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I, Elena de la Cruz: Heresy, Gender,
and Crisis in Mexico City, 1568

by

Jacqueline Zuzann Holler

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1989

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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of

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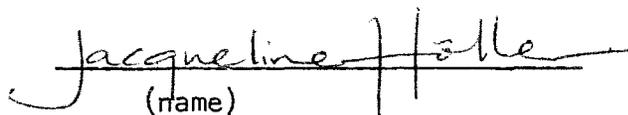
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ABSTRACT

In July 1568, a nun was denounced to the episcopal inquisition of Mexico City. Elena de la Cruz was a professed nun in the prestigious Nuestra Señora de la Concepción and a member of one of Mexico's most important families. She was charged with heretical propositions: namely, that she proposed limits to the powers of the papacy and church hierarchy, including the archbishop of Mexico. Through study of the trial dossier and other primary and secondary sources, the thesis examines the trial of Elena de la Cruz against the backdrop of urban crisis and religious reform in Mexico.

In 1568, while Elena was being tried, the repercussions of the 1566 conspiracy of the Marqués del Valle were still sending shock waves through the city. Elena's family and religious connections made her a natural sympathiser of the Cortés faction and thus a natural enemy of Archbishop Montúfar. Elena's views on the powers of the hierarchy also suggested a threat to public order in an age when religious and civic order were construed as inseparable.

Moreover, Elena's heretical words also took added meaning from contemporary religious crisis and reform. Some of the nun's conceptions vaguely suggested Lutheranism, itself a vague concept in Mexico in this period. More importantly, she seemed to deny the ability of the Council of Trent to carry out its programme of reform. Tridentine reformers were attempting to bring monasteries of women under the control of male religious—and Montúfar was trying to bring regular clergy in general under episcopal governance. Elena's views threatened these efforts.

The thesis finds that political and religious currents swirling around the trial crystallised on the issue of gender. Elena's daring to speak on matters of doctrine was a form of gender treason; she also read forbidden books and attempted to find her own path to salvation. In the late sixteenth century, a woman who took this path was immediately suspect. *Alumbrado* beatas, nuns, and laywomen had paid dearly for this error in Spain and in Peru. In charging Elena, Montúfar was nipping womanly insubordination in the bud, before it could infect the entire convent.

But if gender was part of what made Elena so dangerous, it was also what saved her skin and won her the light sentence she received. Elena's lawyers were able to use the *topos* of the weak, ignorant, misled woman to explain their client's deviation from the path of order and obedience. Hispanic gender ideologies made it possible to frame Elena's crime in terms of treason and disorder, but also provided an opportunity for the nun's reincorporation into society. She could be brought back under control, as the city was being slowly brought back to normalcy at the end of a period of crisis.

The *proceso* against Elena de la Cruz is thus an important moment in sixteenth-century Mexico. Through in-depth study, Elena's trial is seen as a microcosmic enactment of the subordination of the encomendero class to political authority, the promulgation of the decrees and reforms of the Council of Trent, and the subjection of the regular clergy to episcopal governance. The trial also provides a view of the sixteenth-century trend, intensified by Tridentine reforms, toward a virile, homogeneous Catholicism in which women and their religious life were regarded with suspicion.

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Dr. Boyer and Professors Robert Koepke and Mary Lynn Stewart supervised me in graduate courses and were unstintingly generous with time, criticism, and support. To Dr. Boyer I owe much, including my interest in the colonial period. I shall not embarrass him with an enumeration of my debts, but I thank him for his enthusiasm for ideas and for humanity.

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PREFACE

The Dossier

I came to the study of the trial of Elena de la Cruz through an entry in a catalogue of Inquisition documents. The dossier is held in the AGN in Mexico City (Ramo Inquisición, Tomo 8, exp. 1, ff. 5–116).

The case is also mentioned in Richard Greenleaf's *Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century*.¹ Greenleaf devotes two pages to the case, reaching conclusions that are superficially similar to my own, but, I believe, fundamentally different. I have indicated disagreements in footnotes at several points in the text. The major difference between Greenleaf's discussion of the case—which I came to only after having finished my research—and mine is in methodological orientation. I write from a consciously gendered perspective, paying close attention to the text; Greenleaf, writing in the early 1960s in a survey of the entire century, recognised the “unworldly feminine side” created in Elena's defence but did not analyse its components.

Greenleaf also sees Elena as “an articulate theologian... the sixteenth-century precursor of Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz” (134–5). One of the things I liked best about Elena is that she does not seem to me a “woman worthy” waiting to be rediscovered in order to be polished and inserted in a feminist pantheon. She was not persecuted for being ahead of her time—in fact, she seems eminently a woman of her time—but for a variety of reasons that are infinitely more complex and, to me, more

¹It is also mentioned by Bobette Gugliotta in her *Women of Mexico: The Consecrated and the Commoners*, in a clear paraphrase of Greenleaf. I have come across no other references to it.

interesting.

In transcribing testimony from the document, I have attempted to change as little of the original orthography as possible. Thus I have kept spellings as they appeared in the *proceso*, and have refrained from adding accents. I have, however, capitalised proper names to avoid confusion. Transcriptions from the text are contained in footnotes, so that they may be read if desired.

INTRODUCTION

In July 1568, a nun named Elena de la Cruz appeared before a tribunal of Mexico's episcopal inquisition. She was accused of having said heretical words against the holy Catholic faith. Through the summer, Elena and other nuns of the convent of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción were interviewed by fray Bartolomé de Ledesma, the inquisitor who served Alonso de Montúfar, Archbishop of Mexico. Through fray Bartolomé's interrogations of Elena and other witnesses, he was able to piece together a relatively clear picture of what Elena had said and done one morning in July. But Elena's words, spoken in the convent workshop, had greater meaning than their mundane context would suggest—for the trial took place against a backdrop of urban crisis.

In August¹ 1566, nearly two years earlier, two of New Spain's most powerful and well-known citizens, Gil González de Avila and Alonso de Avila Alvarado, had been executed by decapitation, their heads exhibited on pikes. The two young men (twenty-five and twenty-six years old) were brothers, sons of the conquistador Gil González de Avila. They were accused of high treason for their part in the conspiracy to overthrow the viceroy and audiencia of Mexico. Disgruntled with colonial rule, the conspirators had hoped to elevate the second Marqués del Valle, Martín Cortés, to the position of King of New Spain. The repercussions of the failed conspiracy did not end with the deaths of these two. Cortés, son of

¹There is some disagreement about the date. Some works (including Simpson) give a date of 3 October, but the August date seems more probable, as by 23 August, the Cabildo is referring to Alonso as "deceased" (*difunto*). See Edmundo O'Gorman and Salvador Novo, eds. *Guía de las actas de cabildo de la ciudad de México: Siglo XVI* (Mexico: Fonda de Cultura Económica, 1970); 3064, Acta de 23 de agosto de 1566 (430).

the deceased conqueror, was sent to Spain to face charges of *lese-majesté*. The young marqués was permanently exiled from New Spain.

One year after the execution of the Avila brothers, licenciado Alonso de Muñoz arrived in Mexico City to deal with the conspirators, as he had been ordered by Philip II. And for the next eight months, leading citizens of Mexico City were imprisoned, detained, executed, exiled, and otherwise punished for suspected or proven complicity in the plot. A veritable reign of terror was unleashed against the encomendero class.² Don Martín Cortés, half-brother of the Marqués del Valle,³ was tortured brutally in January 1568. As Elena and her coreligionists testified before fray Bartolomé, the city was still in a state of shock. This was the end—in the Valley of Mexico at least—of the golden age of the encomendero.⁴

The 1560s were also a period of momentous religious change. In 1563, the Council of Trent had concluded its deliberations. The council had met in Trent, Italy in the midst of great conflict between Protestant and Catholic. In fact, the council had to be moved out of the way of fighting in 1546.⁵ In twenty-five sessions, the clerics present at the council hammered out a programme that affirmed the mission of the Catholic church while reforming centuries-old abuses. As 1563 drew to a close, resolutions were

²L.B. Simpson, *Many Mexicos*, fourth (revised) edition (Los Angeles/Berkeley: University of California, 1966), 134: "Scaffolds were erected and the headsman's ax dripped with the bluest blood of New Spain, until it began to seem that Muñoz intended to wipe out the whole class of encomenderos."

³Don Martín, who shared the Marqués's name, was, of course, the son of the conqueror and Doña Marina. The "scapegoat mestizo" (Simpson, 135) was not fortunate enough to be sent to Spain for trial. He was sentenced to permanent exile from Mexico City.

⁴Simpson, 136.

⁵"Council of Trent," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1967), Vol. XIV, 271-8; 272.

passed that would have a strong impact on the entire church, from the laity to the regular religious. On 20 November, principles concerning the period of novitiate, *vita communis* (communal life), profession, and enclosure were passed.⁶ A month later, on Christmas Day, 1563, the final session of Trent ordered the strict enclosure of female religious and the subordination of all women's monasteries to the general chapters of their orders: that is, to male houses.⁷

The Mexican church was not slow to respond to change. In 1555, 1565, and 1585, provincial councils were convened. Archbishop Montúfar opened the first Mexican Provincial Council on 29 June 1555. In line with the European *zeitgeist*, the council dealt with questions of age of profession, priestly comportment, concubinage, bigamy, and church

⁶Ibid., 277.

⁷ Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 102. The order enforcing enclosure read as follows: "The holy council, renewing the constitution of Boniface VIII, which begins, 'Periculosus,' commands all bishops that by the judgment of God to which it appeals and under threat of eternal malediction, they make it their special care that in all monasteries subject to them by their own authority and in others by the authority of the Apostolic See, the enclosure of nuns be restored wherever it has been violated and that it be preserved where it has not been violated; restraining with ecclesiastical censures and other penalties, every appeal being set aside, the disobedient and gainsayers, even summoning for this purpose, if need be, the aid of the secular arm. The holy council exhorts all Christian princes to furnish this aid, and binds thereto under penalty of excommunication to be incurred *ipso facto* all civil magistrates. No nun shall after her profession be permitted to go out of the monastery, even for a brief period under any pretext whatever, except for a lawful reason to be approved by the bishop; any indults and privileges whatsoever notwithstanding. Neither shall anyone, of whatever birth or condition, sex, or age, be permitted, under penalty of excommunication to be incurred *ipso facto*, to enter the enclosure of a monastery without the written permission of the bishop or the superior. But the bishop or superior ought to grant permission in necessary cases only, and no other person shall in any way be able to grant it, even by virtue of any authority or indult already granted or that may be granted in the future. And since monasteries of nuns situated outside the walls of a city or town are often without any protection exposed to the rapacity and other crimes of evil men, the bishops and other superiors shall make it their duty to remove, if they deem it expedient, the nuns from those places to new or old monasteries within cities or more populous towns, summoning, if need be, the aid of the secular arm. Those who hinder or disobey them they shall compel to submission by ecclesiastical censures." See H.J. Schroeder, trans. *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, Illinois; Tan Books, 1978), 220-1.

dignity.⁸ The 1565 council was ordered by Philip II to receive, process, and implement Tridentine reforms.⁹ This second council accepted the decrees of Trent; however, this acceptance was largely incomplete, as the Trent canons had not been received in complete form. Therefore, it was 1585 before a considered response to Trent was possible.¹⁰ The Second Mexican Provincial Council was nonetheless a *reforming* council, most of its decrees dealing with priests' lifestyles and training.¹¹ Elena thus testified in a context of religious ferment and vigorous reformative activity.

Elena's familial connections were crucial to the trial, from its inception to its conclusion. Elena's father, *licenciado* Juan Altamirano, was deceased, but he had been an exceptionally important personage in New Spain. Originally from Medellín in Extremadura, Altamirano was related to Hernán Cortés on the distaff side,¹² either as cousin or as uncle.¹³ This made Elena a close relative of the second Marqués del Valle, Martín Cortés.¹⁴ The *licenciado* Altamirano had been governor's lieutenant (*teniente de gobernador*) of Cuba from 1524 to 1526.¹⁵ It was during this

⁸Willi Henkel, *Die Konzilien in Lateinamerika, Teil 1: Mexiko 1555-1897* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1984), 62-75.

⁹"First Mexican Council," "Second Mexican Council," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Montreal: McGraw-Hill, 1967), VIII, 466.

¹⁰John Schwaller, *Origins of Church Wealth in Mexico: Ecclesiastical Revenues and Church Finances, 1523-1600* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 167.

¹¹Henkel, 79.

¹² An assumption made on the basis of Cortés's mother's name (Catalina Altamirano).

¹³ Peter Boyd-Bowman, *Indice de más de 56 mil pobladores de la América hispánica* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, date), 15.

¹⁴ Greenleaf suggests that the two were second cousins (*Inquisition*, 134).

¹⁵ Boyd-Bowman, 16. Irene Wright, in her *Early History of Cuba 1492-1586* (New York: Octagon, 1970), identifies Altamirano as governor's lieutenant (*teniente de gobernador*) rather than lieutenant governor (*teniente gobernador*).

period that Elena was born to Altamirano and his first wife, Mecía Maldonado.

Finding little success in Cuba,¹⁶ in 1527 Altamirano moved his family to Mexico, where, of course, he had excellent connections. He remarried¹⁷ to Juana Altamirano, who gave birth to Hernán Gutiérrez Altamirano (and possibly others of Elena's siblings).¹⁸ The licenciado became a prominent encomendero, holding encomiendas in Metepec, Calimaya, and Tepemaxalco in the valley of Toluca. The licenciado added mining interests in Taxco to his portfolio, and also acted as Cortés's attorney. At his death, the licentiate left a substantial mayorazgo to his eldest son, Juan Gutiérrez Altamirano,¹⁹ who had two sisters and two brothers.

The Altamiranos were thus a noble and prominent family, well connected and involved in the affairs of Mexico City and New Spain. The licenciado, both in his own affairs and in those of his kinsman Hernán Cortés, was a vigorous administrator not averse to litigation. As a member of the high elite of Mexico City, Altamirano figured prominently in urban rituals. For example, just one year after his arrival in Mexico, he was present on the scaffold with other distinguished citizens as convicted Judaisers Hernando Alonso and Gonzalo Morales were executed.²⁰

¹⁶ Wright describes the licenciado's stormy tenure; v. 105–9.

¹⁷ Francisco A. De Icaza, *Diccionario autobiografico de conquistadores y pobladores de Nueva España* (Guadalajara: Edmundo Aviña Levy, 1969), 186.

¹⁸ Robert Himmerich y Valencia, *The Encomenderos of New Spain 1521–1555* (Austin: University of Texas, 1991), 118. It is unclear what had happened to Mecía.

¹⁹ Boyd-Bowman, 16.

²⁰ Luis González Obregón, *The Streets of Mexico*, trans. Blanche Collet Wagner (San Francisco: George Fields, 1937), 162.

The licenciado's son Hernán Gutiérrez Altamirano, named for his grandfather—and possibly for Cortés—was a permanent fixture in the Mexico City cabildo. Hernán repeatedly served as *alcalde*: a post he was holding in 1568 as well. Hernán was also busy with his own financial affairs. In fact, he was out of town when the workshop incident (and the subsequent denunciation) occurred; the *alcalde* had applied for permission to visit his haciendas for a couple of weeks.²¹ Elena's half-brother, like her father, was important in city festivities—a good indicator of the family's continuing high social status. In September 1568, while his half-sister was preparing to carry out the sentence imposed upon her by the Holy Office, Hernán, as captain of infantry, was preparing a mock battle to welcome the viceroy Martín Enríquez.²² In 1580, Hernán would again be instrumental in staging a skirmish; this time, he was captain of cavalry, and the viceroy to be welcomed was Lorenzo Juárez de Mendoza.²³ Mud had been slung over the Cortés conspiracy—Hernán, and many of his friends, had been arrested and detained—but it had not stuck. Nonetheless, in 1568, Elena's family was too close to the conspirators to be free of suspicion. Aside from his suspicious family connections, Hernán had been a close personal friend of the executed Alonso de Avila.²⁴

In the approximately two hundred pages of the dossier,²⁵ a cast that included members of Mexico's most powerful families puzzled out what

²¹*Actas de cabildo* 3254, 25 June 1568 (454).

²²*Actas de cabildo* 3283, 30 September 1568 (458).

²³*Actas de cabildo* 4223, 29 August 1580.

²⁴Luis González Obregón, *Los precursores de la independencia mexicana en el siglo XVI* (Paris/Mexico: C. Bouret, 1906), 270.

now appears as an epilogue to the larger events described above. It is impossible to view Elena's case as taking place in a vacuum. The shadow of the conspiracy of the Marqués del Valle falls over the trial, as it fell over the lives of the elite of Mexico City through the crisis years of 1566 to 1568. But it is equally impossible to view Elena's trial as a conspiracy.²⁶ After all, what of significance was to be gained from simply discrediting a nun? Rather, it seems, the currents of religious reform and political repression that whirled about the convent were brought to bear in the trial, crystallizing in the issue of gender. Elena's trial became a drama, its plot moving, in the best Renaissance tradition, from order to disorder and back again.²⁷ Elena's words were challenges to the hierarchy she was bound to obey. Her gender both amplified her crime and, of course, provided an opportunity for her reincorporation.

²⁵AGN, Ramo Inquisición, Tomo 8, exp. 1, ff. 5–116. See Preface for more information on the dossier.

²⁶It is possible that more archival research might yield more evidence for a conspiracy theory; but for now, the episode simply remains rife with tantalising coincidences that suggest *something* was going on.

²⁷The notion of Inquisition trial and auto-de-fe as theatre is discussed by José Piedra in "Literary Whiteness and Afro-Hispanic Difference," *New Literary History* 18, No. 2 (Winter 1987), 303–32; 308–9.

Microhistory

Elena de la Cruz and her appearance before the tribunal of the Holy Office are what Fernand Braudel called “mere disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs.”²⁸ In concerning itself with such a seemingly minor occurrence, this thesis aligns itself with the category of historical study known as microhistory.

It has long been recognised that the experiences of a single person can illustrate a great deal about the culture in which he or she dwelt. In general, however, such studies have concerned themselves with demonstrably “important” (and generally male) people, such as aristocrats, military men, and politicians. This approach undoubtedly revealed a great deal about individuals and certain social milieux. However, it tended to elide differences within societies and cultures by positing a homogeneous culture that in fact belonged to the few. Microhistory has arisen in part as a way to address difference within cultures, and its subjects are rarely those of conventional history.

Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Zemon Davis, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Judith Brown, Gene Brucker, and Giulia Calvi²⁹ are among the historians

²⁸ Quoted by Randolph Stern in his introduction to Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year: The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xvi.

²⁹ See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/ London: Harvard University Press, 1983); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294–1324*; Judith Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1986); Fulvio Tomizza, *Heavenly Supper: The Story of Maria Janis*, trans. Anne Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991);

who have found entry to a culture through serendipitous documentary traces of individuals. These traces, often left by individuals' encounters with the institutions that governed their lives, offer access to the viewpoints and aspirations³⁰ of people who have often been considered lost to history—women, the poor, the uneducated, the powerless. While preserving the narratives contained in the dossiers that are their sources, microhistories dramatise the often-neglected interplay between context and individual actions.

One of the most commonly raised objections to microhistory is that its subjects are not "typical." Ginzburg's Friulian miller becomes, by this argument, a mere blip on the screen of *real* history. The microhistorian's subject is the deviant relegated by the sober historian to a footnote. To be sure, the typical man or woman of the sixteenth century is highly unlikely to have left us his or her story. The very fact that we know of Ginzburg's miller, Brown's lesbian nun, and Brucker's jilted fiancée makes them atypical. Yet the question of typicality bears closer examination. An individual who comes into conflict with his or her society inevitably tells us a great deal about what is acceptable. Indeed, "perhaps a society is best known through its heretics and dissenters."³¹ We thus learn from the case of Elena de la Cruz what was and was not acceptable behaviour for a Mexican nun of the sixteenth century. This, according to Carlo Ginzburg, is the "negative" way of using microhistory.

and Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year: The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

³⁰The word "mentalities," while evocative, is rejected for its undesired structuralist implications.

³¹ Richard E. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 1.

In a more positive vein, the atypical individual shows the boundaries of possibility by expanding those boundaries.³² The trial of Elena de la Cruz shows us that it was possible for a woman to formulate and promulgate her own theological opinions, and thus to define new possibilities for herself beyond the proscriptions and prescriptions made for women by male clerics. On the other hand, we see the results of pushing back the borders of possibility when Elena's alienation of her fellows makes her unorthodox opinions intolerable. The text thus preserves and displays the interplay of possibility and impossibility and the very small space a woman could find between what was prescribed and what was tolerated.

Objections that arise to the use of Inquisitorial documents in particular concern the power imbalance inherent in their production. The documents, it is said, cannot "tell the truth" because first, they contain information as recorded by a notary who served the Inquisition; and second, they are the words of people who were fighting for their lives. Much of the weight of these objections rests on the Black Legend of the Inquisition, which is now outdated. The first objection can be readily dealt with; notaries were charged with recording verbatim what was said by inquisitors, the accused, and witnesses. The varying voices that emerge from testimonies and the idiosyncratic, idiomatic, and colloquial nature of the language used should convince anyone who works with such documents that notaries took their duty seriously.

³² See Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, xx-xxi.

The second objection is somewhat more difficult to dismiss. There is no doubt that the version of “truth” recorded in trial transcripts is often hermetic. Anyone who has been a juror will know that this problem plagues modern inquisitions as well. However, critical reading is required in dealing with *all* sources. And witnesses did not come passively to the inquisitors as sheep to the slaughter. Indeed, people framed their stories in varying ways, according to their versions of truth. The popular modern perception of the Inquisition was *not* shared by most of its contemporaries. People accepted the Inquisition’s activities much as we accept the activities of the police: we might not like to be on the receiving end of a police investigation, but the presence of the police as an instrument of social order and social control is reassuring.³³ People—that is, *most* people—believed in what the Inquisition stood for and spoke openly to it as a result.

One Inquisition historian has suggested that the information in Inquisition dossiers should be filtered for the truth according to religious sensitivity. That is, information with religious overtones should be considered suspect, while information about everyday life should be accepted.³⁴ Information in the dossiers may sometimes be “twisted,” but

³³ “[I]t controlled society, not with authoritarian measures imposed from above, but with the full cooperation, respect, and assistance of ordinary people.” Richard Boyer, “Juan Vázquez, Muleteer of Seventeenth-Century Mexico,” *The Americas* XXXVII (1981), 421–443; 441.

³⁴ Jean-Pierre Dedieu, “The Archives of the Holy Office of Toledo as a Source for Historical Anthropology,” trans. E.W. Monter, in *The Inquisition in Early Modern Europe: Studies on Sources and Methods*, ed. Gustav Henningsen and John Tedeschi in association with Charles Amiel (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 158–89; 168: “it is obvious, to take an extreme case, that information about mealtimes is less twisted than the qualification of ‘Lutheran’ or ‘Arian,’ which the fiscal [prosecutor] put on some statement by the accused.”

everyday information may be as loaded as more overtly religious information. Meals and their timing were critical in cases against crypto-Jews, for example. There is no quick way to arrive at the truth: only judicious detective work can allow the historian any access to a reconstruction of events and motivations.³⁵ This should not discourage the use of Inquisitorial documents; in fact, idiosyncratic narratives, contesting versions of truth, and discernible (or opaque) witness strategies make such documents the meatiest of sources.

In Elena's case, moreover, the question of *truth* is the least interesting question that one can ask of the sources. All witnesses were in essential agreement about "what happened." More interesting by far are their explanations for what happened—explanations which found their apogee in Elena's gender-based defence. More interesting than whether Elena erred—for clearly she did—is the impression of her personality upon the dossier. She emerges as a woman sure of her status, yet by turns haughty and grovelling; an attentive reader of devotional works who sarcastically scoffs at papal power; an intelligent, arrogant, and domineering woman who calls herself stupid to escape punishment; a formulator of her own theology who shows no courage of conviction when facing the inquisitor. And the document offers further attractions: a fascinating reading of the dossier is possible when the trial is "read against" the events that formed its context.

The case of Elena de la Cruz, approached from this perspective, offers access to an entire world. To assume that Elena was a *representative*

³⁵For an interesting discussion, see Elizabeth S. Cohen and Thomas V. Cohen, "Camilla the Go-Between: The Politics of Gender in a Roman Household (1559)," *Continuity and Change* 4, No. 1 (1989), 53–77; 58.

or *typical* nun is to miss the point. Elena's trial was situated at the juncture of various "webs of significance,"³⁶ resonating with important developments of the period. The *proceso* thus appears as a synecdoche for the subordination of the encomendero class to political authority, the promulgation of the decrees and reforms of the Council of Trent, and the subjection of the regular clergy to episcopal governance. The trial also provides a view of the sixteenth-century trend, intensified by Tridentine reforms, toward a virile, homogeneous Catholicism in which women and their religious life were regarded with suspicion.

This is not to say, however, that the text of Elena's trial was *only* a reflection of the times, "a mirror carried down the high road of history."³⁷ The text contains tensions: between respect for the honour of the elite and distrust of their autonomy; between respect for popular piety as foundation of the Counter-Reformation church and distrust of the unorthodox forms that piety might take; and most importantly, for my purposes, between honouring and protection of women and misogynist fear of their potential for disorder. And the reader is not immune to the tensions of readership: Elena is not the "sixteenth-century precursor of Sor Juana,"³⁸ but neither is she to be reviled because she grovelled in the Inquisition's dock. If she does not seem noble, she is at least recognisable.

To understand Elena, we must first understand that to be a nun in sixteenth-century Mexico was very different than being a nun today. Elena

³⁶The term belongs to Clifford Geertz: see "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 1-32; 5..

³⁷The term is James Smith Allen's; see "History and the Novel: *Mentalité* in Modern Popular Fiction," *History and Theory* 22, 233-52; 235.

³⁸Richard E. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 135.

and her sisters moved and were at home in a world of material, cultural, and spiritual privilege that no longer exists.

Nuns in Colonial Latin America

In June, 1524, after many requests from Hernán Cortés, twelve Franciscan friars (*Los Doce*) arrived at Mexico City to begin the systematic Christianisation of New Spain. Cortés met them at the gates of the city, kneeling to kiss the hems of the friars' mantles and thereby demonstrating to the astonished Indians the singular status to be accorded the clergy.³⁹

Nuns too were to be part of the Christianisation of New Spain. Six years later, in 1530, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, Bishop of Mexico, imported six Franciscan *beatas* to teach Indian girls.⁴⁰ Thus was founded the *beaterio* of San José de Gracia. In 1534, eight more pious laywomen were brought in from Spain for the same purpose. By 1537, it was apparent to Zumárraga that a more *regular* force was necessary; the *beatas* had largely dispersed, and in any case were not bound to obey the institutional church. This had caused problems.⁴¹ Zumárraga's efforts to establish convents of regular nuns were stymied by Ramírez de Fuenleal, the president of the

³⁹ Mariano Picon-Salas, *A Cultural History of Spanish America: From Conquest to Independence*, trans. Irving A. Leonard (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California, 1962).

⁴⁰ Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain: 1523–1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 210. *Beatas* are laywomen who live like nuns—in this case, third-order Franciscans—but are not bound by vows.

⁴¹ Ricard says only that the women proved "unsuccessful." Colin MacLachan and Jaime Rodríguez say of the schools started by the women only that "subsequently they appear to have been closed." See *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1980), 136.

Audiencia of Mexico, who felt that the time was not “opportune.”⁴² Nonetheless, by about 1540, only nineteen years after the Aztec surrender, Zumárraga had managed to found the first women’s convent in New Spain, Nuestra Señora de la Concepción.

La Concepción originally housed Spanish nuns; the first three nuns to inhabit the convent were Madre Paula de Santa Ana, María Luisa de San Francisco, and María Francisca Evangelista, all of Toledo.⁴³ Some other early nuns were from Salamanca.⁴⁴ In its first year of operation, on 22 September 1541, the convent received two novices, both from noble conquistador families. Sor Ana de San Buena Ventura was the daughter of Alonso de Avila and his wife Juana López; her co-professant, Sor Isabel de los Angeles, was born of the union of Juan de Tapia and doña María de Echáñez.⁴⁵ In 1546, Ana’s sister, Ursula del Espíritu Santo, joined La Concepción, inaugurating in Mexico the long tradition of family clustering in convents.⁴⁶ By 1592, the monastery contained at least three hundred people within its walls.⁴⁷ And by 1612, there were approximately 130 nuns in La Concepción, attended by about 500 servants and slaves.⁴⁸

⁴² Ricard, 212.

⁴³ Marroqui, “La Concepción,” in *La Ciudad de México*, Vol. 2, 136.

⁴⁴ “Religious Orders of Women in Colonial Spanish America,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII, 322–8; 325.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ This tendency had long existed in Europe, and was part of the noble tradition of women’s convents. It had been decried as contrary to true conventual life for as long as it had existed.

⁴⁷ Marroqui., 138.

⁴⁸ “Religious Orders of Women,” *NCE* XII, 323–4.

As this suggests the life of the Conceptionist nun was not uncomfortable. By papal concession, some orders of women were allowed to live what was called private life. These women had their own apartments and often brought servants and slaves into the convent to live with them, run errands, and prepare their meals. Those meals might include all manner of dainty foods. Chocolate was one of the biggest expenses of convents such as la Concepción.⁴⁹ Professed nuns in a convent such as La Concepción devoted their time to singing, praying, reading, composing and performing music, and embroidery.⁵⁰ Orders that permitted such a life were known as *calzada* or shod orders. These included Conceptionists, Urbanistas, Dominicans, and Clarissas.⁵¹ Convents of calzadas might include as many as 1000 people, most of them servants. The discalced or barefoot orders accounted for far fewer nuns. Among these orders were the Capuchins, first-order Clarissas or Poor Clares, Discalced Carmelites (St. Teresa's order), Augustinians, and Cistercians. Such nuns lived an austere, demanding, communal life. Because of this, their convents were generally very small, containing no more than fifty nuns.⁵²

By 1580, seven houses of nuns were operating in Mexico City, including two *recogimientos*, or houses of penitence.⁵³ By the end of the

⁴⁹Asunción Lavrin, "The Role of the Nunneries in the Economy of New Spain in the Eighteenth Century." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, No. 4 (1966), 371-93; 382.

⁵⁰"Religious Orders of Women," *NCE* XII., 324.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 323.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Fernando Benítez, *The Century after Cortés*, trans. Joan MacLean (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1965). These houses were used to confine and reform prostitutes and other troublesome women as well as to house women remanded in custody by the Inquisition. Elena was not sent there, nor was she imprisoned in the

colonial period, New Spain contained more than 2400 nuns, the majority of these in the capital.⁵⁴ While this may seem like a miniscule proportion of a total population in the neighbourhood of seven million,⁵⁵ nuns' importance belies this statistic. The convent and the female religious within it were symbolically crucial to colonisation and the imposition of Spanish institutions and values. Marianism and Hispanic notions about women—to be discussed below—combined with the important symbolic role of the convent gave women religious high status in Mexican society.

As part of a general return to a purer, more primitive monastic life, the Council of Trent reinforced claustration for female religious. Claustration was an ideal for all religious, of course; but friars were crucial in ministry and preaching as well as in the more purely monastic pursuits of prayer and study. Therefore, they had a legitimate reason for being in the world. Nuns, on the other hand, were prohibited from active evangelism by their sex. They had no reason to leave the convent. In the Middle Ages, nuns often travelled long distances managing the financial affairs of their convents, visiting family and friends, and making pilgrimages. Their wanderings could, and did, lead to scandal.

dungeons beneath the archepiscopal palaces, where many clerics had languished that year.

⁵⁴ Asunción Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," *Catholic Historical Review* 53, # 3, October 1972; 367—87. With independence and subsequent diminutions of ecclesiastical privilege and status, these numbers declined dramatically.

⁵⁵ Charles Gibson, *Spain in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 117. At the same time (that is, the end of the colonial period), Mexico proper had about seven million people, of whom more than one million were white, and about three million Indian (118). The rest were either of African—a small number, about 375,000 for mainland New Spain—or of mixed descent.

Henceforth, Trent decreed, pure contemplation was to be the only life for nuns. In the Iberian world, this reform was accepted wholeheartedly—claustration persists in Spain. Male and female religious alike were nonetheless enlisted in the “spiritual conquest of Mexico,” but a strict division of religious labour obtained. Only men were to be in the front lines of the battle. Women were to remain within the cloister.⁵⁶

The convent would continue to hold elite women whose families could afford large dowries. In fact, the rigid claustration imposed by Trent solidified the convent’s elite character, because much wealth was needed to sustain nuns in perpetual seclusion. Dowries had to be substantial enough to support nuns without their engaging directly in economic activities: collecting rents, buying and selling produce, and collecting tithes.⁵⁷ The convent had to be wealthy enough that servants and agents,

⁵⁶ No longer would they have the freedom of movement that even papal bulls, such as “Periculoso” of 1298, had been impotent to deny. See Graciela Daichman, *Wayward Nuns in Medieval Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 21. “Periculoso” was a response to the scandals caused by laxity in enclosure. Daichman reproduces and translates a section from the bull: “Desiring to provide for the perilous and detestable state of certain nuns, who having slackened the reins of decency and having shamelessly cast aside the modesty of their order and of their sex, sometimes gad about outside their monasteries in the dwellings of secular persons, and frequently admit suspected persons within the same monasteries, to the grave offence of Him to whom they have, of their own will, vowed their innocence, to the opprobrium of religion and the scandal of very many persons; we by the present constitution, which shall be irrefragably valid, decree with healthful intent that all and sundry nuns, present and future, to whatever order they belong and in whatever part of the world, shall henceforth remain perpetually enclosed within their monasteries; so that no nun tacitly or expressly professed in religion shall henceforth have or be able to have the power of going out of those monasteries for whatsoever reason or cause, unless perchance any be found manifestly suffering from a disease so great and of such a nature that she cannot, without grave danger or scandal, live together with others; and to no dishonest or even honest person shall entry or access be given by them, unless for a reasonable and manifest cause and by a special licence from the person to whom [the granting of such a licence] pertains; that so, altogether withdrawn from public and mundane sights, they may serve God more freely and, all opportunity for wantonness being removed, they may more diligently preserve for Him in all holiness their souls and their bodies” (22–3).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

not nuns, would carry on whatever external economic activity was necessary to the survival of the institution. This goal was also bolstered by the Laws of the Indies, which ordered that no convent should take in more nuns than it was able to comfortably support.⁵⁸ In Mexico, dowries were substantial, and might also include property and slaves.⁵⁹ In the sixteenth century, the necessary dowry for profession in La Concepción was about 1500 pesos,⁶⁰ an amount that only the wealthiest families could provide. Women whose families could not afford dowries were not wholly excluded from the convent; they might profess in a Capuchin convent, which required no dowries (but, of course, had a demanding rule).⁶¹ As well, impecunious novices could win scholarships; rich patrons established dowry funds, and would sponsor poor but "respectable" girls. Girls with musical or other talents were sometimes accepted without dowry on the basis of their usefulness.⁶²

Still, the convent undoubtedly preserved an elite character throughout the colonial period, not least because only those of ostensibly pure Spanish blood were allowed to take the veil. Though there was officially no rule forbidding Indians to profess,⁶³ in practice few were accepted. (Nonetheless, some aristocratic mestizas entered, as we shall see.)

⁵⁸Asunción Lavrin, "Religious Life of Mexican Women in the XVIII Century" (diss.); Radcliffe College, 1962, 3.

⁵⁹ Lavrin gives a figure of 3000 to 4000 pesos for the late colonial period. See "Values," 371n. 9, 375. Asp gives a figure of 4000 pesos and notes that the income of an average encomienda in this period was about 1500 pesos (94).

⁶⁰Schwaller, *Origins*, 130.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 372.

⁶³ "Religious Orders of Women," *NCE* XII 322-8.

The first convent explicitly for Indian nuns, Corpus Christi in Mexico City, was not established until 1724, and was reserved for the Indian aristocracy. Thus the convent replicated the general concern of Iberian society with nobility, which was primarily signified, in this period, by noble bloodlines.⁶⁴

One constant in the history of the convent—and especially critical to the Mexican situation—was its efficacy in preserving elite family wealth and female honour at the same time. Spanish inheritance laws dictated that each child should share in her or his parents' estates. This was taken so seriously that preferment of one heir over his or her siblings was prohibited until the late thirteenth century.⁶⁵ Over time, this would obviously have the effect of dispersing the wealth that families had amassed. One way to avoid this was to create an entailment or *mayorazgo*, which could be worth up to 47 percent of the total estate.⁶⁶ This entailment could be passed to the eldest son—as in the case of Elena de la Cruz's brother Juan Gutiérrez Altamirano. Professing children in religious orders provided another way to concentrate wealth in the hands of as few children as possible.

In New Spain, as elsewhere, fathers designated one or more daughters as nuns to avoid both the prohibitive cost and difficulty of contracting an appropriate and honourable marriage⁶⁷ and to preserve

⁶⁴See I.A.A. Thompson, "Neo-Noble Nobility: Concepts of *Hidalguía* in Early Modern Castile," *European History Quarterly* XV (1985), 379–406; 381.

⁶⁵Heath Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest: Women in Castilian Town Society, 1100–1300* (Place: House, Date), 27–8.

⁶⁶Schwaller, *Wealth*, 10.

⁶⁷ See Susan Soeiro, "The Social and Economic Role of the Convent: Women and Nuns in Colonial Bahia, 1677–1800." *HAHR* 54, #2 (May 1974), 209–232. "The most compelling

family wealth from fragmentation among large families. Convent dowries were in general much smaller than the amounts necessary to ensure an adequate marriage, though families needed to provide professed daughters with a maintenance allowance as well.⁶⁸ As noble dowries rose steadily through the sixteenth century,⁶⁹ the use of the convent as a bulwark of family wealth became even more important. Moreover, a father whose daughter took the veil was assured that her honour—and thus the family's honour—would be preserved. Family honour was reciprocal and collective;⁷⁰ women were thus repositories for the honour of their families. That honour could not be risked. Proverbs illustrated the complete association of feminine honour with protection and/or enclosure. “La mujer honrada, la pierna quebrada y en casa,” it was said. An honourable woman should be in the house—with a broken leg, for good measure.⁷¹ An even more venerable Latin saw claimed, “Aut maritus, aut murus.”⁷² That is, a woman needs “either a husband or a wall.”

Honour, of course, “was the ethos which rationalized the existence of the colonial hierarchy.”⁷³ Damage to honour was a disaster, “the

motive for having a daughter take the veil was the fear of contracting a socially prejudicial marriage” (218).

⁶⁸ Ida Altman, *Emigrants and Society: Extremadura and Spanish America in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 148..

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Peristiany*, 21–77; 52–3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45. Pitt-Rivers calls this an ancient saying that persists today.

⁷² Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1990), 19. Rapley notes that the existence of the phrase itself was used to argue for the existence of law. Also see Daichman, 13.

equivalent of social death.”⁷⁴ Only under male control could a woman’s honour be protected. As virgin under father, as wife under husband, or as nun under confessor, the Spanish American woman had a legitimate place in society. Otherwise, she was a “wandering woman,” the emblem both of female honour lost and of social disorder.⁷⁵ Indeed, female honour was an issue that united society and went beyond ethnic and social divisions:

The protection of female sexual honour was, indeed, one of the very few social values that enjoyed nearly universal respect and consideration... Protection of feminine sexual reputation for virtue was a primary cultural concern, surpassing even claims of social status and economic privilege.⁷⁶

This is not to say that men respected women’s honour absolutely: in fact, a double standard obtained. Men were intensely concerned with the honour of women of their own family and social grouping. But women outside their families, particularly if of lower social status, were fair game for sexual strategies that ranged from false promises of marriage to violent rape. Men were certainly not averse to destroying the honour of an unprotected woman.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ann Twinam, “Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America,” in Asunción Lavrin, ed. *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1989); 118–154; 123.

⁷⁴ Patricia Seed, *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts over Marriage Choice 1574–1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 45.

⁷⁵ Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, 1990), 7, 68–9.

⁷⁶ Seed., 64, 71.

⁷⁷ Julio Caro Baroja suggests that it was precisely the importance of female honour that made it such an attractive target for picaresque conquest. See J. Caro Baroja, “Honour and Shame: A Historical Account of Several Conflicts,” trans. R. Johnson, in Peristiany, ed. *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 81–137; 110. Jimenez Rueda goes so far as to state that “the man who had

Thus, because a woman's honour was explicitly linked to her chastity, her remaining single was considered virtually impossible. Unprotected women were in constant danger of losing their honour. As might be imagined, the possibility of preserving female honour was limited in lower-status groups; low-status women often had to work outside their homes, where they were vulnerable to sexual approach and often victims of sexual attack.⁷⁸ Still, there is little doubt that at the level of ideal at least, female honour was of prime concern at all levels of society—even if the ideal of female honour was only achievable at the top of the social pyramid. The convent was both the expression of this societal concern—founders often used the preservation of female honour as an argument—and its apogee.⁷⁹ It was both the actual medium and the metaphor for the sheltering of female honour.

In Mexico, we have seen the contribution of nuns and the convent to the preservation of female honour; we have noted how the convent served as a metaphor for the sheltering of women and thus for social

conquered a world now dedicated himself to conquering the body of a woman" (*El hombre que ha conquistado un mundo se dedica, ahora, a conquistar el cuerpo de una mujer*)—an enormously suggestive statement. See Julio Jimenez Rueda, *Herejias y supersticiones en la Nueva España (Los heterodoxos en México)* (Mexico: Imprenta Universitaria, 1946), 226.

⁷⁸On the other hand, of course, such women had a certain freedom denied to those with honour. See Cohen and Cohen, "Camilla," 65–7, and Solange Alberro, "Beatriz de Padilla: Mistress and Mother," in David Sweet and Gary Nash, eds. *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California, 1981), 247–256; 255.

⁷⁹ An interesting note: of the (elite) unwed mothers studied by Ann Twinam, only two—who had had secret pregnancies—entered convents. Convents were not simply a repository for unwanted or single women. Their rôle as preservers of female honour was, it seems, taken seriously. Also of note is that fact that Indians were not exempted from valuation of sexual honour. The Aztecs, of course, considered chastity of great importance; and one problem with Zumárraga's beata experiment was that the Indian schoolgirls' fathers (who were, of course, caciques) felt their daughters were given too much freedom by the Spanish women.

order.⁸⁰ Thus it should not surprise us to find that male power functioned in the same way, patriarchy serving as another, complementary metaphor for order.⁸¹

The elevation of women religious combined with patriarchal social structures to create tensions. Female and male clergy tended to conceive of nuns and their functions and abilities in rather different manners. Inevitably, nuns conflicted with male/hierarchical power. For all of nuns' elevated position, they were still women, and as such were considered incapable of self-government. They were subordinate (in practice and by vow of obedience) to male confessors and superiors, who could evoke the spectre of female weakness and sinfulness if necessary. Yet their special status gave them expectations that conflicted with what their confessors were prepared to allow. María de la Encarnación, born in 1571, discovered this when she spoke about her desire to establish a discalced Carmelite convent:⁸²

it came to the attention of our provincial Superior and visitant, Fray Tomás de San Vicente... he said on more than one occasion, never in his day, that for as long as he might be Superior he would never permit a convent of an order professing such perfection to be founded by pampered criollas fond of chocolate [obviously calzadas],

⁸⁰ This is discussed further below.

⁸¹ Seed, 7.

⁸² Literally, "unshod." The discalced Carmelites were, of course, founded by St. Teresa, who reformed the Carmelite order. Most of the Carmelite nuns in Mexico were *calzadas*, who followed a less strict rule considered appropriate for women. Discalced Carmelites followed a very strict and ascetic rule. In fact, some women who tried the life were forced to move to less ascetic orders when their health gave out. The life of the discalced Carmelite was indeed perfect.

who would bring along three or four maids to serve each one of us, and many other things of that style.⁸³

Thus, for all their talk of a garden of virtues, for their use of nuns as models for popular piety, male clergy remembered that nuns were women. Brides of Christ and daughters of Mary could be belittled as mere women, "a sex so scarce in advice and so abundant in caprices."⁸⁴ Hence, Renaissance stereotypes of women as intellectually and morally weak could be invoked; a nun's lack of obedience or desire for an "inappropriate" religious life could topple the pedestal on which she stood.

Nuns sometimes enjoyed real rapport with their male confessors and supervisors. On the other hand, they were obliged to tolerate whatever confessor they received because of their vows of obedience. Friction sometimes resulted, particularly when a nun deviated from what her confessor considered the correct or usual religious path: in general, that is, when she showed an excessive predilection for intellectual, mystical, or ascetic pursuits. For example, María de San José, an early eighteenth-century Augustinian, was commanded by her confessor first to write twenty-three hours a day; then to write and read nothing, not even touching a pen; and finally to resume writing. When she had amassed a quantity of writings, he took her notebooks and papers away, never telling her what he had done with them. Most nuns' writings became the property of their confessors, who might use the writings (especially as

⁸³ *Chronicle of the Founding of The Ancient Convento de Santa Teresa (written by another hand) by the Reverend Mother Sor María de la Encarnación*, trans. Amanda Powell, in Arenal/Schlau, 368–374; 370.

⁸⁴ The Bishop of Puebla quoted in Lavrin, "Ecclesiastical Reform of Nunneries in New Spain in the Eighteenth century," *The Americas* 22, #2, October 1965, 182–203; 199.

excerpts) in the aforementioned popular and devotional literature. In this sense, the mystical “feminine space”⁸⁵ women had created was coopted into masculine strategies of control. Women’s experiences were digested and rewritten as “master texts”⁸⁶ for the edification of others. María de San José complains that her confessor

was by nature a very upright and stern man, and therefore he insisted on treating me with severity and aloofness, because my path was most unusual⁸⁷...And if I wished to tell him something, he would attack me, and then answer me with something quite different from what I had asked... never... did he refer to me in any way that would suggest I was his spiritual daughter.⁸⁸

The degree of control and intolerance evinced by such a complaint shows how much the confessional could determine a woman’s spiritual life and undermine whatever “space” she had created. Thus the “feminine space” of the convent must be situated within the larger system of gender relations. The symbolic role of the convent and its inhabitants as sacred virgins was also related to the larger system of gender relations and ideologies. The convent was undoubtedly a repository for the daughters of the elite, conserving both family honour and family wealth. It was also a powerful economic institution. More recent historians have depicted the

⁸⁵The term is Julia Kristeva’s; see “Stabat Mater,” in Susan Sulciman, ed. *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1985), 99–118; 100.

⁸⁶Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia, 1989).

⁸⁷ She was a mystic, which could cause problems for nuns, especially if their confessors decided their visions were unorthodox enough to merit attention from the Holy Office (Myers, 36); in general, however, it appears that confessors simply burned writings that were doctrinally suspect.

⁸⁸ María de San José, *Life*, trans. Amanda Powell, in Arenal/Schlau, 383–387; 386.

convent as a career option for ambitious women. Undoubtedly, houses of women religious encompassed all of these things. But the female monastery was also of primary symbolic importance in society. Elena de la Cruz and her coreligionists were not simply wealthy noblewomen put on ice, however tempting it may be to view them that way. These women were, for their society, a symbol of religious and social order: and this symbolic role was not without its tensions.

Mary and Her Daughters

According to Tridentine doctrine, imitation (*imitatio*) was to be the characteristic goal of the contemplative Christian, and nuns were to imitate the Blessed Virgin in her prayerful aspect. The veneration of Mary was and continues to be a powerful force throughout the Hispanic and Mediterranean world. Marianism is an incredibly powerful phenomenon; it endured throughout the colonial period, and has lasted (with modifications in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) to the present day.

In Mexico, the worship of Mary can be traced back to Cortés, who carried an image of Our Lady of the Remedies on his person during the Conquest. After this auspicious beginning, Marianism remained strong. Franciscan monks were particularly devoted to Mary and emphasised her in their missionary activities as a symbol of charity, calling her “the good little grandmother.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹William B. Taylor, “The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion,” *American Ethnologist* 14, No. 1 (February 1987), 9–33; 11.

Just outside Mexico City, in Tepeyac, stood a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe. She had appeared there, the story has it, in 1531. Whatever the merits of this dating, by the time of Elena's trial, the cult of Guadalupe was well established. Archbishop Montúfar himself was a patron of the shrine. In 1555, he ordered the building of the first basilica. During the same decade, Spanish women from Mexico City were already making barefoot pilgrimages to visit—and beseech—the Virgin.⁹⁰

The Virgin in *any* of her manifestations was the human Mother of God. As such, she was widely believed and expected to intercede on behalf of humanity; and she was appealed to in a variety of circumstances and cases. In crisis-torn seventeenth-century Naples,⁹¹ for example, the Virgin was appealed to both as a symbol of justice (by those in revolt) and as a symbol of order (by the priests and civic officials hoping to quell the disturbance). Thus in the premodern world at least, Marian worship was a worldly phenomenon, and often provided a ritual context for political action. The Virgin's power was indubitable. For example, as late as 1736, during a typhus plague in Mexico City, the Virgin of Guadalupe was declared "Patroness of the City of Mexico" and was transported to the cathedral of Mexico City; this apparently led to "the truly miraculous cessation of the great plague."⁹² Even some eighty years later, in 1813, a reader of the *Diario* could confidently assert that the 1737 plague "did not

⁹⁰Ibid., 12. The development of the national Guadalupe cult and the Indianisation of Guadalupe appear to be later phenomena.

⁹¹ See Peter Burke, "The Virgin of the Carmine and the Revolt of Masaniello," *Past and Present* 99 (May 1983), 3–21. Burke notes that the rioters "looked to the Virgin Mary and to San Gennaro to protect them against unjust taxes as well as against plague" (20).

⁹² Victor Turner, Edith Turner, "Mexican Pilgrimages: Myth and History" in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 69.

stop until the sovereign Mother of Mercies, in her aspect of Guadalupe, was solemnly reaffirmed to be the patron of the Kingdom."⁹³ A viceregal edict of 1797 discussed various practical methods of discouraging the spread of plague. Among the thirteen points listed was this one: "nothing will do more to stop the epidemic than fervent prayers to God, His Holy Mother, and His Saints, imploring their mercy."⁹⁴

Virgins, like saints, could also specialise. The Virgin of Guadalupe was effective against flood and plague,⁹⁵ the twin banes of the Valley of Mexico; the Virgin of the Remedies (Remedios) specialised in drought.⁹⁶ They also specialised politically and ethnically. The "clash" between these two Virgins in nineteenth-century New Spain⁹⁷ is Mexican evidence of the Virgin's political rôle. Her intercession could come outside the realms of disease and discomfort.

Women's special relationship with Mary was acknowledged widely. We have seen that women were prominent among pilgrims making the trek from Mexico City to the shrine of Guadalupe. Women's devotion to Mary was widespread during the sixteenth century. Jean-Pierre Dedieu has found a "thematic concentration on the Virgin" in Toledan Inquisition

⁹³ Donald B. Cooper, *Epidemic Disease in Mexico City, 1761-1813* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 167.

⁹⁴ Cooper, 101.

⁹⁵ Turner/Turner, 69.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ In 1810, Father Miguel Hidalgo led an anti-Spanish uprising under the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and was opposed by "Spanish" forces under the other Virgin. As the notion of *criollo/mestizo* culture developed, Guadalupe, the dark Virgin, became the Mexican to Remedios' *Gachupina*. See Turner and Turner, 90-92: "Remedios is 'structure,' Guadalupe 'communitas.'" This clash, of course, was not yet evident in the sixteenth century.

trials of women. This concentration could lead to some startling beliefs, such as that the Trinity comprised *four* persons rather than three: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Virgin.⁹⁸ More orthodox women also devoted themselves in particular to the Virgin. For instance, in the plague of 1797, the Viceroy honoured the images of Santísimo Cristo Renovado de Santa Teresa, while the Vicereine sponsored a novena for Guadalupe.⁹⁹ This special feminine relationship to the Virgin was especially important to nuns, who were, after all, dedicated to prayer.¹⁰⁰

As we have noted, the division of religious labour in tridentine Catholicism was gendered. Throughout the Catholic world, nuns' prayers were considered highly effective. Why this should be, in a world that considered women inferior, is an interesting question. Women were undoubtedly considered more carnal than men. Perhaps *because* of this, their spirituality was often considered more worthy than that of the more spiritual sex.¹⁰¹ Often, spiritual women and their male directors would use femininity as an inverted claim for greatness. After all, if God had given divine knowledge and favours to a mere woman, she must be *extremely* deserving. In much the same manner, women religious were beseeched for their valuable prayers—and nuns themselves were not loath to claim

⁹⁸Dedieu, *op. cit.*, 164.

⁹⁹Cooper, 142.

¹⁰⁰*Untold Sisters*, 341.

¹⁰¹MacLean refers to the "contradictory nature of woman who is able to plumb the depths of sin and rise to peaks of virtue not accessible to the male" (7). Also see John Coakley, "Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans," *Church History* 60, No. 4 (December 1991), 445–61; 450. Coakley sees in the relationships between male and female religious the friars' fascination with difference, and with women's privileged relationship to the divine. This did not, however, cause problems of authority, as the women were cloistered and "friars traced the boundaries of their authority through gender" (459).

their prayers' value. In fifteenth-century Florence, one abbess claimed that such prayers were "*plus utiles... que sont deux mille chevaux.*"¹⁰² Many (and often desperate) exhortations to nuns show how seriously their contemporaries took their abilities.¹⁰³ The correspondence of Philip IV with María de Jesús de Agreda shows that even a seventeenth-century king considered the prayers of a nun important to his success in the world and in the afterlife.¹⁰⁴

Prayers might seek not only the release of souls in purgatory, but, as we have seen, preservation from natural and human disaster. For example, María de San Joseph, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun, was beset by requests for her prayers against "earthquakes, drought, and political and ecclesiastical uprisings."¹⁰⁵ In making donations, patrons were conscious of the efficacy of nuns' prayers. Bequests often entailed the recitation of hundreds of masses for the repose of the donors' souls. In one case, the convent of Santa Clara had by 1760 built up a huge debt to a seventeenth-century patron, amounting to 32,196 masses.¹⁰⁶ Thus prayer was by no means taken lightly. Nuns, like the Virgin, could effect change through faith.

¹⁰² Richard Trexler, "Le célibat à la fin du Moyen Age: les Religieuses de Florence," *Annales—E.S.C.* 27 (1972), 1329—1350; 1329.

¹⁰³ Nuns' special relationship to God was not doubted: numerous conventual miracles and visions were tacitly and officially accepted by the Church hierarchy. See Lavrin, "Values," 380.

¹⁰⁴ See Kendrick, *passim*.

¹⁰⁵ Myers, 38.

¹⁰⁶ Lavrin, "The Role of the Nunneries in the Economy of New Spain in the Eighteenth Century," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, #4, November 1966, 387. By episcopal order, the debt load was reduced to sixteen masses per month.

Along with the Virgin's intercessory powers, however, she had another function: that of exemplar for Christian womanhood in general. As the redeemed Eve, Mary embodied "humility, obedience, silence... mortification, modesty, prudence... traditional female virtue."¹⁰⁷ In Reconquest Spain, Christian virtues of the good wife and mother were developed in opposition to perceptions of the harem and its perceived deleterious, feminising effects on Muslim society.¹⁰⁸ Whereas masculine Spanish virtues combined vigorous militarism with Christian virtue, as exemplified by the figure of Santiago, women's roles were defined largely in more purely Christian terms.¹⁰⁹ In Mexico, Mary was a "model-for"¹¹⁰ female behaviour and thus for the erection of a Marianist gender ideology¹¹¹ that stressed female purity, enclosure, and self-abnegation as ideals for *all* classes of women.¹¹²

Mexican Christianity, so strongly influenced by the Franciscans, stressed evangelisation by example. In their behaviour, and in the organisation of their monasteries,¹¹³ the friars would provide the Indians

¹⁰⁷ Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 23.

¹⁰⁸ Dillard, 10-11.

¹⁰⁹ Altman, *Emigrants*, 75.

¹¹⁰ The phrase is Clifford Geertz's.

¹¹¹ For discussion, see Evelyn P. Stevens, "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," in Ann Pescatello, ed. *Female and Male in Latin America: Essays* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 89-101. Marianismo as discussed by Stevens is a later and non-elite phenomenon.

¹¹² See Elinor Burkett, "In Dubious Sisterhood: Class and Sex in Spanish Colonial South America," in *Latin American Perspectives* IV, #s 1, 2, Winter/Spring 1977, 18-26; 20.

¹¹³ As Inga Clendinnen notes, the word "friaries" is more appropriate, as the regular clergy of Mexico were by no means cloistered or monastic, but I shall follow traditional usage. See Inga Clendinnen, "Disciplining the Indians: Franciscan Ideology and

with *exempla*. Even the well-tended gardens and orchards with which monasteries were surrounded were intended for the edification of the Indians.¹¹⁴ The Franciscan beatas were to teach their charges to be good Christian wives and mothers.¹¹⁵ But as *exempla* they failed; according to Robert Ricard, they were not committed enough, and were “undisciplined, of mediocre culture, and without a vigorous personality.”¹¹⁶ The women who *could* exemplify Christian womanhood in its Marian aspect were regular nuns. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century foundation proposals stress the edificatory and exemplary rôle of the convent.¹¹⁷ As they best reflected the Marian ideal, nuns were elevated to the apex of the gender hierarchy, honoured above all of their sex. On the other hand, lower-class—that is, most—women could not live up to this ideal, as their economic situations precluded the enclosure considered necessary for the preservation of female virtue.¹¹⁸ Women religious occupied a lofty position; their emulation of Mary in virginity and prayer guaranteed it.¹¹⁹

Missionary Violence in Sixteenth-Century Yucatán,” *Past and Present* 94 (February 1982), 27–48; 28.

¹¹⁴ Ricard, 143.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 212. It is interesting to note that Josefina Muriel has a different idea of the beaterios, claiming that they “purified the air.” This suggests that the changeover from beatas to nuns was motivated not by the failures of the beatas but by the lessening of tolerance for women not under male control. Ricard’s use of the term “vigorous” is intriguing, given its masculine connotations and the historical tradition of the consecrated virgin as *mujer varonil*.

¹¹⁷ Lavrin, “Female Religious,” 168.

¹¹⁸ See Burkett, 23.

¹¹⁹ Sherry Ortner underscores just how rarefied their position was in her article “The Virgin and the State” (*Feminist Studies* 4, #3, October 1978, 19–36): “A virgin is an elite female among females, withheld, untouched, exclusive” (32).

City and Convent

Nuns, then, were the earthly representatives of Mary; while they clearly could not achieve her perfection, they could imitate her and use their special relationship to her to serve their society. Furthermore, they had a critical symbolic rôle in the success of the conquest of Mexico and the transplanting of Spanish institutions.

Very few historians of New Spain have considered religious ritual as it relates to civic and state politics. I have found that such study is better developed for the European—and in particular, the Italian—context. Two historians of Florence have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the relationship between religious ritual and civic order.

In Renaissance Florence, as in colonial Mexico, religious ritual served a legitimating function. The Renaissance Florentine nunnery was “a cloistered holy city” which bolstered the status and confidence of the actual city.¹²⁰ As art patronage, religion was a road to legitimacy for a wealthy but non-noble city. Since the Middle Ages, Florence had been a centre of burgher wealth and an important trading city. But it lacked continuity in government, an established native aristocracy, and a local pantheon of saints; even as it became the cultural centre of the Italian Renaissance, it was a bastard city, seeking to overcome “the assumed inadequacy and hollowness of [its] own culture” and its reputation as a city of usurers and sodomites.¹²¹ Religion assumed even greater importance as the city developed a more honourable civic identity.¹²²

¹²⁰ Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Studies in Social Discontinuity; New York: Academic Press, 1980), 35.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

Between 1427 and 1551, the number of nuns in Florence underwent a radical increase.¹²³ There were sound demographic reasons for this increase; an expanding elite needed the convent to maintain its position. But the concomitant rise in status of the city was not merely a side effect. While the profession of daughters raised personal honour, the “city’s honor was directly affected by the honor of families, so that the latter’s preservation sustained communal honor and authority.”¹²⁴ Thus both as a symbolic city of pure women, and as an actual preserver of family honour, the convent boosted the city.

Much the same was true for baroque Florence. During the plague year of 1630, the convent was appealed to as a symbol of “good government.” Canonisation hearings were opened for the founder of the Convent of Santa Croce. The nun, Domenica da Paradiso, had been dead seventy-seven years, and was popularly viewed as having offered herself to God in exchange for the city’s salvation from an earlier plague epidemic.¹²⁵ Thus, as in the earlier century, the Florentine convent served as a legitimating symbol for the city, infusing it with purity and authority in time of social crisis.

In the Spanish context, much the same was true. From the early days of the Reconquest, a settled female household symbolised

¹²² “The sacred was... directly involved in the development of the European city. It was not a mere pawn in the profit and power game, but a fundamental part of civic identity.” *Ibid*, 7.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 34.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

¹²⁵ Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year: The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*, trans. Dario Biocca, Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 199.

community. While men were often travelling and battling away from their homes, the presence of their wives and families in towns was “the most secure pledge and measure of a man’s allegiance to a particular community.”¹²⁶ As the Reconquest neared its end, houses of male and female religious became the sacred centres of the newly Christianised and increasingly noble cities. In Avila, for example, during the period 1450–1510, five new houses of religious were founded, four of them to house women.¹²⁷ These monasteries were both symbol and example, “at once cloistered and highly visible, a living sermon.”¹²⁸

Mexico’s convents served a similar symbolic purpose. Convents in New Spain were almost wholly urban, and most were concentrated in Mexico City itself.¹²⁹ The convent’s importance to civic status is emphasised by foundation proposals of the early eighteenth century, many of which emphasise enhancement of the civic prestige of outlying towns.¹³⁰ Not only did founding a convent enhance one’s personal and familial prestige and honour,¹³¹ it raised the status of one’s city. Honour

¹²⁶Dillard, 22.

¹²⁷Avila was reconquered in 1083; the acceleration of foundations in the fifteenth century is related to the status of the aristocracy as well as the completion of the Reconquest. See Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth Century City* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 36.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 146.

¹²⁹ Asunción Lavrin, “Female Religious,” in Louisa Schell Hoberman, Susan Migden Socolow, eds. *Cities and Society in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 165–195; 192. Only in the eighteenth century—and, to a lesser extent, in the late seventeenth century—did this pattern change; see Lavrin, “Role.”

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 169–70.

¹³¹ It is possible that this was even more true in the eighteenth century than ever before. I.A.A. Thompson has found that, in eighteenth-century Castile, “The principle of utility and the public good,” rather than service to the monarch, became the emphasis of noble service. See Thompson, 394.

inheres in social groups as well as in individuals and families. A city, like an individual, could be honoured or honourless in relation to other cities. The presence of holy women was an honourable addition to a city, and also demonstrated financial stability. Since only an area sufficiently wealthy to support a convent could hope to have a foundation proposal accepted, "support of nunneries thus became an index to the wealth of a given city."¹³² Convents meant that a city was financially, demographically, and politically stable, as well as morally protected.

A further symbolic rôle for nuns related to the conquest of the periphery by the city, seat of the centralised government. New Spain's government (clerical and secular) was engaged in extending its control over a vast area. The rôle of clerical women in this conquest was as symbols of the mission of Spain. "The women in colonial convents took on greater symbolic and political importance than their perinsular sisters, because the image of their Marian purity represented Spain's providential mission."¹³³ In fact, this symbolic rôle of nuns was often explicit. In the seventeenth century, María de Agreda was said to have appeared (through a miracle) to a tribe of Indians on the northern frontier, thus pacifying them and making them amenable to Christianity, and thus to Spanish rule. Here is a case in which the symbolic rôle of female religious worked hand in hand with the active rôle of male missionaries.¹³⁴ In the face of the difficulty of the colonial enterprise, the convent offered a tangible representation of the model society: ordered, hierarchical, and moral, with

¹³² Lavrin, "Religious," 169.

¹³³ Arenal/Schlau, 293.

¹³⁴ See Kendrick, *op. cit.*

Spaniards soberly governing the subject races.¹³⁵ Even the organisation of the Spanish American city, and particularly of the capital, reflected this. At the heart of the city lay a central plaza surrounded by governmental and municipal offices, church buildings, and important businesses, "all dominated by the white aristocracy."¹³⁶ Toward the periphery, the city's planning broke down; it became less and less orderly and "Spanish," and its borders were in constant flux due to the mobility of the population of New Spain and the magnetic allure of the capital. Convents were placed as close to the centre as possible, well within the ordered white section.¹³⁷ Unlike the Spanish American city, with its distressingly fluid borders,¹³⁸ the convent was walled; thus its ordered society was invulnerable to the spread of "disorderly native barrios."¹³⁹

The convent's walled purity was also a bacteriological phenomenon. In times of plague, which were frequent in Mexico City until the end of the colonial period, the convent was a refuge, a pure centre in an otherwise pestilent, putrid city. While the city's water supply was often corrupt, and the canals often reeked with decaying animal corpses and human wastes, the convents had enclosed gardens and pure

¹³⁵In the seventeenth century, calzada convents might contain up to five servants or slaves for each nun. Thus the lower orders (both racial and class) were represented in the convent as well.

¹³⁶Gibson, 125.

¹³⁷ Lavrin, "Female Religious," 172.

¹³⁸ Except in vulnerable coastal areas, cities were unwalled, unlike the medieval and Renaissance cities of Europe. "It was a renaissance of the ancient city, in contrast to the fortified city of the Middle Ages." See Góngora, 98.

¹³⁹ Gibson, 126.

fountains.¹⁴⁰ When bodies were hastily buried, only to be devoured by dogs and pigs,¹⁴¹ convent churches preserved sacralised burial.¹⁴² This too related to civic anxiety. Disease was popularly believed to come in from the periphery on “evil winds,”¹⁴³ spreading from outlying areas to the city, or physically brought in by itinerant Indians.¹⁴⁴ The purity of the convent was crucial. Thus, in 1795, when a flood caused the deaths from disease of nine nuns in the Convent of Jesús María, the city finally took long-overdue steps to solve some of the city’s drainage problems.¹⁴⁵ During the pneumonia epidemic of 1784, the prior of the convent of San Agustín refused to allow infected bodies to be buried in the churchyard, “since above all I esteem the health of the nuns.”¹⁴⁶ In the face of an often corrupt city, the purity of the convent was necessary for the city’s psychological survival. In times of widespread gloom and terror,¹⁴⁷ the existence of sacred, pure space at the city’s centre was reassuring.

As well, the Spanish nuns within the convent provided a symbolic counterpoint to the disorderly Indian, African, or *casta*¹⁴⁸ woman of the

¹⁴⁰ Lavrin, 174.

¹⁴¹ Cooper, 30, for a case of a farmer who was fattening his hogs in a swampy and inadequate cemetery.

¹⁴² I am indebted here to Calvi’s discussion of similar phenomena.

¹⁴³ Cooper, 195.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72. “Respectable” persons were sometimes entombed in convents in times of plague, however.

¹⁴⁷ Church bells were ordered rung “to gladden and reassure the public.” Cooper, 59.

¹⁴⁸ A person of low “quality” (*calidad*), generally not white.

outside, with her connections to sexual magic and witchcraft.¹⁴⁹ This connection was a venerable tradition. The missionary friars, in their pious teaching plays, had presented the characteristic sin of Indian men as drunkenness, of Indian women as witchcraft and abortion.¹⁵⁰ In opposition to this stereotype, good nuns were, in the words of one archbishop, "humble, chaste, suffering, amiable, charitable, and disinterested,"¹⁵¹ the apotheosis of female virtue. Here again, the rôle of honour is critical. For "having honor was the ideological key to separating Spaniards from the Indians and slaves."¹⁵² Thus the honourable Spanish women in the convent expressed race/class ideologies as well. Lower-casts—often, *casta*—women on the outside were often characterised as sexually manipulative and impure, as the many complaints against women for sexual magic show. While the nuns served delicate sweets to viceroys and archbishops,¹⁵³ lower-class women might serve men *atole* (corn gruel) or *tortillas* laced with menstrual blood in attempts to win their love or dominate them.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the women within the convent represented an ideal of ordered womanhood that contrasted with the unregenerate reality outside the cloister, but simultaneously provided

¹⁴⁹ See Ruth Behar, "Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women's Powers: Views from the Mexican Inquisition" in *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). An earlier version of this paper emphasises the racial/class aspects of such feminine disorder: "Disorderly Women: Tales from the Colonial Mexican Inquisition," unpublished MS, 1989.

¹⁵⁰ Ricard, 203.

¹⁵¹ Lavrin, "Values," 387.

¹⁵² Seed, 97.

¹⁵³ Hispanic nuns have traditionally manufactured sweets; this tradition continues in Spain.

¹⁵⁴ Many love charms employed it; see Behar, 180.

a model for its regeneration.¹⁵⁵ This ideal was not only for the good of the city, but for “public edification”: the lives and deeds of the nuns were to serve as exemplars for the laity.¹⁵⁶ Nuns’ chastity “encouraged virginity among lay virgins and confidence within a less socialized general population.”¹⁵⁷ In the words of one eighteenth-century Archbishop, the convent served as an oasis for the city: “not only as a garden full of virtues, but a closed garden; not only as a perennial source of good deeds, but as a source that is always closed.”¹⁵⁸ One can almost see the cloister as a safety deposit box wherein the honour¹⁵⁹ and moral wealth of the city was stored.

Periodically, a withdrawal was made. At the level of high literature, *Parayso occidental* (*Western Paradise*), published in 1684, showed America as a garden of Eden “inhabited by innocent and “angelic” virgins, well suited to the brave new world the Spaniards thought they were creating.”¹⁶⁰ The reality, as we have seen, was much different. The brave new world was ravaged by plague and ecological disaster.¹⁶¹ Yet at its centre there lay a precious “model-for” what society could be. The nun could also be a “model-for” the less rarefied classes; often, tales of a nun’s

¹⁵⁵ I am not suggesting that life within the convent was without its problems. On the contrary, bishops sometimes found themselves sorting out convent disputes, which could become serious. I am speaking of the *ideal*.

¹⁵⁶ Lavrin, “Female Religious,” 168.

¹⁵⁷ Trexler, 35.

¹⁵⁸ Francisco Fabian y Fuero, quoted in Lavrin, “Values and Meaning,” 378.

¹⁵⁹ In the Iberian world, honour was tied to female chastity. Yet extramarital pregnancy was endemic in Spain and the Spanish colonies, twice to four times as frequent as in other European countries in the same period. See Seed, 63.

¹⁶⁰ Arenal/Schlau, 338.

¹⁶¹ Cooper, 199.

pious deeds would be circulated in popular literature for the benefit of the literate: a more tangibly pedagogical exercise.¹⁶² And even at the lowest level, furthermore, tales had a way of seeping out into the oral discourse of the city, “creating flurries of religious excitement and resulting in further patronage.”¹⁶³ The mechanics of this exchange of information were simple. The servants of the convent and those who came to the grilles to deliver goods and conduct business exchanged news as well. Families and friends of nuns visited often. As well, the pious often went to convents to hear the latest news of the nuns’ ascetic works and other deeds, some of them miraculous.¹⁶⁴

Thus the nuns within their walls were fully integrated into the surrounding society. Physically as well as symbolically present at the city’s centre, the convent was a microcosmic representation of gender, race, and class order and harmony. Elite by virtue of birth, nuns were doubly so by virtue of virtue. Reinforcing and reproducing the social structure in an ideal form, preserving the patrimony of the elite, and serving as symbols of Mexican gender and race/class ideologies, nuns loomed large in their society.

This is what was at stake in the trial of Elena de la Cruz. Her transgressions, then, were not simply a matter of convent discipline, but a symbol of larger and more troubling disorders. In the post-revolt milieu of

¹⁶² Myers, 5.

¹⁶³ Lavrin, “Female Religious,” 168. Nuns themselves seem to have had a strong oral tradition; Calvi finds evidence of this in baroque Florence, while Myers experienced its continued existence in a Mexican convent in the early nineteen-eighties (21).

¹⁶⁴ Lavrin, “Female Religious,” 173–4. In fact, one common complaint was that *too much* exchange went on: the nuns were not properly isolated from the world.

1568, her insubordination must have seemed treasonous. Elena's was not to question but to obey: nonetheless, she openly questioned hierarchical power. Ultimately, the gender ideologies that got her into trouble, that made her insubordination so troubling, would also get her out of trouble. The discourses of gender first imperilled, then saved, Elena's skin. In order to understand this, we must first examine the process by which Elena came to be charged with heretical propositions.

THE CHARGE

*The Bishop should also exercise the greatest diligence lest heresy creep in or the books of heresy be secretly introduced into his diocese. For there is no deadlier disease nor anything which, when it destroys the foundations of faith, also suddenly overturns all public order.*¹⁶⁵

Between the hours of eight and nine one morning in early July 1568, about a dozen nuns were sitting around in the workshop of the convent of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción in Mexico City. Ursula de San Miguel was there; so was Paula de San Gerónimo; so was Francisca de la Anunciación; and so too were Inés del Espíritu Santo, Isabel de San Gerónimo, María de la Concepción, Isabel de Santa Clara, Antoña de la Presentación, and Elena de la Cruz, among others. The sisters were chatting and gossiping.

During the course of this conversation among the sisters, Elena de la Cruz said something that scandalised her colleagues so greatly that she was almost immediately denounced to the Holy Office.

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On 11 November 1215, Pope Innocent III opened the Fourth Lateran Council, which set the principles by which the Holy Office would operate.¹⁶⁶ Formed in the twelfth century to deal with heretics, the

¹⁶⁵Gasparo Contarini, *De officio episcopi* (1516), quoted in John C. Olin, *The Catholic Reformation: Savonarola to Ignatius Loyola, Reform in the Church 1495–1540* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 105; emphasis added.

¹⁶⁶ Miroslav Hroch and Anna Skybová, *Ecclesia Militans: The Inquisition*, trans. Janet Fraser (Leipzig: Dorset Press, 1990).

Inquisition became one of the most vigorous and enduring arms of the church.

The Spanish Inquisition was born on 1 November 1478, when Isabella of Castile was given papal permission to found a national inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition was an integral part of the Reconquest of Spain, and dealt with a great many Jews and Moors who had been forced to convert to the faith of the Church Triumphant and who were therefore suspect. The Holy Office also looked into matters of clerical indiscipline and corruption, which could range from doctrinal error through concubinage to sex crimes such as child molestation. As well, the Inquisition would deal with many more mundane matters, such as profanity, blasphemy, and bigamy. In this sense, the Inquisitors became the enforcers of Catholic reform and the catechists of the new generations of post-Reformation Catholic laypeople.

On 22 July 1517, the Inquisitor General of Spain gave inquisitorial powers to the bishops of the Indies.¹⁶⁷ Five years later, the papal bull *Exponi nobis feciste* gave quasi-episcopal powers to those friars more than two days' ride from the nearest bishop. Thus the stage was set for the early friar-inquisitors of Mexico. In the absence of a bishop of New Spain, the friars who evangelised the area were given inquisitorial powers. This period, known as the monastic inquisition, lasted from 1522 to 1528.¹⁶⁸ The first known trial of the Mexican Inquisition took place in 1522, when an

¹⁶⁷ Richard E. Greenleaf, *Zumárraga and the Mexican Inquisition, 1536–1543* (Washington, DC: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1962), 7.

¹⁶⁸ Richard Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1969), 9–10.

Indian was tried for concubinage.¹⁶⁹ Six years later, the zealous Franciscan fray Vicente de Santa María conducted the first auto de fé, in which two men were burned for judaizing, and at which, as we have seen, Elena de la Cruz's father was an honoured guest.¹⁷⁰

After 1529, there is no evidence¹⁷¹ of further cases until 1534, when the Bishop of Mexico, the Franciscan Juan de Zumárraga, took over as Apostolic Inquisitor. The two cases conducted in that year inaugurated the episcopal inquisition. When doctor fray Alonso de Montúfar took over as archbishop of Mexico in 1551 (the area became an archdiocese in 1546), he naturally assumed inquisitorial functions as well. The Montúfar inquisition initiated thirty procesos between 1556 and 1570.¹⁷²

Women were a minor presence in inquisitorial trials, both during the episcopal Inquisition and during the period 1571–1700. Nonetheless, women appear before the Inquisition more frequently than before civil courts in the modern period. For 1571–1700, it has been estimated that women never exceed 30 percent of cases in a given year.¹⁷³ They are underrepresented in cases of blasphemy, which are overwhelmingly male; are roughly equal to men in heresy cases; and appear in the majority of magic cases.¹⁷⁴ Overwhelmingly, women are associated with this latter

¹⁶⁹ Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*, 8.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.; *Inquisition*, 26.

¹⁷¹ See Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*, 13.

¹⁷² Leon Lopetegui and Felix Zubillaga, *Historia de la Iglesia en la América española: Desde el Descubrimiento hasta comienzos del siglo XIX* (Madrid: La Editorial Católica (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos), 1965), 438.

¹⁷³ Solange Alberro, *La actividad del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en Nueva España 1571–1700* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1981), 130.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

crime, as Spaniards are associated with blasphemy and bigamy, Portuguese with judaizing, and blacks with cursing.¹⁷⁵

On 25 January 1569, Philip II would sign a *cédula* establishing two permanent tribunals of the Holy Office—one in Mexico and one in Peru. The Mexican tribunal would begin to function in 1571, under Inquisitor General Dr. Pedro Moya de Contreras, at whose welcome Bartolomé de Ledesma would preach the sermon. But for now, fray Bartolomé was the inquisitor, and Elena de la Cruz was the accused—one of the last people to be tried by the episcopal inquisition.

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On the sixteenth of July, fray Bartolomé de Ledesma, master of holy theology, went with notary Juan de Vergara to the locutory of the convent of la Concepción. There, the two men would hear the testimonies of witnesses concerning a scandalous occurrence. Ledesma was a seasoned professional of forty-six, member of a powerful Spanish family, which included a private secretary to Philip II.¹⁷⁶ For eight years, he had been Archbishop Alonso de Montúfar's right-hand man, both as diocesan administrator and as censor of printed material. As the archbishop's final and longest-serving *provisor* [vicar general], Ledesma grew more powerful by the year. A Dominican, fray Bartolomé was his patron's coreligionist as well as his inseparable companion.¹⁷⁷ As Montúfar grew older—he was seventy-nine this year—Ledesma found himself with more and more

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ John F. Schwaller, *The Church and Clergy in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987), 21.

¹⁷⁷ In fact, it was later argued by his enemies in the cathedral chapter that he had been *only* the companion to the archbishop. See Schwaller, *Church*, 21.

responsibility and power.¹⁷⁸ Montúfar's tenure of the archbishopric was marred by constant battles with the regular orders and with his own cathedral staff. As Montúfar's representative, Ledesma too had come into conflict with the cathedral chapter, which complained that he was usurping episcopal powers.¹⁷⁹ Ledesma was also taking over much of Montúfar's inquisitorial jurisdiction. This case of the nun was not the only trial he was conducting.

The *cabeza de proceso*¹⁸⁰ records that Ledesma said it "had come to his notice" that some nine or ten days earlier, Elena de la Cruz had said and affirmed that it was not a sin not to obey the mandates of councils. Furthermore, she said, the pope could not declare any more mortal sins than the seven deadly ones.¹⁸¹ And finally, Ledesma noted, Elena de la Cruz had said that the Archbishop of Mexico had no authority to give pardons and indulgences. The question, then, was whether Elena de la Cruz had indeed made this frontal attack on the power of the hierarchy from the pope down to the archbishop of Mexico.

The first witness to appear was Antoña de San Joseph, a thirty-year-old nun of la Concepción. Antoña proved a very forthcoming witness who remembered a great deal about the events in question. She swore by God, the words of the four holy evangelists, and by a sign of the cross which she made with her right hand to tell the truth. This was standard

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷⁹ As Schwaller explains, this conflict came to a head after the archbishop's death.

¹⁸⁰ AGN, Ramo Inquisition, Tomo 8, exp. 1, 6.

¹⁸¹ "no podía el papa hacer leyes que obligasen a pecado mortal mas de los siete pecados mortales" (6).

inquisitorial practice. Ordinarily, however, this would be followed by general questions concerning the witness's age, occupation, marital and social status, genealogy, and command of religious doctrine. Notaries would record not only witnesses' responses, but their appearance and demeanour. However, the dossier of this trial contains little such information. There are two explanations for this. First, the episcopal inquisition was not as order-bound as the official tribunals of the Holy Office, and did not follow procedure as rigidly as historians might hope. And second, the witnesses were of generally known quality; they were all professed religious and of high social status.

Antoña told fray Ledesma that about ten days previous, she had been in the workshop of the convent with some nuns, talking. The abbess was there, talking to Inés de la Madalena and Ana de Santa Maria about the upcoming profession of Madalena de la Concepción, their sister. The abbess, Ana de San Gerónimo, asked Inés and Ana whether Madalena had completed the time [length of novitiate] dictated by the holy council. The Council of Trent had ordered that each novice should complete one year of probation before profession; otherwise, profession would be nullified.¹⁸² Madalena's two sisters indicated that yes, their sister had completed the required novitiate, and she would be able to profess the following Sunday.¹⁸³ The abbess warned them that the council had ordered that no one should be professed who had not completed the dictated time.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸²*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 226.

¹⁸³"y las dichas respondieron que si ella podia profesar el domingo siguiente porque ya avia cumplido" (7).

¹⁸⁴"les dijo que les encargaba las conciencias porque el sacro concilio mandaba que no profesase ningunas hasta aver cumplido año y dia" (7).

Some of the nuns who were present said that they knew well that Madalena had not completed the required time, and the abbess walked out of the workshop, leaving the nuns to their labour.¹⁸⁵ Then Paula de San Gerónimo said that she had known that there was a problem, but to avoid bothering Madalena's sisters she had kept quiet.¹⁸⁶ But, she said, she knew well that Madalena was two days short of the required time.¹⁸⁷ Trouble arose, then, in a textbook case of the conflicts aroused by profession of various family members within the same convent. The aforementioned sisters' loyalty was to their sister Madalena rather than to the rules of their order or the dictates of the church hierarchy.

Antoña continued with her story. After the revelations about Madalena, she said, Catalina de San Miguel brought up the case of Doña Luisa de Lara, who had done something scandalous. She had lied about her son's age, claiming that he was older than he actually was, in order to make the Franciscans accept him for profession. Antoña identified the boy as fray Diego. It is interesting to note that both John Schwaller and Paul Ganster identify the son who joined the Franciscans as *Francisco* de Cervantes rather than Diego.¹⁸⁸ The fact that the Cervantes/de Lara union produced twelve children with three different last names may have accounted for the confusion in Antoña's mind. Whatever the case, the

185 "*se salio del dicho obrador y dejo a las religiosas en su labor*" (7).

186 "*por no desabrir a las hermanas de la dicha novicia avia callado*" (7-7v).

187 "*ella bien sabia que le faltavan dos dias*" (7v).

188 Diego was another brother. The de Lara/Cervantes family was one of the prominent families of New Spain. See Ganster, "La familia Gómez de Cervantes: Linaje y sociedad en el Mexico colonial," *Historia Mexicana* XXXI, No. 2, October-December 1981; and Schwaller, "Tres familias del siglo XVI," loc. cit.

point illustrates both the extent and the undependability of convent gossip.

Antoña said that "Diego" was not of the minimum age decreed necessary for profession by the holy council.¹⁸⁹ This probably means that he had not attained the age of sixteen; the Council of Trent had set this as the minimum age for profession for either male or female religious. It is possible, however, that he was less than *fourteen*; this was the age which the First Mexican Provincial Council had set for male profession,¹⁹⁰ and it may be that the sixteen-year limit was not yet being observed. In any case, it was clear to Antoña that doña Luisa had transgressed.¹⁹¹

The other sisters were disturbed upon hearing that Doña Luisa had lied. Some of them commented that by going against the decrees of the council, Doña Luisa had committed mortal sin for little profit.

Elena de la Cruz, at forty-three the oldest nun present, told the other nuns to leave off and not to believe "these things of the council" (*esas cosas del concilio*). The number of mortal sins, Elena informed the others, was limited to the seven deadly ones. No one—not even the pope—could increase their number.

Antoña de San Joseph told Ledesma that the other nuns who were present—Paula de San Gerónimo, Catalina de San Miguel, Ursula de San Miguel, and many others—told Elena to "watch what she was saying."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ "siendo menor de edad e no thenido la edad que manda el sacro concilio" (7v).

¹⁹⁰ Henkel, *Konzilien*, 63.

¹⁹¹ Interestingly, this revelation did nothing to harm fray "Diego" in his chosen career. Extremely successful in his order, he became *patrocinador* of the Holy Office at the end of the sixteenth century. See Schwaller, "Tres familias," 187.

¹⁹² "dijeron a la dicha Elena de la Cruz que mirase lo que dezia" (8).

Elena responded that she knew what she was saying, and she repeated that she didn't believe that the pope could make something a mortal sin. Later, Antoña said, Ursula said to Elena: "Watch what you say, sister; many times I've heard words from you that I'm obliged to denounce."¹⁹³

At this, Antoña said, Elena became angry. But Ursula was not intimidated. She told Elena exactly what kind of words she was talking about:

Remember when we were standing in the doorway of the choir in the chapterhouse, and you told me that his Reverence the archbishop cannot concede indulgences of any kind, and that I should leave the beads [rosary] off my neck, because you don't believe that there are indulgences for wearing it; and know well that I told you twice that the archbishop can concede the said indulgences because in this matter he is a delegate of the pope.¹⁹⁴

Later, Elena again spoke with the other nuns, telling them that what she was saying was not heresy but a very great truth.¹⁹⁵ And then she proceeded to repeat her earlier propositions and add a few new ones. The pope couldn't create new mortal sins—there were only the seven. The deliberations of the council had been instituted only for bad people who offended God.

And then, Antoña said, Francisca de la Anunciación came in with the abbess, who asked the nuns what they were talking about. Elena piped

193 *"mira hermana lo que decias que muchas vezes os he oido palabras que estoy obligada a denunciar"* (8).

194 *"acorda os que me aveis dicho estando a la puerta del coro en el capitulo que su señor Rreverencia del señor arzobispo no podia conceder indulgencias ningunas y que quitase las cuentas del cuello por que ella no creya que sea indulgencias ningunas por traer las al cuello/ y la dicha ursula de san miguel le dijo, bien sabeis que os a dicho dos vezes que su señor de señor arzobispo puede conceder las dichas indulgencias por que en esta es delegado del papa"* (8v).

195 *"es que yo dijo no es erejia sino muy gran verdad"* (8v.)

up, repeating the same things she'd said before, but not all of them.¹⁹⁶ Ana de San Gerónimo immediately asked her to defend her ideas and to say who had told them to her. Elena replied that a confessor had told her the things that she'd said. Clearly annoyed, the abbess responded: "Remember who it was who told you, because it's going to cost both you and that confessor dearly."¹⁹⁷ No response from Elena is recorded. Ana de San Gerónimo told all who were present to keep silence and not to speak with Elena.

Having listened to this story, fray Bartolomé de Ledesma asked Antoña whether Elena or any other nun of the convent had said any other scandalous or evil-sounding words related to the holy faith. Antoña reported that on the same day, in the afternoon, Elena de la Cruz had called her over and asked what the vicar of the convent, Francisco de los Rios, had been told about the workshop events. Antoña claimed that nothing has been said. Elena then asked her: "On your soul, what evil was there in what I said? For what has the abbess made such a scandal?"¹⁹⁸ Antoña told Elena that what she had said appeared bad. Elena attempted to dissuade Antoña from this view. "On your soul, daughter, these things aren't God's law."¹⁹⁹

Antoña was shocked. "For the love of God, be quiet," she said. "Don't cast everyone to ruin!"²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ *"dijo la dicha Elena de la Cruz las mismas cosas que antes habia tratado aunque no todas"* (9). Francisca had at some point gone to call the abbess.

¹⁹⁷ *"acordaos de lo que aveis dicho por que a vos y al confesor os costara caro"* (9v).

¹⁹⁸ *"por vida suya que mal dije yo en estas cosas que dije para que tanto escandalo aya hecho la abadeça"* (10).

¹⁹⁹ *"estas cosas, hija, por su vida no son ley de dios"* (10).

Elena told Antoña not to be afraid. She had been told these things, after all. In reply, Antoña said that Elena had better be quiet, for they would force her to tell who it was who had taught her this false doctrine.

Elena responded in a defiant manner, giving an answer that would cause her trouble. Intransigent, she replied that they could sacrifice her, because she wouldn't say who had told her.²⁰¹

Antoña de San Joseph had just about finished her testimony. There was only one other thing to report. Only two or three days earlier, Elena had called her over in the corridors and said: "Daughter, upon your soul, if fray Bartolomé calls you, don't say anything about what you heard me say—only tell him that I was sorry for what I said."²⁰² Here we see an Elena who clearly believed what she was saying enough to try to convince Antoña in a private conversation—but who was just as clearly frightened of fray Bartolomé's power. Antoña read her statement and signed it. Then, after swearing to keep the contents of the questioning secret, she was dismissed.

Immediately thereafter, Bartolomé de Ledesma called the thirty-two-year-old Francisca de la Anunciación. Francisca had been questioned at another Inquisition hearing, not as a witness but as the accused. Five years earlier, in 1562–1563, she had been denounced by someone inside the convent. After a nun committed suicide, Francisca told the others that God would not damn the dead sister's soul to hell. This understandable, if unorthodox, statement landed Francisca in hot water. There was no

²⁰⁰ *"calle por amor de dios no echeche a perder a todas"* (10).

²⁰¹ *"bien la podia sacrificar, porque ella no diria quien se las avia dicho"* (10).

²⁰² *"hija por vida suya que si el padre maestro Bartolomé la llamase que no diga nada de lo que me ha oido sino que le diga que me pesaba de lo que avia dicho"* (10v).

sentence, but the nuns and abbess of the convent were warned to be on guard for heresy.²⁰³ So, perhaps because of the vigilance instilled in the nuns by this experience, Francisca found herself in front of Ledesma again.

Francisca told Ledesma that she had been present in the workshop on the day in question, and confirmed most of Antoña's story, albeit with more brevity. She added to it her own conversation with Elena, in which she had told her: "Look, señora Elena de la Cruz, you're meddling in very delicate matters."²⁰⁴ She also mentioned that Elena was very angry.

Fray Bartolomé asked Francisca whether she'd heard any other superstitious, evil-sounding, or scandalous words from Elena. She said that she couldn't remember having heard anything other than what she'd already stated. The inquisitor then asked her whether she'd heard Elena say the council and the pope couldn't make something a mortal sin. Francisca said she couldn't remember having heard that. Had she heard Elena say that the archbishop couldn't concede indulgences for wearing the rosary? Francisca couldn't remember having heard that either, except that she had heard Ursula de San Miguel say to Elena that it was only stubbornness that had made Elena say that the archbishop couldn't give pardons for the wearing of the rosary. And she had heard Elena reply that she had never heard of the granting of indulgences in this kingdom. And this, Francisca told Ledesma, was all she knew. She read and signed her deposition. Ledesma, obviously unconvinced that Francisca was being as forthcoming as she ought to be, told her to examine her memory and to return if she recalled anything else. Then he called in his next witness.

²⁰³ Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 133–4.

²⁰⁴ "*se mete en cosas muy delicadas*" (11v).

Ursula de San Miguel, who figured prominently in Antoña de San Miguel's account of Elena's transgressive statements, was thirty years of age. She began by taking Ledesma back to an event before the workshop occurrence. She said that fourteen or fifteen days before, she had been at the door of the choir with Antoña de San Joseph and some other nuns—which ones she didn't remember. They were talking about the fact that, as the Mother Abbess had told them, the archbishop had granted an indulgence to those who wore the rosary. Elena de la Cruz said that she didn't believe that there were such indulgences, nor did she believe that the archbishop could concede indulgences, and neither should the rest of the nuns believe it.²⁰⁵ Ursula said that she had told Elena to be quiet, because the archbishop could give indulgences, as he was the pope's delegate. Elena said she didn't believe it, and Ursula sat down in the choir to pray.²⁰⁶ This ended the incident.

Nine or ten days ago, Ursula continued, she had been in the workshop at about eight o'clock in the morning. Abbess Ana de San Gerónimo had come in with Ana de Santa María and Inés de la Madalena, talking about the profession of their sister Madalena de la Concepción. The abbess warned Ana and Inés about their sister's profession, then left the room. Paula de San Gerónimo said that she'd known there was a problem, but didn't want to annoy the sisters. Then Antoña de San Joseph, in the presence of all the nuns who were in the workshop, said that should they go against the decrees of the council, they would be committing mortal

²⁰⁵ *"la dicha Elena de la Cruz dijo que no creya que avia tales indulgencias ni su señor las podia conceder ni les hisiese en creyente que las podia conceder"* (13v).

²⁰⁶ *"esta testigo sentio en el coro a resar"* (13v).

sin. And then, Ursula said, Elena de la Cruz made her speech. Elena said that they shouldn't believe that there were more mortal sins than the seven; that the pope couldn't order or create more mortal sins than those; and that the council ordered the things it did for *bad* people, not for the good or for enclosed nuns.²⁰⁷ This may seem a canny comment. In fact, enclosed nuns were clearly not under attack by the council. But the council's mandates were for everyone, and Elena's cynical comment wouldn't do.

Ursula described her reaction. She had told Elena to be quiet, and not to meddle in such profundities, for she was putting herself in danger.²⁰⁸ Elena did not respond mildly. She told Ursula and all the rest to be quiet, saying that as they were young and had been enclosed in this convent²⁰⁹ they didn't understand such matters.

Having taken testimony from three nuns, Ledesma adjourned for the day. The following day, 17 July 1568, he called on Ana de San Gerónimo, the forty-five-year-old abbess of La Concepción. Ana was surely among the foremost nuns of the city. Born Ana de Soto, she had come to New Spain in 1532, at the age of seventeen, and entered La Concepción in 1544. She was thrice elected abbess (serving three-year terms) during the twenty-seven years she was a professed nun in the convent.²¹⁰ The respect

²⁰⁷ *"e no para los buenos y religiosas recogidas"* (14v).

²⁰⁸ *"callase y no metiese en aquellas honduras porque hera cosas de gran peligro y no le podia ir bien dello"* (14v).

²⁰⁹ *"que como thenian poca hedad y avian estado en esta casa recogidas"* (14v).

²¹⁰ Josefina Muriel, *Recogimientos de mujeres: Respuesta a una problemática social novohispana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1974), 50.

the hierarchy held for her would be indicated in 1572, when Ana would be selected as founding abbess of the Recogimiento de Jesús de la Penitencia, a home for reformed prostitutes.²¹¹ The keen administrative sense necessary for that job was displayed in Ana's dealings with her nuns, as portrayed in witness testimony, and in her own testimony before Ledesma. From the beginning of the episode, Ana recognised the potential for and attempted to minimise damage to the convent.

The abbess told Ledesma that on the fateful morning, she had been in the cloister when Francisca de la Anunciación called her to come to the workshop. She entered and asked the nuns what had happened there, and was told what Elena de la Cruz had said. She mentioned that among other things, Elena had said that she felt herself free of sin.²¹² The abbess noted that she'd told her to watch what she said, because the Lord had given the church hierarchy the power to lift souls into heaven or throw them into hell.²¹³ Then, she said, she had told Antoña de San Joseph to go to the turnstile (*torno*) and have fray Bartolomé called. Later, knowing that the vicar Francisco de los Rios had arrived, the abbess gave him an account of what had happened. Before dinner, he called some of the nuns who had been present in the workshop and tried to find out what had happened. Afterward, the abbess said, she had the idea that don Francisco had gone to bring the problem to the attention of²¹⁴ the Archbishop and fray Bartolomé.

²¹¹*Ibid.*, 49.

²¹² *"ella se hallava libre en su conciencia de pecado"* (17).

²¹³ *"nuestro Señor les avia dado autoridad... por llevar al cielo y echar al inferno"* (17).

²¹⁴ *"el dicho vicario fue a dar parte deste negocio"* (17v).

Also, the abbess said, she remembered that Elena de la Cruz had said in her presence that the orders of the council were made to enforce compliance (*poner themor*) and frighten (*medientar*). She had also heard some of the nuns saying that Elena had said that the archbishop couldn't give indulgences and pardons, but she hadn't heard such talk herself. The only thing she could remember was that Elena had one day asked her whether it was true that the archbishop could grant indulgences; she had told her that it was true. This concluded the abbess's testimony.

Paula de San Gerónimo followed Ana. Some years later, Paula would become abbess of la Concepción;²¹⁵ but for now, she was simply a professed nun of the convent. She said that twelve days previous, she had been in the workshop with most of the nuns between the hours of eight and nine in the morning. Some of them were discussing whether one could profess before the age mandated by the holy council.²¹⁶ Then, she said, Antoña de San Joseph and Isabel de San Gerónimo said that doña Luisa de Lara had made her son do just that by lying about his age so that he would be accepted by the Franciscan order. And then some of the nuns—which ones Paula didn't know—said that this lady had sinned mortally by going against the council.²¹⁷ And later, Elena de la Cruz said that no one should believe that there were more sins than the seven deadly ones and going against the Ten Commandments,²¹⁸ and further

²¹⁵ In 1592, she turns up asking the cabildo to do something about La Concepción's water supply problem: a recurrent complaint in sixteenth-century Mexico City. See *Actas de Cabildo* 5387, 11 December 1592 (763).

²¹⁶ "*tratando algunas de las dichas religiosas sobre si podian profesar antes de la edad que determinaba el santo concilio*" (19).

²¹⁷ "*algunas religiosas que no se acuerda de sus nombres dijeron pues esa señora pecaria mortalmente por ir contra lo determinado por el santo concilio.*" (19V)

stated that the pope could not make new sins. Paula said that she and the other nuns—especially Francisca de la Anunciación—had upbraided Elena. Paula may have been trying to demonstrate to the inquisitors Francisca’s vigorous orthodoxy, and thus the extent to which she had been reformed by her own brush with the Holy Office. Or Paula may simply have been repeating what she observed; after all, Francisca’s brush with the Inquisition made her the nun most cognizant of the dangers of unorthodoxy. In any case, Paula singled Francisca out as having a particularly strong reaction to Elena’s comments. But all the nuns were clear on the unorthodoxy of doña Luisa’s behaviour and especially Elena’s comments. Here is a clear example of how many denunciations arose—and of how seriously people took matters of the faith. Discussions of theological questions, earnestly engaged in by people at *all* levels of society, had a way of casually revealing heterodoxy.

Paula continued, telling Ledesma that Elena was intransigent. She had responded to the nuns’ outrage by saying that the mandates of the council were made to frighten (*aterrorizar*) and not to decree new sins.

Paula reinforced the previous testimony. But she also added some new incriminating bits. For example, she said that after the furor in the workshop, Elena had said to Francisca de la Anunciación and Ursula de San Miguel that as more scrupulous women, they might go denounce her.²¹⁹ After recording this sarcastic comment, Paula concluded her testimony.

²¹⁸ “Y luego Elena de la Cruz monja profesada del dicho convento dijo que nadie les hisiese en creyentes que avia mas pecados que los siete mortales y ir contra los diez mandamientos” (19V).

²¹⁹ “luego dijo la dicha Elena de la Cruz a Francisca de la Amnnciacion y a Ursula de San Miguel que como mas escrupulosas fuesen denunciar a ella” (21).

María de la Concepción was next. She mentioned that she had been in the workshop with “doña Antoña” (Antoña de San Joseph) and the other Carvajal girls (*las demás hijas de Carvajal*) and others. María’s introductory statement suggests the importance of Antoña de San Joseph in the convent. In fact, nearly all of the witnesses mention her first when detailing who was present in the workshop. The use of the title “doña” rather than “sor” to describe Antoña and the mentioning of the Carvajal name also illustrate the extent to which the Spanish American convent—and La Concepción in particular—was firmly tied to the secular elite.

The nuns were conversing, María said, about doña Luisa de Lara. María too recorded the things Elena had said, and how the other nuns had reprimanded her, saying, “Be quiet and don’t say such things because the pope has the power to cast into hell those people who... don’t keep that which was determined by the holy council.”²²⁰

Catalina de San Miguel was the next witness to be interviewed. She referred to “Antoña de Carvajal” (clearly, from María de la Concepción’s information, Antoña de San Joseph). Catalina reiterated the basic testimony of the others, adding that the other nuns had told Elena that “all who go against the holy council sin mortally.”²²¹ Even at this early date, when the decrees of the council had not been completely received by the Mexican church, the nuns of La Concepción were almost unanimous in the belief that the council’s mandates had the force of dogma. Elena’s

²²⁰ “callase y no dijese cosas semejantes porquel papa podía echar al inferno a las personas que... no guardasen lo determinado por el santo concilio” (22v).

²²¹ “todos los que van contra el santo concilio pecaran mortalmente” (22v).

position was one that no nun agreed with—or, at least, that no nun was willing to support openly.

It was four days (21 July) before Bartolomé de Ledesma interviewed the next nun, María de Santo Domingo. She said that she hadn't been in the workshop when the contentious words were spoken, but she had entered with the abbess. She had heard the words between the abbess and Elena, but then she had left to go to mass, and for this reason she hadn't heard more.

Inés del Espíritu Santo repeated the story Ledesma had by now heard many times, and added yet another incriminating detail. When the abbess threatened Elena with the pope's ability to cast her into hell, Elena questioned that power, saying, "What power does he have to cast me into hell?"²²²

On the 23rd, Ledesma heard from yet another nun, Antoña de la Presentación. She reported that she had been in the workshop and had heard the talk about doña Luisa de Lara. However, she hadn't heard much of it because she had been busy writing (*estava ocupada escribiendo*). But she had heard Elena say that they shouldn't believe that there were more mortal sins than the seven deadly ones. The rest she hadn't heard, she said again, because she was busy writing. But "later, she had been alone with Elena—in which place, she couldn't remember—and Elena had told her that she had only said the things she'd said "because it had seemed to her that there weren't any other sins."²²³

²²² "la abadeza dijo a la susodicha Elena de la Cruz quel papa thenia poder para echar la al inferno sino guardaba lo del santo concilio... y [Elena] dijo que que poder thenia el papa para echar la al inferno" (29).

Antoña was followed by Isabel de San Gerónimo, who reiterated what had already been said, noting that Antoña de San Joseph was her sister. Thus we know that she was one of the *hijas de Carvajal*. She too located the beginning of the controversy in the discussion of Doña Luisa de Lara and her son. Isabel, who obviously got her gossip from her sister's well, also erroneously called the boy fray *Diego Cervantes*.

On the 26th of July, fray Bartolomé was still gathering information. The nineteen-year-old professed nun Isabel de Santa Clara was the first to appear before him this day. She too confirmed all that he'd heard about the goings-on in the workshop.

After Isabel, Francisca de la Anunciación came to testify anew. She said that she had examined her memory and remembered that she had heard Elena say that neither the pope nor any other person could impose any mortal sin above the seven deadly ones, and that a confessor had told her this. This information had already been given by many witnesses, but the fact that Francisca had come forward with it showed her submission to the Inquisition. Ledesma must have been pleased.

By now the friar had a solid stack of papers all affirming the same thing: Elena de la Cruz had indeed said that neither the pope nor the councils could decree things relating to mortal sin; that the archbishop could not grant indulgences or pardons; and that the decrees of the council were not binding, but rather were created to frighten bad Christians. The woman Ledesma had encountered through the testimony of witnesses also demonstrated a sharp tongue, an irascible temperament, and a certain

223 "*despues estando esta testigo a solas con las dicha Elena de la Cruz aunque no se le acuerda el lugar donde estava la dicha Elena de la Cruz le dijo que aquellas cosas que avia dicho no las avia dicho sino por parescer el a ella que no avia otros pecados*" (30V).

haughty disregard for the Catholic church and its hierarchy. The evidence was indeed solid.

It was time to talk to Elena.

On the 29th of July, just twenty-five days (more or less) after the alleged incident was said to have taken place, Elena was made to appear before Ledesma. He asked her what her name was, whose daughter she was, and how old she was. Speaking in a natural voice, she told him that she was a daughter of the licenciado Altamirano, *vecino*²²⁴ of the city, that she was of the age of forty-three years, more or less, and that she was called Elena de la Cruz. She said that she had always lived in Mexico City, but it was said that she had been born on the island of Cuba.²²⁵

As was standard inquisitorial practice, Ledesma asked the accused whether she knew why she'd been called before him. The accused in an Inquisition trial was not told the charges before being interviewed, as in a modern judicial system. Rather, the accused was deliberately kept ignorant of the charges until after being interviewed. It was hoped that in this fashion, accused persons would be less evasive and more forthcoming than if they were cognizant of the charges against them. Elena told the inquisitor that she did know why she had been called before him.

Ledesma then asked Elena to tell him whether at any time she had said superstitious, offensive, or heretical words contrary to the faith.²²⁶

²²⁴That is, a person with a settled household (Cóngora, 101).

²²⁵ *"dijo que es hija del licenciado Altamirano vecino desta dicha ciudad y que es de edad de quarenta y tres años poco mas o menos y que siempre ha residado en esta dicha ciudad aunque dizen que nasció en la isla de Cuba"* (34V).

²²⁶*"palabras supersticiosas malsonantes y hereticas contra nuestra santa fez catholica"* (35).

Elena wasted no time in getting to the topic. She told Ledesma that about twenty-five days earlier, between eight and nine in the morning, she had been in the workshop of the convent with Catalina de San Miguel, some Carvajal girls, Antoña de San Joseph, and Isabel de San Gerónimo. They were talking about whether doña Luisa de Lara had sinned mortally by making her son profess before he was of the age decreed by the holy council. Elena had said that one might not so easily create mortal sins, because “she had understood that there weren’t more sins than the seven deadly ones.”²²⁷

At this, Elena said, Ursula and Paula “told this confessant not to discuss these things, as the Sovereign Pontiff²²⁸ could make a mortal sin of whatever he might want to.”²²⁹ Elena told Ledesma that she had responded by saying that the Pontiff was interested not in condemning but in saving souls; and that she had read confessional manuals, pamphlets, and primers and had never found reference to other mortal sins than the seven.²³⁰ Moreover, Elena added, she had told the other nuns that “everything the pontiff has ordered, and the saints have kept, and the preachers have preached—everything was for the keeping of the Ten Commandments of God and the saving of more souls.”

²²⁷ “porque thenia entendido que no avia mas pecados que los siete mortales” (35v).

²²⁸ This term (*sumo pontifice*) is repeatedly used in preference to the standard “pope” (*papa*). The reason for this lies not in pretension or exaggerated reverence but in the discourse of conversion. The sixteenth-century church avoided the use of *papa*, as this was the term the Aztecs had given to their native priests.

²²⁹ “dixeron a esta confesante que no tratase destas cosas quel sumo pontifice podia obligar a pecado mortal, lo que quisiese” (35v).

²³⁰ “no venia a condenar sino a salvar las animas... y que avia leydo en confesionarios y cartillas y abecedarios y que nunca avia hallado otros pecados mortales sino estos siete” (35v–36).

After reporting this speech—we might almost call it a sermon—Elena told Ledesma about the incident of the indulgences. She said that eight days before the workshop incident, more or less, she had been outside the door of the choir in the company of Ursula de San Miguel and Paula de San Gerónimo. Ursula said that a woman had come to the grille and told her that his Reverence the Archbishop had granted many years of pardon to those who would wear the Rosary around their necks.²³¹ Once again, an incident found its start in gossip. Elena said that she didn't believe this, because "such women come to say a thousand things that never happened that way; and in this kingdom she had never seen his Reverence concede pardons or indulgences."²³² This incident provides an example of the contact between city and convent; the grille becomes a locus for the exchange of information of varying content and reliability. Gossip at the grille was an inevitable corollary of female enclosure, but it was nonetheless decried by churchmen who saw in it the potential for sin. Elena attempted to present herself as free of the "womanish" vice of gossip; she would not believe what "such women" said to her.

To this, Elena said, Antoña de San Joseph and the abbess, who arrived just then, said that the archbishop could grant indulgences because he had papal authority.²³³ At this, Elena reported, she told the others that she now believed it; and thereafter, she had treated the rosary with great devotion.

231 *"Que una muger avia venido a la reja y le avia dicho que su señor Kreverencia avia concedido tantos años de perdon a quien trajese el rosario de nuestra señora al cuello"* (36).

232 *"estas mugeres venian a decir mill cosas que no pasavan asi, e que no avia visto que su señor concediese despues que estava en la tierra perdones ni yndulgencias"* (36v).

233 *"porque thenia las vezes del sumo pontifice"* (36v).

Ledesma tried another question. Had she said in the workshop that the pope couldn't make something a sin that wasn't before, and that he couldn't make any new mortal sins? Elena replied that it appeared to her that neither the pope nor anyone else could decree as mortal sin something that wasn't committed out of malice, and she repeated this twice. But she didn't remember whether she had said the other thing, because she was angry at the other nuns at the time in question. It could be that she had said it, out of anger.

Fray Bartolomé then asked whether she had said that the council ordered things not for the good but to frighten the bad. Elena admitted having said that everything the popes ordered was "to frighten those who were lukewarm in the keeping of the Ten Commandments."²³⁴

When Elena was reprehended by the other nuns who told her to watch what she said, had she said that "she knew well what she was saying and it wasn't heresy but great truth"? Elena "couldn't remember" having said the part about heresy and great truth, but she told the inquisitor that she had said that she knew what she was saying, because in the books she had read and the sermons she had heard she had never detected more mortal sins than the seven; and Christian perfection lay in the keeping of the Ten Commandments and avoiding falling into these seven deadly sins.²³⁵

²³⁴ "para aterror y espantar de los que sugesen con tibieza en la guarda de los diez mandamientos" (37).

²³⁵ "En los libros que avia leído y en lo que avia oído de los predicadores como dicho tiene no avia hallado otros pecados mortales mas de los siete e que la perfeccion de los cristianos consistia en guardar de los diez mandamientos e no caer en los siete mortales" (37).

Ledesma returned to the question of conciliar power. After being told what the council had ordered relating to profession, had Elena told the other nuns not to believe the decrees of the council, and that no one should take account or notice of its orders?²³⁶ This Elena denied.

Ledesma then asked whether Elena had told the other nuns to be quiet, calling them girls who didn't know about such things because of their enclosure. Elena admitted telling them to be quiet, because so few of them had the education she did.²³⁷

Fray Bartolomé then asked Elena whether she had said that bishops in general and the lord archbishop in particular could not grant indulgences. She said that she had said it with regard to what she'd already explained (meaning that she had said it until corrected, and not thereafter).

The friar proceeded to a critical question for Elena's case. Had she ever, before or after the events of the workshop, communicated with nuns or with other people to persuade them that what she said was truth? Elena wisely said that she had communicated with no one, except that after the workshop trouble, she had approached some other nuns, telling them that she was very sorry for having taken what was said to her the wrong way. She told them that she didn't understand or know how she'd offended, because she had always tried to keep the Ten Commandments without sticking her nose into other niceties; she said that she believed everything that the holy mother Church of Rome believed, and that she would die clutching the hand of Our Lord.

²³⁶ *"e que nadie hisiese cuenta o caso de lo que manda el santo concilio"* (37v).

²³⁷ *"que tan poco thenian letras como ella"* (38).

If Elena hoped to end the questioning with this affirmation of obedient faith, it was not to be. Ledesma moved to the question of the confessor. Was it true that being reprehended by the abbess, Elena had told her that a confessor had told her these things? Elena responded with a more subtle account of what had happened. The abbess had told her that there might be no doubts about what the pontiff ordered, because he had the power to both order mortal sin and cast into hell. Elena claimed to have said that she well believed it, and that she wouldn't meddle in such things—a clear contrast to the sarcastic response described by the abbess herself. What she'd said, Elena continued, was that “all our perfection consists in the keeping of the Ten Commandments,” because she had read this in “the Carthusians” and had been told it by her confessor.²³⁸

Ledesma was incredulous. Was she saying that all she'd said—that the pontiff couldn't make something a sin, that the council's orders were to frighten rather than to order mortal sins—was told her by a confessor? And who was that confessor? Elena said that a confessor had told her that perfection consists in the keeping of the Ten Commandments; that was all. Moreover, she did not say that *a* confessor, but that *confessors*, had told her this.

The inquisitor persisted. Was it true that she had told the abbess and other nuns, particularly outside the workshop, that they could sacrifice her, because she wouldn't say who the confessor might be? Elena evaded the question. What she *really* had said, she responded, was that “she held the honour of her fellow being in such high regard that to avoid harm to anyone, she wouldn't release the name even were she sacrificed.” This

²³⁸ “porque ella lo avia leído en los cartuganos y que su confesor se lo avia dicho asi” (39).

idea, while it may seem clear dissembling, is interesting because it is apparently derived from Elena's reading of fray Luis de Granada. In fray Luis's *Sinners' Guide*, he discusses Christians' duty to their neighbours (using the word *prójimo*).²³⁹ (Elena's reading is almost certainly not what he had in mind.) Clearly becoming frightened, Elena backed away from a discussion of this point by adding that she didn't understand matters of the faith.²⁴⁰

Fray Bartolomé admonished Elena to say anything else she knew and to examine her memory once more, adding the standard warning that if she did so, they would be merciful rather than proceeding against her with the full force of the Holy Office. Elena claimed that she couldn't remember anything else at present. She was admonished again and forbidden to communicate with anyone in the convent.

Ledesma waited a few days before calling Elena for a second examination, on the second of August. He asked her whether she'd examined her memory. Had she remembered anything more than what she'd already said? Elena mentioned what she had said in relation to not understanding the law; in fact, she said, having examined her memory, she realized that she had said that not in relation to the events of the workshop, but regarding the proper order of penances.²⁴¹ Elena was

²³⁹Moore, 63. The question of readership—how Elena read the books that she read is an interesting one. Carlo Ginzburg, of course, explored this question in *The Cheese and the Worms*. But an exploration is far beyond the reach of this paper, especially as Elena (unlike Menocchio) did not discuss what her books meant to her. She was far more circumspect.

²⁴⁰ "*Que thenia en tanto la honra del projimo que por no perjudicar a nadie le parecia que aunque la sacrificaran no lo dijera pero quella no lo enthendia en matheria de la fez*" (39v).

²⁴¹ "*no lo dijo a proposito de las cosas que avia dicho en el obrador sino en cosas tocantes a la horden de cosas de penitencia*" (41).

evidently backing off from any discussion of the events of the workshop, particularly avoiding mention of anything that might suggest she was less than comprehending, and thus penitent. Her strategy in this second confession was obviously one of damage control: she would act as ignorant as possible and avoid getting into debates about matters of the faith.

The friar then asked Elena a new question, obviously designed to demonstrate the flaws in her workshop argument. Excepting what the pope had ordered concerning mortal sin, would it then be no sin to eat meat and not to fast in Lent and on feast days? But Elena would not step into the trap. She replied that she “wouldn’t meddle in” this question, evidently recognising that any debate with Ledesma would end badly.

Ledesma asked again about Elena’s stand on human perfection. Elena repeated that what she had understood in the past and still understood was that keeping the commandments of God, not falling into the seven deadly sins, and following the law of God were the constituent parts of human perfection. Given Elena’s reticence on the other questions, it seems likely that she truly didn’t understand the church’s position on perfection. Her responses to the other questions indicate that she was ready to please; if she did not please with her answer here, it may be because she did not know the correct answer. Ledesma attempted to understand what Elena meant by following the law of God—and to see how far Elena carried her disdain for papal authority. Well, the friar pressed, if one broke the laws that the pope ordered for the keeping of the Ten Commandments, would that then be mortal sin? Yes, Elena replied, because the Ten Commandments are from God.

The inquisitor moved on to Elena's library. Which books had she read other than those mentioned in her first confession, and who gave them to her? And *where* did the Carthusian say that our perfection consists in keeping the Ten Commandments? And which books did she have at present? Elena said that other than the books she'd mentioned [only the Carthusian] she had read one by fray Luis which had been banned by the Holy Office, and another one by Valtanás. She didn't know and couldn't remember the place in which perfection was mentioned. At present, she had one book by fray Luis, called the *Siete Jornadas*, and another about prayer by the same author.²⁴²

Ledesma reminded Elena that she had said in her first confession that she had always tried to keep the Ten Commandments of God without meddling in other "scruples." Precisely what did the confessant call scruples (*que llama escriúpulos*)? Elena responded with what seems some circumspection that "what she understood by scruples were profound matters, such as matters of the faith—things that aren't given to women."²⁴³ If this was indeed what Elena understood by scruples, she had done a singularly poor job of following her own dictum. Everything that she had said in the workshop was just this kind of meddling in things that undoubtedly were *not* given to women. This statement can only be read as an obvious bid for Ledesma's tender consideration—and a somewhat implausible avowal of feminine submissiveness.

²⁴² "Dijo que demas de los libros que dicho tiene a leído en un fray Luis quel santo officio del inquisicion vedo y en otro de Baltanas que no sabe que libros ni se acuerda los lugares donde se decia lo susodicho e que al presente tiene un libro de fray Luis de Granada que se dize las siete jornadas y otro de la horacion del mesmo fray Luis" (43).

²⁴³ "cosas hondas como cosas de nuestra fez como es esto como es lo otro cosas que no son dadas a m:ijeres" (43v).

Ledesma returned to the confessor. Which confessor or confessors had told her that our perfection lies in the keeping of the Ten Commandments? With what seems to the modern reader to be obvious dissembling, Elena said that she couldn't say, because this had taken place before she had become a nun. Elena was afraid.

Nine days later, on the eleventh of August, fray Diego Rodríguez, dean of the church of Michoacán, and fray Francisco Despinosa, a Dominican monk, were sworn in to assist in the investigation. The Inquisition prided itself on its use of experts, generally bringing in educated churchmen to aid in trials relating to doctrine. The Montúfar Inquisition was particularly careful in this regard. But Ledesma did not bring in a Franciscan monk to sit on the panel, even though La Concepción was under Franciscan jurisdiction. The hostility between the orders was undoubtedly part of the reason; and the battle between the bishopric and the Franciscan order concerning jurisdiction over the convent continued through the Montúfar years.²⁴⁴ Ledesma was not exempt from the internecine battles between Dominican and Franciscan, bishop and regulars.

Immediately following the swearing in of these religious, Elena was brought before the newly constituted commission for a third examination. Now she faced not one cleric, but three (four, counting Juan de Vergara, the notary). This time, Elena had to place her hand on a crucifix as she swore her oath. She was asked first whether she had examined her memory and remembered anything else. If she had, she should say it,

²⁴⁴Marroqui, 138.

because if she did this, mercy would be forthcoming; if the contrary, “they would proceed against her as against a person who doesn’t keep the precepts and laws of the holy Catholic faith.”

Elena tried to explain the logic in what she had said. She said that it had seemed to her that as the laws of the King didn’t mandate things relating to mortal sin, in the same manner it seemed that the ecclesiastical laws should not. This seems to the reader a rather studiously ingenuous response, and most probably not the real reason Elena had come to this conclusion. But her mood had changed in the previous nine days, and she wasn’t up to long explanations. Rather, she humbly stated that “if such a thing had passed through her thoughts, it was because she knew little and couldn’t grasp”²⁴⁵ such things. At the present time, she affirmed, she believed in anything that the Church believed, and she believed in the power of the Church to decree mortal sin.

But Elena was still not prepared to hand over a confessor. She told the panel that she had examined her memory and remembered that ever since she was a girl, her confessors had told her and taught her that keeping the commandments would save her.²⁴⁶ Thus she put the offensive statement in a whole new context. Indeed, she seemed to suggest, if a confessor had told her that perfection was in the keeping of the commandments, it was as a simple formula for a child’s ears.

Juan de Vergara read Elena her previous confessions. Ledesma cautioned her again to tell him who the confessor might be, so that he

²⁴⁵ *“si esto la paso por el pensamiento hera porque poco sabia e no alcanzaba”* (46).

²⁴⁶ *“desde niña sus confesores le avian dicho y enseñado que guardando los mandamientos se salvaria”* (46).

might be merciful. Otherwise, he warned, they would proceed against her with complete rigour.

The following day, Archbishop Montúfar gave authorisation to pursue the case. Two days later, on the fourteenth of August, Elena appeared again before fray Bartolomé, don Diego, and fray Francisco. Ledesma admonished her to say anything else she had remembered. She affirmed her previous confessions, and the examination of Elena de la Cruz concluded. She submitted herself to the correction of the Church.

Following this, Ledesma drew up the charge. It was simple and followed to the letter what the witnesses and Elena herself had said: that, being in the workshop of La Concepción and talking about the profession of a certain nun, Elena had said that the other nuns shouldn't believe the orders of the council, because the pope couldn't order mortal sin: that there weren't more than seven mortal sins; that the pope couldn't order anything relating to mortal sin; and that in the same manner the archbishop couldn't grant indulgences. And being reprehended by the other nuns, Elena had said that what she was saying was not heresy but great truth; that the orders of the council were for the bad and not for the good; that a confessor had told her this; and that the nuns shouldn't be afraid but should take no account of the council. And finally, that in her confessions she had said that all of our perfection consists in the keeping of the Ten Commandments. Ledesma ordered that Elena receive a copy of the transcript with all names removed, and that she be given ten days to review the testimony.

Immediately following, Ledesma ordered that Elena be allowed to communicate with no one from inside the convent, not less than if she were imprisoned; that she should be kept from other nuns and anyone

else from outside the convent; and that Juana de San Miguel should have the key to Elena's apartment (*aposeno*),²⁴⁷ and should be in charge of the accused. Only the abbess was to be allowed to talk to Elena, for the purposes of consoling her. The abbess and Juana de San Miguel were called in to hear the order. They signed their names and swore to comply with the order. Juan de Vergara delivered the transcript of the *cabeza de proceso* to Elena.

What was the substance of the charge? It was relatively straightforward. Elena had thumbed her nose at the church hierarchy in the presence of the other nuns. Though her propositions carried vague scents of various heresies, she was clearly no heretic. But she suggested limits to the power of the hierarchy—and particularly the council. Furthermore, she suggested that the church was engaged in a political game, using its decretory powers to intimidate bad Christians. In saying that the pope had no power to decree things related to mortal sin, she was denying the divinely granted nature of the pope's authority, which came to him from Christ through Saint Peter. And in saying that good Christians need not heed the decrees of councils, she implied that Christians might follow their own consciences: the death of doctrinal authority. Her beliefs, though they were far from heretical, were far from harmless.

Elena's hostility to indulgences may seem to smack of Lutheranism. The 96 theses were, after all, a direct response to that question. However, Elena hadn't questioned papal power to give indulgences, but simply

²⁴⁷ This is translated as "apartment" because of the setup of La Concepción. "Cell" or "lodging" would not convey the luxury of dwellings within the convent.

episcopal power. Indulgences for sale—such as the Santa Cruzada indulgences, which were sold in Mexico—could be decreed only by the pope.²⁴⁸ The Santa Cruzada indulgences were sold ostensibly to finance the crusade against the Muslims, as the name suggests. They were introduced in Mexico by the very cleric who uncovered and informed on the Cortés conspiracy.²⁴⁹ But the indulgence for the wearing of the rosary was an *apostolic* indulgence, not to be sold but simply granted as a favour, and could therefore be granted by bishops.²⁵⁰ It is possible that Elena was against indulgences in general; she certainly would have been wise enough to avoid discussing this with Ledesma. As roughly drawn as the picture of Lutheranism was at this time, a hostility to all indulgences would undoubtedly have caused Elena a great deal of trouble.

As we have seen, Elena also claimed that the keeping of the Ten Commandments and the avoidance of mortal sin were “all our perfection.” Yet she surely must have known that these form the *foundation* for perfection and are its lowest level. The keeping of the commandments and the avoidance of sin is the layman’s level of perfection. The removal of hindrances to loving God fully is the next step. Charity, or the observance of counsels, forms the important next step, which allows one to become closer to God. Charity is manifested in good works and especially in the observation of the counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The next step is union with God.²⁵¹ But even once

²⁴⁸“Indulgences,” NCE VII, 482–6; 484.

²⁴⁹Schwaller, *Church*, 48. Also see France V. Scholes, “An Overview of the Colonial Church,” in R. Greenleaf, ed. *The Roman Catholic Church in Latin America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

²⁵⁰“Indulgences,” NCE VII, 484.

one has achieved this state, perfection is still only relative. The Catholic church holds, of course, that absolute perfection cannot be achieved in this life. Elena's explanation of perfection left out the most important parts of charity, and thus suggested the Lutheran abnegation of works.

Elena originally claimed that a confessor had given her this explanation of perfection. As her interrogations progressed, she seemed to recognise that this was a dangerous claim. In the end, her defenders threw it out altogether, claiming that she had made it up. Such lack of doctrinal orthodoxy would have undoubtedly been more serious in a priest than in a nun, and Elena's connection with such a clergyman would have been dangerous for her as well. Moreover, because the Inquisition considered the *teaching* of heresy far more serious than simply *holding* heretical positions,²⁵² the confessor might have found himself in an uncomfortable position.

Of course, we cannot be sure whether or not the confessor actually existed. Perhaps, as Elena's defence would argue,²⁵³ she did fabricate this detail out of whole cloth. After all, the appeal to authority in argument was a venerable Catholic tradition; and a male confessor's doctrinal authority would be enough, at least in theory, to confound even the abbess. Ana de San Gerónimo was not, as we have seen, impressed. Rather, she immediately demanded to know the confessor's name so that she might have him punished. It is possible that Elena persisted in the

²⁵¹ For this explanation, see "Spiritual Perfection," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* XI, 126-7.

²⁵² Greenleaf suggests that this was particularly true of the Montúfar inquisition, which "suggests more a fear of heretics who might contaminate others than a concern for doctrinal error in itself" (*Inquisition*, 99-100).

²⁵³ This is discussed below, in the following chapter.

fiction of this confessor for as long as she did to avoid the humiliating admission that she had lied.

It is also possible, however, that the mysterious confessor existed. Certainly, Ledesma did not find it implausible. It is even possible that Ledesma may have had a particular candidate in mind.

As Elena's trial was being conducted, don Alonso Pedro Chico de Molina was in a Spanish prison. Don Alonso had a long history of conflicting with Ledesma and Montúfar. The don had been archdeacon of the cathedral chapter from 1560 to 1561, and then dean until his removal in 1565.²⁵⁴ As dean, don Alonso had repeatedly embroiled the chapter in controversy, initiating many suits against Montúfar over the limits of episcopal authority over the cathedral chapter.²⁵⁵ Don Alonso repeatedly took the side of the regulars—and particularly the Franciscans—in the power struggles of the 1560s. At one dinner with the Archbishop and Ledesma in the episcopal palaces, Chico de Molina went so far as to lay hands on the Dominican Diego de Osorio. Chico de Molina grabbed the Dominican monk by the cape, telling him that “neither he nor his entire ‘Black Order’”²⁵⁶ would succeed in imposing their opinions on him—referring to the colour of Dominicans' garments while making a comment on the order's Inquisitorial history.²⁵⁷ Chico de Molina's temperament

²⁵⁴Schwaller, *Church*, 28.

²⁵⁵*Ibid.*

²⁵⁶Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 143. Mexican Dominicans wore white habits with black capes, while Franciscans wore blue habits after the brown material they had originally used gave out. See González Obregón, *Streets*, 88.

²⁵⁷In fact, don Alonso accused Montúfar of using the Inquisition as a tool in his battle with the regulars.

seems to have been similar to Elena's. He, like Elena, tended to alienate his colleagues and superiors with his angry and arrogant outbursts.

The dean was also a close ally of the Cortés family, particularly the second Marqués del Valle.²⁵⁸ Don Alonso was jailed after the Cortés conspiracy was uncovered. Apparently, he had been promised the bishop's mitre when Martín took power; and don Alonso would also be the delegate who would visit Rome to get papal recognition for the new kingdom.²⁵⁹

Chico de Molina had some unorthodox opinions. He believed that the dicta of the Council of Trent were not binding, as the pope had not given them his approval. And he was suspected by Ledesma and others in the cathedral chapter of favouring individual reading of Scripture over doctrinal authority.²⁶⁰ Ledesma must have found Elena's beliefs unsettlingly similar to those of don Alonso, especially given her family connections. But if he suspected the renegade priest of being the mysterious confessor, Ledesma never let on.

Ledesma showed more interest in Elena's reading list. This should not surprise us. The Council of Trent had in 1546 recognised the errors that reading could bring. The Spanish Inquisition had responded promptly, publishing its first index of prohibited books in 1551.²⁶¹ In 1559, the first index to meet with papal approval was printed.²⁶² Increasingly,

²⁵⁸Ibid., 152.

²⁵⁹Schwaller, *Church*, 30.

²⁶⁰Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 152.

²⁶¹Sara Nalle, "Literacy and Culture in Early Modern Castile," *Past and Present* 125, 65-96; 72.

²⁶²"Index of Forbidden Books," *NCE* VII, 434-5; 434.

books and their effects on readers—particularly “unschooled” readers—were viewed with distrust. In 1564, the Tridentine index formalised norms for censorship.²⁶³

The European church’s suspicion of “bad books” was equalled or even exceeded by the Mexican church. In 1531, Charles V had issued an edict banning Indians from reading fiction²⁶⁴ (romances being a particular addiction of the conquistador class).²⁶⁵ Part of Ledesma’s job was the examination of books, in accordance with the orders of the First Mexican Provincial Council (1555), which decreed that “owing to the errors introduced among Christians by bad and suspicious books,” the publishing and distributing of all books would be overseen by the archdiocese.²⁶⁶

In 1559, the archbishop and Ledesma produced an order concerning prohibited books. The same year, the archdiocese banned the *Doctrina cristiana* of the previous bishop of Mexico, the Franciscan fray Juan de Zumárraga.²⁶⁷ Increasingly, the episcopal inquisition moved against doctrinal works and catechisms in Indian tongues, popular Castilian devotional works, and more spicy fare such as Bocaccio. The Second Provincial Council (1565) prohibited Indians from owning Bibles and sermon-books (sermonarios).²⁶⁸ Elena’s readership was thus juxtaposed

²⁶³Ibid.

²⁶⁴Nalle, “Literacy,” 93.

²⁶⁵Francisco Fernández del Castillo, ed. *Libros y libreros en el siglo XVI: Selección de documentos* (Mexico: AGN, 1982), 9.

²⁶⁶Ibid. The order is reproduced on pages 9–10.

²⁶⁷Ibid. The order is reproduced on pages 1–3.

²⁶⁸Ibid., 10.

with diminishing tolerance of the use of religious books by those unschooled in theology.

Ledesma seemed particularly interested in Elena's reading as it related to the formulation of her views on perfection. As we have seen, Elena claimed to have "read in the Carthusian" that perfection consists in the keeping of the Ten Commandments. Ledesma, it will be remembered, questioned this.

The Carthusian was almost certainly²⁶⁹ Ludolf of Saxony, a fourteenth-century German who began his career as a Dominican before switching to the Carthusian order. Published in 1474, his *Vita Domini nostri Jesu Christi ex quatuor Evangeliiis* circulated in "innumerable editions"²⁷⁰ in the sixteenth century. Saint Teresa ordered that every Carmelite house have one copy;²⁷¹ and Saint Ignatius Loyola was also devoted to the work, which he said had changed his life.²⁷² Ludolf was a proponent of private prayer.²⁷³ The mystical nature of the work may have caused Ledesma some concern, but he clearly did not believe that errors in the Carthusian were directly responsible for Elena's error.

Elena also mentioned two books by fray Luis de Granada, whose religious works were the bestsellers of the Spanish Golden Age, far

²⁶⁹Most authors who mention the Carthusian seem to be referring to Ludolf. However, Jimenez Rueda also identifies another *cartujano*, Dionisio el cartujano, as a favourite among illuminists. See Julio Jimenez Rueda, *Herejias y supersticiones en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Imprenta Universitaria, 1946), 141. Nonetheless, the far more prominent Ludolf seems the safest bet.

²⁷⁰"Ludolph of Saxony," *NCE* VIII, 1063-4.

²⁷¹*Ibid.*

²⁷²Olin, 199.

²⁷³H. Outram Evennett, *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (Cambridge, 1968), 34.

outdistancing Cervantes and Lope de Vega.²⁷⁴ To judge from Elena's description, she probably owned the *Libro de la oración y meditación*, published in 1544 and 1566. This book was fray Luis's most popular work. Elena seems also to have owned *Memorial de la vida cristiana*, published in 1565.²⁷⁵

Fray Luis de Sarría was born in Granada in 1504 and died in Lisbon in 1588. He was a zealous apostolic preacher who believed in the Erasmian ideal of theology for all—including women.²⁷⁶ He was also a disciple of Juan de Avila, a reformer who advocated an active clergy, poor relief, the rejection of honour, religious education for the laity, and other reforms.²⁷⁷ A prolific writer, fray Luis published twelve books between 1554 and 1559. He was confessor to Queen Catherine of Portugal and in 1562 received the title Master of Sacred Theology from the Dominican order.²⁷⁸

But fray Luis's career was not without crises. In 1559 and again in 1568, his books were first placed on the Index of Forbidden Books and then removed. (It will be remembered that Elena was aware when she testified that she was in possession of a banned book.) More seriously, fray Luis would late in his life, in 1584, be fooled by the false stigmata of the mystical

²⁷⁴Nalle, "Literacy," 80.

²⁷⁵That is, the book she called the "siete jornadas." *Memorial* is divided into seven sections according to the week.

²⁷⁶"Louis of Granada," NCE VIII, 1021-2.

²⁷⁷Bilinkoff, 80, 84.

²⁷⁸"Louis of Granada," NCE VIII, 1021-2.

Sor María de la Visitación—an incident that would be seen by many as proof that spiritual perfection should be a path for the few.²⁷⁹

The dangerous aspect of fray Luis's work, for the Inquisitors, was twofold: first, fray Luis stressed the quest for perfection in spiritual life;²⁸⁰ and second, he wrote for and was popular among an audience that included many laypeople and women of all classes. Moreover, his work found adherents among the *illuminada* and *alumbrado*²⁸¹ heretics, many of whom were women—including professed nuns. An inquisitor referred contemptuously to fray Luis's writings as "contemplation for carpenter's wives."²⁸² Here, gender and social status function as reflexive metaphors; women and workers are equated as groups needing tutelage.²⁸³ Persons of such mean social status, particularly if they were part of the *sexo debil*, had no business pursuing mystical knowledge of God. In doing so, they were bound to fall into error. Elena's reading of fray Luis suggested that she was reaching beyond her grasp.

One of the major goals of the Counter-Reformation was the education of the laity into a homogeneous Catholicism. Literacy was seen as important in this task; the church tended to view illiterate laypeople as superstitious.²⁸⁴ On the other hand, the rise of Lutheranism and the

²⁷⁹Ibid.

²⁸⁰Ibid.

²⁸¹John A. Moore, *Fray Luis de Granada* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 16.

²⁸²Ibid., 34.

²⁸³See Trexler, 16.

²⁸⁴Peter Burke, "The Uses of Literacy in Early Modern Italy," in Peter Burke and Roy Porter, eds. *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 31.

spread of *alumbrado* and illuminist sects in the first half of the sixteenth century suggested that there were worse threats than superstitiousness. The literate laity came to be viewed with suspicion, their literacy correlated with heresy.²⁸⁵ One Italian preacher even claimed that “all of the lettered are heretics.”²⁸⁶

In the second half of the sixteenth century, then, reading was increasingly viewed with suspicion. In Mexico, Indians were not to read the Bible. In Spain, the lower classes were to avoid concerning themselves with doctrine. And everywhere in the Catholic world, reading by women was seen as particularly dangerous. Reading needed to be controlled. In the late 1500s, the Archbishop of Milan suggested that literacy be laid in the hands of the *paterfamilias*: a father would read to his family so that he might control, observe, and be responsible for what was learned.²⁸⁷

In general, women’s literacy was not the problem it might have been, because few women were literate. European women’s literacy lagged behind that of men well into the modern period. In early modern Spain, literacy levels for men compared with those of men in Northern Europe.²⁸⁸ However, women were largely illiterate, even compared with their Northern European counterparts, whose literacy was limited at best.²⁸⁹ For various reasons, it was not considered necessary or desirable for women to learn to write.

²⁸⁵Ibid., 32. In Italy, Burke places this transition at about 1520, when Protestant books began to circulate.

²⁸⁶Ibid.

²⁸⁷Ibid., 33.

²⁸⁸Nalle, “Literacy,” 69. She gives figures for the seventeenth century ranging from 69 percent in Madrid down to 52 percent in Cuenca and Galicia. For the sixteenth century, the range is 34 to 70 percent, while women’s range is from 2 to 16 percent (68).

Prescriptive writers linked women's illiteracy to prohibitions against women's teaching or to limitations of "feminine nature." Sixteenth-century writers such as fray Luis de León cautioned against a woman's studying anything difficult; rather, women should devote themselves to "a simple and domestic office."²⁹⁰ Juan Luis Vives, in his *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1523), was not hostile to female literacy. He thought that a woman *should* learn to read, "copying some sad, prudent, and chaste sentence over and over again. As she shapes her letters, she is being shaped by another's moral and religious precepts."²⁹¹ Here, woman is a *tabula rasa*. She has an uncritical, unmediated relationship with the texts she reads, absorbing them by virtual osmosis. Thus women's literacy is seen as unproblematic *only* as long as the sentences they read are "sad, prudent, and chaste." Presumably, should women read "bad books," they might absorb them just as easily. This belief obviously implies the control of women's reading. Such attitudes were not uncommon in the lower echelons of society as well as at the level of prescriptive literature. In 1579, a fisherman's wife told the Cuenca Inquisition that "women should not have books, or know how to read and write—they're crazy!"²⁹²

²⁸⁹Ibid.

²⁹⁰Fray Luis de León, *La perfecta casada* (Buenos Aires/Mexico: Espasa-Calpe Argentina, 1938), 139: "a la mujer buena y honesta la naturaleza no la hizo para el estudio de las ciencias, ni para los negocios de dificultades, sino para un solo oficio simple y doméstico."

²⁹¹Quoted in, and translated by, Patricia E. Grieve, in "Embroidering with Saintly Threads: María de Zayas Challenges Cervantes and the Church," *Renaissance Quarterly* XLIV, No. 1 (Spring 1991), 86-104; 89 n. 7.

²⁹²Nalle, "Literacy," 92.

But many women *did*, of course, read the popular devotional manuals of the sixteenth century; and often, their reading led them to shape their own spiritual paths. At the beginning of the century, a certain opening had existed for such lay literacy. But as the century wore on, those who would seek “novel” ways to spiritual enlightenment were condemned. The path of private prayer came to be associated with the heretic *alumbrados* and *illuminados* who believed that contemplation could lead—on its own, without works, without church mediation—to perfection. Among these heretics women were prominent—and even took leadership roles.²⁹³ Such women inverted the natural order, in teaching men; moreover, they threatened public order in their insistence that the church hierarchy need not be obeyed.²⁹⁴ Menéndez y Pelayo claimed that this heresy was an infection that attacked almost all the women of Seville:

la mayor parte de la ciudad estaba inficionada y particularmente mujeres, entre ellas señoras muy principales, nobles, y ricas... No hay duquesa ni marquesa, ni mujer alta ni baja, excepto las que se confiesen con frailes dominicos, que no tenga algo que decir de lo que rezan los edictos.²⁹⁵

In Seville in 1568, the threat was taken so seriously that some unrepentant women were burned at the stake. And the errors of these women had

²⁹³Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, 1990), 23. Lea thought it “natural that the impressionable female nervous system should render women especially liable to the ecstasies which were the characteristic feature of this emotional form of religion [mysticism]; we find them everywhere as its exponents and missionaries.” *Chapters from the Religious History of Spain Connected to the Inquisition* (New York, 1967 (1890)), 252.

²⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 143.

²⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 144.

begun with the reading that encouraged them to follow their own paths to spiritual fulfilment.

To be sure, New Spain had seen little of such activity. But Elena's ownership of forbidden books—of those books most suspected of leading the untutored to heretical positions—must have raised suspicions. Elena and the other nuns of the convent were *not* pious and ignorant. Of the twenty-five nuns who appeared before fray Bartolomé's inquisitorial panel, only three could not write their names: twenty-eight-year-old Isabel de San Gerónimo, fifty-six-year-old María de la Circuncisión, and thirty-four-year-old Luisa de San Gerónimo. Of the other nuns, some had the splotchy, uncomfortable, unligatured signatures associated in early modern writing with women and the unlettered.²⁹⁶ Most, however, had practised signatures. And a few, such as Antoña de San Joseph, Isabel de Santa Clara, Juana de San Miguel, Inés de la Cruz, and Elena herself, had bold, elegant, stylised signatures that indicate a high degree of comfort with writing. Given that writing was generally taught separately from and after reading, these women were, by the standard of the time, highly literate. They were precisely the kind of women who were likely to read: not in the unproblematic manner described by Juan Luis Vives, but to formulate their own ideas.

Elena had done just this, and the results lay before fray Bartolomé on sheaves of paper covered in Juan de Vergara's practised hand. The question was not simply unorthodoxy; male clerics constantly engaged in

²⁹⁶See Ginzburg, 89. I am grateful to Dr. Sharon Strocchia of the Department of History at Emory University for pointing out to me in a telephone conversation that the lack of ligatures alone may indicate not a lack of education, but an adherence to gothic script.

disputations about the same issues Elena had discussed. The night that don Alonso Chico de Molina grabbed the Dominican monk by the cape, the men had been discussing whether the sacraments in and of themselves conferred grace on the recipient. It was not Chico de Molina's unorthodox views, but his refusal to submit to doctrinal authority, that eventually saw him tried by the Montúfar Inquisition (and the Council of the Supreme Inquisition, which found him innocent).²⁹⁷ Unlike Elena, Chico de Molina was given every chance to apologise to the archbishop and Ledesma for his conduct and to retract the offending views. Elena's apology to the convent had somehow not prevented the Inquisition from pursuing the case. Therefore, her crime was *not* simply a matter of convent discipline, of her betraying the Church and the cloistered life to which she had committed herself. Rather, her crime was an infection that had to be flenced from the convent, lest it spread.

The problem with Elena was that there was no legitimate *use* for her questioning. As a woman, she did not belong to the group (male clerics) that was allowed to discuss matters of such import. Those matters, as Elena well knew, were "deep things not given to women." Elena's questioning of (male) hierarchical power, and the sarcastic manner in which she dismissed the council's aims, suggested that this woman was out of control. And her attempts to formulate her own theology, through reading mystical bestsellers, smacked of the same subversion of hierarchy. She had not only engaged in theological questioning of her own, but had

²⁹⁷Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 144–9. Montúfar undoubtedly used the Inquisition against his enemies, prosecuting several clerics for doctrinal error, but the prosecution of Elena differed in that Elena had backed off quickly when faced with the censure of her coreligionists, the abbess, and the vicar. Submissiveness, however, was not enough to prevent Ledesma from pursuing the trial to its end.

attempted to convince her coreligionists that her views were correct. Elena was, in retrospect, clearly no heretic in the mould of the beatas, nuns, and laywomen who had recently been punished at Seville. Nonetheless, she was out of line and out of order. In a historical moment at which public order seemed fragile at best, rebellion against the natural order could not go unpunished.

THE DEFENCE

*The Bishop's first care should be for the men rather than for the women, both because men surpass women by nature and also because the governance of a city proceeds with a certain order. Women by nature are subject to men and ought to wait upon their command. Wherefore it seems proper that the Bishop's rule be brought to the women by the men as mediators, or instruments, so to speak.*²⁹⁸

On the nineteenth of August, Ledesma named licentiate Fulgencio de Vique, a prominent attorney of Mexico City,²⁹⁹ to defend Elena. He was immediately sworn in, promising to do his job well and faithfully, and to keep everything secret. Two days later, Ledesma appointed a second defender, licentiate Juan Vellerino, who was ordered on pain of excommunication to accept the commission and was sworn in on the twenty-third. Elena's defence was underway.³⁰⁰

The first thing the lawyers needed was more time. Elena's ten days ended the following day, the 24th of August. The lawyer wrote a note requesting more time, noting that the next day would be Saint Bartholomew's Day, undoubtedly a special day for Ledesma, who granted an additional ten days. By the twenty-seventh, Vellerino had already prepared an opening statement.

²⁹⁸Gasparo Contarini, *De officio episcopi* (1516), quoted in Olin, 101-2.

²⁹⁹ Schwaller describes him as "a distinguished lawyer before the Audiencia." See *Church*, 154.

³⁰⁰ Greenleaf describes the defenders as appointed by Elena's family rather than by Ledesma, "because appointed defenders usually appear in the procesos." However, the dossier *does* contain Ledesma's orders, which appear on pages 71 and 71v.

In his defence of Elena, Juan Vellerino had to rewrite the script that the Inquisitors had constructed. In effect, he had to create another Elena de la Cruz. His defence was anchored in some of the fundamental beliefs of Spanish American society.

Vellerino began by saying that his client had no intention of deviating from the faith or of saying anything against the beliefs and teachings of the Church. The failings the Holy Office could collect against her, he said, proceeded not from malice but from ignorance, because as a woman, she didn't know better. For this reason, he suggested, the Holy Office should be merciful and give her a gentle, healthful penance.

Concerning the indulgences, Vellerino said, his client didn't know much—because she was a woman, unschooled in legal matters, and because she had never seen anything else. This, he said, was confirmed by the second, fourth, and fifth witnesses (known to us and to the inquisitors, if not to the defence, as Francisca de la Anunciación, the abbess Ana de San Gerónimo, and Paula de San Gerónimo). Vellerino also noted that his client had, after hearing that the indulgence was real, held the rosary in greater reverence, and had worn and continued to wear it.

The question of the pope's ability to create new mortal sins couldn't be ignored. But here too Vellerino noted that what his client said came not from malice but from ignorance, for she didn't understand or know anything else. She had read in pamphlets and other books that there were seven deadly sins, and so it didn't seem to her that there could be others. Elena's ignorance was demonstrated in her response to Ledesma's question concerning fasting and Lent. (It will be remembered that Elena had refused to answer—or, as she put it, "meddle in"—this question.)

The words Elena had spoken arose from her being at the time “very inflamed and with great choler and furor of ire and annoyance.”³⁰¹ This anger was proven by the first and second witnesses. His client, Vellerino argued, was in the habit of “with little reason getting carried away by anger in such a manner that she almost parts with her senses.”³⁰² “And being in this condition,” he continued, “she would persist excessively to come out on top with what she said.”³⁰³ This, he said, was affirmed by the sixth witness (María de la Concepción). It was for this reason, Vellerino said, that Elena had said a confessor had told her the aforesaid, when in reality no confessor had ever said it or discussed the matter with her.³⁰⁴ Elena’s defender thus admitted that his client had lied to the inquisitors; however, he hastened to add, she deserved less punishment for this than if she had said it of her own free initiative. She had lied under duress. This left a problem: Elena had said that even if they burned her, she would not reveal the name of the confessor. Vellerino had a response for this:

And as to the witness who said that my client said that even if they broke her into pieces she wouldn’t name the confessor who had said it to her: that witness was moved by hatred to twist the sense of the words. When so many nuns talk, they discover confessional secrets and then go spreading them; for this reason and for no other, my client said that she wouldn’t discuss it, because these were things related to the confession, which it is not right to go publishing and discussing around the house.³⁰⁵

301 *“muy encendida y con gran calor y furor de ira y enojo” (75v).*

302 *“suele con poco causa arrebatarse de enojo en tanta manera que quasi sale de sentido” (75v).*

303 *“y estando desta suerte porfiar demasiadamente qualquier cosa por salir con lo que dize” (75v).*

304 *“por esta causa dezia lo de el confesor pero en realidad de verdad nunca tal cosa le dixo no trato ningun confesor” (75v).*

Moreover, Vellerino noted, the same day that the conversation in the workshop occurred, Elena “made the nuns assemble, and knelt before them to beg their pardon for the scandal she’d caused. With many tears, she said that she had erred.”

The Ten Commandments problem Vellerino dealt with by saying Elena had read it in fray Luis de Granada and other books. The question of the council’s frightening people, and the other answers she had given to questions, could also be chalked up to her femininity. The defender suggested that the inquisitors attribute her answers “not to malice but to the difficulty a woman has in responding well to many questions.”³⁰⁶ In fact, the answers she had given showed her “simplicity.”

Finally, the licentiate described Elena de la Cruz as a model nun and citizen:

Elena de la Cruz is a good nun and good Christian, of laudable life, a good example; an Old Christian and noblewoman [*hijadalgo*], daughter of the licentiate Altamirano, resident [*vecino*] of this city, now deceased, an Old Christian man, nobleman of a well-known manor [*hidalgo de solar conocido*], a very prominent personage, without a stain in all his lineage [*sin mácula en toda su generación*].³⁰⁷

Fulgencio de Vique signed the declaration.

³⁰⁵ “Y un testigo que dize que la dicha mi parte dijo que aunque la hisiesen pedaços no diria quien se lo avia dicho, se movio con oido y torcio el sentido a las palabras porque estando se tratando de que algunas religiosas, descubren los secretos de las confesiones y los andan publicando, mi parte a este proposito, y no un otro dixo, que Alla no los trataria porque son cosas que tocan a la confesion, y estas no es justo andar las publicando y tratando por la casa” (75v).

³⁰⁶ “una muger difficultosamente podia bien responder a muchas preguntas” (76).

³⁰⁷ The emphasis on “Old Christian” here does not seem to indicate any stain on the lineage of others involved in the case; rather, it seems, Vellerino wanted to supply the genealogical information that Elena herself had not given.

De Vique and Vellerino then submitted the questions by which they proposed to examine the defence witnesses. These eight questions would be the backbone of the defence effort.

1. Did the witness know Elena de la Cruz; know her father the licentiate Altamirano; and know about the charges against her?
2. Did the witness know that Elena de la Cruz was a professed nun in la Concepción, in which she lived in a primitive state, and that she was a very good Conceptionist whose life provided a good example? And before this case, had the witness ever heard any scandalous or offensive words of her?
3. Did the witness know that Elena was the daughter of the licentiate Altamirano, a vecino of the city, who was a very prominent man, an Old Christian, and nobleman of a known manor (*hijodalgo de solar conocido*)?
4. Did the witness know that Elena de la Cruz was in the habit of becoming angry easily and with little cause, and that when angry she appeared to lose her sense, burning with and being carried away by excessive anger? And that when she was in this state she was in the habit of persisting excessively in order to come out ahead?
5. Did the witness know that when Elena de la Cruz said what she'd said in the workshop, she was very angry at the things the other nuns were saying to her?
6. And did the witness know that the same day Elena de la Cruz had called together the nuns and, upon her knees before them, and with tears, begged their forgiveness for the scandal she had caused them, and said that she'd erred?

7. Did the witness know that before the events in question had occurred, Elena had asked the abbess and other nuns whether the archbishop could grant indulgences to those who wore the rosary; and that receiving affirmation of this, she had worn the rosary and held it in greater reverence?

8. And finally, did the witness know that after the fateful events, Elena had been very repentant and contrite, "with great tears"? And that this was well-known in the convent?

The first witness for the defence appeared on the 30th of August. Juana de Santa Clara, professed nun of la Concepción, said that she had known Elena for eight or nine years, and that she knew the licentiate Altamirano, who was "in glory." Juana knew about the charges, of course. She also knew that Elena was a professed nun, and indeed took her for the daughter of the licentiate Altamirano, who was a very prominent man in the city. She had heard this from many people, and it was well known in the city and the convent. Juana agreed that Elena was easily angered, to the point of appearing to be out of her sense (*que parece no está en su juicio*) and losing her reason (*ir fuera de razón*). Juana hadn't been in the workshop, but she had heard other nuns say that Elena had been very angry. This witness had seen Elena kneel in the presence of the whole convent, in total humility (*con toda humildad*). Juana had seen that Elena wore the rosary, but she didn't know about the indulgences. She agreed that Elena was very repentant.

The following day, Bárbara de la Concepción was interviewed. Bárbara was a forty-five-year-old professed nun, and she had known Elena for eight or nine years, ever since Elena had been in the convent. This means, of course, that Elena had only been in the convent since the age of

thirty-five or thirty-six. This gives an added perspective on her bad temper and insubordination. Though life in la Concepción was hardly communal, it presented certain strains for elite women, who were not accustomed to taking orders—from members of their own sex, at any rate.³⁰⁸ Coming into the convent as a mature woman who had perhaps commanded a household, Elena would have found the transition more difficult, particularly if her profession was coerced.³⁰⁹

Bárbara said that she had known the licentiate Altamirano and knew of the case. She knew that Elena was a professed nun, because she had watched her take profession in the convent. Bárbara said that she had seen Elena perform good Christian works (*muy buenas obras de cristiana*), but she didn't detail what they were. She had never before this heard scandalous or offensive words from Elena, whom she knew to be the daughter of Altamirano. Altamirano was known to be a very prominent man.

Bárbara too had seen Elena's excessive anger. She said that when Elena was angry, she was "in the habit of persisting in things that lead nowhere just to come out on top."³¹⁰ Bárbara hadn't been in the workshop, but had heard it said that Elena was very angry. Elena was very

³⁰⁸See Marilo Vigil, *La vida de las mujeres en los siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid: Siglo veintiuno de España, 1986), 216–7.

³⁰⁹I do not have information on Elena's life before she entered the convent. Though coerced profession was decried by the church—and this prohibition renewed by the Council of Trent—it persisted, and was not uncommon in Elena's social network. The Avila brothers had coerced their sister's profession in La Concepción to preserve family honour—an action that led eventually to her suicide.

³¹⁰ "suele porfiar cosas sin razon e camino por salir con la suya" (95).

devoted to the rosary, she added, and for as long as she had known her, Elena had worn the beads. She affirmed Elena's repentance.

Juana de San Miguel, a forty-year-old professed nun and vicar (*vicaria*) of the convent, was next. She had been in charge of the secluded Elena for the previous two weeks. She too had known Elena for the eight or nine years she had been in the convent. But she didn't know the licentiate Altamirano, other than through hearing his name. Juana had watched Elena take the veil. She took Elena for a good God-fearing Christian,³¹¹ and had never seen evidence to the contrary. Juana had heard that the licentiate Altamirano was a prominent and noble man.

Juana too confirmed Elena's tendency to anger. Juana hadn't been in the workshop, but she had heard that Elena appeared to have lost her senses (*parece estan fuera de sentido*). Afterward, Juana had seen that Elena was very repentant and shamed by what she had said. Juana didn't know about the indulgences, but she did know that Elena ordinarily wore the rosary, and she had seen her praying with it.

Inés de la Cruz was next. A twenty-seven-year-old professed nun, Inés had known Elena for about thirteen years, and had been her friend for about six, since Inés had entered the convent. This witness was the only one who had known Elena for longer than the period that Elena had been in the convent. Inés also knew the licenciado.

Inés told Ledesma that a cousin of hers was married to Hernán Gutiérrez Altamirano, Elena's brother, but that this would not stop her from telling the truth.³¹² In the time Inés had known Elena, she had seen

³¹¹ "*buena cristiana thenerosa de dios e de su conciencia*" (96v).

her perform good Christian deeds. She'd never heard anything scandalous or offensive from her. Inés then mentioned the good treatment and friendship she had received from the accused.

The witness had known the licentiate Altamirano, whom she knew to be a prominent man in the city. She had heard this many times, from her father, Juan Alonso de Sosa, and from other relatives. She knew that Elena was prone to anger, and when angry would say "things that don't lead anywhere" (*cosas que no llevan camino*). This, she said, was well known in the convent. Inés had been in the workshop when Elena had made her speech, and had seen that she was very angry. Inés had also seen Elena kneel and beg pardon of the assembled sisters, and had been present when Elena asked the abbess about indulgences. Inés had noticed that her friend wore the rosary, prayed with it, and held it in great reverence. Inés concluded by saying that she had seen Elena's great repentance and tears, which were well known in the convent.

Isabel de la Visitación, a thirty-five-year-old nun, had known Elena since the latter had been in the convent, and she also knew the deceased licentiate Altamirano. She had been present at Elena's profession, and took her for a very good God-fearing Christian. Isabel said that Elena had given a good example to the other nuns. Isabel told Vellerino that she took Altamirano for an Old Christian nobleman (*cristiano viejo hijodalgo*) and knew that he was a very prominent man (*hombre muy principal*). She had heard this from her father, Juan Cano,³¹³ and from other relatives.

312 "*una prima hermana desta testigo esta casado con Hernán Gutiérrez Altamirano hermano de la dicha Elena de la Cruz pero que por esto no deján de decir le verdad en esta causa*" (98v).

Isabel had noticed Elena's anger, and agreed that when angry, she'd say anything to win an argument. She hadn't been in the workshop, but had heard that Elena was very angry. Isabel was also not present when Elena had asked the abbess about indulgences, because she had been busy elsewhere in the convent.

Isabel was followed by the fifty-eight-year-old María de la Circuncisión. She too had known Elena since the latter had been in the convent, and had seen Elena profess about eight years before. María had heard that the licentiate was a prominent man, but hadn't known him. She took Elena for a good Christian. María noted that when angry, Elena would "say many things without watching what she said."³¹⁴ María could testify to Elena's devotion to the rosary, and to Elena's contrition. As the witness told the commission, Juana de San Miguel, who was in charge of Elena, had described it to her.

The thirty-one-year-old Leonor de la Trinidad followed María. She had known the accused for eight or nine years. She'd heard of, but hadn't known, the licentiate Altamirano. Leonor had seen Elena profess, and took her for a good Christian. Leonor confirmed the stories of Elena's anger, but she hadn't been present either in the workshop or when Elena talked to the abbess about indulgences. However, the witness had seen Elena wear the rosary and pray with it. Leonor agreed that Elena had repented "with tears."

Juan Vellerino then called Luisa de San Gerónimo, who had known the accused for eight or nine years but hadn't known her father

³¹³He is discussed below.

³¹⁴ "dize muchas cosas sin mirar lo que dize" (104).

except by reputation. Luisa said that she was thirty-one, and had seen Elena profess. Luisa took Elena for a God-fearing Christian and a good example, and affirmed that Elena was inclined to anger. She hadn't been present in the workshop, but had seen Elena kneel and beg pardon for her words and the scandal she had caused. Luisa said that Elena was very repentant and contrite, "very recollected and doing penance in prayer and in fasting."³¹⁵

A male witness followed: the licentiate Francisco de los Rios, the man we have heard the nuns describe as vicar of the convent. De los Rios was, in addition, curate of the cathedral of Mexico, a post he held from 1559 to 1577.³¹⁶ The licentiate had, as we know, taken the case to Ledesma in the first place. The witness said that he was more than forty-five years old, and knew Elena de la Cruz because he had confessed her several times. He hadn't known the licentiate Altamirano—reasonably, as de los Rios had only been in the colony since 1554—but had heard many people speak of him as a prominent man and an *hidalgo*. He couldn't answer the rest of the questions, except to testify to Elena's repentance. He had seen her "with great tears" repenting of the scandal she had caused. Things were going well for the defence. But Ledesma was preparing another charge.

On the third of September, Ledesma called his witnesses again. First to be called was the abbess Ana de San Gerónimo. Fray Bartolomé asked her whether she had heard Elena say that she would go to heaven as a

³¹⁵"*muy recogida e hazer penitencias ansi en ayunos como en oraciones*" (107v).

³¹⁶ Schwaller, *Church*, 203–4.

martyr. Ana said that she'd never heard this, but that Elena had told her that her conscience was clear, because she had had no intention of going against God or the law.³¹⁷

María de la Concepción was next. She had heard Elena say the offending words: "if it pleased God that they burn me I would go to rejoice in God."³¹⁸ María didn't remember the part about being a martyr.

Isabel de San Gerónimo also remembered hearing Elena say those words, on the afternoon of the day of the workshop altercation. Isabel reported that Elena had said that if it pleased God to take her from among them, and if they burned her, she would be a martyr. This was confirmed by Isabel de Santa Clara, who thought that Elena had said it in response to being told to watch what she said.

On the sixth of September, Ledesma said that he was charging Elena with new offences, and he ordered that the transcript of the new evidence be sent to Fulgencio de Vique. Elena's defenders responded quickly. On the seventh, Vellerino and de Vique submitted a statement to Juan de Vergara. Their response to the new charges was not, however, novel. Elena had committed these newly discovered errors out of "ignorance and simplicity with no malice," "in the heat of anger." The defenders again asked that Ledesma absolve their client, imposing a light and salubrious penance. Vellerino then asked for some more time to prepare the defence. Ledesma granted another four days.

³¹⁷ *"en su conciencia no temia cosa que le diese pena... por que su intencion no fue de ir contra dios ni las leyes"* (78v).

³¹⁸ *"si pluguiese a dios que me quemasen que yo me iria a gozar de dios"* (79v).

On the ninth, Ledesma called his witnesses again and asked them to confirm what they'd said on the third. Before signing her deposition, Ana de San Gerónimo added that she had heard Elena say that she didn't understand that she'd sinned against the Church. María de la Concepción confirmed her testimony and fleshed it out a bit, saying that she remembered that when Elena talked about being burned, she had said that she would go to heaven without a fault (*sin culpa*), and that it would please God that she would be killed without reason, for then she would be a martyr for Jesus (*ella seria martir de jesu*). María added, helpfully, that it seemed to her that these words were said in ignorance. Isabel de San Gerónimo and Isabel de Santa Clara confirmed their statements. Once again, solid evidence of Elena's wrongdoing had been obtained. According to this evidence, Elena seemed not to understand or care that she had erred. In fact, she seemed to be claiming access to a higher truth; God knew she had not erred. She seemed to think she had achieved the human perfection that she had talked about before. The Elena de la Cruz Vellerino had worked so hard to create seemed to have fallen by the wayside.

On the tenth of September, Elena's defence went back into action. Rather than responding directly to the new charges, the defence seemed to wish to pile up more and more character evidence. The same questions were used, but additional witnesses were called. Vellerino called Inés de la Madalena. This thirty-five-year-old nun told him that she had known Elena for eight or nine years, and had seen her profess. Inés had also known the licentiate Altamirano, and had heard many people say that he was a prominent nobleman (*hidalgo principal*). Inés also testified to Elena's anger, and had seen her tears and repentance. She told the panel

that Elena had knelt “in the middle of the chapter house” (*en medio capítulo*) and had begged forgiveness. Inés also testified to Elena’s devotion to the rosary.

Isabel de los Reyes also confirmed what had been said. A twenty-nine-year-old nun, Isabel had known Elena for eight or nine years, but hadn’t known Altamirano except by reputation. She had heard many people speak highly of the man. Isabel had seen Elena profess, and took her for a God-fearing Christian. Elena’s anger was again confirmed; Isabel said that when Elena got angry, she “didn’t know what she was saying” (*no sabe lo que dize*). Isabel hadn’t been in the workshop, but had later heard that Elena had in anger said words against the faith.

Now Vellerino called upon the dean of Michoacán, don Diego Rodríguez, who from being part of the prosecution was now called to be part of the defence. He told Vellerino that he was more than fifty-five years old, and that he knew Elena because he had confessed her several times. Don Diego had known the licentiate Altamirano, whose status was well known in the city. To the rest of the questions, don Diego simply answered that he didn’t know, as he hadn’t seen Elena since the workshop incident. With this testimony, the defence closed its case. With a whimper, admittedly—don Diego might have been more forthcoming—but having amassed some solid evidence.

But evidence of what? All charges against Elena had been amply proved; Vellerino and de Vique made no effort to deny the allegations, except for the one that concerned the confessor. (There, it will be recalled, Vellerino had asserted that the confessor did not exist.) The defence got its power from its creation of a parallel script that detailed an offence committed in anger by a member of an elite family—and, most

importantly, as we shall see, by a woman. The effect was not simply to trivialise the offence, but to provide a assurance that this woman could be rehabilitated and should be punished lightly.

Vellerino arranged the questioning so that two questions, the first and third, mentioned the licentiate Altamirano. Though witnesses weren't asked by the first question to comment on his character, they invariably did so. Thus witnesses ended up repeating information about the prominence and nobility of Elena's father.

In describing Elena's father, witnesses used the standard sixteenth-century formula of *hidalguía*. Altamirano was "prominent," and was a nobleman of a known manor (*hidalgo de solar conocido*). These were the most important components of nobility: blood and reputation.³¹⁹ In asserting them as proper to Elena's family, witnesses told the inquisitors that what happened to Elena had repercussions in the world of honour; something they undoubtedly knew well.

Among Elena's character witnesses were women of extremely high social standing. Only two of the nuns revealed their parentage; given that parentage, we might view these nuns' naming of their fathers as extremely calculated.

The twenty-seven-year-old Inés de la Cruz, it will be remembered, told the court that she had heard of Altamirano's prominence from her father, Juan Alonso de Sosa, and from other relatives. De Sosa was the royal treasurer and an extremely prominent man. He was also involved in

³¹⁹ The third component, service, does not figure strongly in the witnesses' testimony, nor, according to Thompson, is it commonly mentioned in this period. See Thompson, *op. cit.*, 382–5. For the importance of reputation, see J.H. Elliott, *Spain and Its World 1500–1700: Selected Essays* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 163.

local government, of course, and had served as *regidor*. Inés also mentioned that her cousin was married to Hernán, Elena's brother. Another important connection that Inés didn't mention was that her sister, doña María de Sosa, had been married to Alonso de Avila.³²⁰ Exactly two years earlier, Inés's brother-in-law had been executed for his part in the conspiracy of the Marqués del Valle.

The thirty-five-year-old Isabel de la Visitación referred explicitly to Elena's father's hidalgo status. As had Inés, Isabel identified her father, Juan Cano, as the source of this information. Juan Cano was a conqueror who had come from Caceres in the Extremadura. He had come into fabulous wealth by marrying doña Isabel Moctezuma,³²¹ who was daughter of Moctezuma II. Doña Isabel bore Juan Cano five children, three sons and two daughters, Isabel and Catalina. The girls both professed in la Concepción, thus giving the lie to the notion that pure Spanish blood was absolutely necessary. Noble Indian blood was certainly not a hindrance. Of course, the Cano girls' acceptance may have been partly due to the wealth they gave and caused to be given to la Concepción.³²²

Doña Isabel had also borne Hernán Cortés a daughter, Leonor, who was reared in the home of licenciado Juan Altamirano.³²³ Born around 1526, Leonor Cortés Moctezuma would have been a natural companion for the licenciado's daughter Elena. After giving birth to Leonor, doña Isabel bore another child, this time to her new husband Pedro Gallego de

³²⁰ This genealogical information can be found in Benítez, *Century*, 163.

³²¹ Information on Juan Cano can be found in Ida Altman, *Emigrants and Society*, 272-3.

³²² "Religious Orders of Women," *NCE* XII, 322-8.

³²³ Jennifer Asp, "Strategies for Survival: Indigenous Women in the Conquest of Mexico" (MA Thesis; University of Calgary, 1989), 94.

Andrade. The infant, Juan de Andrade Moctezuma, was baptised by Zumárraga, with godfather Juan Altamirano standing by.³²⁴ Many years later, in 1550, the licenciado Altamirano was also witness to and executor of doña Isabel's will. The sisters' mother, Doña Isabel, died in 1551, and Juan Cano returned to Spain during the 1560s, followed by one of his sons. But the ties between Doña Isabel Moctezuma and the Altamirano family were long-standing and deep, even if the older generation had disappeared. Isabel de la Visitación was tied to Elena by ties of kinship, patronage, and friendship.

The two witnesses who identified their parentage, then, were of the high nobility—and inextricably linked to the Cortés party. Their word on Elena's noble status was not to be taken lightly. And the concurrence of all witnesses concerning Elena's social standing was irrefutable. The inquisitors, it will be noted, never asked Elena to detail her lineage further than the identification of her father. In contrast, when Francisca de la Anunciación appeared some years earlier, she was asked about her genealogy, including whether anyone in her family had been a Jew or Moor, or had been involved with the Inquisition.³²⁵

Though such questions were standard, Elena was not asked anything more than her parentage, of which she revealed only her father's name. She did not mention her mother, Mecía Maldonado. This in itself is not unusual, as the distaff side was not thought to figure greatly in matters of honour or nobility.³²⁶ However, distaff lineage *did* matter

³²⁴*Ibid.*

³²⁵ Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 134.

³²⁶ Altman, *Emigrants*, 49–50, 52.

before the Holy Office. Elena's lack of information in this regard betrays her confidence in her status and lineage—something Ledesma did not challenge.

If Vellerino's first concern was to establish who Elena was, he was equally concerned with establishing her anger. The piling up of words in his fourth question established that this was no ordinary anger. It was an anger in which, as so many witnesses confirmed, Elena "would say anything"—and had. Elena's rage would redeem her by serving as an excuse for what she had said. She hadn't believed the things she'd said, but had only thrown them in the faces of the nuns with whom she was arguing. Although witnesses for the prosecution and the defence confirmed Elena's fury, the defence argument ignored the fact that the anger had arrived *after* she started promulgating her unorthodox opinions.

Nonetheless, anger was a crucial plank in Elena's defence. For anger was the critical characteristic needed to distinguish heresy from blasphemy. The church discriminated among profanity, blasphemy, and heresy. Profanity was characterised by carelessness, while blasphemy was conceived in "positive irreverence and contempt."³²⁷ In addition, blasphemy could be nonheretical, consisting simply in insolence toward God, or heretical. Heretical blasphemy "openly asserts something contrary to the faith."³²⁸ Blasphemy was not considered trivial by any means; indeed, the intention behind it is malicious,³²⁹ and its effects, particularly

³²⁷ "Blasphemy," NCE II, 606–7.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

in an honour-based society, are damaging to the general respect that ought to be accorded God. On the other hand, blasphemy was considered less serious than heresy. During the sixteenth century, the Mexican Inquisition tended to conflate the two offences, often judging as blasphemy what might have been seen as heresy had a more clear distinction between the two been drawn.³³⁰ In establishing that Elena's words were said in anger, Vellerino was attempting to make the script less complicated. His client, he was suggesting, had blasphemed rather than spread heresy.

Elena's anger was also important in terms of the gender-based defence. It would explain how she had come to say what she'd said. Since the nineteenth century, anger has generally been seen as more proper to masculinity than to femininity. In sixteenth-century Europe, however, the reverse was true. Women were seen as physiologically more prone than men to anger and violence. As venerable a source as Seneca knew that "anger is a womanly and childish vice" (*ira est vitium muliebre et puerile*).³³¹ This was a long-standing belief that dated to the ancient world, in which uncontrollable violence was seen as "womanish."³³² The Aristotelian notion of woman as defective man was finally rejected by Aquinas,³³³ but medieval and Renaissance philosophers nonetheless continued to believe that women were constitutionally weaker and therefore less controlled—and therefore more like children than like men.

³³⁰ Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 12.

³³¹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 53.

³³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³³ See Vern L. Bullough, "Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1973), 485–501; 487.

Spanish law entrenched the association of woman with child. Women were treated as minors who needed paternal protection and authority. They were unable to witness wills or be guarantors. (They also enjoyed limited protection from prosecution for debts.)³³⁴ Juan Vellerino emphasised Elena's childlike "simplicity," pointing up this woman/child conflation.

Beliefs about women's childishness and uncontrollability were bulwarked by humoural pathology, the dominant medical model of the sixteenth century.³³⁵ Humours are a way of structuring political and social realities as well as medical ones.³³⁶ Beliefs about the functioning of the body have long been connected with politics and society. Thus we should not be surprised to find that in the world of humours, as in the social world, women were inferior.

Women were traditionally thought watery, governed by the cold, moist humours;³³⁷ men were fiery, governed by the hot and dry.³³⁸ This meant, among other things, that women were more passive, while men were more active. It also meant that women were less stable and lacked psychological control.³³⁹ The female sex was considered prone to attacks of melancholy, but also to fits of anger. The *Historia animalum* described

³³⁴Josefina Muriel, *Recogimientos*, 16–17.

³³⁵George M. Foster, "Humoural Pathology in Spain and Spanish America," in Antonio Carreira et al, eds. *Homenaje a Julio Caro Baroja* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1978), 357–70; 361.

³³⁶*Ibid.*, 363.

³³⁷See Fray Luis de León, *La perfecta casada*, 36.

³³⁸Bulloughs, 491.

³³⁹MacLean, 41.

women as “more querulous, more apt to scold and strike.”³⁴⁰ And woman’s anger was not only more easily aroused, but much more intense and virulent. “Hell hath no fury” was an axiom in Spanish as well: According to fray Lu s de Le n, “no hay... ira que iguale la de la mujer enojosa.”³⁴¹ This was the “natural” inheritance of women, but it was an entirely negative one: women had no business being violent, as did men in war, for example.³⁴²

Humoural pathology thus posited a biological basis for social roles. Biology was a necessary, but not a *sufficient*, condition for those social roles. Women needed to be ruled and kept in control, or they would attempt to usurp male privilege. As Avicenna had it, the hen who once defeated the rooster would soon grow spurs.³⁴³ This was a warning to those men who allowed their women to escape masculine control. Women’s anger could take the form of a “catfight”—all hair-pulling,

³⁴⁰Ibid., 42.

³⁴¹*La perfecta casada*, 19.

³⁴²Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987): “If a woman’s rage erupted into violence, it could be approved in the exceptional case of defending her children or her religion, as in a grain riot or a religious uprising, or her people, as with Judith and Joan of Arc, but most rightful bloodshed was better left to men” (81). Women in Spain did take up arms in the Reconquest, of course: but such women were generally seen as “manly women,” women who took up masculinity as a superior and necessary identity in times of crisis. For example, Avila has a legend of Jimena Bl zquez, a woman who became male (*varonil*) and fought for the city, but refused political power and returned to femininity once the crisis was over (Bilinkoff, 3). Mary Elizabeth Perry suggests that Catalina Erauso, the famous nun-ensign of Mexico, avoided punishment because her life suggested the superiority of maleness and reinforced patriarchal values (Perry, 135).

³⁴³Bulloughs, 496.

amusement, and even titillation³⁴⁴ for male onlookers. But beneath the amusement, there was a serious message about gender and power.

Prescriptive sources describe anger as arising out of garrulity—a characteristically female vice.³⁴⁵ When women talked, they argued, and when they argued, they fought. How different from this vice was the female virtue of silence, modeled after the silence of the Virgin.³⁴⁶ Following the apostle Paul, churchmen consistently³⁴⁷ argued that women's eloquence lay in silence. The well-governed woman offered silence/obedience to the man's speech/command.³⁴⁸ Silence was equated with enclosure and chastity as the fundamental components of decent womanhood. A woman who argued was "leaky." "Casa que se llueve es la mujer rencillosa," wrote fray Lu s de Le n.³⁴⁹

If we follow the trajectory of the trial from this perspective, we see the origins of Elena's anger in gossip. Garrulous women, instead of keeping silence, discuss things that are beyond their ken. Elena too speaks out, becoming successively more angry and adding blasphemy to blasphemy. Silence is imposed on all by the abbess, and order is

³⁴⁴Davis reproduces a 1580 engraving of "The Battle for the Eel," in which women battle over a phallic eel, disheveling one another's hair. One woman's buttocks and legs are serendipitously revealed (see 100).

³⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

³⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 23.

³⁴⁷*La perfecta casada*, 18.

³⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 54.

³⁴⁹See Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago/London: Chicago, 1986, 123–142). "The surveillance of women concentrated upon three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house. These three areas were frequently collapsed into each other" (126).

momentarily restored. Nonetheless, Elena's words must be dealt with by a higher authority than the abess; but in emphasising her anger, the defence attorneys embed her words in a context of feminine frailty. This context, in this case, implies a lenient sentence.³⁵⁰

³⁵⁰Anger would not imply a lenient sentence, or a pardon, in the case of a serious crime such as the murder of one's husband, as Davis argues. A woman's anger was only trivial when controllable.

CONCLUSION

On the sixteenth of September, Ledesma ordered Elena and Vellerino to appear to hear the definitive sentence. The sentence came down on the second of October in the archepiscopal palaces. from whence it was taken to the convent. After consulting with "persons of science and of conscience," Ledesma reached the conclusion that Elena was guilty of having said that the Sovereign Pontiff and the council could not decree mortal sins, that there were no more than seven deadly sins, and "other pernicious words and heretical propositions." Fray Bartolomé sentenced Elena to the following: one feast day, she was to stand in the choir of the convent while the high mass was said, with her head uncovered and with a lighted candle in her hands.³⁵¹ She was to fast three Fridays, repeat the psalms of penitence, and abjure her errors.³⁵² She was solemnly warned to avoid such errors in the future.

On the third of October, Elena heard the sentence in the chapter-house of the convent, in the presence of Ledesma, Juan de Vergara, the dean of Michoacán, Francisco Despinosa, the abbess Ana de San Gerónimo, and the *vicaria* Juana de San Miguel. She read aloud and signed her abjuration and was absolved. Here the dossier ends.

This ending is unsatisfactory for the reader, because of the lack of continuity between the charge and the vehemence with which it was pursued on one hand, and the sentence on the other. Ledesma carefully stacked up evidence against Elena, found her guilty as charged, and then

³⁵¹ "un día de fiesta en el coro del dicho monasterio mientras se dixere la misa mayor en cuerpo y en pie y con una candela encendida en las manos" (116).

³⁵² "ayune tres viernes y rrese los salmos de la penitencia y haga abjuracion" (116).

gave her nothing more severe than a slap on the wrist.³⁵³ One is left wondering why Elena was charged in the first place.

I have suggested throughout this thesis that Elena's actions were threatening to the hierarchy, not because of her great intellectual powers but because of her gender and a complex of other factors beyond her control or ken. The first of these factors, which, I have argued, overshadowed the case, was the Cortés conspiracy. One is left with the overwhelming impression that the conspiracy of the Marqués del Valle had *something* to do with Elena's prosecution,³⁵⁴ but defining that something causes problems. The possibility of a causal connection between the two events would be impossible to prove without more information. It must be remembered that the charge had many components; it took scandalised sisters to call the abbess, a cautious abbess to call the vicar, and a worried vicar to call Ledesma *before* the actual charge could be contemplated. Proposing a conspiracy to discredit the Altamirano family, then, would be rash. On the other hand, Ledesma's decision to press charges and pursue the case was indubitably affected by recent events.

We have seen that Elena's complicated kinship connections placed her in the centre of the conspiracy, even if she was isolated from it behind thick walls. Given that the archdiocesan hierarchy allied itself with the *audiencia* against the conspirators, it would not be surprising if Montúfar

³⁵³This is not to suggest that the Inquisition was always more harsh. It doled out its share of wrist-slaps, to be sure, but the substance of the charge and length and intensity of the trial would suggest a somewhat more severe penalty.

³⁵⁴Greenleaf agrees that the conspiracy "obviously had some bearing on Montúfar's decision to act harshly in this instance," but he is also unable to provide more detail. Further, he suggests that "It was upsetting to the hierarchy clergy that such an articulate theologian as Elena de la Cruz existed in a Mexican nunnery" (134-5). Elena certainly upset the hierarchy, but not, I would argue, because of her articulateness.

and Ledesma took it upon themselves to purify La Concepción. This would certainly demonstrate to the nuns within—many of whom were allied to the conspirators through birth and marriage connections—that they were under the control of the bishop, not their families.³⁵⁵ It would also demonstrate to those families that their influence on the church was not total. In this sense, the trial is part of the defeat of the *encomendero* class, part of a group of politicised trials of conquistadors and *encomenderos*.

The exertion of power over the recalcitrant nun would also have the effect of demonstrating to the regular clergy, and particularly the Franciscans, that the convent was to be under episcopal jurisdiction. I have suggested that the trial may be read as a microcosmic enactment of the subjection of regular to secular and female to male clergy—a true Tridentine moment. The Council of Trent and the Mexican Provincial Councils had affirmed and extended the powers of the bishop. Montúfar had not been reticent in claiming his privileges, exerting his power over the orders, or prosecuting clerics.³⁵⁶ While Philip II had reiterated in 1566 that the Franciscan order ought to supervise La Concepción, Montúfar felt that the convent ought to be under episcopal jurisdiction, and thus it continued.³⁵⁷ And as the 1560s drew to a close, royal favour was increasingly swinging toward the bishop rather than the orders.³⁵⁸ The

³⁵⁵Given how quickly the abbess had Elena denounced to the Inquisition, the nuns seemed to understand this.

³⁵⁶Schwaller, *Church*, 166.

³⁵⁷Marroqui, II, 140.

³⁵⁸See Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 137.

tide was inexorably turning, a movement that would culminate with the promulgation of the *Ordenanza del Patronazgo* in 1574.³⁵⁹ This ordinance would severely limit regulars' powers, effectively ending eighty years of autonomy. Elena's trial fit neatly into a general push toward comprehensive episcopal power.

The trial of Elena de la Cruz also resonates with an increasing surveillance of religious women. From the dawn of the Lutheran threat throughout the sixteenth century, religious women were increasingly viewed with suspicion. The prominence of mystical women among the heretics persecuted by the Inquisition in Spain and elsewhere suggested a particular susceptibility to heterodoxy among the weaker sex. At the same time, reading and writing, always suspicious activities for women, became correlated with Lutheranism. The sixteenth century was a turning point for women religious with quasi-episcopal jurisdiction, as the Council of Trent removed such power from women's orders and subjected all female orders to male. No monk should henceforth have to genuflect to an abbess.³⁶⁰ There was thus reduced room for women religious. Women such as Elena, who hoped to formulate and discuss their own opinions, found decreasing tolerance for such activity. In this sense, Elena's experiences echo those of many women of the period, who found themselves forced to take refuge in feminine weakness in order to survive. Elena was no Saint Teresa, but she shared with the saint the protective if stifling *topos* of womanly frailty. Embracing this motif was for

³⁵⁹Schwaller, *Church*, 82.

³⁶⁰Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop*, 82. According to Morris, "it was only in the sixteenth century that an antifeminist attitude arose with regard to the jurisdiction of abbesses and that it became a subject of debate" (73). Now, apparently, monks found it degrading to genuflect to a woman (51).

many women, and increasingly in the sixteenth century, the only way to escape suspicion.

In aligning my analysis of the dossier with these important events and movements of the sixteenth century, I do not mean to imply that Elena's trial was simply a reflection of one or more of them. I have suggested that we should see the trial as a focus for a whole *cluster* of meanings. I am not abandoning causality for the pleasures of the text, but without further evidence I have no basis for saying that Montúfar, or Ledesma, decided to pursue Elena because she was part of the Cortés faction. Yet how convenient for them that her case synchronised with larger social and cultural issues of the time.

However, the elimination of strictly causal connections does not obviate the need to make sense out of the trial. Why *did* Montúfar move so decisively against Elena?

I have attempted to argue that the webs of significance that formed the context for the trial resonated one with the other to create a picture of dangerous subversion where, in fact, none existed. Gender and heresy were the central axes of this spiderweb, with general church reform and the Cortés conspiracy draped around them in concentric circles. Should we wonder that a movement on the meeting point of these central axes should shake the entire web?

Gender, after all, is one of the fundamental vehicles—perhaps *the* fundamental vehicle—for the expression of beliefs about power, and also for the construction of social relationships.³⁶¹ This means that in the

³⁶¹Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, No. 5 (December 1986), 1053–75; 1067.

realm of theory, for example, royal authority was construed as similar to the rule of a man over his wife. This has obvious implications for what it meant to be a king, or *queen*—or a man or a woman, for that matter. The governing of a republic was equated with the governing of a household.³⁶² Womanly insubordination thus resonated with political treason in ways explicit—as in English law, where a woman’s murder of her husband was petty treason³⁶³—or implicit.

What does this have to do with Elena? Simply put, she was heir to centuries of conflation of power with gender: legitimate authority with maleness, and submission (rebellion) with femaleness. In the crisis of 1568, given her family connections, her femaleness added fuel to the fire of her insubordination rather than trivialising it. Her anger did the same. The possibility of the whole convent’s boiling over cannot have been far from the minds of the hierarchy—especially given the recent examples from the peninsula. Montúfar’s—or perhaps we should say Ledesma’s—decision to pursue the case so aggressively was linked to fear of individual or corporate womanly insubordination as well as desire to exert episcopal authority over La Concepción.

This does not change the lack of verisimilitude between the trial and its outcome. If Ledesma were a novelist rather than an inquisitor, we might accuse him of failing to create a plausible ending. The sentence was without doubt a light one.³⁶⁴ Why? Solange Alberro suggests one

³⁶²See *La perfecta casada*, 86.

³⁶³See Davis, 81.

³⁶⁴Greenleaf calls it “very light.” See *Inquisition*, 136.

possibility: that women appear in Inquisition cases as irresponsible minors whose behaviours do not merit serious treatment.³⁶⁵ And indeed, we have seen that the notion of women as minors was a venerable one. However, it did not follow that their foibles were therefore trivial. Instead, it made it all the more logical to control their potential for insurrection. Vellerino's—and Elena's—triumph was in defusing the charges by allying the incident with the trivial errors of a minor rather than the rebellion of a dangerous, heretical, unruly woman.

Elena's case was taken seriously by the nuns who testified before Ledesma and by the inquisitor himself, who devoted a substantial amount of time and paper to the trial. And the beatas and nuns and laywomen burned in Seville and Peru were certainly taken seriously in their insubordination—they merited no special treatment. Women were heirs to two sides of one tradition. One said that women were perpetual minors, children whose crimes shouldn't be taken seriously and should be dealt with within the framework of family discipline. The obverse held that women, when they "went bad," would be much worse than bad men—*hell hath no fury*—and were potentially dangers to the whole of society. To a certain extent, women accused by the Inquisition could play into the former belief. If they did so, women could gain access to the tender consideration due to minors; they need only, as would Elena, work within the framework dictated by that topos.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵Solange Alberro, *La actividad del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en Nueva España 1571-1700* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1981), 130.

³⁶⁶Davis's women murderers did not plead for special consideration on the basis of their sex; Elena proved quite willing to do so.

Clearly, however, more was operating in the trial than a simple concern for womanly weakness. The quality of one's family was always a consideration in Inquisition trials: hence the genealogical questions. And Elena's family connections were superior enough to both minimise her crime and cause concern about what might happen were she harshly punished. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the Inquisition, particularly the Dominican version, *was* used against the encomendero class.³⁶⁷ Members of the Cortés party tended to be punished more harshly than others for similar crimes.³⁶⁸ We can discount the idea that Elena was released virtually unscathed simply because of her family connections.

If we assumed that the motivations for initiating the case were the motivations for the sentence handed down at the end, we would be completely unable to make sense of the trial. For the sentence, as we have noted, was almost laughably light. It seems that as the trial progressed, Ledesma's aggressiveness was overcome by Elena's gender-based defence. It should be remembered that an Inquisition trial was in many ways a battle of the text, in which reading and writing were of critical importance. Elena received the testimony against her in written form, as did Vellerino. Ledesma and his colleagues retired at the end with the transcript, on the reading of which their decisions and discussions were based. Thus textual issues of narrative and character are not peripheral to the question of Elena's sentence.

Any complex text contains tensions and competing interpretations.³⁶⁹ An Inquisition text is particularly complex because of

³⁶⁷Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 14.

³⁶⁸*Ibid.*

the many people involved in its construction. There exists a virtual battle of authorship between prosecution and defence. Here, Ledesma and Vellerino struggled to create plausible and compelling stories to explain Elena's behaviour. In the end, we must conclude, Vellerino was successful. From the beginning of the trial, it had been clear that Elena had erred, but Vellerino minimised her error. His story managed to locate Elena's insubordination on the trivial side of the dividing line that separated "childish" women from "dangerous" women. By emphasising her femininity, Vellerino managed to transform Elena's character—and even her astonishing anger. As we have seen, he described Elena as "simple." When angry, she would, as was repeated again and again by the witnesses for the defence, "take leave of her senses." Elena's words, in the hands of Vellerino, become the babblings of an ill-disciplined child. (Clearly, Ledesma was not unsusceptible to arguments about the protection of women; he appears before the *cabildo* in 1578, arguing for the establishment of a new convent, Santa Catalina de Sena.³⁷⁰) It seems evident that he was amenable to Vellerino's argument, giving Elena the "light and healthful penance" the defender had requested.

And so we leave the Altamiranos—bareheaded Elena with her candle, reciting the psalms of penitence, Hernán practising for the welcoming ceremony for the new viceroy. The picture is reintegration into the community, far from the flames of the *auto-de-fe* and the scaffold on which the Avilas were beheaded. Reintegration, however, must have

³⁶⁹Writing of *The Faerie Queene*, Louis Montrose notes that in that text, or any complex text, "so many cultural codes converge and interact that ideological coherence and stability are scarcely possible." See "Professing the Renaissance: The Politics and Poetics of Culture," in H. Aram Veenser, ed. *The New Historicism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), 15–26; 22.

³⁷⁰*Actas de cabildo* 4054, 28 April 1578 (547).

had its price. One can only guess at Elena's position within the convent after the incident. She had, after all, been humiliated, a forty-three-year-old woman forced to kneel before the "ill-educated girls" to whom she had considered herself superior. She had read her defender's descriptions of her simplicity, her defence witnesses' descriptions of her uncontrollable anger. The intellectual superiority that she felt she possessed (and which she had flaunted before the other nuns) she had been forced to deny, mumbling to Ledesma that she "understood little." We can only guess at these questions, for the record is silent.

In the final analysis, Elena is no "woman worthy." Nonetheless, her 1568 trial touches on a number of issues and events. As such, the dossier is able to illustrate something about the manner in which authority was extended over women religious by the church, over regular orders by the episcopacy, and over the encomendero class by the government of New Spain. The trial shows authority in its human, rather than monolithic, manifestations. If the dossier is less like a mirror of history than like a house of mirrors—each reflection refracted in another—I shall be glad. The issues touched on by the trial were complex and full of their own tensions, and the trial itself no less so. It would seem to me a lie to posit an overriding unity to the dossier, except for that provided, ultimately, by Elena. For the trial was not simply a sixteenth-century event, or a text, but also a momentous crisis in an individual life.

Elena may disappoint the reader. She was, as far as I can ascertain, no Sor Juana, and her personality as described by her fellow nuns is not particularly attractive. Ultimately, she seems little more than an arrogant woman with a hot temper. But she read books, cared about what she read, and tried to formulate ideas for herself: no small task for a woman in her

position. And it is worth remembering that it is only because of her anger, her arrogance, her inability to “be silent and dissimulate,”³⁷¹ that we know of her at all.

³⁷¹This was the strategy of María de Agreda, who was given this very sound advice by none other than the Virgin. See Kendrick, 84.

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