In recent years, Spanish historiographical research has highlighted the way in which women occupied a space of their own in the early modern court and formed part of the power networks that were being developed in the palace. Recent work on the queens and other female members of the royal family, as well as studies of sociability and court institutions have demonstrated the importance of the figure of the queen and royal women within the Spanish monarchy, making visible and accentuating not only their political power, but also the authority and importance of their households. From the beginning of the early modern period, the households of Spanish queens, just like the female households in other European courts, were the sexually segregated spaces in the palace where the women resided, as well as the small and exclusive set of people—both men and women—who attended the royal person and with whom they established networks of patronage and clientelism. In this way, although...
the king was the principal source of power and the courtiers, as a matter of course, depended on his favours, they were not unaware of the influence and political power that his consort and women of the royal family exerted. To gain access to these royal women, they had no choice other than to use those who served them—in particular the women who accompanied and lived alongside them—as intermediaries. Consequently, to win the monarch’s support, it was common for courtiers to try to gain access to the apartments of the royal women and their ladies, where they were concerned with both private and public affairs, because, as Magdalena S. Sánchez has demonstrated, “women, especially royal women, were at the centre of the early modern European political world”. Members of the aristocracy, ministers, ambassadors, nuncios and other courtiers, frequenting the female environments of the royal palace and other places in this composite Spanish monarchy—such as the convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid—were provided with abundant information about the factions and opinions that were being formed at court.

However, at present we know more about the function and structure of the queens’ households than we do about the women who served in them. Using the etiquetas, the documentation generated to set up and govern the queens’ households, scholars have been able to establish and describe the offices, the number of servants and their remuneration. They have also found in the archives several economic registers and service records that give us information, not always complete, about their offices, the wages stipulated, and their dates of service. From these documents, we know that the households of the queens and of other female members of the royal family were made up of a large and varied number of women, whose number fluctuated depending on the royal personages to be attended to, in accordance with the strict protocol established for the palace. These women lived with their mistresses, and were organised hierarchically, according to office and social provenance: from mozas [maids] and lavanderas [laundresses] to the powerful camareras mayores [mistresses of the household, women of the high nobility, usually widows, who directly attended upon the queen and supervised the Chamber

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3 Magdalena S. Sánchez, The Empress, the Queen and the Nun: Women and Power at the Court of Philip III of Spain (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 10.

4 For example, for the queens’ households in the times of Philip II and Philip III see José Martínez Millán and Santiago Fernández Conti, eds., La Monarquía de Felipe II: la Casa del Rey, 2 vols. (Madrid: Fundación Mapfre Tavera, 2005); and José Martínez Millán and Maria Antonietta Visceglia, eds., La Monarquía de Felipe III: la Casa del Rey (Madrid: Fundación Mapfre-Tavera, 2008).