

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Scott, Amanda L. The Basque Seroras: Local Religion, Gender,  
and Power in Northern Iberia, 1550–1800**

Jennifer Mara Desilva

Volume 44, Number 3, Summer 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085865ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38039>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Desilva, J. (2021). Review of [Scott, Amanda L. The Basque Seroras: Local Religion, Gender, and Power in Northern Iberia, 1550–1800]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 324–327.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38039>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

how important the masks were for portraying caricatures of actual citizens negotiating their place in the social network. Under the protection of the mask, characters could speak truth to power, as well as expose their own evil, if they were performing the oppressor roles, such as Pantalone. In the section on “other masks,” Crohn Schmitt looks at pastorals and tragicomedies to discover the host of gods, magicians, devils, demons, satyrs, nymphs, shepherds, wild men, and humans turned into animals that are represented in them. She posits that the extensive use of the mask was central to the long-lasting appeal of the commedia since masks were popular, recognizable, and compelling.

“The Coda” takes on the mythological question of the commedia dell’arte’s claim to have existed without pause since its beginnings. Crohn Schmitt admits that this is an impossibility, although she does profile four contemporary companies who all claim to have strong connections with the commedia. The first three—the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the El Teatro Campesino, and the Théâtre du Soleil—all began as collectives, use group improvisation, and have produced memorable shows dealing with various forms of social injustice. She offers details about her final example, The Improvised Shakespeare Company from Chicago, to show how much of the commedia’s spirit underpins their inspired improvisations. She leaves us wondering just how much of the commedia dell’arte is still with us. Her monograph would argue that it still invites intense interest in the means and methods of crafting performances that spoke to its audiences.

ROSALIND KERR

University of Alberta

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38038>

**Scott, Amanda L.**

*The Basque Seroras: Local Religion, Gender, and Power in Northern Iberia, 1550–1800.*

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. 246 + 10 ill., 2 maps. ISBN 978-1-5017-4749-6 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

This is a study about the role of women in Catholic communities and the cyclical nature of religious reform. From the late medieval period through the

late eighteenth century there were one or more *seroras* in each community or parish in the Basque Country and Navarre. The seroras were devout laywomen who cared for parish churches and shrines, and the position offered women financial stability and official recognition outside of marriage. The serora's responsibilities included organizing, cleaning, and caring for the fabric of the shrine or church and its liturgical tools. Seroras dressed the celebrant, prepared the dead for burial, collected alms, and taught catechism classes to girls. Uncloistered and exempt from taking vows, seroras were valued examples of female spiritual vocation in a period that encompassed two campaigns of religious reform: the reforms that followed the Catholic Church's Council of Trent (1545–63) and the Spanish Bourbon monarchy's *Cédula Real* (1769).

As Amanda Scott's excellent study shows, the seroras reveal how timeless concerns coexist with and extend beyond great institutional change. Anxiety over women's proximity to sacred spaces and objects, or the possibility that their religious authority might overshadow male clergy, continued across three centuries. Studying the seroras involves witnessing many of the same campaigns and complaints about clerical behaviour and professionalization found in other investigations of early modern religious reform. However, at the same time, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, reform changed its focus. The Tridentine willingness to accommodate various local practices, as long as male clergy adopted certain reforms, gave way to the Bourbon demand for a simpler and cheaper religious life led only by male clergy. In the late eighteenth century, studying the seroras tracks the local response to a state drive to reduce, centralize, and economize religious practice. The impetus for and results of these two reform campaigns were dramatically different and reveal the value of tracking offices and practices across centuries. While Scott's study chiefly focuses on the long early modern period, as only a few seroras continue to work in Basque communities today, this book describes how persistent needs promoted creative solutions that resisted suppression.

Across seven chapters, Scott establishes the place of seroras in early modern religious life and ecclesiastical office-holding and describes their experiences in compelling detail and with ample archival support. Chapter 1 introduces the seroras and compares them to better known female religious communities. Chapter 2 describes the seroras' responsibilities, the process of application, dowry, and investiture, and the office's prestige. Photographs of several *serorías* (the houses where seroras lived close to their churches) help

readers envision the serora's local situation and daily work. While it would be nice to know more about alms-giving to seroras and their financial situations, these are precisely the topics that elude or depend on predominantly lost documentation. Chapter 3 lays the groundwork for understanding the serora's value to the diocese in the period of Tridentine reform, by unravelling current historiographical discussions of clerical behaviour, diocesan control, and local jurisdictional disputes in a clear way using valuable archival examples. A discussion of clerical reform in the diocese of Pamplona draws on the substantial material preserved in the diocesan archive and particularly the diocesan synod of 1590. This allows Scott to draw comparisons with better-known discussions of reform in Spain and Italy. Where Italian bishops pressed for claustration of third-order religious women, Navarre's reformers and bishops considered the seroras to be administrative officers, alongside sacristans and parish priests. The Tridentine push to establish an examination and licensing procedure for all seroras signalled tacit acceptance of their work, while episcopal regulation of the office led to their legitimation and some long-term protection as auxiliary employees.

Chapter 4 further integrates the seroras into their communities by applying a notarial lense. In a discussion of seroras' testaments, Scott concluded that even the most committed seroras continued to identify first and foremost with their natal families. This observation parallels one aspect of the historiography or clerical professionalization, which sees persistent connections between early modern clergy and their natal kin that apparently subverted the development of a clerical vocation and identity. The exploration of seroras' wills and their appearance in siblings' marriage contracts reveals Scott's broad efforts to contextualize seroras against other members of their communities using a deep sample of over a thousand testaments from subnotarial districts across Basque Country and Navarre. In a deeply researched book, this is one of the most compelling and fascinating chapters, as it shows how seroras shared notarial habits of other laywomen, clergy, and geographic and class contemporaries.

Chapter 5 investigates how contemporaries vocalized concerns about independent women and their potential for disorderly behavior. The seroras' autonomy prompted gendered fears that could include witchcraft or suspicion of sexual transgression. Scott draws on Inquisition documents and Pierre de Lancre's treatise on witchcraft in Lapurdi (1612) to show how these rumours and accusations developed convincingly and proposed an inversion

of the serora's ideal role. Chapter 6 reaches beyond concerns and explores examples of jealousy, misbehaviour, violence, and community response to conflict. Acknowledgement of local prestige did not exclude seroras from neighbourhood tension, and periodically enhanced it. Finally, chapter 7 chronicles how the Bourbon reforms of the 1760s originated, and the struggle of implementation through the eighteenth century. Exploring local resistance provides an opportunity to contrast the Tridentine campaign with the Bourbon reforms that mostly extinguished the profession.

In this study of seroras, Scott combines discussions pertinent to church reform, alongside institutional, social, and women's history, in order to depict habits similar to but distinct from what many scholars know. This book is an excellent contribution to all those fields, but remains, like the seroras themselves, interesting and valuable as a rare English-language study of early modern Basque life.

JENNIFER MARA DESILVA

Ball State University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38039>

**Skelton, Kimberley, ed.**

***Early Modern Spaces in Motion: Design, Experience and Rhetoric.***

Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. Pp. 274 + 44 b/w ill. ISBN 978-9-4637-2581-1 (hardcover) €109.

Kimberley Skelton's edited volume features eight essays that survey varying approaches to motion in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Early modernists have recently placed the study of motion in diverse contexts at the forefront of their agenda. Rather than outline the contributions of the essays to this burgeoning field in the introduction, Skelton opts to explain that between 1500 and 1800, "individuals across Europe increasingly designed, experienced, and discussed a new world of motion—one characterized by continuous, rather than segmented, movement" (13). She suggests that early modern transformations in urban and domestic design, scientific inquiry, and global trade triggered a radical change in the conception and use of motion. For example, domestic interior schemes that had once included compartmentalized