LICENSE TO CURE:

POLICING WOMEN'S HEALING
IN THE TRIALS OF YSABEL DE MONTOIA

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ABSTRACT

The Mexican Inquisition arrested Ysabel de Montoia, alias La Centella, in 1650 and again in 1661 on charges of witchcraft, superstitious healing, and crimes of sensuality. As a well-known curandera, or magical healer, in Puebla and Mexico City, Ysabel served a broad client base ranging from prostitutes to city officials. After her first trial, Ysabel claimed that the Inquisition had granted her a special license to heal; she was able to expand her business and even gained inquisitor as a client. In her trials, Ysabel articulated alternate matrices for understanding gender relations, expertise, and religion. This thesis uses her case, and the figure of the curandera, to analyze women’s agency and the influence of non-elite discourse in colonial Mexico.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1660, a wealthy man named Don Miguel lay dying in his apartment, around the corner from Mexico City’s main square. Suffering from a wasting illness, Don Miguel drew comfort from a woman healer named Ysabel de Montoia, whose ministrations included magical and religious ritual as well as herbal prescriptions. Her methods, however, and her constant presence in the household perturbed Don Miguel’s wife. When the wife tried to remove Ysabel from the apartment, “the sick man begged with his hands pressed together that she not throw [Ysabel] out.” He protested “that she had a license from the Holy Office to cure,” while Ysabel, “putting her hands on her chest swore that it was all true what he was saying.”¹ This quotation appears in the denunciation made by Don Miguel’s wife shortly after her husband’s death, condemning Ysabel to the Mexican Inquisition.

A well-known magical healer in Mexico City, Ysabel had faced the Inquisition ten years earlier and, since her release, had used her encounter with the Holy Office to bolster her reputation as a curandera. Ysabel appropriated the name of the Inquisition to enhance her “license” to heal, reaffirming the church and crown’s power to legitimate religious and medical practice. At the same time, however, Ysabel’s case reveals the Inquisition’s failure in eliminating unorthodox popular culture: the 1652 trial did not prevent but rather enabled Ysabel’s heterodox views and practices to continue. Ysabel’s case illustrates how the Inquisition, as a state-building institution, enforced the organization of society according to gendered, class, professional, and

¹ Lea, Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 51 R. “El enfermo le pidió con las manos puestas juntas que no le echasse de allí, que tenía licencia del Santo Officio para curar semejantes hechizos y la reo poniendo las manos en el pecho juró que era verdad todo que el enfermo decía...[y el enfermo] rogaba mucho a dicha testificada que se quedasse a dormir en su cassa la testificada porque cuando se quedaba allí la dicha repassaba él y quando faltaba passaba malas noches.” All translations from Ysabel’s trials are my own.
religious hierarchies. This case also, however, reveals limits to the Inquisition’s success in imposing such categories. Through the lens of the 1652 and 1661 Inquisition trials of Ysabel de Montoia, this thesis examines the extent to which the Mexican Inquisition enabled alternative discourses about class, gender, religion, and knowledge to persist.

Ysabel de Montoia

All the information we have regarding Ysabel comes from the records of her two Inquisitional trials. On both occasions, inquisitors compelled Ysabel to give a “life narrative.”

Ysabel de Montoia was born in 1614 in Mexico City, the legitimate daughter of Diego de Montoia y Guzmán, a Spanish immigrant (gachupín) shoemaker, and Luisa Hernández, a mulata healer. By the age of ten, Ysabel had been trained in herbal lore and midwifery by her mother and her two aunts, who in turn had learned the healing arts from Ysabel’s grandmother, a famous healer in her neighborhood. In 1624 a Spaniard arrived at Ysabel’s house and took her—presumably with the consent of her parents—to work as a servant in his mother’s house. There Ysabel lived with two other mulata servants, one of whom, Francisca Ruiz, served as a godmother for baptisms for many black and mulatto children born in the neighborhood. Francisca taught Ysabel her craft, which included instructing her godchildren in Catholic folk practice and knitting clothes to dress the image of the local patron, Our Lady of Carmen, during parish processions.

At the age of fourteen, Ysabel caught the attention of the treasurer of Mexico City’s minting house, who installed her as his mistress in a rented house under the care of an African slave. After a year, however, she was spirited away by Don Gabriel de Cabesco, a sergeant major in the local militia, who kept her as his concubine for six years. Ysabel then returned to live in

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2 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 51 R.
her parents’ house, while maintaining a relationship with the city treasurer, Juan Serrano, by whom she became pregnant. When her parents insisted that she marry Serrano, Ysabel fled her house, returning to live “a scandalous life” ("como mala mujer") and giving birth to a daughter, Ana María. Her outraged parents took away the child and paid for Ysabel to be held at the House of Seclusion of Santa Monica, a center of religious reformation for immoral persons condemned by the bishop or city officials.

At the House of Seclusion, Ysabel met and married Gaspar de la Peña, a former cabin boy; although they remained legally married for twenty more years, they lived together only eight days. After suffering repeated beatings by Gaspar, Ysabel reported him to city authorities, who threatened to throw him in jail. Gaspar fled, returning once in 1655 only to make two attempts on Ysabel’s life. In 1635, the year she gave birth to her daughter and married Gaspar, Ysabel moved to the nearby city of Puebla. She earned her living as a prostitute and healer, her home regularly crowded with laymen as well as priests from a nearby monastery. As a healer she provided remedies for physical and emotional ailments, combining Indian herbal medicine, Galenian humoral theory, and magical ritual to address natural as well as supernatural forces. Many of her clients were women seeking love potions, wax hearts, minerals, and other magical means for “taming” violent or wandering partners and attracting new lovers.

Ysabel met women similar to herself during a two year stint in Puebla’s House of Seclusion. On orders from Puebla’s new bishop, Palafox, Ysabel was incarcerated there from 1641 to 1642, along with other citizens in need of reform—prostitutes, peyote sellers, magic practitioners, and corrupt clergymen. Ysabel formed friendships with various female prisoners, poor unmarried women from a variety of racial backgrounds, with whom she lived and practiced love magic upon release from prison. These women would also testify against her when, in 1650,
Ysabel was denounced to the Inquisition by a customer dissatisfied with a magical remedy. In her first encounter with the Inquisition, Ysabel confessed to using supplications to the devil and other forms of witchcraft. Inquisitors also condemned Ysabel for her work as a procuress, bringing together men and women from all levels of society to commit "grave crimes of sensuality." Ysabel was formally found guilty of witchcraft and abuse of Catholic symbols, for which she received two hundred lashes, was exiled from Puebla, and served a term of three years working in Amor de Dios, a syphilis hospital in Mexico City.

Upon release, Ysabel used healing skills learned at the hospital, acquaintances formed with Inquisitors and hospital administrators, and a reputation enhanced by her public punishment to expand her business. Ysabel gained new clientele among Mexico City's elite, including the Inquisitor Don Francisco de Estrada y Escobedo. In 1661, however, another disgruntled customer denounced Ysabel to the Inquisition. She faced charges of witchcraft as well as medical quackery, and Inquisitors discovered that she had also made claims to be a vessel of divine healing power. Following two years of imprisonment, torture, and interrogation, Ysabel confessed to the charges. Only weeks after her sentencing—she received another two hundred lashes and would serve again at Amor de Dios—Ysabel died of pneumonia.

Ysabel de Montoia and Colonial Mexico

Ysabel's healing practices and love magic offer a window onto social relations in colonial Mexico, between men and women, the sacred and the secular, and the professional and the popular. Although framed by her interaction with the Inquisition—by the pen of the Holy Office and Ysabel's efforts to allay inquisitorial concerns—Ysabel's responses to inquisitors'...
questions reflect alternate matrices for comprehending colonial society.\(^4\) It is difficult, however, to use Inquisition trials to draw the sweeping conclusions achieved by more quantitative social historical approaches.\(^5\) Although highly codified, Inquisitional procedures and judgments varied based on the individual personalities of defendants, witnesses, and presiding officials as well as the temporal, geographical, and local circumstances of each case.\(^6\) While this thesis does not assess whether Ysabel's case was typical, her trials demonstrate similar concerns to trials of other women healers, practitioners of love magic, and visionaries.\(^7\) To understand Ysabel's testimony and inquisitorial statements, the proceedings are contextualized with other trials as well as with inquisitional reviews that assessed on the tribunal's work,\(^8\) works published by Mexico City writers, and other material reflecting opinion about class and gender.\(^9\) Inquisitional trials themselves constitute rich sources of information. Inquisitors, seeking to enforce religious and social orthodoxy, searched meticulously for mention of diabolical incantations or misappropriation of Catholic symbols, often including extraneous information about the witnesses' and defendant's lives. Inquisitors used these investigations to inform themselves broadly about popular practice, transcribing every result of their search regardless of relevance to the case at hand.


\(^5\) Mary Giles's volume of essays, *Women in the Inquisition*, provides a useful model for how to employ Inquisition records in microhistory. The essays demonstrate how to draw meaningful conclusions from individual cases while attending to the multiplicity of "woman's" experience. See Mary Giles, ed., *Women in the Inquisition*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).


\(^7\) These sources include trial summaries gathered from the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid, Spain.

\(^8\) These include pronouncements archived at the Henry Charles Lea Library at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

\(^9\) These tracts and opinions will be culled from secondary sources including John Tate Lanning's study of the Protomedicato, *The Royal Protomedicato: the Regulation of the Medical Professions in the Spanish Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), as well as Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán, *Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico* (Wilmington: SR Books, 1999). Viqueira Albán's use of such documents in models the way in which I will discuss elite concerns about ordering and controlling Mexico City.
The Spanish and Mexican Inquisitions ostensibly policed religious and political crimes; the definition of and punishments for these crimes, however, involved ideas about gender roles and professionalization in addition to religious practice. Catholicism played a significant role in establishing norms for femininity in early modern Iberoamerican societies, and witchcraft trials reflect ideas about women and the occult. The Inquisition moreover helped consolidate religious and political control in the early modern Spanish empire. The institution advanced definitions of femininity, knowledge, and ability that organized society under religious, political, and gendered hierarchies. Inquisition documents reveal early modern boundaries between marginality and acceptability, as well as examples of individuals who transgressed those boundaries. These individuals show how the popular classes rejected, adopted, or negotiated intellectual ideals—such as the polarization of male and female bodies into categories of good and bad, or the valorization of written culture.

According to Serge Gruzinski, to understand the process of cultural transfer, we must examine the “groups and individuals who act as go-betweens, as intermediaries, who move between the large blocks that we are happy to identify.”¹⁰ Intermediate spaces—such as Ysabel’s shack, which Inquisitors reported to be filled with Indian, Spanish, and African talismans and herbs, and frequented by members of practically every social group in colonial Mexico—played a key role in history. Walter Mignolo argues that such in-between spaces “produced by colonization [provided the] location and energy of new modes of thinking whose strength lies in the transformation and critique of the ‘authenticities’ of both Western and

¹° Serge Gruzinski. *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization.* (Translated by Deke Dunisberre. New York: Routledge, 2002), 23. In a helpful analogy, Gruzinski likens cultural “mélange” or mixing to the mixing of fluids. To understand fluid mixtures, scientists examine the chemical dynamics of interaction between individual molecules of different substances.
Amerindian legacies."¹¹ Mignolo proposes that these individuals provided the energy and intellectual innovation for social change.

In Ysabel’s case, her interactions—not only contentions over power but everyday relationships—with other poor women, members of the clergy, and the Spanish elite help understand the distinguishing features of colonial society. Ysabel’s trials reveal the colonial roots of Mexico’s unique brand of Catholicism, the obstinacy of gendered hierarchies, and the continued appeal of folk healing. Ysabel’s case reveals the dynamics of interaction between professional and popular, sacred and secular, and different gender identities that defined Mexican popular culture. Elite ideas—particularly, ideas about masculinity and femininity—often dominated in defining social relationships in colonial Mexico. At the same time, however, Ysabel’s case shows how cultural exchanges were multidirectional, resulting in “mutual interpenetration” between “high” and “low” colonial cultures.¹²

As a healer, Ysabel transcended social boundaries; her role as an intermediary between worlds and ranks made her fascinating, powerful, and dangerous. Ysabel depicted herself as an intercessor between humans and the divine, involved in the mediation of Christianity rather than existing at the bottom of an ecclesiastical hierarchy. She sold holy water and wafers to clergymen, as well as serving as a healer for them. In Ysabel’s worldview, the natural and supernatural coexisted and intersected, and the Catholic Church did not hold a monopoly on access to the divine. The curanderos not only bridged spiritual and temporal worlds, but also traversed boundaries of race, class, and gender. Members of all levels of society, from Inquisitors and Spanish widows to Indians and black slaves, relied on the expertise of Ysabel, an unmarried

¹¹ Cited in Ibid., 23.
¹² Ibid.
mulata woman. Her skills derived from an oral, matriarchal tradition of healing knowledge, and Ysabel selectively combined Indian, African, and European remedies and rituals.

As Carlo Ginzburg demonstrates in his study *The Cheese and the Worms*, the format of Inquisitional records provide a platform for analysis of cultural encounters between popular classes (Ysabel and her friends), educated elites (agents of the Holy Office), and the levels in between (Don Miguel and his wife).\(^\text{13}\) Ginzburg shows how the Inquisition identified and examined cases of cultural individuality; in the case of Menocchio, interrogations of popular heterodoxies reveal the extent to which popular classes reject, adopt, or adapt elite or intellectual ideas. In the Mexican Inquisition, not only “elite” ideas but cultural strands from African, European/Catholic, and indigenous cultures combine and resurface in the texts of Inquisition trials. These trials give us the opportunity to examine the roots of the popular religiosity, professional structures, and gender identities that endure today in Mexico.

This thesis reflects recent work on the Inquisition by Irene Silverblatt and Jean Dangler. In her book *Modern Inquisitions*, Silverblatt moves beyond the inquisitional studies of the past thirty years, which have debated the leniency or harshness of the Inquisition.\(^\text{14}\) Silverblatt instead examines the colonial Inquisition as an institution of state formation, arguing that it represents a precursor of modern systematized violence against marginal groups such as Jews. According to Silverblatt, the Inquisition sought to establish acceptable and marginal identities within a colonial hierarchy of gender, class, and race. In recent studies Jean Dangler has also contended that the polarization of gendered and social identities characterized the emergence of a “modern”


Spanish society. Dangler, like Silverblatt, argues that the categorization of self and other colluded in the consolidation of the nation-state. Dangler provides a valuable analysis of early modern medical texts, illustrating how ideas about the human body—particularly the female body—changed. Dangler argues convincingly that views on the human body increasingly incorporated Catholic rhetoric about women’s inferiority and moral weakness. These ideas about femininity contributed to the marginalization of groups such as women healers, whose public influence defied standards of feminine enclosure. Women healers also mediated between hierarchical categories of professional and unprofessional medicine. The establishment of the Protomedicato in Spain and the Indies reflected the organization of medical practice according to hierarchical divisions. Required to fulfill university medical education and obtain a license, the ranks of “professional” doctors also excluded women and racial minorities.

This thesis also builds on Michael Taussig’s book *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*. In this work Taussig examines how colonizing discourses about racial, gendered, and cultural superiority not only defined relationships between colonizers and colonized, but infiltrated social relations between individuals at all levels of society, as in a “chamber of mirrors”. Taussig concludes, moreover, that the essentializing of an Indian “Other” was, and is, necessary for the Spanish elite’s self-definition. Taussig provides a model for studying hybrid religious practice, describing how indigenous peoples seized images of saints and other symbols of “white magic”—that is, the discourses of Western institutions—and appropriated their sanctity for popular religious rituals. According to Taussig, these rituals, as well as shamanism and

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17 Dangler 2005, 139.
witchcraft practices, reconstituted colonial hierarchies. Studies of magic and subaltern resistance have demonstrated that witchcraft produced contradictory effects, reproducing ideology about “Otherness” and moral weakness but also inciting real fear in the targets of magic.\(^{19}\) Drawing from Taussig and Ruth Behar, this thesis will show how women’s magical remedies continued a language of terror and violence that evolved from the violence of colonial oppression.\(^{20}\)

Ysabel’s case, however, provides an opportunity to move beyond debates over resistance and reinforcement, to explore the female networks and feminine spaces in which magical remedies flourished. While attending to the role of colonial discourses in ascribing magical and manipulative roles to women, this analysis of inquisitional proceedings identifies alternative discourses about gender, religion, and knowledge that allowed magic to hold subversive meaning. In the model of Carlo Ginzburg, this thesis evaluates moments of tension and conflict between male ecclesiastical figures and popular female healers about gender, class, religion, and knowledge.\(^{21}\) In these gaps or moments, one can discern nascent or submerged ideas and voices that promote alternate ways of knowing, value women’s abilities, and understand plural forms of power.

The Inquisition policed practices as well as belief, reinforcing a vision of society that denied hybridity or alternate views of religious and social hierarchies. In Ysabel’s case, the Inquisition enforced social norms most effectively with respect to gender and class, while enabling the persistence of religious heterodoxy. Although the process of the inquisitorial trial and punishment was designed to repress and deny Ysabel’s expertise and hybrid religiosity, the


\(^{21}\) Ginzburg, 10.
proceedings expanded her clientele and added new fuel to her heterodox beliefs. By examining Ysabel’s interactions with Inquisitors and members of different social groups, we can better understand the tenacity of popular religiosity and other enduring aspects of popular culture in Mexico.
Ysabel’s magical healing practices operated within, and demonstrate particular understandings of, colonial social structures—specifically, class and gender relations. Her conception of social relations differed from the views of Mexican and Spanish elites, including her upper-class clients, inquisitors, and clergymen. Despite municipal, imperial, and religious attempts to organize Mexican society according to social hierarchies, Ysabel envisioned a relationship of mutual necessity between rich and poor. Although Ysabel and her friends aimed to improve their social and economic status by entrapping rich husbands, reaffirming the privilege of Mexico City’s wealthy Spanish citizens, she also understood herself to provide essential services for individuals from all sectors of society.

Ysabel’s testimony also reveals elite and popular understanding of gender relations. In the conquest of New Spain, Spaniards imported honor/shame gender codes with very different implications for each sex. For women, honor and virtue required maintaining sexual propriety and a submissive posture to patriarchal figures in the family and community.\(^{22}\) The emphasis on women’s enclosure from improper associations and gossip necessitated male protector figures to safeguard female virtue. For lower-class women, however, social enclosure proved incompatible with the demands of everyday life. Women from impoverished families could not refrain from walking alone on the street to and from work, or from defending family interests in combative

public confrontations. Poor women therefore enjoyed less virtue than elite women, earning a status associated with the sexualized, barbaric “Other.” Gender norms within the honor/shame complex thus perpetuated the class order. In a family-attached situation, women received the patriarchal vigilance that ensured sexual purity and propriety. Preferring more secure social and economic networks, most women submitted to fathers’ or husbands’ authority in their families. At the same time, however, women’s financial dependence on men—as well as their reliance on male guardianship to protect virtue—exposed women to violence and oppression within the home.

In her explanations to the Inquisition, Ysabel portrayed men as naturally violent and fickle in their desires. Ysabel’s magical remedies often targeted men, aiming to calm wandering mates or “tame” violent husbands. The goal of “taming” (amansar) was typical of women’s love magic in Mexico. The term expresses an understanding of masculinity as a wild and violent force that women must subdue, as well as reflecting a reality of gendered violence. In the context of patriarchal enclosure and women’s legal minority status, love magic sometimes represented women’s only recourse against the threat of drunk and violent husbands.

The bad life and life as a bad woman (La mala vida, y vivir como mala mujer)

Ysabel’s love magic clients consisted mainly of women seeking remedies to tie down cheating partners, elicit the return of absent husbands or lovers, and soothe violent male tempers. In large part, love magic consisted of instances of women reforming or exacting retribution on

\[\text{References:}\]

23 Stern, 14.
24 Ibid., 15.
26 Stern, 20.
the men who harmed them: "tying" (ligar) unfaithful men, rendering them impotent with their other lovers; causing lovers physical pain or affliction; or "taming" (amansar) violent men. As Inquisition trials of love witchcraft document, the demand for these types of magical remedies extended throughout Mexico and throughout the colonial period. This demand reflects an ongoing contest over gender rights in a patriarchal society, as well as the commonplace nature of casual and illicit sexual relationships and the geographical movement of both men and women.27

Women seeking magical remedies often aimed to convert illicit (deshonesta) relationships into legitimate ones. These clients did not seek to overturn the patriarchal system, but rather to secure a marriage that would restore sexual honor, or to ensure peaceful and loving cohabitation—as Richard Boyer theorizes, the just rule of the husband.28 In colonial Mexico, the term la mala vida, or the "bad life," described an unhappy and inadequate domestic partnership. Civil court records document women's use of this term to plead for a divorce, describing the mala vida as a result of a husband's abuse of his autocratic powers.29

Ysabel presumably faced her own version of la mala vida when her parents attempted to force her to marry the father of her unborn child. Rather than marry against her will, Ysabel fled from home and made a living as a single working woman. When she decided to marry a man she had met in prison, however, she found herself again living the mala vida. In the eight days Ysabel lived with Gaspar de la Peña following release from prison, she suffered a series of brutal beatings that led her to report him to local authorities. Ysabel's sense of entitlement to marital wellbeing was recognized by law; city authorities "threatened to have him thrown out of her

27 Behar, 35.
29 Ibid., 254-280.
company” and into jail. In the “narrative of her life,” Ysabel emphasized the brutality of her husband, repeatedly referring to an attempt he made on her life eight years after their marriage and separation, when he returned to her home for one night. Ysabel gives a graphic description of how “that night, he gave her a stabbing that made her guts spill out, then he left, and she has not seen him since.” Following her marriage to Gaspar, Ysabel recounts that she “lived as a mala mujer for what would be a time of twenty six years in [Puebla] and Guaxocingo and Cholula, without any man.”

The mala mujer is the biblical term for a prostitute, but it also can simply refer to a woman who lives in disregard of morality or in pursuit of pleasure. Related to the virginal ideal for women—even for married women, who were discouraged from taking pleasure in the conjugal act—a “bad woman” possessed inappropriate sexuality. She enticed a man to commit illicit sexual acts, endangering herself and society. The phrase mala mujer reflects the harsh binary of sexual roles available to women: the virginal “good woman,” enclosed in the home, marriage, or the convent; or the “bad woman,” whose loss of sexual virtue and freedom of movement equated her with the prostitute, regardless of whether she engaged in sex work. For Ysabel, however, life as a “bad woman” was preferable to the “bad life” she endured as Gaspar’s wife. Ysabel declares defiantly that she lived “without any man”; in the narrative she constructs of her life, liberation from men’s tyranny arrives as a sort of triumph. This may represent an

30 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. I, 89. “Porque le amenacaban que lo avian de echar achina de ausento de esta confesante.”
31 Inquisitional defendants were required to provide “la narrativa de su vida” before questioning commenced.
32 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. I, 89. “Aquella noche le dio una estocada a esta confesante que le echo las tripas de fuera, se ausento, y nunca mas le a visto.”
33 Ibid. “Vivia de ser mala mujer en que estaria tiempo de veinte y seis anos en dicha ciudad y Guaxocingo y en Cholula sin hombre alguno.”
34 Nora E. Jaffary, False Mystics: Deviant Orthodoxy in Colonial Mexico, (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 53.
attempt to justify her lack of male guardianship and her freedom of movement before the
Inquisition.\textsuperscript{36}

The Inquisition indeed looked unfavorably on “bad women” like Ysabel. The Mexican
healer counted among the loquacious, indiscreet women that Inquisitors condemned in trial
records as “lewd sorceresses” and “lost women.”\textsuperscript{37} Inquisitorial judgments—although rendered
according to religious and sacramental transgressions—proceeded from understandings of
female nature as sinful, weak, and needing male supervision.\textsuperscript{38} Trials began, for example, by
identifying a woman according to her sexual status and relationship to male figures—as a wife,
widow, daughter, slave, “public woman” or \textit{doncella} (unmarried virgin). Seventeenth century
moralists such as Juan Luis Vives and Fray Luis de Leon articulated the ideology of feminine
silence and enclosure in their influential prescriptive works. According to Fray Luis’s \textit{La
Perfecta Casada} [The Perfect Wife], the wandering woman “perverts her very nature,” and
allowing women to talk together “always leads to a thousand evils.”\textsuperscript{39} Fray Luis likened woman
to a fish who thrives in water and dies without it, for inside her home a woman lives in peace and
virtue but, outside it, becomes “obscene and whorish.”\textsuperscript{40}

Ysabel nevertheless prized freedom of movement and freedom from male authority. She
prescribed remedies to relieve women of men’s control over emotions and economic situation.
Ysabel gave one woman rosemary so that “she wouldn’t have sorrow or worries about the man
returning.”\textsuperscript{41} In this case, Ysabel and her client did not seek to control men, but rather to liberate

\textsuperscript{36} Ysabel moved from town to town on seasonal basis, to participate in harvests, to trade in peyote and magical
powders, and to sell her services among the crowds of religious festivals.
\textsuperscript{37} Mary Elizabeth Perry, \textit{Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville} (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1990), 123.
\textsuperscript{38} See Mary E. Giles, ed., \textit{Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins
University Press, 1999).
\textsuperscript{39} Quoted in Perry 1990, 72.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. “No estubiese con pena ni cuidado que el hombre volveria”
a woman from romantic attachment. Lone women like Ysabel evaded mechanisms of state and church control by living outside marriage and moving regularly between cities—movement allowed her to escape inquisitorial scrutiny, particularly regarding her trade in the illegal substance, peyote. Such behavior violated acceptable standards of female passivity and activity as defined by Iberian honor/shame constructs, but reflected other models of female activity—such as Ysabel’s saint of choice, Saint Martha.

**Saint Martha, model for a powerful woman**

In Ysabel’s first trial, inquisitors took particular interest in certain “prayers” to saints used by Ysabel and her adherents in inappropriate ways. Ysabel often prayed to Saint Martha, using a certain *oración* to manage gender relations. Ysabel explains that “she had wanted to memorize the prayer because the aforementioned Doña Mariana that gave it to her and prayed with it many times, said that by praying with it, although a man might want to kill a woman, he would not kill her, and they would live in peace forever, without there being injuries, or sorrow, and they would never want for food.”

Ysabel and other witnesses offer various versions of the prayer, including:

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Saint Martha,
Into Mount Tabor you entered,
With the great serpent you met,
With the sprinkling of holy water you challenged him,
With the cord you secured him,
So that creed and pig would fall in love,
So that with me he would be defenseless.
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42 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. I, 98. “La quería tomar de memoria [la refran] porque la dicha Dona Mariana que se la dio y la recava muchas veces, la dixo que recandola, aunque un hombre quisiese matar a una muger, no la mataria, y vivirian siempre en paz, sin que huviesse heridas, ni pessadumbres, y nunca les faltaria de comer.”

43 Ibid. “Santa Marta,
En el Monte Tabor entraste,
Con la gran sierpe encontraste,
Con el eslopo del agua bendita la arostaste,
Con el cordon la amarraste”
Saint Martha is traditionally known as the sister of Lazarus and Mary Magdalene. During the twelfth century, a retelling of Saint Martha's life recast her as a Gallic hero who tamed a dragon named Tarasque that had been terrorizing a French town. Martha sprinkled holy water on the dragon, pacifying the creature and tying it to her belt so that townspeople could slay it. The town and church, renamed Tarascon in honor of the dragon, were part of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, and the legend of Saint Martha probably disseminated along the path of the pilgrimage.

Considered the first bishop of Tarascon, Martha was a uniquely active saint. Church scholars regard Martha as the head of her household, over Mary and Lazarus; unlike any other woman saint, she was called an apostle and disciple and healed infirmities like Christ. Moreover, Martha differed from any other female saint in that her sanctity resided not in her bodily suffering or her virginity, but in her strength of character. Although Martha fulfilled the heroic, "manly woman" archetype, transcending the inherent weakness of the sex did not factor into Martha stories. She in fact maintained a feminine identity as the "holy hostess" for Jesus. According to religious scholar Martha Daas, Martha's unique activity and type of sanctity reflects the influence of popular spirituality on church teachings. The dynamic example of Saint Martha resonated with single women seeking ways to deal with physical abuse, emotional

Credo y cerdo que seamanse
El que conmigo estuviere tirado."


45 Ibid. The prayer echoes the saint's life of Saint Martha recorded in documents at El Escorial in Spain. The life of Saint Martha narrates: "And the good hostess, who had been entrusted to take care of the good Visitor, went there and carried with her holy water and a cross, and she found him (the dragon) eating a man. And she showed him the cross and sprinkled him with holy water and the dragon became quiet and docile and she tied him up with her girdle." "E la buena huéspeda, que se fiava en el su buen Hasped, fue allá e levó agua bendita e una cruz, e fallóle que estaba comiendo un omne. E mostróle la cruz e echóle del agua bendita, e el dragón, assy commo vençido, estovo quedo e mansso, e ella lo ató con su cinta."

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.
hardship, and poverty. For prostitutes, former mistresses, and sexually active women like Ysabel and her friends, the virginal saints were probably less inspiring or relevant than the capable Martha. Martha's ability to tame feral dragons may have even combined with Christian-African-Indian syncretistic traditions, in which the act of tying up the serpent represents domination over the devil or the harnessing of his powers.\textsuperscript{48}

In Ysabel's version of the prayer, the term \textit{amarrar} describes Saint Martha tying the dragon. This word can mean to tie, to moor, or to live with in matrimony; thus the legend of Saint Martha tying a dragon to her belt—subduing and even leashing to herself a feral creature—here becomes an allegory for romantic capture of a man. Ysabel expresses her great interest in learning the prayer based on its power to pacify irate men and ensure their devotion—even when a man "wanted to kill a woman." Although the inquisitors protested that spells such as this "violated the free will"\textsuperscript{49} of the men they targeted, Ysabel clearly expressed that men's free will was irrational, dangerous, and in need of control. While domestic violence was a cruel reality of daily life for women, Ysabel's conceptions of men as wild, irrational creatures echo men such as Juan Luis Vives and Fray Luis de Leon's understandings that women were governed by emotion and lacked rational capacity. In this way, ideas about feminine inferiority filtered through society and, in the form of sexual witchcraft, were refracted back onto men as in Taussig's "chamber of mirrors."\textsuperscript{50}

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\textsuperscript{49} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. I, 92. "Violentandoles el libre albedrio"

A female class?

Although Ysabel could not read or write, she carried the prayer to Saint Martha written on a scrap of paper; at some point, her friend María Rivera came into possession of the paper. When Inquisitors accused Ysabel of disseminating heretical religious material, Ysabel protested that she “gave [María Rivera] the prayer because she saw her yearning for an image of Saint Martha, and for a prayer to pray to her with, so [Ysabel] gave her [the paper] as a grand gift.”

Ysabel offered to inquisitors an alternate matrix of morality in which loyalty to friends took precedence over other, institutional stipulations. She also justified magical remedies by describing the desperation of her friends and clients—for instance, the same María Rivera hounded Ysabel for a fumigation ritual that would bring economic success, and Ysabel, moved by her poverty, could not deny her a chance to improve her situation. In this respect, Ysabel implied that the Inquisition, by restricting magical paths to economic and romantic wellbeing, deprived poor, “bad” women of ways to survive.

Women’s female friendships functioned as important strategies of survival. These women shared economic as well as emotional resources, often living together and sharing food, money, and magical knowledge. When seized by the Inquisition for the second time, Ysabel proposed that “she will be good” if the Holy Office would only grant her a “[woman] friend to be with” during her imprisonment. During a civil prison sentence for prostitution which Ysabel had served years earlier, her friend María Rivera had visited her regularly, providing her with food and

51 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. I, 100. “Solo se la dio [a Maria Rivera] por verla tan deseossa de una ymagen de Santa Marta, y de una oracion para recarla; y se la dio por muy gran regalo.”

52 According to Jean Dangler, the early modern period saw the conversion of Iberian ideas of duality—of positive and negative as ways to the same end (like ying and yang)—into Christian concepts of good and evil. In this way, magic became demonic rather than a “negative” means to an end (for instance, to the social and economic privilege that could not be achieved by honor, valor, noble birth, or “positive” means). I am not convinced of Dangler’s theory, or how this may apply to Ysabel’s case, but it is interesting to consider that Ysabel may possibly still conceive of magic as a “negative” complement to the “positive” position of the Church, and sees inquisitorial restrictions on her work as unreasonable roadblocks on a complementary, or parallel, path. See: Jean Dangler, *Making Difference in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2005).
“remedies” for luck. In this Inquisition trial, Ysabel likely sought the same type of support and companionship.

These women belonged to a similarly low social class, but their variety of racial backgrounds—ranging from black to Indian to mulato to mestizo to Spanish—suggest a relatively fluid ethnic pyramid. Most scholars of colonial Mexico agree that in colonial society, where Indians, mestizos, and blacks greatly outnumbered Spaniards, race remained a negotiable category until the late colonial period. Among the *gente vil* [base folk] of colonial Mexico, commonalities of gender and economic status overrode racial difference. In Ysabel’s world, common experiences led her and other poor women to form a sisterhood that worked to resist and manipulate male individuals and institutions. Ysabel met friends on the street or during various stints in women’s reform prisons; her friends were also single women, sex workers, and magic practitioners, and, like Ysabel, were connected to members of society from bishops to bailiffs to Indian curers.

This network of women practicing amatory and curative magic operated within a feminine space and with gender consciousness. These women demonstrated awareness of male partners’ violent tendencies, alcoholism, and economic irresponsibility, and the need for females to support each other to solve these problems. Cohabitation and economic cooperation allowed women to resist integration into social hierarchies, fostering a “haven” from male-dominated caste and religious systems—without separating women from male company, as did the convent. However, Ysabel and her friends were neither immune to nor ignorant of the danger

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53 Many scholars, including Laura Lewis, Mary Elizabeth Perry, and Eric Van Young identify that only in the second half of the 18th century did Spaniards become “whites”; then, a polarity between Indians and “whites” emerged that erased blacks from Mexico’s racial narrative completely.
55 Amos Megged sees Ysabel’s case as a shining example of feminine solidarity.
56 In the *desengaños amorosos* [love disenchantment stories] of Maria de Zayas, a seventeenth-century female novelist, women suffer horrific physical and emotional abuse at the hands of men. A series of *desengaños*
of inquisitional and judicial repression. Magical practices represented illicit activity that earned these women punishment by various social institutions. In addition, the cohabitation and collaboration between these women aroused suspicions of marginal sexual activity. In 16, two of her companions, María Rivera and Margarita de Palacios were condemned to the Inquisition for living *amancebada*, in concubinage, with each other.\(^{57}\) Whether or not María and Margarita were sexual partners, their close relationship qualified threatened the sexual-gendered order and warranted investigation by the Inquisition.\(^{58}\)

To a certain extent, Montoia and her friends employed magic as a tool to advance within the male-dominated system, to reap financial benefits and honor-status from members of acceptable society. As an *alcahueta*,\(^{59}\) Ysabel worked on behalf of elite men and lower-class women to coordinate sexual liaisons that often took place at her own house. Attempting to recruit young women seeking wealthy partners, Ysabel depicted her home as a site of intermingling of different classes and genders. One client of Ysabel’s curanderismo, when called to testify to the Inquisition, recalled that:

> Ysabel said to the sick woman that if she wanted, she would look for a man for her; to which [the sick woman] responded that she didn’t want a man from around here, but rather a Spanish man of importance; and the defendant

culminates in the women’s mass exodus from male society into a convent, which functions as a female “haven” to enclose women from men’s tyranny. Zayas emphasizes the need for men to “rule justly” and treat women with love and respect, rather than the need for women’s liberation from traditions of marriage and enclosure. This message closely resembles love magic and sexual witchcraft that seeks to reform male behavior but operates within ideas about women’s mysterious nature and men’s violent one. See María de Zayas, *Desenganos Amorosos*, (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006).

\(^{57}\) Megged 2006, 84.

\(^{58}\) Megged uncovered mention of Margarita’s and María’s relationship in the Inquisition archives at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City. He simply notes that Margarita de Palacios was accused of living *amancebada* with María Rivera, but does not mention the context of the accusation—that is, if the accusation of sexual deviancy stemmed from underlying economic or social resentment or conflicts between the accuser and Margarita, or if the accuser was perhaps a confessor or community member troubled by these women’s relationship. It would be interesting to know, given that perhaps the women’s network, the haven from male society, fostered an atmosphere of alternative sexuality—or perhaps the women’s network simply aroused suspicions of deviancy by posing a threat (an alternative) to male society.

\(^{59}\) *Alcahueta, tercera*, and *medianera* are all terms for “procuress” or matchmaker used to describe Ysabel (by inquisitors and witnesses) in the texts of the trials. *Alcahueta* more strongly connotes prostitution.
replied that she would give her a great present, which would be one of two [such men] who called her Mother; and that she told the woman to stay and eat in her house, and she would see how many gentlemen and important people from all states would come to see her.\textsuperscript{60}

Ysabel described a familiar, even matriarchal, relationship with the men who consulted her as an alcahueta, and the witness’s testimony emphasizes the control of the woman in selecting a suitable partner. Moreover, Ysabel used the term \textit{regalar}—to give a present—to describe how she could set up for the witness an arrangement of great economic and social benefit. Although Ysabel may simply use the language of the gift-giving culture of lower-class colonial society, a liaison with a rich Spaniard indeed represented a great gift—a chance to advance socially and financially for women who lacked the sexual and class honor to otherwise win a mate from the elite. Women looked to Ysabel to facilitate arrangements across borders of class and race, and they often later consulted Ysabel for love magic to extend these liaisons into long-term relationships. Although illicit, prostitution and concubinage provided women with the opportunity to manage their own economic situation, free of male control. If these women wished to reintegrate into acceptable society via marriage, Ysabel’s matchmaking and love magic services made possible the selection of mates and management of male behavior—that is, they allowed women to choose the terms by which they submitted to male social control. Using magical remedies to compensate for the sexual and economic honor-status they lacked, Ysabel and her adherents attempted to attract men of high social standing, generate good economic fortune, and operate business that appealed to members of all classes.

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\textsuperscript{60} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol II, 142 V. "Dixo a dicha enferma que si queria ella le buscaria hombre; a que le respondio, la dicha una muger, que no queria hombre de por aca, sino gachupin de importancia; replico esta rea que como la regalasse bien, lo hara con uno de dos, que la llamaban Madre; y de que en otra ocasson dixo esta rea a dicha una muger se quedasse a comer en su cassa, y beria como la iban a ver muchos caballeros y personas de importancia de todos estados."
Acculturation and class relations

In colonial Mexico, healers also employed "medicines" to establish intimate relationships with Spaniards and other people of different social groups.\(^6^1\) These relationships involved Spanish deference to and respect for blacks, Indians, and women, but the power of curers was fleeting and dangerous. This power inspired fear of abilities of curanderos to cause illness as well as health, to manipulate emotions as well as solve romantic problems. When such fears arose, Spaniards and other elites called upon the Inquisition as a tool to reconstitute social hierarchies.\(^6^2\) Each of Ysabel's trials began, for example, when an upper-class woman felt disturbed by Ysabel's magical rituals or felt swindled by a member of the gente vil and subsequently complained to her confessor or the Inquisition. As the ultimate judge of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, the Inquisition enabled elites to reassert their authority in their homes and communities when curers threatened to usurp it. Calling upon the Inquisition was not just a discursive move: the accused were publicly humiliated, received physical punishment, and were often exiled from their communities.\(^6^3\)

Nevertheless, Ysabel's case shows that the finality of Inquisitorial judgments should not be overstated. The Inquisitor Don Francisco de Estrada y Escobedo was also a client of Ysabel. After her first trial, Don Francisco sought her out and requested various cures. In her testimony, Ysabel described herself as hesitant and Don Francisco as desperate and insistent, promising her protection from inquisitorial scrutiny in exchange for remedies for flatulence and home-cooked food. Estrada y Escobedo moreover commended her to his sister and brother-in-law, a city alderman. Ysabel's first trial brought her in contact with the highest members of the religious

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\(^6^1\) The term "medicine" must be qualified; at the time, it was a complex of ritual and medical material which addressed not only physical but also supernatural forces.


\(^6^3\) Ibid.
and social hierarchy, allowing her to expand her clientele and promote the value of unofficial healing. Ysabel testified:

Don Francisco de Estrada y Escobedo, who is from this Tribunal, after [the defendant] was punished by this Holy Office, sent for her to be called a few afternoons, saying that she cure him and she would be taken care of, that those doctors that came from the Holy Office wouldn’t do her any wrong, and if she would take care to not draw out the cures but rather just do one...he asked her for an ointment for flatulence with which he felt better and after that two days later he sent for her to be called and told her that the ointment was very nice and he had benefited a lot from it and that she should make a little for the town...and when she brought a little bowl of ointment that he had requested for the town, he gave her a peso and a piece of chocolate and she gave as a gift to this Señor Inquisitor some afternoons chicken stew, tamales, and fritters because he said that he could not eat anything from his house.”

Ysabel maintained a personal relationship with the inquisitor, based on his faith in her cures and the protection he provided against inquisitional scrutiny. She even gave Estrada y Escobedo a gift of food in the same spirit that she gave her yearning friend Maria de Rivera her precious copy of Saint Martha’s prayer. Ysabel described networks of mutual necessity between the rich and the poor, who performed vital services that included not only healing but also housekeeping, cooking, and companionship. The language which Ysabel uses to quote the inquisitor praises Ysabel’s healing methods and even requests that she expand her work as a public service for the town.

At least in Don Francisco’s eyes, Ysabel had presented a vision of herself as a skilled and powerful healer during her first trial. Estada y Escobedo’s solicitation of Ysabel’s services could reflect her success in establishing herself as a true marshal of the diabolical forces that the

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64 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 75 R-V. “Don Francisco de Estrada y Escobedo que lo fue de este Tribunal despues que esta fue castigada por este Santo Oficio y envia a llamar a esta algunas tardes que la oy a decia curase y que se guardase que no le hiziesen algun mal los doctores que se benian de este Santo Oficio y si no se alargase en las curas sino que solo hiciera alguna y esto responde...invio a pedir a esta un poco de inguento para la ventosidad con lo cual se sinto mejor y de alli a dos dias la envio a llamar y la dixo que era muy lindo el inguento que le avia aporvechado mucho que la havia de hacer un poco para la puebla y que con este curaba esta potas curas y quando le trajo la ollita de inguento que le pidio para la puebla le dio a esta un peso y una galleta de chocolate y regalaba esta al senor Inquisidor algunas tardes con pollos guisados tamales y bofueulos porque decia que no podia comer nada de su casa sino lo que algunas personas le enviaban.”
Catholic Church believed to inform popular healing ritual and women’s love magic. Don Francisco could have interpreted the testimony of Ysabel and witnesses according to the ecclesiastical binaries of good and evil, self and Other, religion and magic, that would indeed associate the wizened, racially Other, single woman, Ysabel, with magical healing ability. Don Francisco’s belief in Ysabel’s powers of witchcraft may have encouraged and perpetuated her business, but it did so by casting Ysabel as a repository of illicit knowledge. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak would support this interpretation, according to which the inquisitional trial succeeded in incorporating and re-presenting Ysabel in terms of elite, ecclesiastical discourse.

This assumption, however, has no basis in the text at hand. The matter-of-fact tone of Ysabel’s testimony suggests that interactions between Ysabel and Don Francisco simply reflect the imperfect borders between official and illicit, the colonizing and the colonized, the elite and the popular. As Gruzinski explains, “a border is often porous, permeable, and flexible—it moves and can be moved.” Gruzinski traces the indistinct nature of a border to the molecular level, observing how in math and biology, an “apparently smooth border, once enlarged, is in fact composed of a chain of spirals.” In animal tissues, the boundary that separates a cell from its external environment is not an impenetrable wall but rather the flexible and dynamic “selectively-permeable membrane.” The example of Estrada y Escobedo relying on a woman he tried for witchcraft illustrates the “porous, permeable, and flexible” nature of the borders between marginality and acceptability erected by the Inquisition. Penetration of these borders

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66 Spivak, 218.
68 Ibid., 24.
remained “selective,” however—selected by the inquisitor or elites with the power to determine whether Ysabel was protected from or reported to the Holy Office.

Despite the westernizing drive of the colonial process, the demographic balance of the New World constantly tested social boundaries. Alien surroundings, a vast population of illegitimate and interracial individuals, and the physical and psychic distance from Iberia resulted in the incomplete dominance of Western discourse: the “mutual interpenetration” of official and unofficial discourses. One of the first scholars of the Mexican curandero, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, asserts that “opposing elements of the cultures in contract tend to be mutually exclusive, confronting and opposing each other; but at the same time they tend to interpenetrate, combining and identifying with each other.”\(^\text{70}\) At the highest level of society—the level of religious-political governance—inquisitors such as Estrada y Escobedo prosecuted individuals for witchcraft, crimes of sensuality, and illicit healing, yet solicited those same services.

Don Francisco appeared familiar with popular healing and its practitioners, beyond his inquisitorial knowledge of their religious transgressions. For instance, he asked Ysabel not to scam him by “drawing out the cures,” rather demanding efficacy and quality of care. Estrada y Escobedo exemplified the acculturation of Spaniards to a mestizo lifestyle; as well as availing himself of Ysabel’s services, Don Francisco had initiated intimate relations with various mulata prisoners of the Inquisition.\(^\text{71}\) Don Francisco was famously enamored of another piece of Mexican culture—chocolate—which could account for his payment made to Ysabel in chocolate. Estrada y Escobedo was not an anomaly in his mestizo lifestyle; his sexual, social, and economic interactions with other racial and class groups typified the Mexican elite. The inquisitor Bernabé


de la Higuera y Amarilla likewise sustained a black and a mulata mistress, one of whom had been his intimate for twenty years. When Pedro Medina Rico, a visiting official from Spain, arrived to monitor the Mexican Inquisition, he deplored the corruption and scandalous behavior of the colonial inquisitors. Perhaps due to the implication of Estrada y Escobedo in Ysabel’s crimes, Medina Rico presided over Ysabel’s second trial.

The second trial focused less on love magic than it did on the practice of magical-religious healing. Ysabel presented herself to Estrada y Escobedo as an able healer, but the second trial would debate the nature of and qualifications for healing. While inquisitors questioned Ysabel’s right—as a woman and a poor mestiza or mulata—to the healing profession, Ysabel asserted alternative and gendered understandings of medicine, arguing that women were skilled and knowledgeable in ways men were not.

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
PART II: LIMITING AND LEGITIMIZING FEMININE KNOWLEDGE

The previous section dealt with the complicated relationships of female healers with men, women, and social superiors. Although curanderas were able to interact with other classes and negotiate certain powers, social hierarchy nevertheless defined class and gender relations. This hierarchy can also be noted in the Hapsburg efforts to regulate the medical profession. Ysabel’s trial derived from processes of professionalization which attributed rationality and learning capacity to men and excluded women from the medical profession. Like the nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, persecuted by the Archbishop for exercising and promoting women’s intellectual freedom, Ysabel de Montoia was caught in a space increasingly claimed by men. Nevertheless, Ysabel described healing as an area of female expertise. The second section of the thesis analyzes Ysabel’s conception of knowledge and expertise with respect to medical practice. Her dialogue with the inquisitors reveals conflicts between written and oral culture and between professional and “popular” medical practice.

Expertise and the License to Heal

Conflicts over medical practice arose when the inquisitors demanded that Ysabel produce an official license to legitimate her healing practice. The inquisitors informed the defendant “that to cure it is necessary to know how to do it and have the license for it and [it was asked] who taught her to cure such illnesses and in what form it was taught and who gave her the license for it.” In response, Ysabel explained:

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74 Margaret Sayers, introduction to A Woman of Genius : the Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Salisbury, CT: Lime Rock Press, 1982).
that her aforementioned aunts taught her to do it, and also a man named Villa Viciosa came from Spain impoverished and in amancebo\(^75\) with her aunt named Ysabel Martín and [her aunt] taught him how to cure and he was the best surgeon that there was in the city and he cured with herbs and in the ways that her aunt had taught him and thus [the defendant] learned from her aforementioned aunts...

and that no-one had given her license to cure and that in these lands everyone cures without a license although in a few places where she had been it might help to know that in Puebla and San Diego Gofango and in Cholula she had been given a license by the Bailiffs to cure and she has [license] and later she told the Bailiffs that they should give her the licenses in written form, and that when she was a prisoner of the Holy Office the first time they had been turned over to [the Holy Office] and hadn’t been returned to her.\(^76\)

In this exchange, feminine traditions of healing, which relied on herbs and sometimes included magical remedies, confronted the professionalization of medicine. The inquisitors demanded proof of Ysabel’s education, not only an indication of the nature of her medical instruction but also a written form of permission to heal.

In 1528, a year after the appointment of Mexico City’s first medical officer, the council ordained that to practice medicine, an individual must obtain a certificate of examination or face a fine of sixty pesos.\(^77\) A 1593 decree established Mexico’s first Protomedicato tribunal, formalizing royal control over the process of registering and authorizing medical practitioners. In 1642 and 1646, the crown issued decrees responding to disputes over the leadership of the Protomedicato and accusations of corruption in the office.\(^78\) Only six years after the 1646 decree that established a definitive structure for the Protomedicato, the Inquisition arraigned Ysabel de

\(^{75}\) “Amancebo” can mean concubinage, unmarried union or cohabitation, or open sexual relationship.

\(^{76}\) Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 74 R. “Se le dixo...que para curar es menester saverlo azer y tener la licencia para ello que quien la ensefio a curar tales enfermedades y en la forma que dice y quien le dio licencia para ello. Dixo que la enseñaron a curar sus tías que de la referidas y que un hombre llamado Villa Viciosa vino de España pobre y de amancebo con una tía de esta llamada Ysabel Martín y ella lo enseñó a curar y era el mejor cirujano que avia en esta ciudad y curava con las yerbas y modos que le enseño dicha su tía y esta aprendió de dichas sus tías y que supo que dicha muger se avía de curar en la forma que tiene dicha porque lo vio hacer así a su madre a sus tías y al dicho Villa Vicoso y que nadie le ha dado lizencia para curar y que en estos Reynos todos curan sin lizencia aunque en los lugares a donde ha estado conbienía a saber en la Puebla y en San Diego Gofango y en Cholula le an dado lizencia los Alcaldes Mayores para curar y tiene y luego dixo que le dicen dichos lizencias por escritos los Alcaldes Mayores que quando fue presa en este Santo Officio la primera vez las otras eran a el y no se las an buelto.”

\(^{77}\) Lanning, 46.

\(^{78}\) Lanning, 62.
Montoia on charges of witchcraft and superstitious healing. The ongoing disputes over the proper management of and qualifications for medical practice shaped the perspective of inquisitors and of elite clients who denounced Ysabel. Inquisitors’ fellow religious leader, the Bishop Palafox, was one of the leading critics of the inadequacy of Mexico City’s Protomedicato. Palafox’s emphasis on proper professional medicine—communicated in public declarations and in private discussion or correspondence between religious elites—likely reflected inquisitorial opinion on Ysabel’s healing and insistence on a license.

Obtaining the physical document of the license allowed the inquisitors to verify its authenticity and determine if someone was issuing fake licenses or licenses for improper types of healing. The requirement of written proof moreover established the legitimating power of written documents rather than oral contracts or understandings. Ysabel claimed that she “had been given a license” but also that she “has license,” an expression that suggests unwritten understanding or consent. Whether or not she actually carried “a license”, Ysabel contended that her interaction with city bailiffs gave her “license”, or official consent, to practice her craft. Ysabel’s perspective reflects a culture of oral agreements, in which holding written documents such as a license did not affect her daily practice but served to satisfy official—such as inquisitional—scrutiny.

79 Ibid.
80 The Bishop Palafox fought avidly to reform the vices of colonial society. Ysabel actually cites him in her testimony multiple times, recalling that he once sentenced her to prison for prostitution and forced the chief bailiff of Puebla to marry his mistress, a client of Ysabel’s. Interestingly, Pedro Medina Rico, the peninsular visitador sent to assess the Mexican Holy Office, noted that inquisitors devoted excessive time to “persecuting the Bishop Palafox” (see Alberro 1988). Palafox’s denunciations of the Holy Office’s corruption stimulated resentment of the popular bishop among inquisitors—so to some extent, the ecclesiastical elite was divided by conflicts between Palafox and the inquisitorial tribunal. The direct influence of Palafox’s opinions on the tribunal is likely minimal—in fact, differences in opinion with respect to healing practices may be reflected in the Inquisitor Estrada y Escobedo’s use of Ysabel’s healing services. The presiding official over Ysabel’s second trial—which focused more on the seventeenth-century equivalent of malpractice—was Pedro Medina Rico, who was more aligned with Palafox’s mission of social and ecclesiastical reform.
The inquisitors also adopted a pedagogical tone, instructing Ysabel in the process of education and confirmation necessary to practice medicine. The statement that "to cure it is necessary to know how to do it" condescends to Ysabel, assuming her to be a charlatan prescribing remedies at her whim. The inquisitors then challenged Ysabel to justify her practices. The inquisitorial tone demanded a rationalization of actions it presumed to be illegitimate and unjustified, undermining the validity not only of her practices but of her response. Ysabel's response, however, indicted inquisitorial expectations, protesting that "everyone cures without a license."

Reminding inquisitors of the reality of popular practice, Ysabel also assured inquisitors that she held multiple honorary licenses. Ysabel admits "it might help to know" she indeed held a license, accommodating the elite men's valorization of written culture and interest in professionalization. Ysabel allied herself with the inquisitors, reenacting inquisitors' demands for a document as "she told the bailiffs that they should give her the licenses in written form." At the same time, however, Ysabel blamed the Inquisition for her lack of physical proof. In Ysabel's formulation, the Holy Office itself prevented her from providing the physical proof the proceedings demanded, even infringing on her rightful ownership of the documents. Ysabel regarded the Inquisition not as an all-powerful, monolithic institution, but rather as a malfunctioning bureaucracy out of touch with common practice.

That common practice included family-taught modes of healing, passed from mothers and aunts to daughters and nieces, which Ysabel described to justify her occupation. Emphasizing the herbal knowledge of her aunts and mother, Ysabel explained that her aunt's lover used the techniques he learned from his partner to become the "best surgeon" in Mexico City. In repeated references to the Spanish immigrant Villa Viciosa, Ysabel associated her

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81 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 74 R.
82 This impudent claim warranted a scribe's note in the margin of the page—"[She] says this Holy Office did not return her licenses." The marginal notes usually mark astonishing or incongruous findings in inquisitional hearings.
healing with Spanishness and masculinity. Her tale invoked the Spanish male as a type of symbolic currency to validate the abilities that originate from female knowledge, teaching, and networks. Many scholars of colonial Mexican social relations identify similar techniques of defense. In courts of law and before Inquisition tribunals—spaces in which Spanishness and maleness represented power—defendants emphasized their affiliations with Spanish men, Spanish education or skills such as writing, or service to Spanish institutions such as the army.

Contrary to the opinion of some historians and anthropologists, however, association with masculinity and Spanishness did not always depreciate femininity and other racial backgrounds. For example, Ysabel positioned her aunt as the source of healing wisdom and skill, imparting the knowledge that allowed the Spaniard Villa Viciosa to excel in his masculine discipline. Also a student of her learned aunt, Ysabel thus equated herself with the Spanish male who enjoyed official status and acclaim in his medical practice. References to Villa Viciosa as “poor” and amancebado to Ysabel’s aunt portrayed the Spaniard as helpless and dependent on his female partner, from whom he learned the skills necessary for success. Ysabel’s invocation of the Spaniard not only served to appropriate the social capital of Spanish maleness, but also revealed the central role of feminine knowledge in what was seen as a masculine profession.

Processes of professionalization excluded women and racial minorities as well as linking medical practitioners to the crown, consolidating the nation-state within a gender-class hierarchy. During the mid-fourteenth century, civil courts in Valencia began to punish women for folk healing practices that “interfered with the medical profession.” Starting in the fourteenth century, processes of professionalization in Iberia explicitly excluded women; a 1329 law

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83 See Lewis 2003.
84 Lewis 2003, 25. Lewis argues that these techniques unequivocally served to reinforce social hierarchies and negated subaltern agency.
85 Dangler 2001, 46.
stipulated that “no woman may practice medicine or give potions, under penalty of being whipped through the town; but they may care for little children and women to whom, however, they may give no potion.” Ordinances such as these differentiated between women’s business of caring for other women and children and professional medical care, which involved concocting and prescribing medicines, and which should be practiced exclusively by men.

Nevertheless, the numbers of “professional” doctors remained negligible. Between 1606 and 1738, the University of Mexico granted 438 medical degrees, at the rate of 3.35 degrees per year. John Tate Lanning, author of the seminal study on professional medicine in colonial Mexico, admits that “the whole history of colonial medicine, as it really was, is the story of the all-too-natural filling of this awesome gap of doctors.” The weak reach of the state meant that official narratives of professionalization—the inquisitors’ insistence on a license—formed a thin crust over the unofficial medicine practiced and consulted on an everyday basis. Although Lanning asserts that poor curers enjoyed a “monopoly by default,” not only disenfranchised and rural populations relied on curers; elites with access to the best professional care, including inquisitors and clergymen, turned to folk healers like Ysabel. In spite of Inquisitorial insistence that medical knowledge was legitimized by (male) professional instruction and official registration, Ysabel valorized healing techniques learned informally through female kin networks. Ysabel agreed with inquisitors that holding a physical license was preferable, but reminded them that written certification was hardly standard practice and, on a daily basis, did not affect the authority of a healer.

87 Lanning, 143.
88 Noemi Quezada’s anthropological study Medicina y Maleficio provides useful appendices containing the names, places, charges, practices, and punishments of healers tried by the Mexican Inquisition. See Noemí Quezada, Enfermedad y Maleficio: El Curandero en el México Colonial (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1989).
Sor Juana and Alternate Types of Knowledge

The famed 17th century nun and intellectual, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, also participated in debates over ways of learning and women’s right to learn. In her 1689 *La Respuesta, or The Response*, a passionate reply to Church attempts to silence her writing, Sor Juana defended women’s right to intellectual freedom and development. In the *Respuesta* Sor Juana coins the oft-quoted adage, “Had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a great deal more.” Sor Juana argued that intellectuals should seek wisdom from the experiences of women, and that women gleaned knowledge from their daily work and observations of natural phenomena. Sor Juana recorded meticulous observations of the chemical process of a cooking egg, valorizing the practically scientific expertise of women who master the complicated techniques and processes of domestic work. These observations argued for women’s intellectual capacity and freedom in an age where men claimed exclusive rights to knowledge. As Jean Franco observes, in baroque Mexican religious and intellectual life, Sor Juana encountered “a grid that defined learning as masculine and mystical knowledge as feminine.” Yet through documents such as *La Respuesta*, Sor Juana “directly defied the clergy’s feminization of ignorance.” Sor Juana presents an alternative—but clearly rational and not mystical—type of knowledge to that of the *letrados*, or men of letters.

Ysabel’s case proves that Sor Juana’s sentiments about female ability were not, as Octavio Paz would have it, limited to the work of an aberrant genius. Her talent, not her concerns, was exceptional. Sor Juana succeeded in articulating gendered struggles, such as the

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91 Ibid., 23.
92 Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, o Las trampas de la fe*, (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994).
assertion of women’s intellectual freedom and feminine expertise that occurred across Mexican society, from the convent to the healer’s shack. Like Ysabel’s healing practices, however, Sor Juana’s poetry, religious writing, and social critiques prompted fierce institutional backlash. Her critique of the Bishop was unacceptable to ecclesiastical standards of female behavior; not only did Sor Juana elude male control over her spiritual and intellectual affairs, but she actually challenged and criticized male leaders in a rational—and indeed decisive and irrefutable—way.\textsuperscript{93} Not long after the publication of \textit{La Respuesta}, Sor Juana retreated from public and intellectual life, selling her magnificent library and her musical and scientific instruments and renewing her monastic vows. Although the reason for her retreat remains unknown, Sor Juana faced tremendous pressure from her superiors following the scandal of \textit{La Respuesta}, and, in the end, her voice was silenced.

Sor Juana explored the nature of knowledge in a number of her religious-allegorical plays. In \textit{El mártir del sacramento, San Hermenegildo}, Sor Juana illustrates Hercules boasting that his pillars encircle the world and Christopher Columbus explaining to Hercules that “more worlds” exist beyond the pillars.\textsuperscript{94} Sor Juana referred to the awareness of different worlds and conceptualizations, different bodies of knowledge, outside the institutions and classical traditions of Spain. In part, this awareness was generated by the encounter with the New World. At the same time as New Spain was incorporated into and defined by the institutions of the Spanish empire, native culture offered new and powerful types of knowledge. Sor Juana, for instance, honored the elegance of native languages by writing poems in Nahuatl. Before the Inquisition, meanwhile, Ysabel named one of the sources of her medical knowledge as “todos los indios

\textsuperscript{93} Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 60.
\textsuperscript{94} Quoted in Franco, 53.
Although this representation amalgamates the native peoples into a single, Othered corpus, it also refers to the Indian world as a resource for medical and mystical power. This power was not only used in occult practices but was acknowledged by licensed, European medical practitioners. Phillip II’s personal physician, Francisco Hernández, documented curanderos’ remedies, examined native plant life, and commended Indian herbal lore and other “materia médica” to doctors on the peninsula.

The acknowledgement of the value of Indian herbs reflects the worth of Sor Juana’s “other worlds” beyond the pillars. Moreover, Indian medical practices played a role in the reverse acculturation of Spaniards to native—or at least, a mestizo—Mexican culture. The acknowledged efficacy of native cures led members of all levels of society—even the inquisitor Estrada y Escobedo—to seek out practitioners of mixed race and culture. Spanish practitioners, on the other hand, rarely used native drugs according to native practice, rather assessing their usefulness according to the Galenian humoral theory that dominated Western medical practice, and in the process compromising the efficacy of the remedies.

Attitudes towards native ritual varied, of course. Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, a Dominican priest, published his Treatise on the Superstitions of the Natives of this New Spain in 1629 to draw attention to the deeply rooted Indian heresies that pervaded Mexican culture. Composed in epithets, the treatise systematically recounts and derides Aztec thought and medical practices with remarkable detail. Inquisitors appeared not to share Ruiz de Alarcón’s unmitigated hatred of Indian remedies. In Ysabel’s first and second trials, Inquisitors brought two Indian

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95 Lea Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 94.
97 Gruzinski, 23.
curanderos, one male and one female, to assess the material medica in Ysabel’s home.

Inquisitors, who loved material proof of witchcraft, relied on the Indians’ judgment to determine which powders, stones, feathers, bones, and other items were used for medical remedies and which served more diabolical purposes. The Indian consultants to Ysabel’s case found no objectionable items (such as a wax heart or doll with pins) in Ysabel’s abode, instead reporting a wealth of herbs and powders used for healing.

Botanical and chemical analyses of Aztec herbal remedies, recorded in tracts by 16th and 17th physicians such as Francisco Hernández and Francisco Ximénez, have shown that indigenous medicines were overwhelmingly more effective than the Renaissance pharmacopeia. This finding underlines the power of native herbology in Ysabel’s time, not only as a result of associations between the Indian “Other” and magical power, but because of its visible results. The indigenous world produced an efficacious alternative to Western understandings of medicine.

Experience and Feminine Knowledge

Sor Juana and Ysabel de Montoia both lived in eras of inquisitorial surveillance of feminine and religious behavior, and both were required to justify their religious and occupational autonomy to superiors. When prompted by inquisitors to recount her medical education as justification for her trade, Ysabel, like Sor Juana, emphasized the importance of experience. She admitted

She had not studied any science, that she had learned to cure from the age of eight, that her mother and aunt ordered her to grind powders when they went to cure and they also ordered her to make all of the medications, and she had cured all the ills there were like typhus and pneumonia (“pain in

100 Silverblatt, 150.
101 Otriz de Montellano, 1.
Despite a lack of formal schooling, Ysabel justified her expertise with practical experience; from childhood she prepared medicines as would any pharmacist, even obtaining medicines from official pharmacies. She also accompanied her expert mother and aunt “when they went to cure,” depicting a kind of medical apprenticeship and logical continuation of the family trade. This type of experiential qualification reflected medieval standards for women physicians. As Merry Weisner has documented, in the Middle Ages, although women could not attend the university and receive an official degree, women with extensive experience in medical practice were called by the same term, “médica,” as university-educated male doctors.\textsuperscript{103}

At the same time as religious and literary discourse devalued feminine thought, some medical scholars observed that women possessed particular aptitudes or inclinations toward healing that men did not. Medieval European scholars more often made these observations than did their early modern counterparts, yet even in 1530, a medical treatise published by Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim praised the “‘old wife’ [who] searched wood and field for the individual plants, learning their colors, forms, taste, scent, and species [and] according to her experience of their virtues administers the surest remedy free of charge to everyone.”\textsuperscript{104} Similarly, Olivier de Serres, lord of Pradel, observed in 1600 that women healers were “more equipped than men” to

\textsuperscript{102} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 59 R. “No ha estudiado ciencia alguna, que ella ha aprendido a curar desde edad de ocho años que le mandavan dicha su madre y tía molerlas cuando iban a curar y también mandavan a esta hazer todos los medicamentos, y que ha curado tantos males hay de tabardillo y de dolor del costado; ha curado también con medicinas de Botica Real, haziendo con ellas parecitos benditos y tierra de San Diego y de San Miguel, conviene a saber de un poco en que le aparecio, porque los santos aiuden al enermo para sanar.”

\textsuperscript{103} Merry Weisner, \textit{Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 103.

\textsuperscript{104} From Cornelius Agrippa, \textit{The Certainty and Vanity of all Sciences and Arts} (1530) as quoted in Alison Klairmont Lingo, “Empirics and Charlatans in Early Modern France: The Genesis of the Classification of the ‘Other’ in Medical Practice,” \textit{Journal of Social History} 19 (1986), 590. In a 1529 work, Cornelius Agrippa, a German humanist, argued that women were not simply equal to men, but rather that they were superior.
heal the sick.\textsuperscript{105} While these attitudes may not translate directly to ideas in Spanish America, the common European tradition of female empirics and "old wife" healers provided a basis for the work of Mexican \textit{curanderas} such as Ysabel. Likewise, these texts demonstrate that a measure of respect for female medical expertise endured regardless of male-oriented professionalization.

The quality control exercised by bodies like the Protomedicato had more to do with control than quality. In the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries, the state of scientific understandings meant that the experience of a practitioner trained his or her entire life in healing guaranteed quality of care better than a physician's book learning. As Celestina, the bawd in Fernando de Rojas's \textit{La Celestina, o La Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea}, opines, "The doctor with experience is more skilled than the learned one."\textsuperscript{106} Celestina also, however, represents herself as a doctor that exploits patients' illnesses for profit and opines that "experience and what's learned from it make men cunning."\textsuperscript{107} She is both an unsavory and (socially and sexually) "experienced" character who uses worldly know-how to deceive, manipulate, and swindle other characters. In this case, unlike in Sor Juana's formulation, experience generates a base type of knowledge—associated with greed and deceit—whereas academic study yields virtuous knowledge. In the text of \textit{La Celestina}, Rojas continually equates folk healers with dangerous con artists who claim expertise while harming their patients. Just as in \textit{La Celestina}, Ysabel's trial articulates anxieties about experience, learning, and the nature of medical expertise at a time when processes of professionalization had begun to devalue unofficial healing, while the scarcity of professional

\textsuperscript{105} From Olivier de Serres, \textit{Le théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs} (Paris, 1600), fols. 885v-887r, as quoted in Klairmont Lingo, 593.

\textsuperscript{106} Fernando de Rojas, \textit{La Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea} (Newark, DE: European Masterpieces, 2003 [1499]), 78. "Es más cierto medico el experimentado que el letrado."

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 79. "La experiencia y escarmiento hace los hombres arteros."
doctors—and the dubious efficacy of book-learned medicine—made such folk healing still necessary.\footnote{Luz María Hernández Saénz, Learning to Heal: The Medical Profession in Colonial Mexico, 1767-1831 (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).}

Before the tribunal for a second time, Ysabel argued that inquisitors had issued a selective prohibition on her curing at the end of her first trial. Inquisitors, dismayed that the\textit{curandera} had continued to expand her business, asked Ysabel to verify “if in the sentence that was given to her in the first trial she was prohibited from curing or not.” Ysabel responded

\begin{quote}
That God allowed it [her curing], earth swallow her if everything argued in her first trial was true, because they punished her only because she went around with those other women, and they did not prohibit her from curing, rather they only ordered that she not return to being a \textit{comadre} [midwife] and not anything else.\footnote{Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 75 R. “Preguntada si en la sentencia que le dio contra esta en la primera caussa se le prohivo curar o no: Dixo que permitia dios que la tierra la trague si es verdad todo lo contendio en su primera causa porque a ella la castiguaron solo porque andava con ese otras mugeres y que no le prohivieron curar sino solo la mandaron que no volviera a estar comadre y no otra cosa.”}
\end{quote}

Ysabel offered multiple justifications for continuing to heal. First, she alleged that her first conviction was unjust and that God, as ultimate arbiter of truth, superseded the human courts of the Inquisition. Ysabel also attributed her conviction to her movement with “those other women,” her companions, fellow practitioners of magic, and prostitutes who fell outside of the boundaries of acceptable society. She distanced her healing work from her marginal activities with her female friends—the invocations of the devil, love magic, and procurer work for which the Inquisition condemned her in the first trial.

Ysabel also differentiated her healing work from the work of the\textit{comadre}, the archetypal midwife that La Celestina embodied. Her perception of inquisitors’ objection to midwifery reflects the pejorative illustration of midwives set forth by the\textit{Malleus Maleficarum}, the famed late fifteenth century German treatise. According to the\textit{Malleus}, which provided criteria for
identifying and hunting witches, midwives were particularly inclined to witchcraft and “surpass all others in wickedness...No one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives.”

However, Merry Weisner and David Harley have localized these opinions to elite authors. Weisner and Harley identify that, at least in early modern Europe, midwives were not overrepresented in condemnations for witchcraft; rather, midwives had to cultivate a trustworthy and respectable character. In her testimony Ysabel recognizes the inquisitors’ focus on midwifery, the *comadre*’s link to female networks (“those other women”), and perhaps inquisitorial regard of midwifery as corroboration of witchcraft. Ysabel’s testimony also separates curing or healing work from the more suspect trade of the *comadre*.

In the New World, curing drew on efficacious Indian herbal lore; before the Inquisition, Ysabel could associate herself with “todos los indios antiguos” and distance her curing from the European model of the Celestina-like midwife.

Ysabel also justified her trade with her use of religious iconography. As a supplement to drugs from the Royal Pharmacy, Ysabel invoked “Saint James and Saint Michael” because, to her understanding, “the saints help the sick become healthy.”

Although inquisitors concerned themselves with Ysabel’s scientific education and the problem of unlicensed empirics, the most worrisome element of Ysabel’s healing was her misappropriation of Catholic ritual. The next section examines Ysabel’s religious

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110 Quoted in Weisner, 264.


112 The inability of inquisitors to suppress Ysabel’s healing with the ban on midwifery may stem from the inadequacy of focusing on this minor part of her trade; whereas inquisitors hope to curb witchcraft by prohibiting midwifery, Ysabel could have interpreted—or at least, claimed to interpret—the ban as a prohibition simply on the trade of deliver babies. However, the proceedings could also have forced Ysabel to recognize illicit connotations of women’s midwifery. It is impossible to decipher from these few lines but the focus on midwifery is still interesting in terms of the gendering of medical work and the changing perceptions of an age-old female trade.

113 The term “empiric” refers to one whose knowledge is gained from experience.
healing, devotion to the saints, and relationship with Catholicism in the context of women's popular religiosity in Mexico.
PART III: NEGOTIATING WITH GOD

This section examines Ysabel’s religious beliefs and practices. Her testimony provides insight on popular Catholicism, including the cult of the saints and the hybridization of Catholicism with magical rituals. Ysabel’s understanding of the saints—who were specialized to patronize particular causes, such as health or good harvest—reflects pre-Christian pantheons of deities who dealt with all manner of mundane problem or earthly concern. Ysabel saw her devotion to the saints and magical practices as viable supplements to and rituals of Christianity. The Holy Office, however, termed her practices “witchcraft.” This section examines how Ysabel’s saint worship and particular uses of magic violated orthodoxy, according to inquisitional ideology. This section also explores how Ysabel negotiated a space within Catholicism that met the needs of daily life—easing poverty, securing work, and attracting companionship. Her folk religious practices allowed access to God without clerical intermediaries that would interfere with Ysabel and her friends’ lifestyle.

White Magic and Church Power

Michael Taussig has described how indigenous peoples seized images of saints and other symbols of “white magic”—that is, the discourses of Western institutions—and appropriated their sanctity for popular religious rituals. The Catholic Church represented a source of power in social and economic as well as spiritual relationships. In her testimony before the Inquisition, Ysabel recounted various interactions with Juan de Palafox, the Bishop of Puebla who


115 Taussig, 49.
campaigned against Church corruption and was nearly canonized. Although other religious leaders resented his celebrity and Jesuit austerity, Palafox drew all dregs of Puebla society together through Catholicism, attaining a folk saint status during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{116} Into the late eighteenth century, Puebla residents hung images of Palafox in their homes and prayed to him as a saintly intercessor in various matters.\textsuperscript{117}

Palafox was most active politically between the years of 1640 and 1649—during which time he also sentenced Ysabel de Montoia to a house of reform for her infamy as a public woman in Puebla.\textsuperscript{118} Ysabel recounted with great pride the fact that the bishop himself had sentenced her—much like she would claim that her interaction with the Inquisition had given her special powers to heal. Regardless of the negative nature of her interactions with Catholic authority, Ysabel’s proximity to the fonts of Christian power—the bishop Palafox and the Holy Office—gave her popular credibility in healing and love magic. She drew on supernatural power from both indigenous and Catholic worlds, and perhaps African traditions as well, although African ritual magic closely resembled folk practices in Europe and America.

When the Inquisition criticized Ysabel for using love magic to force a man to marry a woman client, Ysabel admitted that “it wasn’t because of herself or anyone else, but rather because of the Señor Bishop Palafox, who made them marry.”\textsuperscript{119} The man was the head bailiff of Puebla, who, “after so many years of bad friendship” with Ysabel’s client, was probably forced to marry her as a part of Palafox’s reformation campaign within church and state.\textsuperscript{120} As Ysabel phrased it, however, Palafox wielded a powerful force that resembles the social and economic

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol I, 100 V. “Ni a una, ni a la otra se devia, sino al señor Obispo Palafox que los hizo casar.”
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. “Después de tantos años de mala amistad...”
magic practiced by Ysabel and her friends. As the head of the Puebla church that ordained and carried out the marriage, Palafox held the ultimate power to shape and compel social relationships—power that Ysabel tapped into using Catholic prayers and the invocation of saints.

The Spanish arrived in the Americas intent on evangelizing the native peoples and hostile towards local redefinitions of Christianity according to existing religious tradition. Much of what the Spanish promoted, however, was in fact a redefinition of Christianity according to European folk culture. Within the Catholic Church, saints were grafted onto the hierarchical structure of patriarchy and onto the tradition of specialized pagan deities. Saints emerged as intercessors to divinity in a patriarchal structure in which humans occupied the lowest rung and God ruled as a king. The church promoted saints as “models of virtue that the faithful could imitate,” while individuals imagined them as beings who could provide money, property, health, and well-being for entire cities or groups of people. Saints presided over agricultural activities, geographical locations, physical welfare, and festival days throughout the year; in the New World, moreover, saints lent their names to rivers, mountains, new towns, churches, neighborhoods, and newborns. Thus, “saints offered social cohesion and a chance at collective identity,” both between pre-Christian and Christian cultures and between New World and Spanish populations.¹²¹

Although Ysabel saw the Church and its clergy as a source of power, the economic and sexual relationships that Ysabel maintained with clergymen acquainted her with the human aspects of priests’ character. Clergymen’s use of her folk-Catholic ritual remedies, her sexual services, and her materials for church ritual, such as relics and holy water, undermined religious men’s position of spiritual authority. Ysabel recalled one priest in particular whom she befriended in prison—and to whom she convinced her friend María Rivera to give sexual favors:

Montoia said that when she was imprisoned there was also imprisoned a certain old friar with whom she had a great friendship, and that he knew a lot about these [occult] things, and remedies in which he was very skilled, and that at midnight both used to go out to the patio of the jail and get into the fountain of water and watch where the stars were running, giving the impression that Montoia was also an astrologist and knew a lot about astrology, and that she would go out to pray to obligate [Maria de Rivera]...to have the carnal act with the said person, which she came to do [regularly].

Although she may have simply seen herself as fulfilling priests’ natural and human desires, Ysabel’s work as a go-between for clergymen cast her as an arbiter of the morality of these churchmen. Ysabel’s ability to facilitate priests’ sin—as well as the lascivious behavior of confessors well-documented in Inquisition trials for solicitation—destabilized clergymen’s position of spiritual superiority.

The institutional response to clerical corruption at the Council of Trent and through the Inquisition demonstrates that for Church officials, sexual transgressions such as clerical concubinage represented threats to the economic, moral, and gendered order in which the Church occupied the highest seat of authority. Sexual relations between priests and laypeople pulled priests down to the moral—or physical—level of their parishioners, undermining the authority of the Church as a spiritual and moral guide for the community. However, church restrictions on sexual activity placed many individuals outside the boundaries of proper society. While such unfeasible regulations reinforced the power, authority, and necessity of the church as an intermediary for salvation and reentry into society, unrealistic demands of discipline could backfire, producing more debauchery rather than less. For example, requirements for clerical

122 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol I, 134 R. “Que la dicha montoya dixo a la dicha persona que quando estubo presa en la carcel tamben estubo pressada cierta persona que (un fraile viejo) que nombro con quien tenia grande amistad, y que sabia muchas destas cosas, y remedios en que era muy diestro y que a las doce de la onche se salian ambos al pato de la carcel y se ponian en la pila del agua, y miraban por donde corrían las estrellas, dando a entender la dicha Montoya que tambien era Astrologa, y que sabia muchas cosas de Astrologia, y que asi mesmo las sabia la dicha persna, la qual, y la dicha Montoya, se salian a rezar, para obligar a la dicha persona (Maria Rivera), a quien se lo contaba a que fuese a tener acto carnal con la dicha persona su conocida como con efecto vino azer.”
celibacy codified at the Council of Trent marginalized many relationships between clergy and their families, or forced the clergy's relations into the realm of the illicit—the realm in which Ysabel operated, contracting young women as concubines for religious and political elites.\(^{123}\)

Whether as a result of her unorthodox relationships with clergy or in efforts to avoid institutional backlash for her magical healing or prostitution business, Ysabel developed alternative methods of confession. For instance, she admitted that she had been taking communion without being absolved because

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\text{She took some bad advice given to her by Ysabel de Vivanco [the woman who taught Montoia]...that she didn't have to confess these things to the confessors [in a way] that they would hear it. Rather, [they should confess] very quietly interiorly, when the confessors would be absolving them, because if the confessors heard about it they would have to ask who taught it, and they would have to say it was her and then they would discover her and do her harm and supposing that it was said to the confessor although it was very quiet, they were confessing it and they were absolved and they also did another thing, which was since the confessor was in place of God, they confessed to God, who was in the sacred host. And in raising it they would confess before it, about all those things, and they asked for mercy, which the defendant has done a few times, confessing quietly to the confessors and other times, in church hearing mass when they lifted the host.}\(^{124}\)

Whether or not she truly believed in the power of private confession, Ysabel described to inquisitors a viable relationship between herself and God in which she communicated directly with him, eliminating the need for an active intercessor. These intercessors would interfere with the processes of Ysabel and her friends' daily life, withholding salvation until they ceased the practices, such as love magic, necessary for generating revenue, luck, and friendships. By using this alternative system of confession, Ysabel balanced her economic and emotional need with her


\(^{124}\) Ms. Codex 1436, Vol I, 109. “Supuesto que se dezían al confesor aunque fuese muy quedito las confesavan y quedavan absueltas y que sino hiziesen otra cosa, y era, que pucs el confesor estava en lugar de Dios. Las confesaran a Dios, que estaba en la ostia censagrada. Y en alsandola. Se confesasen delante de ella, de todas aquellas cosas y le pidiesen misericordia lo qual a echo esta confesante unas veces confesandolo muy quedito a los confesores y otras estando en las Yglesias oyendo misa quando alsavan la ostia.”
needs for salvation. Colonial Mexicans saw confession as a regular necessity, in the case of unexpected death, and also as a way to amass forgiveness to shorten time spent in purgatory.\textsuperscript{125} In Ysabel's testimony, the person of the confessor functioned much like the sacramental bread or an image of a saint—a presence which opened channels to the divine. Ysabel focused on rituals and material objects as ways to access or invoke divine power. Like a saint or the sacramental bread, the confessor had special access to God's ear—his presence, not his active participation (neither his hearing of the crime nor prescription of penitence), allowed Ysabel to receive forgiveness.

**Dreams, Visions, and the Appropriate Female Religious Experience**

Ysabel, meanwhile, depicted herself as an intercessor between humans and the divine, involved in the mediation of Christianity rather than existing at the bottom of an ecclesiastical hierarchy. She sold holy water and wafers to clergymen, as well as serving as a healer for them. During healing rituals, Ysabel invoked the saints and Catholic refrains, and even saw herself as a vessel of divine will. Ysabel reported to inquisitors how, before curing Don Miguel, she experienced dreams in which the archangel Michael exhorted her to heal.\textsuperscript{126}

\begin{quote}
They sent for her again saying that [Don Miguel] was dying of an episode he had had the night before in his house. And she returned and said that they should take care for he was dying. Later she said that when she was in her house dreaming, she heard a voice that said to her, 'Ysabel, get up and heal,' and she woke up; and she said that a little later she fell asleep again and between dreams she saw a figure of a very lovely soldier like how it is said in the chapter, and she said that perhaps the saint wants me to go down to cure Don Miguel and she remained thus perplexed until they sent for her to cure the said Don Miguel.\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{126} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 51 R.

\textsuperscript{127} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol II, 78 R. "La volvieron a llamar diciendo que se moría de un disgusto que avía tenido la noche antes en su casa. Y esta volvó y dxo que tuviesen mucho cuidado con el que se moría y esto response. Luego
Ysabel testified again later about this episode, adding material details and witness proof that attempted to authenticate her experience:

She said that that night, while sleeping with other women that were close to her, she saw, or heard, or it seemed to her it would be better said that she dreamed, that she saw a very beautiful young man [un mancebo muy hermoso] dressed in green satin with all the signs of being a Saint Michael and that he had instructed her to go cure the said Don Miguel de Guevara, that he was very ill, and that the worries and anguishes that it had given her that one of the persons sleeping with her remembered it, with which she went to cure Don Miguel.\footnote{Richard Kagan, \textit{Lucrecia's Dreams}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).}

Ysabel's visions of Saint Michael evoke the tradition of visionary beatas and prophetic dreams that reached unprecedented popularity in the seventeenth century. As the Catholic Reformation encouraged mystical experiences that personalized religion, women began to report ecstatic encounters in which they joined with God, received his love, and heard messages about faith, life, and even politics. Inquisitional repression discouraged those women who did not seek male ecclesiastical guidance or interpretation with regard to these encounters. Richard Kagan has documented the case of Lucrecia de Leon, a visionary beata of late 16\textsuperscript{th} century Madrid who experienced dreams that—like Ysabel's dream featuring an imperative from Saint Michael—compelled her to take an active role in political life.\footnote{Richard Kagan, \textit{Lucrecia's Dreams}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).} In a few of Lucrecia's prophetic dreams, she saw herself marrying "Miguel," a heroic and saintly reconquistador of Spain, becoming queen, and bearing his child. Richard Kagan interprets the recurring figure of Miguel as a reference to the contemporaneous seer and social critic Miguel de Piedrola, but the figure of the

\footnotesize{dixo que estando ella en su casa sonando oyo una voz que le dixo Ysabel lebantate a curar, y y esta diserto; y dixo que seria esto y despues se volvio a dormir y entre suenos vio una figura de soldado muy lindo como la que en el capitulo se dice y esta dixo quicas el santo quiere que yo baja a curar a don Miguel y se quedo en aquella duda hasta que la enviaron a llamar para curar al dicho Don Miguel."}
valiant holy warrior also evokes the young, beautiful soldier—the archangel San Miguel—who appeared in Ysabel's dreams.

Lucrecia's vision of San Miguel and Ysabel's differ in focus, however. In Lucrecia's dreams, Miguel headed legions of Spanish fighters in a final reconquest of Spain, driving the Moors, disloyal subjects, and other marginal groups out definitively. His role as a holy warrior against heresy reflects the West's esteem of Saint Michael as a Christian soldier, a defender of Christendom. Conversely, in the East, such as Constantinople, Saint Michael was honored not for his role as commander of the host but rather for his powers to heal the sick. Ysabel's dream identifies the figure of San Miguel according to his military garb as well as his appearance as a beautiful mancebo adorned with green silk. This representation brings to mind the Greek and Roman roots of the figure of Saint Miguel; following the Christianization of the East, saints such as Saint Michael were inscribed on existing deities, and many scholars have pointed to the similarities between Apollo and Saint Michael. San Miguel's appearance, moreover, functions mainly to impel Ysabel to heal—perhaps granting her special, saintly skill to accomplish a daunting task of healing. This vision of San Miguel suggests that Ysabel inherited Old World traditions which honored the archangel as a healer.

The realm of dreams allowed women to assume forms of power not normally acceptable—for instance, the power to voice political criticisms, or to attend a critically ill man as a healer. The prospect of healing the ailing Don Miguel was dangerous; he was near death, and Ysabel likely had enough experience to know that clients often blamed the healer for a

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130 Taussig, 206.
131 The term mancebo, during the seventeenth century, referred to any young, unmarried lad, but also carries connotations of sexual availability or appeal. Ysabel's specific description of his adornment—down to the green silk—suggests that she drew from a familiar painting, woodcut, or other visual source.
negative outcome. A divine imperative justified her involvement, particularly her movement across class and racial boundaries. Inquisitors seemed appalled by her claim to divine contact, but Ysabel’s vision of San Miguel was one of the everyday miracles that typified Mexican baroque Catholicism. Most Mexicans expected to see proof of the supernatural—whether divine or diabolic intervention—in their daily lives.\(^{133}\)

Faced with these assertions, however, inquisitors demanded to know, “How was it that she, being such a perverse liar and trickster at least as has been confessed, presumed that the archangel Saint Michael appeared to her, and how he instructed her”—to which Ysabel replied “that she saw it like that.”\(^{134}\) Inquisitors described Ysabel as acting with inappropriate religious autonomy, interpreting dreams and using Catholic symbols in her healing rituals without consulting a clergyman. Ysabel claimed that the apparition showed “all the signs of a San Miguel,” but inquisitors disapproved of Ysabel’s “presumption” in interpreting what she saw. To be sure, the tribunal consulted an expert, Fray Alonso de Barrera, to judge what she may have seen. Fray Alonso concluded that “the said dream (if it was true that she had it) could not be good nor from God on account of the bad means by which it came, and it is of a necromantic nature: and if she did not have this dream it is the trickery of witches to accredit their cures.”\(^{135}\)

In addition to casting doubt on the veracity of Ysabel’s testimony, men of the Church exercised their monopoly on interpretation to deny the divinity of Ysabel’s vision. They cited the devil as the source of the dream, due to the “bad means” by which it arrived. Bad means could refer to the appearance of the vision in a dream; dreams were not trusted as a venue for contact

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\(^{133}\) Curcio-Nagy, 166.

\(^{134}\) Ms. Codex 1436, Vol II, 79 R. “Preguntada que como siendo ella tan perversa enganadera y mentirosa por lo menos como tiene confessado presumio que el archangel sna Miguel se le apareco y como lo contava ella y lo afirmaba con juramentos: dixo que asi le veia.”

\(^{135}\) Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 51 R. “Dicho sueño (si fue verdad que lo tubo) no pudo ser bueno ni de Dios por medios tan malos como los que usaba y es especie necromantica: y si no tubo este sueño es embuste propio de hechizeras para accreditar sus curas.”
with God, but rather suspected as a time of vulnerability to the devil. The term "bad means" could also refer to the vessel, Ysabel: a convicted witch, and a racially ambiguous, sexually independent, and morally reprobate woman. Inquisitors expressed similar concerns regarding female visionaries. The phenomenon of female mysticism did not always worry inquisitors, instead confirming suppositions that feminine nature led to women's more emotional spiritual experience. Women ran into trouble with the Inquisition, however, when they interpreted their visions or promulgated holy messages without a male ecclesiastical intermediary. These inquisitorial perspectives reinforced the status of women as legal and spiritual minors.

The necessity of the Church for mediation of salvation, however, impeded the love magic and herbal lore which constituted Ysabel's means of living. Confessors would withhold salvation until Ysabel stopped practicing and could even report unorthodox activities to the Inquisition. For this reason, Ysabel and her fellow single women negotiated alternative versions of Catholicism, based on folk and native Indian religious traditions, and relying on saints and holy objects to carry supplications up to God through the Christian hierarchy. Although the church promoted the miraculous nature of the host, the saints, the Virgin, relics, and other items, folk beliefs in the magical powers of such items—and the adaptation of these items to popular ritual such as healing or love magic—"smacked of unorthodoxy." Inquisitors were well aware of the rampant unorthodoxy with which New World citizens appropriated Catholic ritual. In the first trial, which focused on Ysabel's love magic involving supplications to Saint Martha and the devil, Inquisitors asked

...if she knew or understood that all these things, enchantments, tricks, words, and prayers that she confesses having said and taught to other [women] were against what our holy and glorious mother [faith] believes, holds true, and

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137 See Franco 1989.
138 Curcio-Nagy, 166.
teaches. She said...that she knew very well that those words that she said were
against our holy faith and regardless she said them and other people learned
them from her because the devil was tricking her, and although she confessed
it...and they absolved her with the charge that she see the commissary of the
town, she never saw him.\textsuperscript{139}

Although Ysabel claimed to know her practices were heretical, most folk practitioners of
unorthodox Catholicism believed themselves to be devout and pious Catholics.\textsuperscript{140} Ysabel herself
used Catholic ritual—involving the Holy Trinity or giving other blessings—during her cures and,
during testimony on other occasions, mentioned these rituals as evidence of the quality of her
remedies. One witness describes the spiritual healing ritual conducted by Ysabel (La Centella):

\begin{quote}
The said woman and the said Centella, staying alone in her room; said
Centella told the woman to disrobe, and she spread a green unguent on her
belly, saying a prayer as she spread it: in the name of the Holy Trinity, father,
son, and holy spirit... and the said Centella told her not to be afflicted, that
God had to remedy everything; to which the sick woman said, Granny, cure
me of this...because I am to the point I can’t even confess; to which the said
Centella responded, the first thing to do is go home and confess, and that then
she would make the green unguent dressing.\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

Ysabel—who from a young age was trained by a \textit{comadrina}, a godmother, in folk Catholic
ritual—saw herself as a religious guide for her patients and her housemates. To her
understanding, the blessings and invocations she used in healing exercised—and should have
proved before the Inquisition—her Catholic faith.

\textsuperscript{139} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol I, 109. “Preguntada si supo o entendio que todas estas cossas echizos embustes palabras y
oraciones que confiesa haver echo dicho y ensenado a otras eran contra lo que cree tiene predica y enseña nuestra
madre la santa y gloria. Dixo que las yerbas solas de que usso no se paresan que eran pecados contra nuestra santa
ley pues eran bien conocidas y las primeras que se la benian a la memoria por engañar y hacer burla que las personas
que la buscavan llevadas de la fama que tenía de saber de estas cosas que tal palabras que decia bien savia que eran
contra nuestra santa fe y no embargante las decia y otras personas las aprendieron de ella porque la engañava el
diablo y aunque lo confeso como declarado tiene a que se remite y la absolveron con cargo de ver al comisario de la
pue bla, nunca lo vio.”

\textsuperscript{140} Joan Cameron Bristol, \textit{Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth
Century} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 16.

\textsuperscript{141} “Quedando dicha muger y dicha centella solas en su apossento, mando la dicha centella desnudar a dicha muger,
y la unto la barriga con inguente verde, diciendo recio quando la untaba; en el nombre de la sanctissima trinidad,
padre, hijo, y espiritu sancto.” As she grew older, Ysabel was increasingly referred to by her nickname, La Centella,
which means “the spark.”
According to inquisitors, however, it meant she “mixed the good with the bad just like a real witch.” More insidious than obvious evil, the mixture of “the good with the bad” tainted religious and social purity, introducing dangerous misinterpretations and usurping the power of Church doctrine for original and unauthorized use. According to Georgina Dopico Black, the concern with purity and taint defined the inquisitorial hermeneutics of early modern Spanish and New World society. Diabolic forces were not readily visible but had to be tracked down, uncovered, and extricated from healthy society. In Ysabel’s trial, however, Inquisitors focused on concrete types of egregious witchcraft, such as her crafting of wax hearts to be punctured with pins, or her supplication to the “Father of the street”—the devil—to attract men and income. Inquisitorial focus on the few mentions of the devil did not adequately dispute the numerous heterodox rituals that Ysabel practiced. Moreover, the Holy Office employed only five or six inquisitors, scribes, and jailers to deal with tens of thousands of complaints each year. The sheer numerical inadequacies of the Mexican Inquisition prevented the tribunal from challenging the widespread heterodox religiosity of Mexican society.

142 Ms. Codex 1436, Vol I, 92.
144 Curcio-Nagy, 171.
CONCLUSION

Chiapas-based rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos described the revolutionary potential of the Mexican people in a 1994 speech entitled “The Long Journey from Despair to Hope.” In his speech, Marcos analyzed the systems of racial, cultural, and gendered inequity that have defined Mexican society since the colonial encounter. Describing the particular revolutionary potential of Mexican women, Marcos argues that women must revolt from an “ancient cycle of daughter-girlfriend-wife and/or lover-mother.”

Marcos acknowledges that dependence or relativism of women to men is an “ancient cycle,” a seemingly natural order in which little has changed over centuries. These themes of patriarchy have endured since the beginning of the colonial period—yet they have been contested for just as long a time. Steve J. Stern has charted the history of gendered conflict in Mexico, concluding that violence that erupted in families was the “ultimate expression of a failed possession in persons.”

Stern shows that resorts to violence and attacks on women recorded in colonial judicial annals largely represented assertions of gender rights in conflict with absolute concepts of gender. Violence marked the inability of leaders to maintain control—the failure of ideology and of masculine authority.

Inquisition trials of women such as Ysabel exemplify structural violence as a result of a “failed possession in persons”—that is, the incomplete dominance of gender ideals, class hierarchy, professional stipulations, and Church control. For example, Ysabel’s practice of love magic and single-woman household—her life “without any man”—envisioned alternative relations between the sexes, in which women could live independent of male control over their

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146 Ibid. 111.
economic, emotional, and physical well-being. Before the Inquisition, however, Ysabel’s independent background verified her depravity, her disregard of morality, and her status as a “bad woman.” Inquisitors observed Ysabel’s history of sexual transgression as evidence towards her condemnation as a witch. Ysabel’s alternative, lone-woman lifestyle also exposed her to the social stigmatization and suspicion that ultimately resulted in condemnation to the Inquisition.  

Although Ysabel contested gender roles and patriarchal right, her loner status, low position in a class hierarchy, and loss of sexual honor meant that her objections represented little threat to the patriarchal system. 

Much more subversive were Ysabel’s folk healing and brand of popular Catholicism. Her pseudo-Catholic and magical healing practices allowed Ysabel to negotiate forms of power across class boundaries. In medieval Spain, women often fulfilled healing roles that ranged from midwifery to the work of a médica, the equivalent of a male, university-educated physician. In colonial Mexico, the availability of effective indigenous materia médica, Spanish traditions of women healers and midwives, and associations of racial and sexual Otherness with magical power bolstered the popularity of mulata and mestiza curanderas. Although professionalization drove women out of legitimate roles as doctors, Ysabel helped fill the “awesome” gap between the number of professional doctors and the demand for cures in Mexican society. Members of all levels of society consulted folk healers but, fearing malpractice or their own moral or religious compromise, often proceeded to report them to correctional bodies such as the Inquisition. By the 16th and 17th centuries, processes of professionalization demonized curanderos as “enemies of nature” and “ministers of death.” The circulation of these discourses of suspicion about healers’ unofficial status suggested miseducation, malpractice, and

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147 Ibid. 65.
148 Ibid.
149 Lanning 135.
even diabolical power; this meant the *curandera*'s practice brought her only fleeting power—that which would arouse suspicions and provoke persecution. Conceptions of feminine knowledge and spirituality also circumscribed Ysabel's work. Like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Ysabel claimed for women a space of rationality and skilled work. Ysabel's case helps show that Sor Juana articulated conflicts over gender rights that occurred not only in elite, white society but throughout colonial Mexico.

While the Inquisition intended to discredit Ysabel's claims to rational medical practice, Ysabel succeeded at least in convincing one inquisitor, Don Francisco de Estrada y Escobedo, of her skill as a curer. In spite of Ysabel's conviction for witchcraft (and perhaps because of it), Don Francisco sought her out for healing remedies in exchange for protection from local authorities. In this case, inquisitorial taxonomies did not function properly, failing to criminalize the magical healing that mitigated the numerical and practical inadequacies of professional medicine. Inquisitors patrolled the borders of illicit and acceptable sectors of society, negotiating directly with marginalized individuals. This contact meant that negotiations, while structured according to religious and political hierarchy, relied on variable dynamics between individuals. In Ysabel's case, a persuasive healer who embodied the wise mestiza crone negotiated her reputation as a healer with a creole acculturated to colonial mestizo lifestyle. Mexican inquisitors often identified as creole, distant from Spanish cultural roots, resentful of peninsular interference, and intimately familiar with indigenous food, ritual, and flesh. Due in part to the corruption—and acculturation—of its officers, the Inquisition failed to establish itself as the ultimate arbiter of moral and religious wrongdoing in Mexican society. At the same time that “heretics”, social critics, and the Bishop Palafox denounced the inefficiency and moral turpitude of the Holy Office, Ysabel derided the Inquisition as a distant bureaucracy out of touch with

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150 Alberro 47-8.
common practice. She implied that its categories of religious crime ignored the necessities of daily life, imposing unrealistic, even ignorant, restrictions on vital love magic, healing rituals, and economic trades (such as prostitution or peyote-selling). When inquisitors tried to educate Ysabel about the need for education and proper licensing in order to heal, Ysabel instructed inquisitors that “in these lands everyone cures without a license.”\textsuperscript{151} Ysabel’s frustration with inquisitorial taxonomies reflects not only an attempt to evade punishment but also a failure in communication between popular and elite sectors. Differences in language between clerical and folk culture limited the extent to which inquisitorial categories of acceptability and criminality penetrated and structured Mexican society.

At the same time, however, the Holy Office retained real and symbolic power to certify or discredit popular practice. Ysabel’s claim to a “license from the Holy Office” channeled the tribunal’s power as a licensing institution to bolster her reputation as a healer. This phenomenon was not uncommon; Irene Silverblatt has identified curers tried by the Peruvian Inquisition who claimed they “got a license from the Holy Office” after passing an exam or speaking with commissioners.\textsuperscript{152} Although inquisitors were horrified by such inventions, curanderos successfully convinced and impressed clients with supposed “licenses” granted by the Holy Office. The Inquisition was understood as an institution that determined the quality, credibility, and power of a magical healer, leading Ysabel to market her skills as “state-sanctioned knowledge.”\textsuperscript{153} In spite of inquisitors’ indiscretions and failures in language, inquisitorial authority remained firmly rooted in the patriarchal structures of church and state. Even when Don Francisco solicited Ysabel’s services, she described their encounters in terms of loyal vassalage. While power was negotiable in spaces such as the sickbed and the household,

\textsuperscript{151} Ms. Codex 1436, Vol. II, 74 R.
\textsuperscript{152} Silverblatt 94.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
religious, social, gendered, and political hierarchy ordered Mexican society. The Holy Office tagged the *curandera* as a marginal figure, although linguistic and cultural gaps in inquisitional procedure allowed unorthodox religious, magical, and medical practice to persist. The trials of Ysabel de Montoia reveal how elite fascination with the racial and sexual Other, demographic realities, and the porous and interpenetrating relations between cultures complicated the borders of orthodoxy. Ysabel's case also demonstrates the realities of women's agency and influence in colonial Mexico, revealing how one woman was able to negotiate power and independence within the constraints of a patriarchal society.
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