphere. Chapter Five provides a survey of the wide variety of occupations women participated in during this period. Drawing once again from notarial records, she shows that women were contracted as domestic labourers and servants, slaves, artisans and traders, investors in long distance trade, and creditors. This is the one chapter where the author is able to shed some light on the activities of lower-class women. Although this overview necessarily views low-waged labour through the narrow lens of formal contracts with wealthy households, it affords a textured view of the conditions in which women worked, as well as how they were perceived.

Chapters Six and Seven focus on women’s involvement as independent actors in the high-stakes occupations of real estate management and sales and moneylending. While women were less visible than men in both occupations, their presence as buyers, sellers, leasers, and lenders demonstrates that the medieval economic landscape was both more complicated and more diverse than the legal sources might indicate. Ifft Decker examines the relationship between the notarial evidence

of Jewish women's activity in these fields and rabbinic prescriptions regarding women's ability to inherit or own property. She concludes that the rabbinic legal sources that imposed restrictions on women's freedoms and independence as wives and daughters had been softened or adapted to accommodate participation in the Christian marketplace, which was governed by different rules. This need for flexibility comes into sharp relief in Chapter Seven in her discussion of how the contingencies of urban life during and just following the Black Death pushed relatively large numbers of women into the business of lending money.

Any effort to restore agency to historical actors whom the documentary evidence has silenced comes with an inherent hazard that the resulting interpretation might be overly infused with modern values or sensibilities. Overall, Ifft Decker has largely avoided this pitfall. While she points to economic opportunities, women's efforts to maintain financial independence and control, she is careful to use language that does not imply that they necessarily understood independence to be a desirable condition. *The Fruit of her Hands* is an extensively and meticulously researched book. The notarial sources provide Ifft Decker with a unique opportunity to demonstrate how women conducted themselves as financially and occupationally responsible agents in medieval Catalonia. This book shows that Jewish and Christian women developed strategies to navigate the market place as independent agents. At the same time, it illustrates clearly that women's distinctive religious and social circumstances shaped their actions and experiences. In addition, while Ifft Decker was clearly drawn to telling the individual stories embedded in notarial records at length, she successfully checks that impulse to maintain a balance between the individual stories or case studies and the broader conclusions she uses them to support.

Nina Caputo
University of Florida