

AN ENGINEER'S VIEW OF  
GENDER AND MOBILITY IN  
LATIN AMERICA  
CIRCA 1600-1800S

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History 216

## INTRODUCTION

In the Encarta Reference Library the word “mobility” has two distinct definitions. The first definition defines mobility as, “the ability to physically move about”. The second definition reads, “the ability of people to move from one social group or class to another”.<sup>1</sup> This paper is concerned with both types of mobility as they relate to the Latin American post conquest era. The degree of mobility which one had during this time varied across many categories. In fact, it not only varied between men and women, but between whites, blacks, and mulattos, and between elites and working class citizens. I acknowledge that the mobility of certain groups differed both with time and place. However, it is often difficult to find comprehensive documents that will deal with all the aspects of a certain time or place.

I also argue that, while values *are* malleable, they would tend to remain similar enough throughout the two centuries being explored. There are perfect examples found in contemporary society. While the concept of honor, defined as it was in the colonial period, currently does not exist, remnants of the honor system still exist today. A very important part of a woman’s honor which I will be discussing below hinged upon whether she was a virgin upon marriage. This definition of honor led many women to have secret pregnancies or marry their rapists in order to cover up their deflowering. When my mother, who is Cuban, was younger she was doing gymnastics. My grandmother was alerted to the fact that a girl’s hymen can be ruptured through gymnastics. Hastily, my mother was taken out of gymnastics, for what would her husband think if he thought that she was not a virgin when they had intercourse for the

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<sup>1</sup> Microsoft® Encarta® Reference Library 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation.

first time? On the opposite end of the spectrum, colonial men's honor was increased by having sex with women. A man who did not have intercourse regularly after puberty was not considered a man. Again, my father, also Cuban, was encouraged by his father to go out and assert his manliness. He was even told to, "date women that do and marry women that don't." Thus, while no one in contemporary Latin America goes around explicitly invoking honor violations, many of its ideas linger today, some four hundred years later. Thus, I assert that my time period, while vast, is appropriate for this paper.



Before moving on to the main arguments of the paper, a few terms must be properly defined. The first definition will be the easiest and most straightforward of all the definitions. Latin America will be defined as those countries in the Americas settled by the Spaniards. In this illustration it is the area shaded darker relative to the rest of the area around it. Thus, for these purposes I am not considering Brazil or any other country's New World possessions – even if they lie in the Caribbean. The simple reason is that these other countries had different social views and values that may have presented different degrees of social mobility for different groups. For example, Blacks in the United States did not enjoy anywhere near the freedom they were allowed in most of Latin America.

The next important term that must be defined is Gender. In this paper I will be adhering to Joan Scott's statement of gender, "Gender is...a social category imposed on a sexed body."<sup>2</sup> Thus masculinity is ascribed to a human with a penis and femininity to those possessing a vagina. This becomes a very important definition of gender in Latin

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<sup>2</sup> Scott (p32)

America because a lot of honor stems on a person's masculine or feminine role relative to another person. Scott mentions, "Sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women...Man fucks woman..."<sup>3</sup> In fact, much of a person's reputation depends upon penetration – real or metaphorical. With women the actual act of penetration can be a traumatic and dishonoring act. With men, the man who allows himself to be ridiculed is seen to be allowing himself to be emasculated and thus metaphorically penetrated. Thus, this definition serves the purpose of this paper quite well.

Finally, it will be important to understand what is meant by honor in order to understand some of the arguments in this paper. In order to understand honor in the colonization period it is necessary to go quite a bit further back in history. In 711 AD Muslim invaders moved into Spain and defeated the Visigoth King which had been placed there by the Roman Empire to protect the province from invaders. By 719 the Muslims, known in Spain as the Moors, had taken over the entire Iberian peninsula. In 1036 the Muslim rule began to fall apart and the Catholic Northern Spaniards began to attack the Moors. Finally, in 1492 the last of the Moors were defeated and Spain was nearly reunited.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this past a very racist Spain emerged resulting in the coalescence of the concept of "purity of blood". The concept of the purity of one's blood emphasized Catholic and Spanish ancestry and stressed that Moorish or Jewish blood was a stain on the family line. This evolved years later to incorporate that being born illegitimate was a stain on a person and his bloodline. The concern with illegitimacy may have stemmed from descendents of Jews and Moors claiming to be bastards in order to

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<sup>3</sup> Scott (p34)

<sup>4</sup> "Spain" Encarta Encyclopedia 2002 ©1993-2002

shed their stained ancestry. This became incorporated into a concept called honor. This later evolved even further so that other races were seen as lacking honor. Finally, even some jobs were seen as lacking honor or taking away honor.<sup>5</sup> Thus mere race or job can be enough to take away one's honor. Also diminishing in honor was a female member of the family having sex out of wedlock. Paradoxically, a man's honor was increased by having sex with women. So honor was a measurement of the respect one received. It was also dependent upon a public audience. They were the ones who had to believe that you had honor and if they believed that you didn't have it, it didn't matter how much you thought you had. In The Faces of Honor a modern scholar is quoted as saying, "Honor was more than a set of rules for governing behavior. It was your very being. For in an honor-based culture there was no self-respect independent of the respect of others...unless it was confirmed publicly."<sup>6</sup> With our terms now adequately defined we can now examine how gender (and the sub-categories of race and honor) affected mobility in Colonial Latin America.

### **HOW MOBILE WERE MEN?**

When the Spanish Empire is examined it is quite fascinating to observe the fractal patterns evident in the social structure. At the top level was God as ruler of the entire world. Everyone was his subject and was supposed to obey his edicts and even pay tribute or taxes to him in the form of offerings. At the next level, the entire Catholic World through its Kings was to follow the commands of the Pope. The officials at the provincial level were to report directly to the King and pay him tribute and obey him. This pattern continues all the way down to the household. At the household level, the

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p4-5)

<sup>6</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p2)

husband is seen to be the ruler and all who live in his household should obey him. They do not have to officially pay tribute, but the money of any women in his household belongs to him.<sup>7</sup> The state saw this fractal pattern as essential to its own well-being. It was well-known amongst the people that the husband was supposed to rule over his house like the king over his kingdom. The analogy was plain for people to see.

Therefore, society did not take kindly to women or children who subverted roles because it was seen to be analogous to citizens subverting the king's rule. Laws were structured, therefore, to give men dominion over their household. Arrom mentions one such law which stated that minors needed a father's permission to enter into contracts or pursue cases in court.<sup>8</sup> Boyer makes mention of these laws as well, "Husbands...inherited the patriarchal mantle which gave them uncontested "jurisdiction" over their wives."<sup>9</sup> His use of the word jurisdiction is very important because, just as the State had jurisdiction over the men of society, men had jurisdiction over their mini-society consisting of the family. Men, therefore, were accountable to no one except those men who were higher up on the hierarchy and, of course, to the law should he commit a crime.

This lack of accountability to his own household affords men what I deem one of the greatest freedoms of mobility – the ability to simply just leave his family at any time. Information traveled relatively slowly during this time period so a man could choose to simply leave his town and move to a new town to start a new life; this is exactly what some men did. During this time period a new method of escape emerged: the New World. Men could escape to the New World and start completely new lives where no

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<sup>7</sup> The money of the females belonging to the husband is, of course, subject to some provisions such as one that states that the husband cannot touch the capital of his wife's money.

<sup>8</sup> Arrom (p57)

<sup>9</sup> Boyer (p61)

one knew of their past lives. Escape to the Indies seemed the best choice for young Francisco Diaz. Young Diaz was only ten years old when his father arranged a marriage for him with an older woman. The woman may have only flanked him by four or five years, but the prospect was quite frightening to the young boy. After the wedding ceremony he lived with her for about two weeks before his brother was able to arrange for him to be sent to the New World. Many years later he was able to marry on his own terms and the family that he married into had no idea of his previous marriage.<sup>10</sup> Thus the New World was about to facilitate his escape.

Men also enjoyed a greater social mobility relative to women. Men were able to have sex with anyone from any class and it would not bring any dishonor to his family. Arrom makes note of this fact in the Mexican legal code. "...a man's sexual behavior carried no legal consequences unless he had a criminal record for some past offense of a sexual nature, such as rape or adultery."<sup>11</sup> Yet, even here men were often not punished. As we will see in the section on women, they often did not report their rapes. There is also credible evidence that some men committed adultery on a regular basis without any negative social repercussions. Of adultery, Arrom mentions, "...a man's adultery was punishable in only four cases: if he committed it with a married woman, with his children's wet nurse while she was in his house, or with a domestic servant while she was in her master's household, or if the affair was conducted so openly as to create a public scandal."<sup>12</sup> Yet even these laws were easy to get around. With the first case we see that it only matters if the woman was married. Thus, a man could commit adultery with any non-married woman. The second and third restrictions contain the important clause "in

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<sup>10</sup> Boyer (p64 & 65)

<sup>11</sup> Arrom (p64)

<sup>12</sup> Arrom (p65)

her master's home" therefore he could have sexual relations with her anywhere else.

Finally, as long as discretion was observed and a public scandal did not evolve, the man did not have to worry.

Men could use the honor system for their benefit in another manner – to gain marriage to women with dissenting parents. This could allow men to achieve some social mobility. Of course, the leap could not so great as a slave moving up to the status of elite, but small moves within certain proximity could be reached.

An analogy can be drawn to linearization in calculus. A linearization is used to make calculations on a complex function by reducing it to a simpler one. At values near the point in question it is a good approximation, but far away it is very off. Thus, as a linearization of a function has a certain margin of error within which it is near perfect, a person's honor could be raised or lowered, but usually the change was not dramatic. If the point in question is, therefore, the person's status, they can be slightly above or below this point by contracting a beneficial marriage. However, they would not end up very much higher or lower.

The manner of achieving such a marriage was quite an exploitation of the honor system. It was dishonorable for women to have pre-marital sex. However, the woman's honor could be rectified by marriage. Thus, pre-marital sex was ok as long as marriage followed. Therefore, if a man and woman wished to be married in the face of parental dissent they would elope and have sex. The couple would then return to town and announce their sexual escapades. In an effort to repair the family honor, the family would allow the two to marry. Martinez-Alier mentions, "Elopement was successful as a means to overcome parental dissent because it inflicted a very concrete loss on the

family, which could only be made up, at least partially, through marriage. A suitable marriage could be achieved if the girl was a virgin. Otherwise she became a perpetual liability for the family and a stain on its reputation.” One parent claimed, “[he] snatched from her..the most valuable jewel nature has given her and which she will never be able to recover...resulting [in] the scandal of the family.” Yet another parent who fell victim to this elopement blackmail mentioned that, “in view of the elopement he is no longer opposed to it [the marriage], but rather on the contrary the marriage should take place the soon the better, so that public virtue does not remain unredeemed.”<sup>13</sup> Most families, then, quickly allowed the marriage to go on when a man took advantage of the system in this manner.

Of course, things were not perfect for men either. Men were still bound by the honor system and, in some cases, held captive by it. Many government offices were only available to men with honor. There was little that men could do to ruin their honor, but another woman in his family could ruin it for him. Examining legal documents we discover that in January of 1786 there was a hotly contested debate over who would be elected for a very important office. The choices for the position boiled down to don Mariano de las Casas and don Antonio Basilio Menocal. Lots were cast and don Mariano arose victorious. However, he ultimately lost the elections. What was the reason for this loss? The other faction claimed that don Mariano had no honor because his mother was a bastard. Since the position required a man to have honor in order to have it, don Mariano was denied his win.<sup>14</sup> His climb up the social ladder was stopped due to the honor which

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<sup>13</sup> Martinez-Alier (p108)

<sup>14</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p68 & 69)

he had not inherited due to his mother's illegitimacy. Men, therefore, were also slaves to the honor system which could affect their social mobility.

### **HOW MOBILE WERE WOMEN?**

Women, returning to the fractal view of society, were considered to be the subjects of their husbands. Subversion of these roles was intolerable and even seen as seditious. Thus women were subjected to the whims of their husbands. According to nineteenth-century law, "A married woman is bound by her husband's wishes in everything."<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Silvia Arrom quotes legal handbooks as saying "women... [were] all presumed incapable of many activities...they were deemed weaker in body, mind, and character." Also, she quotes, "The woman is not of as high a status or as good a condition of the man."<sup>16</sup> In listing the activities from which women were excluded she lists banishment from taking the role of "judges, lawyers, priests..." and they could not "be guardians or adopt children as they pleased..."<sup>17</sup> So great was the pressure for women to remain in the home that Laura Lewis, in her describing women of lower economic status, states, "those women compelled by economic circumstances to be on the 'outside'...lost honor and value". Physical mobility also seems to have been denied to most women. Women were to stay in the house most of the time and they were not supposed to mingle with men outside of their family unless the man was brought to the house for that express purpose. Even when men were in the house women were not to interact with them unless spoken to. I feel that this cooping up of the women served two purposes. First of all, it kept women isolated from the freedom that men enjoyed. This may have been seen as an attempt to keep them from wishing to be out and about with

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<sup>15</sup> Arrom (p65)

<sup>16</sup> Arrom (p56)

<sup>17</sup> Arrom (p58)

men. Second, women were kept inside for their own protection. The first reason is pretty self-explanatory, it is the second purpose – protection – to which we will now turn our attention.

Why would women be protected by staying indoors? Is this just an excuse made by a chauvinistic society to give the women an incentive to *want* to stay inside their homes? Actually, the evidence seems to point to the fact that it may in fact have been quite a bit safer for the women to stay indoors. Women who were found outside of their homes were exposed to quite a few dangers – rape, seduction, and a loss of honor. As a matter of fact, the first two dangers could also lead to a loss of honor.

Honor was of absolute importance to women in colonial Latin America. A woman generally lost her honor by having sex with a man outside of marriage. A woman without honor was considered tainted and generally could not be married off. If the woman could be married to a man, he was generally either of a lower status or tainted himself. This was quite undesirable for the family because a loss of honor by the females in the family amounted to loss of honor for the whole family. Also, future generations would be denied honor partially because of the family's loss of honor and partially because the mother would marry a lower man.<sup>18</sup>

Rape was a very real problem for women in the colonies. The push for a man to rape was intensified because “the girl was prey to the male’s sexual aggressiveness and desire to assert his virility” and also because “a man’s honor was...enhanced by the seduction of a virgin.”<sup>19</sup> This behavior was exacerbated by the fact that “although the

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<sup>18</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (since this is the premise of most of the book I will not specify a certain page number)

<sup>19</sup> Martinez-Alier (p111)

sentence for rape was death, any penalties actually applied were rarely very severe.”<sup>20</sup> Thus men who engaged in rape often did not have a real deterrent to this action. Rape was also relative to the status of those involved. One man claimed that he had not raped a girl because he did not owe her any honor.<sup>21</sup> A woman’s social mobility was also limited by rape. Often the girl was persuaded to marry her rapist. The families tended to be more upset that the girl’s honor had been violated as opposed to the fact that she had been raped.<sup>22</sup> By marrying, the family would not have to worry that the girl was no longer a virgin. Often the circumstances leading up to the rape were taken into consideration. The rape was not considered a rape if it seemed as though the girl was dressed in such a manner as to invite sexual lust. Women who had been drinking or were out alone at night were also considered at fault for being raped. Maria Antonia, a mestiza, was guilty of both drinking and being out alone at night. Thus she did not report her rape until she was approached as a murder witness.<sup>23</sup> Most likely it would have only led to her dishonor with no punishment for the rapist. In fact many women did not report rape for these reasons. Rape was also seen as terrible because it involved the taking away of a young girl’s virginity, thus women who were not virgins and were raped were often not treated as well.

Seduction was similar to rape with one important distinction – the sex was often consensual. However, the result of a seduction was the same as that of a rape – loss of honor. Why would a girl agree to have sex outside of marriage knowing that it would damage her honor? Seduction most commonly occurred when a man promised to marry

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p195)

<sup>21</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p195)

<sup>22</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p194)

<sup>23</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p196)

the girl and thus it was ok to have sex. As mentioned above, sex before marriage was typically alright as long as marriage followed. Thus, the girl had no reason to suspect any dubious behavior from her suitor when he promised to marry her. However, seduction occurred when the man refused to marry or simply left town to avoid being forced to marry the girl.<sup>24</sup> Martinez-Alier gives us an example of such a seduction, “A bride told the court: ‘It is exactly two months since he stopped seeing her and her mother...as a consequence of having noticed that she was pregnant, and having pressed him repeatedly to fulfill his promise of marriage he abandoned her for she does not know what reason, although she suspects it was to evade his responsibility.’”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, women could also lose honor through other seemingly innocent actions. For example, a woman who walked through the streets unaccompanied risked losing her honor. Since women had no business in the streets, if she was out and about, she was considered to be doing something dishonorable. Similarly, a woman whose husband was absent for an extended period of time had her honor questioned. Since women were considered to give into all their sexual urges, a woman alone would certainly be having illicit relationships. Thus, for all these reasons women were kept physically immobile for their sexual protection and for the protection of their honor.

Women were also very restricted when it came to social mobility. Since they were responsible for the honor of the family, parents held a tight control on who they married. In fact, marriage for love seems to be quite rare at this point in colonial Latin America’s history. Most marriages were arranged for profit or social advantage. Women who became pregnant outside of marriage also fell prey to the constraints of society.

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<sup>24</sup> Martinez-Alier (p103-112)

<sup>25</sup> Martinez-Alier (p110)

Elite women would often go into seclusion to avoid the scandal associated with being pregnant out of wedlock. Lower class women often did not have that option since they did not have servants to go to the market for them. Thus their pregnancies chanced becoming public knowledge. Many lower class women, having no other choice, turned to infanticide to protect their honor. Often they would take drugs or harm themselves to induce an abortion.<sup>26</sup>

Thus we see that women are typically denied mobility in colonial Latin America. They are kept inside their homes and expected to obey their husbands. They must guard themselves from sexual attacks which could even come from family members. However, as we will see below, there were ways which women found to overcome these barriers to their mobility.

#### **MOBILITY OF ELITES VS THE MOBILITY OF THE LOWER CLASS**

In general the lower classes enjoyed a greater mobility than the upper classes. Poor women, in general, had the greatest degree of freedom when compared to their elite equivalents. Poor women were not expected to remain trapped at home because they often had to go to the market to buy things for their families. Some poor women also worked in the houses of elites as maids and therefore could not remain at home. As mentioned above, poor families did not have slaves to prevent their women from being exposed to the streets. In addition, poor women who lived in the countryside often had to join their husbands in the fields. The necessity of labor coupled with the lack of money for slaves led to a slightly more egalitarian household in the countryside. Marriages were also able to be more about love or at least to the man whom the woman wished to marry. Since the poor were already at the bottom, there was not much lower for them to go.

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p192-194)

Therefore, nearly any poor man was as good as the next. The main exception to this was the fact that even the poorest of whites considered themselves above the mulattos. Thus, it was not acceptable to most of them for their daughters to marry mulatto men.

Similarly, mulattos held themselves above freed blacks who considered themselves better than slaves. However, it was not just women who enjoyed more freedom. Men also enjoyed more freedom. They tended to move from place to place in search of jobs. This kept them from having a definite honor reputation to worry about since honor was dependent upon public opinion. One who constantly moved around always had a new public to convince of his honor and who did not know about his past transgressions. For example, someone who had been considered a drunkard in a previous town could have a different reputation if he moved to another town after giving up his vice. Thus, the poor enjoyed more mobility than the elite.<sup>27</sup>

#### **EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES**

When one reads accounts of the lives of Spanish American women during the seventeenth century one is bombarded with accounts of restrictions. However, I found that, with a bit of cunning, women **could** undermine the system which was designed to keep them subservient to men. That is, by manipulation of the system women could gain the freedom to pursue their dreams by, paradoxically, appearing to be obeying the rules imposed upon their sex. The two women who best exemplify this undermining of the rules also happen to be extremely famous for having done so extremely successfully. The first is Catalina de Erauso, known by some as the Lieutenant Nun because, by disguising herself as a man, she served in the army in the New World (among other things). The second woman to successfully pursue her dreams through manipulation was

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera (p127-149)

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. She was a very intelligent young lady who was able to use the life of a nun to pursue her intellectual studies.

Our first woman, Catalina de Erauso, made an important realization early in her life. She realized that men were able to do as they wished and women were to silently obey the wishes of men. At the age of four Catalina was sent into a convent with the intention that she would live out her life in the convent. As Scott mentions, “In Catalina’s day, and indeed in her own family, ‘the men served the king; the women entered religion.’”<sup>28</sup> When she reached the fifteen years of age she realized that she would be trapped in the monastery if she did not escape as soon as possible. Catalina wanted to experience the world outside of the convent. She did realize, however, how much attention a woman roving the country-side would attract. After all, women at this time in history were supposed to be in the home or accompanied by men when they traveled. Therefore, as Scott observes, “Aware of the restrictions that her gender imposed on her life, she did not try to change the inequity between the sexes. Instead she chose to change herself.”<sup>29</sup> Catalina realized that she was incapable of changing the system that guided her world. Therefore she decided to use it for her benefit. Men were allowed to roam the world as they pleased and nearly able to do whatever they wished. She became a man in order to escape the constraints of a woman.

While, as a woman, she would have been restricted to life in the home (if not the convent), as a man she was able to play many roles. Being a man also afforded her many advantages and benefits. For example, while in the town of Trujillo she received two slaves and a cook to prepare her meals. The person she was working for even left her in

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<sup>28</sup> Scott (p18)

<sup>29</sup> Scott (p19)

charge of his shop where she was in charge of selling objects, collecting money as payment, and determining who was able to buy on credit.<sup>30</sup> These responsibilities would never have been laid upon a woman since they were considered to be mentally inferior. A woman would not have the capacity to do the mathematics necessary to effectively run a shop, much less be able to determine who was abusing their credit. Later she is working in Lima for another shopkeeper earning six hundred pesos a year.<sup>31</sup> A woman would never be trusted with so much money for economic freedom would have meant that she wouldn't have to depend upon her husband or other male figure. Eventually she finds herself in the Army in Chile. This is, blatantly, not a place for women. Yet Catalina joins the ranks of other men in battle. Not only did she fight, but, according to her own account, her performance was rather exemplary. We read, "Seeing them make off with it [the standard], I and two other mounted soldiers went after them through a great multitude, charging and killing and being wounded in turn. Soon one of the three fell dead. The two of us kept on, and we got to the standard, but a lance thrust felled my companion. I, with a bad wound in one leg, killed the cacique who had it in his possession, took the standard away and spurred my horse, charging, killing, and wounding indiscriminately;"<sup>32</sup>

Such manly behavior is not only unacceptable for women to perform, but even when women must perform in such a manner for simple survival, the rule-breaking must be excused. For Example, Doña Isabel de Guevara was part of an expedition in the early days of conquest of the New World. When her exploration group suffered a fate similar to the early years of Jamestown in Virginia, the men were left extremely weak and the

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<sup>30</sup> Scott (p39)

<sup>31</sup> Scott (p42)

<sup>32</sup> Scott (p42)

women had to take on the tasks of men. Part of her description reads, "...the women took all the labors on board...they all worked at handling the sails and steering the ship, taking soundings at the bow and taking over the oar from a soldier unable to row...and encouraging the sailors not to lose heart; this was men's work, and in truth the women were not rewarded for it..."<sup>33</sup> Here we see that even though it was **necessary** for the women to take on the tasks of men, that the women still needed to virtually ask for forgiveness for having turned the tables. Catalina, as a man, did not have to make these excuses. In fact, it is expected that she would do all that she could to protect her city of residence if it was under attack.

Some historians have mentioned that Catalina may have been homosexual. If this is the case then it serves as yet another example of how she was able to use her male identity to break the rules and do what would otherwise have been considered taboo. She mentions two accounts of such activity. The first occurs while she is in Lima. She is told to find work somewhere else when her boss suspects her of ill play with one of his nieces. Catalina is fired from another job in Chile because she is caught cavorting with her brother's mistress.<sup>34</sup> These two men believe her to be man and therefore feel that she is interacting with these women in a sexual manner. As a man she is simply relieved of her job and sent away to find work elsewhere. As a woman she may have been reported to the church and possible excommunicated or burned at the stake. Additionally, as a *puta* she would have lost her legal rights as a woman since these legal rights were only afforded to respectable women.

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<sup>33</sup> Scott (p13)

<sup>34</sup> Scott (p40 & 42)

The next woman that I would like to examine is remarkable, not only in her own right, but also when her method of manipulating the system is juxtaposed with Catalina de Erauso. Sor Juana's method of escape was, ironically, to join a convent. She had been blessed, or cursed as it was in this time period, with an insatiable curiosity about the world around her and an immense intelligence. In her letter to the Bishop, whose pen-name in a previous correspondence was Sor Filotea, she states, "I learned to read in such a short time that I already knew how by the time my mother heard of it."<sup>35</sup> When she was old enough she requested that her mother disguise her as a man so that she would be able to attend college in Mexico City. Her request was not granted and she was forced to teach herself. She even opposed marriage because she felt that her husband would ask her to do other tasks which would take away from time that she could spend in study.<sup>36</sup> Her situation thus presented her with two problems. Primarily, she was learning – an activity considered seditious and dangerous in the seventeenth century. Sor Juana even acknowledges this sentiment with her words, "He [God] knows that I have prayed that He snuff out the light of my intellect, leaving only enough to keep His Law. For more than that is too much, some would say, in a woman; and there are even those who say it is harmful."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as we shall see a learned woman would be able to refute the status quo with intelligent arguments. These arguments might excite enough other people to overthrow the system into one of chaos where women were equal to men. This was obviously something that the male-dominated society did not want to occur. The second problem was her aversion to marriage. Women were supposed to be under the authority of some male. If she was not married there was no male to supervise her activities. Sor

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<sup>35</sup> Powell (p49)

<sup>36</sup> Powell (p51)

<sup>37</sup> Powell (p47)

Juana therefore acted upon the only option which she had – she joined a convent. By becoming a nun, and therefore inherently agreeing to remain celibate for as long as she was in God's service, she was able to avoid marriage.

Nuns were also required to learn theology and Sor Juana hoped to be able to sneak in some of her own secular learning while she was in the convent. This she was able to do quite effectively as is evidenced by her constant quoting of various philosophers of whom the average woman would have been ignorant of. In fact, she is able to make a very convincing case as to why she should be learning secular subjects. The basis of her argument is that she will be able to be a better catholic through her studies.

She states, rather eloquently, "Without Logic, how should I know the general and specific methods by which Holy Scripture is written? Without Rhetoric, how should I understand its figures, tropes, and locutions? Or how, without Physics or Natural Science, understand all the questions that naturally arise concerning the varied natures of those animals offered in sacrifice, in which a great many things already made manifest are symbolized, and many more besides? How should I know whether Saul's cure at the sound of David's harp was owing to a virtue and power that is natural in Music or owing, instead, to a supernatural power that God saw fit to bestow on David? How without Arithmetic might one understand all those mysterious reckonings of years and day sand months and hours and weeks that are found in Daniel and elsewhere, which can be comprehended only by knowing the natures, concordances, and properties of numbers? Without Geometry, how could we take measure of the Holy Ark of the Covenant or the Holy City of Jerusalem, each of whose mysterious measurements forms a perfect cube uniting their dimensions, and each displaying that most marvelous distribution of the proportions of every part? Without the science of Architecture, how understand the mighty Temple of Solomon - where God Himself was the Draftsman who set forth His arrangement and plan, and the Wise King was but the overseer who carried it out; where there was no foundation without its mystery, nor column without its symbol, nor cornice without its allusion, nor architrave without its meaning, and likewise for every other part, so that even the very least fillet served not only for the support and enhancement of Art, but the symbolize greater things? How, without a thorough knowledge of the order and divisions by which History is composed, is one to understand the Historical Books - as in those summaries, for example, which often postpone in the narration what happened first in fact? How, without command of the two branches of Law, should one understand the Books of Law?... Well then, and without being expert in Music, how might one understand those musical intervals and their perfections that occur in a great many passages - especially in Abraham's petitions to God on behalf of the Cities, beseeching God to spare them if there were found fifty righteous people within? And the number fifty Abraham reduced to fortyOfive, which is sesquinonal [10 to 9] or like the interval from mi to re; this in turn he reduced to forty, which is the sesquioctave [9 to 8] or like the interval from re to mi; thence he went down to thirty which is sesquitertia, or the interval of the diatessarion [the perfect fourth]; thence to twenty, the sesquialtera or the

diapente [the fifth]; thence to ten, the duple, which is the diapason [the interval and consonance of the octave]; and because there are no more harmonic intervals, Abraham went no further. How could all this be understood without knowledge of Music? ..."<sup>38</sup>

Her mastery of theological and secular concepts to such a level that she can intertwine them in the way that she does is, all by itself, an argument as to why women (especially nuns) should be well learned. Thus she is able to prove that, if a nun's top objective is indeed getting as close to God as possible, nuns should study all the other subjects as earnestly as the Bible.

Sor Juana even went so far as to use her time in the convent to subvert the roles of men and women even further. On a small scale she had power over men through the ability to choose her confessor. Therefore, if she found that the confessor did not meet her standards she could fire him, as it were, from the job of confessing her. She did indeed do this very thing. Here men are made to please women; an obvious overturning of gender roles. More powerfully, however, she is able to suggest that something is wrong with the status quo through her own study of the Bible, which was considered, of course, the authority on how one should live in the Catholic World. She mentions the great women of the Bible.<sup>39</sup> Deborah, one of the women she mentions, led the Israelites into battle. Ester is famous for having saved the Jews from genocide by appealing to the king. Rehab was a prostitute who was saved from death for helping the Hebrew spies into the enemy city of Jericho. The fact that these women were appointed by God to such important roles suggested that something was wrong with the way that the Spaniards were imposing gender roles in the seventeenth century. She uses her study of the theology to refute yet another mandate from men. They were using Paul's verse stating

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<sup>38</sup> Powell (p53,55)

<sup>39</sup> Powell (p77)

that “women should keep silent in the churches” as a way to keep women from having important roles in the church. Sor Juana does some digging and finds out that Paul was describing a certain group of women who were being disruptive during masses. He does not mean, she interprets, that women should be silenced. Rather, they should refrain from chatting during mass.<sup>40</sup>

Thus we see how two women were able to use mechanisms built into system in order to keep themselves from being subjugated by it. Of course one must make two key realizations. Obviously all women did not use the system in such a manipulative manner. Were such subversion to have taken place the entire system would have collapsed. If everyone is an exception to the rule, then of what use are rules? However, one cannot, in an attempted to discredit this essay by claiming that only two women have been offered up as examples, be to naïve as to think that Sor Juana and Catalina were the only two to take advantage of such loopholes. The loopholes were available to whoever was cunning enough to use them. The key to such manipulation was to appear to be conforming to the system all the while undermining it. Catalina was able to achieve this by becoming a man. As a man she was free to do what she wished. As long as all others believed her to be a man, her actions were consistent with what was expected of her. In the same sense Sor Juana did not decided to live her life as a single woman out in public. To do so would have been too outwardly subversive. Instead she avoided marriage by appearing to be turning to God. An intense desire to go beyond their boundaries and the realization that they would be vehemently opposed if they were to have so obviously stepped out of the cages in which their gender placed them allowed these women to secretly pursue their aspirations with considerably fewer impediments than they might have otherwise faced.

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<sup>40</sup> Powell (p89 & 91)

### CONCLUSION

Thus we have seen that men, in general, were more mobile than women both physically and socially. Men were allowed to roam about the city without any restrictions, could hold public office, and were allowed to have sex whenever they please with whoever they pleased. However, men were not totally free. Men had were denied positions which could lead to their social mobility because of their lack of honor and also could not marry whoever they wished. Family would vehemently oppose a marriage to an inferior woman. Women, on the other hand, were almost completely lacking in freedom of mobility of any kind. They could sometimes take advantage of certain loopholes in society to become free without others realizing it. Unfortunately, only a small portion of society could do this. However, poor women generally enjoyed more freedom than their elite counterparts. Thus we see mobility in colonial Latin America as ultimately dependent upon three factors: gender, class, and honor.

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