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Gender in Nahuatl Texts of the Early Colonial Period: Native “Tradition” and the Dialogue with Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial documents are a major source of information about gender in Pre-Hispanic America, but the fact that they were produced in a colonial context—one of political and economic oppression, Christian evangelization, and demographic collapse—complicates their use in reconstructing Pre-Hispanic ideas and practices. In the case of Central Mexico, this has not stopped many scholars from making uncritical use of such sources as Sahagún and Durán in their cultural reconstructions. Miguel León-Portilla has defended this practice by arguing that the Late Postclassic Nahuas were capable of passing down the exact words of their ancestors through combinations of hieroglyphic writing and memorization (1992b). Even if they were capable of doing it, this does not necessarily mean that they did so.

There is no simple solution to the problem of using colonial texts. The very inscription of native culture in these documents was a colonial process, an attempt to render the natives knowable and known. Indigenous concepts became articulated in this process, both as a counterdiscourse to Christianity and as a revaluation and reinterpretation of native tradition. Native people who took over alphabetic writing for their own purposes were living under altered circumstances; native authorship does not mean that a text is faithful to Pre-Hispanic models. One can attempt to strip away obvious Christian and European “influences,” but one is not then left with some pure Pre-Hispanic product—and these influences can be quite subtle.

In respect to gender, there is also the problem of male bias. It is not simply that male consultants described native ways of life in a manner that reflected their own gendered experience, thus leading to an underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women’s experience. The entire culture of alphabetic literacy, of education in European languages, and of text production was not

only an elite but also a male domain, from the friars who taught these skills down to the scribes who copied and recopied the documents. True, some indigenous consultants were female and some of their words were written down, but all within a context defined and controlled by men. The apparatus of inscription marginalized women in a manner parallel to and functionally interrelated with their exclusion from other domains of formal and public culture in the colony.

Simultaneously with the production of the codices and other ethnographic texts there occurred the inscription of Christianity into indigenous languages, a process that involved many of the same priests and native scholars. In order to evaluate representations of gender in the ethnographic corpus, it is important to consider how gender was treated in the Christian texts. These show how priests sought to alter Nahua ideas and practices related to gender; however, just as the ethnographic texts are not pure Pre-Hispanic discourses, so the Christian texts in Nahuatl are not pure European discourses. Indigenous interpreters sometimes adapted Christian texts into Nahuatl in such a way that native views of gender were expressed in them. For example, in a Nahua adaptation of a Spanish Holy Week drama, the native translator rewrites a dialogue between Christ and Mary so that Mary is accorded more deference and shows greater foreknowledge of events. The relationship between mother and son is thus adjusted to show greater gender complementarity and filial obedience (Burkhart 1996).

In the Christian texts as well, men dominated the process of inscription. However, women were active in the early Nahua church. It is possible that they may have had indirect influence on the production of Christian materials, for example by exerting preferences for certain types of text and by affecting customary usage through their oral performances of Christian or Christianized discourses.

Although Christianization is only one of the colonial changes that affected gender roles and ideology in native society, it is one that is relatively accessible on the discursive level and also provided the rationale for other significant changes. For example, *reducciones* were said to facilitate indoctrination, early marriage was to prevent sins of fornication, and restrictions on women's activities were to promote chastity.¹

In this essay I discuss how certain aspects of gender are represented in colonial Nahuatl ethnographic texts and in Nahuatl-language Christian literature,

¹ On the impact of colonialism on Nahua women's status, see Kellogg (1995) and Nash (1980).

with particular attention devoted to interconnections between the two discursive domains. What can these documents tell us about the ways in which gender was treated in the ongoing dialogue between the native people and their Catholic evangelizers? I focus on models of proper female and male behavior, with an emphasis on the female, as the issue of male bias makes this the more problematic area.

SEX AND THE HUEHUEHTLAHTOLLI

To a large extent, the Christian discourse on proper gendered behavior is a discourse centering on the control of sexuality. Christian teachings set up sexual difference as the primary distinction between men and women, while at the same time exhorting men and women to explore this difference as little as possible. Virginity is presented as the ideal state for both sexes; barring this, marital fidelity is the only acceptable choice (see Lavrin 1989 for a discussion of colonial Mexican views on sexuality). Confession manuals make it clear that even within marriage sexual contact should be limited to vaginal intercourse with the man on top (*Confessionario* n.d.: fols. 16v–17r; Molina 1565: fols. 12v–14r; Molina 1569: fols. 34r–35r). Sexuality is represented as immoral, polluting, dirty, the domain of the demons; sexual transgressors are destined for hell. Through preaching the evils of sex, questioning sexual behavior at confession, and controlling the marriage rite and the choice of marriage partners, the priests sought to shift the locus of control over sex from the family and the native judicial system to the Church.

Friars recorded Nahuatl orations known as *huehuehtlahtolli*, or “old speech.” They intended to use these speeches to gain insight into native ideas and values as well as to obtain linguistic and rhetorical tools that they could employ in their own preaching. These were contradictory goals, for the texts were expected simultaneously to document exotic and diabolical customs and to serve as protosermons. Native orators’ desire to present their traditions in a manner that might impress the friars or, alternatively, defy their teachings adds yet another layer of ambivalence.

There are two major collections of such speeches. One set was recorded for fray Andrés de Olmos in the 1530s, probably in Texcoco, emended and edited by fray Juan Bautista and, presumably, the indigenous scholars on whom he relied very heavily, and published by Bautista in 1600 (Bautista 1988). The second is the set collected by fray Bernardino de Sahagún for his *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (1950–82); most of these are contained in book six of the treatise, though some appear elsewhere in the work (see Sullivan 1974 for a listing). These orations are thought to have been first collected beginning

in 1547, but they may have been edited repeatedly prior to the work's final and extant redaction in the 1570s.

According to Alonso de Zorita (1994: 140), a Spanish judge who used Olmos's work in his own chronicle, Olmos asked the elders reciting the texts to "take out the names of their gods, substituting the name of the true God and of our Lord." To assume, however, that the texts are otherwise verbatim preconquest discourses would be naive. George Baudot (1995: 233–234) credits Olmos with a subtle reworking of the texts to accord with Christian preaching on sin. In contrast, in Sahagún's collection Baudot (1995: 232) finds a "deep idolatrous resonance" and believes that these are verbatim transcriptions not adapted by the friar. Regardless of either friar's editing policies, however, the native consultants and assistants may themselves have adapted the traditional oral texts to the colonial situation.

The *huehuehtlahtolli* orations are often treated as canonical native texts that gloss the traditional wisdom of the Aztecs. They are used as sources of information on many aspects of preconquest culture (García Quintana 1976; Sullivan 1974), whether to illustrate a balanced and harmonious philosophy of life (León-Portilla 1963, 1992a) or to provide evidence of the systematic subordination of women (Rodríguez-Shadow 1991). Some of them were directed at controlling the behavior of children, including sexual behavior. There is no reason to doubt that preconquest parents were concerned with controlling their children's sexuality; however, the Church's emphasis on abstinence determined not only the fact that these speeches were recorded but also, to some extent, their content.

For example, Sahagún's collection of *huehuehtlahtolli* contains a ruler's speech to his son exhorting him to chastity; this is the longest and most explicit text on the subject that speaks, or purports to speak, in a native voice (Sahagún 1950–82, 6: 113–119). Other *huehuehtlahtolli* directed at children, both in the Sahagún and the Olmos and Bautista collections, also warn against premature and excessive sexual activity, but this is the only oration devoted entirely to this topic.

The oration tells of divine reward for virginity and chastity. One has to wonder, however, whether the gods in preconquest times cared all that much about a person's sex life when selecting who would die in battle and consequently go to the heaven of the Sun and who would die of the water-related causes that sent the soul to Tlalocan, the home of the rain deities. Small children go to the garden of Tonacatecuhtli because they are precious and pure; in context, sexual innocence is implied. It seems that the afterworlds most closely resembling the Christian heaven were being recast as places of reward for sexual purity. In turn, the underworld was now characterized in negative terms, as a

frightening place of obsidian-bladed winds, as if it were a place of punishment.

The text also argues for delay of sexual relations until marriage, lest the youth dissipate himself through uncontrolled emission of semen in his tender years and thus become unable to satisfy his wife later on. The father describes an old man who, because he abstained in youth, was able to be sexually active in old age. He also tells of two elderly women driven to adultery, who complain that men get all used up and are good for nothing. This part does not sound very Christian, since it does seem actually to condone, not just tolerate, sexual relations between married adults as well as sexual activity beyond childbearing years. However, one statement suggests that the Christian idea of the conjugal debt has been worked into this text. This is the notion that, if one's spouse desires sexual relations, one must comply (within reasonable limits), lest the spouse be driven to commit some unchaste act such as masturbation or adultery (see Lavrin 1989: 73–74). In the oration, the father suggests to his son that his future wife might desire “earthliness” (*tlalticpacaiotl*), that is, sexual relations, “which you owe to your spouse” (*inic timaceoalti in monamj*); with him unable to comply, she will commit adultery against him (*mitzontlaximaz*) (Sahagún 1950–82, 6: 117).

The instructions addressed to marrying couples in fray Alonso de Molina's Spanish and Nahuatl *Confessionario mayor*, first published in 1565 and reprinted in 1569, explain the conjugal debt. Marriage partners must obey one another in respect to copulation, lest they fall into deadly sin and offend God. If a man is driven to extramarital liaisons, his wife will go to the underworld, as will the man himself—although the text does not actually impute any unchaste acts to the frustrated wife (Molina 1569: fol. 54r–v).

Further on in the Florentine Codex oration, the wife is described as *monacaio*, “your body” or, more literally, “your flesh.” It was in order to express Christianity's dualism of body and soul that this Nahuatl term became a commonly used word for the body as a whole, as opposed to simply its fleshy parts. In Molina's *Confessionario*, the following statement comes immediately after the explanation of the conjugal debt: “It is necessary that you know that the body of the man who is someone's spouse in a sacred way [that is, married by the Church], it is as if it is no longer his body, it is the possession of the one who is his woman in a sacred way. And the woman, her body is his possession, it pertains to the man” (1569: fols. 54v–55r; translation mine).

Similarly, Sahagún in the *Apéndice* of 1579 tells Nahuas of what St. Paul says on the subject: “the woman who was married in a sacred way, her body is not her possession, it is the possession of the man; he [St. Paul] speaks in the same way in regard to the man who is married in a sacred way, his body is not his

possession, it is the possession of his wife” (1993a: 100; translation mine). Such reciprocal ownership of one another’s body would appear to be a Christian introduction.

The Florentine Codex oration refers to the boy’s future wife as *monamic*, “your spouse” or “your match,” rather than *mochihuauh*, “your wife” or “your woman.” While admitting that the evidence is somewhat ambiguous, James Lockhart (1992: 80–81, 270) suggests that the use of *namictli* as a kin term for spouses is of colonial origin, a coinage related to the introduction of Church marriage. Thus, what is being described for this boy is his future marriage in the Church.

Sahagún’s collection also includes a noblewoman’s oration to her daughter, about a third of which is devoted to advice regarding chastity within marriage. The daughter is told to “keep” (*moxicipia*) the injunction against infidelity as “your very firm commandment” (*vel motepitznaoatil*) and never betray her husband (the word *monamic* is used). The mother states, “as the words are said, ‘do not commit adultery.’” The phrasing suggests an intertextual link to the Christian catechism, through which Nahuas were taught the ten commandments, the sixth of which prohibits adultery. If the daughter commits adultery and is discovered, she will be stoned—the Pre-Hispanic punishment, according to many sources, but also one found in the Bible. She will disgrace the memory of her ancestors. Even if her husband does not find out, God will see what she has done. The epithet Tloque Nahuaque, or “he of the near, he of the nigh,” appears in these texts as a vague reference to an omnipresent and omnipotent deity—in effect, the speakers are represented as having a god equivalent to the Christian one rather than any particular native deity. He will bring divine vengeance in the form of blindness, paralysis, or impoverishment, and will inspire the daughter’s husband to be angry with her. Moreover, he will send her to the underworld; again, the implication is that this is a place of punishment for misdeeds. But even if “our lord” is merciful—a trait of the Christian god—and does not make the adultery known, he will still cause the woman’s husband to be angry with her (Sahagún 1950–82, 6: 102–103).

Are these *huehuehtlahtolli* Christian sermons in disguise? Certainly not. They do not present Christian teachings in any direct or systematic way. In contrast to Christian moralizing, the ruler’s advice to his son does take a positive view of sexual pleasure, as does the ruler’s address to the daughter in the same collection (p. 93). There are many other statements in the *huehuehtlahtolli* that priests would be unlikely ever to use. In the address to the daughter, for example, it is only after the ancestors are invoked as arbiters of morality that there is any mention of divine sanction. We may read speeches such as these as

counterdiscourses to Christianity. They do, to some extent, articulate indigenous values that we may presume to be of pre-Hispanic origin. At the same time, however, they represent native culture as being more like Christianity than it may really have been, and therefore—from the perspective of colonial Nahuas and their friars—as being more legitimate. They also indicate the extent to which Christian discourses have worked their way into native expression.

Elsewhere, Sahagún rejects the arguments put forth in the exhortation to chastity about the sexually pure receiving divine reward—even though these probably were, at least in part, a response to Christianity. In the *Apéndice*, written in 1579 (1993a: 91–101), he discusses “how your old men loved pure living and chastity” but mixed it with many false words (*ibid.*: 96–97). Sahagún thus sought to break down the authority of the ancestors. The purity and penances of native children and any other non-Christians, he claimed, were of no value: their gods were demons and, since all the people were tainted by original sin, not even the babies were pure. Purity did not admit one to the Sun’s heaven, to Tlalocan, or to the home of Tonacatecuhtli. Instead, all went to the underworld, with the young children to be confined in Limbo. Only the purity of those who worshiped the sole God was valued and rewarded. Abel, son of Adam and Eve, was the first to keep his virginity; likewise the male saints John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, and Paul received divine favor because of their virginal status. Sahagún adds that many Christian men and women follow this lifestyle in the present time. Through this text the friar, well aware that the Nahuas had their own highly developed concepts of purity and pollution, was striving to establish a strong distinction between those and his own Christian views.

The words that the friars used for virgins, regardless of their age, were *telpochtli*, “youth” or “young man,” and *ichpochtli*, “girl” or “young woman”; sometimes intensifiers were added, but often not. Virginity was expressed by the abstract noun forms *telpochotl* and *ichpochotl*, gender-specific terms that, as used by the Church, defined sexual inexperience as the essential quality of young manhood and young womanhood. The usage in Christian religious contexts, especially the constant use of the term *ichpochtli* in reference to the Virgin Mary, changed the meanings of these words. However, as is also true of other Nahuatl terms adapted into Christian usage, it is difficult to guess how quickly, to what extent, or how pervasively Nahua understandings and associations were shifting.

These changes in usage and meaning probably affected numerous terms relating to sex. Did “pure living” formerly refer specifically to sexual absti-

nence or to a broader range of behaviors aimed at moral and/or ritual purity? Or is the very term a Christian coinage? Did “keeping of oneself” mean chastity, in the Christian sense of restriction of sexual relations to marriage? Did “earthliness” refer specifically to sexual acts, and if so, which ones? The fact that the meanings of the terms were being contested between two religious and moral systems further complicates our readings of the indigenous texts.

The Church’s ongoing diatribe against sexuality changed the terms in which Nahuas expressed the relationship between the sexes. But the denigration of sexuality applied to both genders. How did gender difference find expression in the dialogue with Christianity?

One difference that may be noted between the two orations discussed above is the contrast between the notions of preserving male potency and of guarding female chastity. This is consistent with a greater emphasis on female virginity and chastity in the Christian devotional texts in Nahuatl. Even though male saints who preserved their virginity are extolled, as is Christ for the same reason, this is less of a defining characteristic for men than it is for women.

SAINTLY WOMEN

Moralizing about the evils of sexuality was one way in which the friars sought to affect gender-related behavior. Another was to provide role models that were considered appropriate to each sex. In order to find models of specifically female behavior, I discuss here the female saints whose festivals are included in the two major Nahuatl hagiographic compilations of the sixteenth century: the *Psalmodia christiana*, authored by Sahagún and four native scholars (Sahagún 1583, 1993b), and the *Sermonario* by the Augustinian friar Juan de la Anunciación, presumably also prepared with indigenous assistants (Anunciación 1577). I have chosen to focus on female saints because they are so underrepresented in these books—between the two collections, nine female saints are included as opposed to forty-three male saints, which speaks of the relative importance assigned to men and women by the Church. The fact that there are so few women makes those included even more important.

These narratives are significant in the dialogue about gender because they are presented to Nahuas both as models for emulation and as models of the female sacred. These saints differ from the Pre-Columbian female deities not only in character but also in function, as Pre-Columbian deities were superhuman figures with divine powers of their own, and on the whole not models one presented to one’s daughter to teach her moral behavior.

The principal female saint is, of course, the Virgin Mary. Several of her festivals are included in these collections: the Conception, Nativity, Annuncia-

tion, Visitation, Purification, and Assumption. She is described as existing in a state of total purity. Not only is she a perpetual virgin, with her body intact even after childbirth, but she is conceived without original sin, commits absolutely no misdeeds during her entire life, and is taken bodily into heaven. She marries, but she and Joseph share a vow of virginity; his role is to accompany her and provide for her. In general, she appears in these texts as humble and obedient in character. However, as a young girl brought up in temple service—an experience that paralleled that of some preconquest Nahuatl girls—she refuses the priests' demand that she marry when she comes of age (*Doctrina* n.d.: fol. 104v). Just before the Passion, she seeks to dissuade Christ from going through with his foreordained suffering and execution (Burkhart 1996). She also intercedes with Christ on behalf of her devotees, sometimes insisting that he pardon even very sinful individuals (e.g., Burkhart 1999; *Doctrina* n.d.: fols. 65v–66v).²

In addition to Marian festivals, both collections observe the days of Ann, Catherine of Alexandria, and Mary Magdalene. Sahagún's collection also includes Clare of Assisi and Martha, while Anunciación covers Agnes, Lucy, and Monica. Five of these saints are, like Mary, virgins. These virgin saints are by no means uniformly passive and submissive; indeed, they display more self-determination than does Mary in the same and other texts. St. Martha, for example, after fulfilling her Gospel-attested role as host to the itinerant Christ, goes on to a career as apostle to Marseilles, where she converts the local population, heals the sick, raises the dead, tames a dragon, and then retreats into the forest with other maidens to live a penitential life, subsisting on tortillas and water (Sahagún 1993b: 208–213). St. Catherine, wealthy, highly educated, and heir to a kingdom, argues theology with the pagan emperor Maxentius, who calls in fifty great sages to refute her. She persuades the sages that Christianity is superior to their pagan philosophy. When as a result the emperor has her beheaded, milk flows from her neck, and Christ himself buries her on Mount Sinai (Sahagún 1993b: 334–339). In addition to describing her martyrdom, Anunciación's version includes the story of Catherine's mystic marriage to Christ. After she rejects all earthly suitors, Catherine has a vision in which the Christ child gives her a ring, which is on her finger when she awakens (Anunciación 1577: fols. 208v–210r).

St. Agnes, for her part, spurns the marriage proposal of a Roman official's son. Her suitor's father orders her to worship the idols; she refuses to do so and

² I am currently preparing an anthology of Nahuatl texts on the Virgin Mary, in which these traits are evident. See also Burkhart (1989, 1992a).

speaks against the worship of false deities. He then has her hauled off to a brothel, but an angel surrounds her with a light so bright that none can look at her. After Agnes's prayers save her suitor from a demon, he accepts Christianity, but she is burned to death by other idolaters (Anunciación 1577: fols. 132v–133v). In St. Lucy's case, an idolatrous judge orders her taken to a brothel for refusing to make offerings to the images of the demons, but it is impossible to move her body, even with chains. She is tortured with fire on the spot and then beheaded (Anunciación 1577: fol. 214r–v).³

Valor is a trait these Early Christian women share with some of the Aztec female deities—as is dismemberment—but their valor is exerted in defense of the faith and linked to sexual purity. The old goddesses were sexually ambivalent and were dismembered to symbolize the defeat and humiliation of the enemies of the Mexica state (Klein 1994), whereas these pure Christian virgins are extolled for their symbolic victory over paganism. Friars may have seen these women as appropriate models for Nahua girls and women in that, in addition to being virgins, they refused to participate in non-Christian worship or to marry idolaters.

St. Clare, also a virgin, was an early follower of St. Francis and founder of the women's branch of the Franciscan order. The text devoted to her in the *Psalmodia* (Sahagún 1993b: 236–241) sets her up as a model of chaste and penitential womanhood: she made a vow of virginity; she was cloistered and went about with bowed head; she lived on water, old tortillas, and crusts of bread; she cut off her hair and wore coarse garments, including “an itchy mantle called a hair shirt”; she swept, cleaned, and cooked all day and prayed at night.

Clare's life is contrasted with a model of womanhood designated for noblewomen. The noblewomen described, however, are indigenous Mexican noblewomen, not those of thirteenth-century Italy. They love meat tamales and other rich foods; they esteem fancy skirts and blouses decorated with coyote fur and other materials; they fix up their hair, paint their faces and teeth, and hang about the roads and in the marketplace, showing themselves to people and making people (that is, men) desire them.

This is not, however, a simple dichotomy between Christian and native discourses on female virtue. The *huehuehtlahtolli* addressed to noble girls similarly tell them not to dress themselves very fancily, not to use cosmetics, not to linger in the streets and markets, and not to go around looking at people. Instead, they are to be moderate and circumspect in all things and ignore men

³ Anunciación's account omits the action that got Lucy into trouble, namely, her spurning of her pagan betrothed and donation of her dowry to the poor (Voragine 1993, 1: 25–26); the episode of her gouging out her own eyes is also omitted here.

who try to flirt with them (Bautista 1988: 312–325; Sahagún 1950–82, 6: 93–103). Neither is this simply a dichotomy between Christian behavior and a traditional native model of bad behavior. The term “sinner women” (*tlatlacoani cúa*) used here (Sahagún 1993b: 240) would not have been applied to these noblewomen outside of a Christian or Christianizing context. Although the *huehuetlahtolli*, with their ideals of marriage and moderation, certainly do not condone a lifestyle like Clare’s, penitential practices are extolled for both sexes and girls are told to get up during the night and talk to “our Lord” (Sahagún 1950–82, 6: 95). Noble girls were, reportedly, sequestered away from men (see below, p. 102–103). And we may note that Clare sweeps, which is a penitential and housekeeping rite closely associated with native women (Burkhart 1989: 117–120; 1992b: 32–40; on this text see also Burkhart 1989: 138–139; 1992a). Thus, even when set up as foils for one another, native models muddle the Christian ones, and vice versa.

As Nahua girls were not permitted to become nuns and generally married at a young age, married saints may have been more realistic role models. The two married, noncelibate women in the hagiographic collections, Monica and Ann, derive their main claim to fame from their offspring. St. Monica is the mother of St. Augustine. A Christian woman married to a pagan man, Monica succeeds in converting her husband; her prayers, weeping, and penances eventually help to bring about her son’s change of faith as well (Anunciación 1577: 153r–v). Like the virgin martyrs, Monica can serve as a model of religious zeal in a context of recent or ongoing conversion.

In a similar vein, St. Ann is famous for being the mother of Mary and the grandmother of Christ. Her cult is based not on the canonical Gospels but on the apocryphal Gospel of the Birth of Mary and Protoevangelion, which tell of her long-childless marriage to Joachim and the angel-heralded conception of Mary. Ann is also notable for another reason: Sahagún (1981, 3: 352–353) attested to the case of a Nahua community, formerly devoted to the deity *Tocih* (“Our Grandmother”), which now had Ann as its patron saint. The friar suspected that the old goddess was still being worshiped under the cover of the saint.⁴

The *Psalmodia*’s songs dedicated to St. Ann are based in part on an Old Testament text from the book of Proverbs (31:10–23). The biblical verses describe a strong and industrious woman, trusted by her husband, who spins thread and makes fine clothing, brings her bread from far away like the merchant’s ships, rises before dawn to prepare food, plants a vineyard, labors at night by

⁴ The community is Santa Ana Chiauhtempan, near Tlaxcala.

candlelight, provides well for the members of her household, and is generous to the poor. Part of this text was used as a breviary reading for Ann's festival;⁵ this, presumably, is how the *Psalmodia*'s authors came to connect it with Ann. But the authors—perhaps the native writers more than Sahagún—translated the biblical text as a literal description of St. Ann and made a few adjustments in accordance with the local context. For example, Ann's house was full of goods as if it were a house of merchants (*oztomecacalli*). She sought wool and cotton, rather than wool and flax, for her spinning, and "she made many mantles, because she knew her womanly work very well." The people of her household kept many adornments. The final verse, "Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land" (Prov. 31:23), is translated as "And her spouse, St. Joachim, she dearly loved, she greatly honored. She would adorn him with many precious mantles, with designs on them" (Sahagún 1993b: 206–207; translations mine).

The *Psalmodia*'s Ann could be the matron of a Nahua household, a hardworking woman properly brought up according to *huehuehlahtolli* dictates, with Christian charity thrown in. The wool and the grapevine being Spanish imports, she could not quite be a preconquest woman. The weaving of mantles (*tilmahltli*) was a central economic activity of Nahua women, vital not only for clothing household members but also for paying tribute and trading for other goods. Ann as a weaver of mantles is ambivalent: she supports the Spanish colonial economy but also ensures her household's economic survival. Here, native and Christian models of womanhood are not contrasted but subtly conflated, to an unusual degree for a Church-sanctioned text.

In Anunciación's (1577: fol. 171r–v) text, in contrast, Ann serves as a model for rejecting an aspect of native behavior. Women who are unable to become pregnant should, like Ann, pray to God rather than consult the native midwives (*titicih*), specifically those who specialize in fertility problems, the *tepillaliliah*, or "they who place children for people" (on these practitioners, see López Austin 1967: 111).

Unlike the other female saints, St. Mary Magdalene was neither married nor a virgin. Anunciación (1577: fol. 167r) describes her as a wealthy and beautiful woman who, deceived by the demon, became enamored of "earthliness" and the "foul pleasures of the flesh"; the *Psalmodia* does not explicitly identify her misdeeds as sexual in nature. On meeting Christ, Mary Magdalene abandoned her sinful life, repented, and became his follower. After Christ's ascension she went to France (with her sister Martha) and did the usual apostolic

⁵ I have found verses 31: 10–12 used in this context in a 16th-century breviary (*Breuiarium romanum* 1553).

work of converting people and working miracles. But afterward she moved to a mountaintop and spent thirty years living in a cave in the forest and doing penance for her sins, alone except for the angels who would come every day to feed her and carry her in their arms (Anunciación 1577: fols. 166r–167v; Sahagún 1993b: 198–201). Thus, Mary Magdalene serves as a model of repentance and penance for sin, but her life has little in common with the life experience of Nahua women or with the native deities associated with female sexuality.

TEACHING SUBMISSION?

Over the course of the early colonial period, women's status declined, in part because of the colonial policies that favored early marriage and emphasized the nuclear family over consanguineal kinship networks (Kellogg 1995). One might expect that the Christian texts in Nahuatl would have encouraged female subordination within marriage, in accordance with Spanish ideals, but this was not a predominant or pervasive theme compared to the theme of general disapprobation of sexual excesses. As we have seen, the female saints are submissive to divine authority and are valued more for chastity than for any other single quality, but they are not controlled by fathers and husbands.

One complicating factor, I suggest, is that the priests (like other Europeans) saw all native people as weak, passive, and submissive by nature. Sahagún (1993a: 112), addressing a native audience, compares the Spaniards to the lion (*castilla miztli*) and the indigenous people to the rabbit, which cannot succeed in emulating the lion. These animal metaphors have clear masculine and feminine associations for Europeans. The native people as a whole were also considered more carnal and less spiritual than the Old World Christians (Burkhart 1998), and thus more susceptible to temptation, especially toward sexual sins and acts of idolatry or Devil worship. Laura Lewis (1996) documents various contexts in which native Mexicans were directly or indirectly feminized and treated as legally and morally comparable to women; such discourses stripped them of legitimate power and authority while at the same time ascribing to them illicit power gained through witchcraft and ties to the Devil—powers more often associated with women than men in Europe (see also Behar 1989).

The friars' concern with eradicating polygyny may have led them to see native men as equally—or more—susceptible to sins of the flesh as native women, in contrast to the typical views on gender difference among Europeans. For example, they preach to men against concubinage (*momecatiliztli*, “tying oneself”). Women's traditional clothing was notably more modest, by European standards, than that of men. In this sense, both sexes were constructed as being morally weaker than Europeans, with women not necessarily seen as weaker than men.

Thus, some critical ways in which gender hierarchy was constructed in European discourses collapsed in New Spain under the weight of more salient hierarchies of power—Spaniard over Indian and Christian over pagan. Feminization of colonized people is, of course, typical of colonial discourses, as Edward Said and others have noted (e.g., Said 1979; Thomas 1994). If all natives are by their very nature meek and humble, it is unnecessary to teach such traits to the women and pointless to try to eradicate them in the men.

Molina's instructions to the marrying couple, cited earlier, teach mutual obedience only in respect to the conjugal debt; the woman is not told to obey her husband in other matters. Preaching against sexual excesses, Sahagún (1563: fol. 18v) states that spouses must not obey one another in such matters if the acts entail disobedience to God; the example he gives is mutual touching, presumably of the genitals.

While wifely submission is not a common topic, there are some examples of texts that condone it. Some tell of Eve's punishment in Genesis (3:16), when God tells her, "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." In a sermon of Sahagún's (1563: fol. 29v), God tells Eve that she will bear many children with suffering and "your husband will rule over you; you will obey him." This judgment applies to all women: "To you it happens as our Lord said." Adam is also punished, but with the tilling of the now-cursed earth, not with obedience to his wife—for it was obedience to her that got him into trouble.

Female obedience within marriage is given further sanction in another of Sahagún's sermons, which emphasizes the permanence of the marriage bond. For women who are married in the Church, the command is to obey their husbands, and to love and honor them. Sahagún provides the following model speech for women to deliver to their daughters, a substitution for the traditional *huehuehtlahtolli*:

My precious daughter, you little woman, you are going to marry in a sacred way. And marriage in a sacred way, it is very great, it is a sacrament. It is not like the marriage of long ago, when a woman who was jealous would leave her spouse; thus she would console herself. But today when you marry in a sacred way, if indeed you should become jealous, if indeed your husband beats you, if indeed he afflicts you, in no way will you be able to leave him. It is necessary that you will always live with him, you will obey him, you will honor him. He is your lord, he is your spouse in a sacred way. It is ordained by our mother the Holy Church. It is also ordained by God. It is a sacrament. No one at all will be able to break it. May you thus be taught. It will

become your command when you marry that never will you leave him, you will always obey him. And if sometime you become jealous, you do not obey him, or perhaps you leave him, you will be caught, you will be locked up, and in the church you will be shamed, you will be whipped. Our mother Holy Church is the example for women who have married in a sacred way, as she obeys her husband, our Lord Jesus Christ. She loves him very much, she honors him very much, and she looks after her children very well, she takes good care of them. (1563: fol. 65r; translation mine)

With Christ and the Church presented as the model couple, there was little room for women to assert independence. The essence of marriage here is the inviolable bond created by the Church.⁶

The *huehuehtlahtolli* teach diligence and chastity. Young men and women are exhorted to submit to the authority of their parents and ancestors. But do the orations teach women to be submissive to their husbands? The orations to the marrying couple in Sahagún's collection emphasize hard work and responsibility for both partners; marriage is depicted primarily as an economic partnership and a union between families. The bride is told to be diligent in selling the mantles that her husband gives her, so that she will be able to obtain food and firewood; the groom is exhorted to go on trading expeditions. Their comportment toward one another is not mentioned (Sahagún 1950–82, 6: 130–133). Here, the essence of marriage appears to be the formation of a household based on complementary productive activities.

In the Olmos–Bautista collection, however, the mother tells the daughter that, when she is married, she will attend to how her husband advises and commands her, and she will obey him, receiving his words with gladness. She is not to become angry or turn away from him (Bautista 1988: 320–321). Sons do not receive comparable advice. Rather, the father cautions the son against marrying before he has the wherewithal to support a wife and children (1988: 296–297). A married son is told by his father to make his wife do housework: spinning, weaving, preparing drinks, and grinding maize (1988: 356–357). Perhaps preconquest parents would have also made such statements, but it is possible that a Christian model of marriage, with an obedient and economically dependent wife under the direct authority of her husband, has worked its way into

⁶ The bond was not so inviolable as the friars would have liked. According to Zorita (1994: 125), judges in preconquest times had discouraged divorce and sought to reconcile the partners. Zorita states that he was informed by friars that divorce became more common under Spanish rule than it had been previously.

these speeches. Women's responsibility for household tasks is not at issue; rather, it is a question of whether these are represented as a female domain of economically productive activities over which women exercise control, or as work that women do to serve their husbands.

Christian reworking is also apparent in the Bancroft dialogues. These are a collection of model Nahuatl speeches recorded probably in a late-sixteenth-century Franciscan context, apparently in Texcoco, and known from a seventeenth-century Jesuit transcription (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987). The collection contains a speech addressed by a male speaker to a couple newly married in the Church. The bride and groom are told to live prudently, serve God, and avoid moral error. Addressing the groom, the speaker says, "You are the head and trunk of the maiden here whom our Lord has vouchsafed to you" (ibid. 1987: 109). The groom is then told to work hard to provide for his household. The bride is not told to obey her husband, but she is admonished to be diligent in household tasks—the canonical ones of sweeping, cooking, spinning, and weaving—"so that you will please your husband whom our Lord has vouchsafed to you, for as a woman you are to take care of things, watch over things, and not let things go to ruin in your house and home; and keep yourself so that you do not live in vice and badly, for this is why you will be loved and honored" (ibid. 1987: 108–111). There is a clear sense of gender hierarchy here, and of the mutuality of the conjugal relationship as contracted through the Church. Whether the author, a Christian Nahua, was writing to please the priests or transcribing what he really would have said to newlyweds, the dialogue with Christianity was affecting what was being recorded as native discourse about marriage.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Bancroft dialogues there is a speech attributed to an elderly woman. She reminisces that children were much better brought up in the old days and misdeeds such as adultery were more severely punished. After describing the education of noble boys in a wide range of activities—warfare, hunting, crafts, singing, oratory, musical instruments, astronomy, reading, and agriculture—she narrates how noble girls were raised:

Likewise within the houses, where the ladies were in their quarters, the girls [*ichpopochtin*] were taught all the different things women do: sweeping, sprinkling, preparing food, making beverages, grinding (maize), preparing tortillas, making tamales, all the different things customarily done among women; also (the art of) the spindle and the weaver's reed and various kinds of embroidery; also dyeing, how rab-

bit down or rabbit fur was dyed different colors. And in the same way (as with the boys) those who did something wrong or did not take care were severely punished. And they were all well cared for: no men, no matter who, entered there; taking care of them was the exclusive domain of the elderly noblewomen. (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987:152–155)

As for commoners, the girls were raised “at the women’s temple, where the female penitents were enclosed and fasted” (ibid.: 154–155).⁷

Is this an accurate description, a nostalgia-tinged exaggeration, or a projection of new, Christian values into the past? Or is it a counterdiscourse to colonialism, a way of saying “we were better Christians when we were pagans than we are under Spanish rule”? Knowing that female saints were represented as cloistered, hardworking, and penitent, that domestic productive tasks were virtually the only activities of preconquest women explicitly sanctioned in Christian teaching, and that virginity was treated as the most important attribute of young women, we may reasonably suspect that this account has been framed in terms of the dialogue with Christianity, regardless of how ethnographically specific or accurate it may (or may not) be.

The same speech describes how the old sacred books discussed “he of the near, he of the nigh, the creator of people” (ibid.: 152–153), while also dealing with the false gods about whom people used to be confused before the coming of the faith. Turning the ancestors into proto-Christians was not an uncommon strategy for colonial Nahuas who wished to assert continuities between past and present and depict their forebears in a favorable light.

These examples of interconnections between ethnographic and Christian texts have indicated some of the ways in which gender representations are complicated by the dialogue with Christianity. In respect to female gender, the documents reflect a new emphasis on chastity and virginity, a stress on domestic work and limitations placed on female activity outside the household, a revaluation of the marriage bond, and the demonizing of women who do not fit Christian patterns, including medical practitioners. But we also find evidence of indigenous constructs working their way into Christian texts as, for instance, a Clare who sweeps or an Ann who weaves many mantles. Only by treating ethnographic inscriptions as part of the same discursive universe as Christian inscriptions—a universe dominated by both elite, literate native men

⁷ For another description of the cloistering of girls in preconquest times, see Zorita (1994: 130–131, 136–137).

and Catholic priests—can we evaluate them as sources of information about indigenous gender constructs. And while we cannot expect to recover Pre-Hispanic gender in some pure, essential form, these sources do reveal a great deal about the negotiation not only of gender but also of ethnicity, class, and religious identity by native people during the early phases of Spanish rule.

The Nahuatl texts have broader implications for the study of gender in colonial situations. Wherever the ruling group's gender-related values and practices differ significantly from those of the subordinate group, the result is not simply that the colonizers will disapprove of the indigenous expressions and attempt to alter them. One can also expect indigenous discourse on gender to undergo what Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 22) calls "regularization" (see also Hanks 1987). That is, the colonized will attempt to represent themselves as being in line with the values of the dominant group. In the case of a confrontation with patriarchal Christian Europe, this will most likely lead to an increased emphasis on female chastity and submissiveness, as seen in the Nahua case. In turn, this reevaluation of indigenous culture, on the part of indigenous people themselves, may have the unfortunate result of furthering the process of colonial hegemony. If European constructs of gender come to be represented as part of traditional native culture, their adoption is condoned, as it were, from both sides. The decline in status experienced by Nahua women over the course of the early colonial period (Kellogg 1995, 1997) may thus have resulted not just from direct Spanish pressure but also from a growing sense among Nahuas that this was, after all, the normal order of things.

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