Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas
Anuario de Historia de América Latina

60 | 2023 | 38-68

Linda A. Curcio-Nagy

University of Nevada, Reno

Female Agency and Scandal: Doña Josefa de Angulo in 17th-Century Mexico City

hosted by

Except where otherwise noted, this article is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0)

https://doi.org/10.15460/jbla.60.2180

Female Agency and Scandal: Doña Josefa de Angulo in 17th-Century Mexico City

Linda A. Curcio-Nagy[1]

Abstract. – This essay examines the life of Doña Josefa de Angulo through the lens of a 1661 Inquisition case. Josefa, whose much older husband, Juan de Vilches, deposited her at the Recogimiento de la Magdalena (the home for wayward women) in Mexico City, demonstrated a concerted effort to live life on her terms, ignoring the expectations for a married woman of some socio-economic standing. She dramatically altered life at the recogimiento and set in motion a series of scandalous events that involved employees at that institution, the archbishop and his staff, her stepchildren, the inquisitors, and her confessor Miguel de Palmares, who she accused of solicitation in the confessional. She challenged normative ideas about marriage, obedience to male authority, female agency, and the very purpose of the recogimiento. Her story illuminates the complicated relationship between gendered social control and the nature of scandal in colonial Mexico City.

Keywords: Recogimiento, Mexico City, Mexican Inquisition, Popular Culture, Gender

Resumen. – Este ensayo se examina la vida de Doña Josefa de Angulo a través de un análisis de un caso inquisitorial del año 1661. Josefa, casada con un hombre mucho mayor, Juan de Vilches quien la depositó en el Recogimiento de la Magdalena, se mostraba un esfuerzo concentrado en vivir su vida por sí

[1] Associate Professor of History at the University of Nevada, Reno, USA. An historian of colonial Mexican history, she specializes in gender issues, popular culture, and religion. Her publications include many articles and essays including the recently published "The Language of Desire in Colonial Mexico": Javier Villa-Flores / Sonya Lipsett-Rivera (eds.), Emotions and Daily Life in Colonial Mexico, United States of America: University of New Mexico Press, 2018, pp. 44-65 and "Martín Garatuza and the Cultural Landscape of Colonial Mexico City": Cheiron, 1 (2021), pp. 90-117. Her books include the award-winning The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity (2004), Latin American Popular Culture Since Independence (2012), and the forthcoming Grave Sins of Sensuality: Sexuality and Popular Religion in Colonial Mexico, 1570-1720.

misma, rechazando las expectativas para una criolla casada y acomodada. Ella dramáticamente alteró la vida cotidiana en el recogimiento y provocó una serie de sucesos escandalosas las cuales se involucraban los empleados de la dicha institución, el arzobispo y su personal, sus hijastros, los inquisidores, y su confesor Miguel de Palmares, lo cual le acusó de solicitación en el confesionario. Ella desafiaba las normas sobre el matrimonio, la supuesta sumisión femenina a la autoridad masculina, y el mismo propósito del recogimiento. Su historia se ilumina la complicada relación entre el control social de género y la idea del escándalo en la capital virreinal.

Palabras clave: recogimiento, Ciudad de México, Inqusición novohispana, cultura popular, género.

On August 8th in 1661, the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Mexico City arrested Miguel de Palmares, a secular priest, for soliciting at least two women for sexual favors during confession at the Church of the Recogimiento de la Misericordia. The subsequent trial was based on an original investigation that began in 1645. Although the formal trial was about the supposed guilt of Palmares, it became clear that the story truly revolved around a pivotal witness, 22-year-old criolla Doña Josefa de Angulo, whose much older husband, Juan de Vilches, had deposited her at the *recogimiento* (home for wayward women) that same year. Although her actions became the focus of the 1661 inquisition case, her voice is almost non-existent in the trial. The witnesses in the case labeled her actions scandalous; however, those same actions also demonstrated a concerted effort to live life on her terms, ignoring the expectations for a married woman of some socio-economic standing. She dramatically altered life at the recogimiento and apparently set in motion a series of events that involved employees at that institution, the archbishop and his staff, her stepchildren, the inquisitors, and her confessor Miguel de Palmares. This essay examines Josefa's life as told through eyes of the witnesses of the case, who 16 years later remembered her scandalous behavior in detail. Josefa challenged normative ideas about marriage, obedience to male authority, female agency, and the very purpose of the recogimiento. Her story thus illuminates the complicated relationship between gendered social control and the nature of scandal in colonial Mexico City.

On Scandal

As sociologist Ari Adut points out "scandal is shaped by the structure of relationships among those who are involved in or exposed to them."[2] The social practice of individuals in a community had to be balanced within and against the perspectives of others in that community. When their actions disrupted that balance, then scandal ensued. Thus, scandal influenced norms, transforming, highlighting, or reaffirming them. Certainly, scandalous actions, however defined, required monitoring, witnesses, judgements, and the desire to make such behavior known to others (usually through gossip and/or contacting certain authorities). Average people were fascinated and extremely interested in the lives of their neighbors, a fact reflected in their testimonies in criminal and Inquisition proceedings. However, historian Donald Ramos points out an individual encountered little censure unless someone in the community was gravely offended.[3] Thus, we cannot assume that social condemnation happened automatically when presumably transgressive activities became public.

At issue, then is the question: what makes a scandal a scandal? Assumptions about gender and ethnicity and ideas about what constituted scandalous behavior influenced how people interpreted an individual's actions and the nature of scandal. Scandal can function as social control that discourages some individuals from illicit behavior, fearful of the public shaming, while others continue their activities clandestinely. Some of most striking scandals in 17th-century Mexico involved sexual impropriety including very egregious cases of solicitation in the confessional, very public acts of marital infidelity on the part of a wife, or any combination of these circumstances. Nonetheless, as Adut points out, a transgression (or scandalous act) may be widely known but still not generate "collective and focused attention."[4] It also might be the case that only some individuals, label an act as scandalous while others might perceive it as unremarkable, tolerable, or even expected. We might also expect increased interest,

---

[2] Ari Adut, On Scandal: Moral Disturbances in Society, Politics and Art, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 3.

[3] Donald Ramos, "Gossip, Scandal and Popular Culture in Golden Age Brazil": Journal of Social History, 33: 4 (Summer 2000), p. 150.

[4] Adut, On Scandal, p. 19.

gossip, and condemnation reserved for the foibles of higher status individuals because their very status tended to magnify any transgression. Certainly, for non-plebian women the pressure to conform to accepted modes of behavior was great, but, even here, adherence should not be taken for granted, despite the supervision of priests, husbands, and neighbors. However, when repeated public transgressions against gendered social norms occurred, scandal very likely followed.

On Gendered Societal Norms

As Adut and Ramos both point out scandal is intricately linked to the historical and cultural context; therefore, Josefa's actions cannot be understood without a closer examination of colonial gender relations and ideas about female impropriety. Colonial Mexican society privileged males socially, culturally, religiously, and legally in a strong patriarchal system that categorized women as minors with limited rights, subordinate to fathers and husbands who had the right to discipline them for supposedly wayward behavior. Theorists such as Fray Hernando de Talavera believed that women by and large were evil, although he begrudgingly admitted that some might be good. Writer Cristóbal Acosta claimed that when women sinned, it was a far worse than when men did so, even though men committed far worse misdeeds. Fray Martín de León believed that there were so many bad women that they could constitute their own lineage.[5] Religious writers Martin de Córdoba and Luis de León both placed special blame on women as temptresses who wore clothes and make-up with the sole purpose to attract and seduce men, because many believed that the clothes on the outside reflected the spiritual state on the inside. They posited that morally "loose" women could bring spiritual danger to an entire

[5] Fray Hernando Talavera, De cómo se ha de ordenar el tiempo para que sea bien expendido, Madrid: Bailly-Bailliere, 1911 (Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles 16), p. 253; Cristóbal Acosta, Tratado en loor de las mujeres, y de la castidad y honestidad, constancia, silencio, y justicia, Venezia: Presso Giacomo Cornetti, 1592, pp. 77-77v; and, Fray Martín de León, Camino del cielo, México: Diego López Dávalos, 1611, p. 253.

community, upset the public good, and bring disorder to married life.[6] Although they represented idealized goals for women that did not always reflect reality, these ideas were adopted by influential ecclesiastical authorities and transmitted as archetypes via sermons and the confessional. Promoting, what historian Mary Elizabeth Perry, has called "the theology of purity," these moralists and theologians, along with priests, archbishops, and civil authorities, sought to enforce a gendered natural order in which women, because they were theoretically vulnerable to the temptation of the devil, required supervision and protection, thereby negating the possibility of scandal.[7]

Although women theoretically always needed protection under this gendered natural order, the 17th century (especially the latter half) witnessed an increase in official concerns regarding public sins and the libertine actions of some women. Increased regulation began when Philip III closed the brothels in 1623. More important, in 1674, Mexico's Real Sala del Crimen named 22 women as disturbers of the peace because they were courtesans who publicly and scandalously showcased their wealth due to their elite paramours. Later in the 1680s, four sisters, the famous Zarjueletas, in Guadalajara, gained notoriety because they had abandoned their marital homes to go about freely at night with married men. Like Josefa, who preceded them, these women would upset the social hierarchy, challenge ideas about the stability of marriage, and dishonor wives and families.[8]

Gendered Spaces

Concepts of personal and familial honor, that intangible quality regarding public reputation and status, added more impetus to the goal to protect women from temptation, adulterers, lotharios, and sin. As Pilar Gonzalbo indicates the maintenance and protection of honor was

---

[6] Martín de Córdoba, Jardín de nobles doncellas, Madrid: Colección Joyas Bibliográficas, 1953, p. 73; Fray Luís de León, "La Perfecta Casada,": Fray Luis de León, Obras Completas Castellanas de Fray Luís de León, Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1957 (vol. 1), pp. 324, 309.

[7] Mary Elizabeth Perry, Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 112.

[8] Nicole Von Germeten, Profit and Passion: Transactional Sex in Colonial Mexico, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018, pp. 71-73.

a means to safeguard the prestige of the social group especially elite Spanish women.[9] Women then should be confined to spaces guided by certain patriarchal norms that would limit their movements as a type of protection: the convent, marriage, or, if necessary, their temporary placement in a recogimiento (those houses of enclosure for badly behaved women). In these spaces, female bodies, actions, and thoughts could be confined. This gendered category of space belied the reality of plebeian and rural women who worked outside the home, and, as Sonya Lipsett-Rivera points out, received less protection against sexual harassment and assault.[10] However, such emphasis on control also underestimated the resistance to such boundaries. After all, in his concept of "spatial trajectory", Michel De Certeau points to a type of "politics of place" wherein challenges to how space is conceptualized can generate alternative codes of conduct, transforming that space.[11] In Josefa's case, through her agency, these transformations came to pass within her martial home and at the recogimento.

For Josefa, like most women, the expectations of feminine behavior came to rest in marriage. Those same religious writers, theorized marriage as a safe emotional space for women, while it ostensibly minimized disruptive and scandalous behavior. For example, writer Pedro de Luján viewed marriage as "a union of complementary spirits" who together forged "a peaceful environment conducive to personal realization…" [and] "the cultivation of the virtues."[12] Conduct manuals for women, such as *The Perfect Wife*, celebrated the active wife who increased her family's patrimony through virtuous conduct, good

---

[9] Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "Los peligros del mundo. Honor familiar y recogimiento femenino": Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru (coord.), Honor y venganza. Historias de un pasado remoto y cercano, Mexico: El Colegio de México, 2009, pp. 272-273.

[10] Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, "The Intersection of Rape and Marriage in Late Colonial and Early National Mexico": Colonial Latin American History Review, 6: 4 (1997): pp. 559-590.

[11] Michel De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, Berkeley: University of California, 1984, pp. 117, 123-125. Also see Anne J. Cruz, "Afterward": Brian M. Phillips / Emily Colbert Cairs (eds), Confined Women: The Walls of Female Space in Early Modern Spain, Hispanic Issues OnLine, 25 (2020), https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/212981/hiol_25_afterword_cruz_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, (accessed on March 25, 2022).

[12] Pedro de Luján, Coloquios matrimoniales del Licenciado Pedro de Luján, Madrid: Imprenta Aguirre, 1990, p. 39.

management of her home, and work alongside her husband. Female authors in courtship novels championed marriage as a potentially happy state for women, a means to self-assertion and agency.[13] Asunción Lavrin posits that women pursued "activities of their own as independent agents."[14] Grace Coolidge and Edith Couturier emphasize that women of wealthy noble families actively collaborated with spouses to increase wealth and to preserve and augment family power.[15] Nonetheless, for some women of lessor means, like Josefa, marriage, meant a move from one form of confinement or restriction to another. A very public refusal to accept those restrictions resulted in scandal.

The Challenges of Married Life

Marriage, without the possibility of divorce, and independent resources, could be fraught with challenges including the threat of abandonment and domestic violence. In both cases, women attempted to exercise agency to improve their lives and find some form of contentment. The abandoned wife could seek comfort and aid from another male.[16] Lisa Sousa points out Christian marriage and the legal

---

[13] Gwendolyn Barnes-Karol / Nicholas Spadaccini, "Sexuality, Marriage, and Power in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia": Eukene Lacarra Lanz (ed.), Marriage and Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 235; and Shifra Armon, Picking Wedlock: Women and the Courtship Novel in Spain, Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2002, p. 67. Also see Edward Behrend-Martínez, Unfit for Marriage: Impotent Spouses on Trial in the Basque Region of Spain, 1600-1750, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007, p. 88.

[14] See her essay, "In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries": Asunción Lavrin (ed.), Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978, p. 7.

[15] Grace E. Coolidge, Guardianship, Gender, and Nobility in Early Modern Spain, New York: Routledge, 2011; and Edith Courturier, "Women in a Noble Family: The Mexican Counts of Regla, 1750-1830": Asunción Lavrin (ed.), Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978, pp. 129-149.

[16] For example, in 1617 Michoacan, Native Magdalena María, rather than remain destitute and alone, decided to join with a new man, Tomas, and became pregnant, after having suffered many years waiting for her spouse to return. Archivo General de la Nación, (México), Inquisición, vol. 295, exp. s/n, folios 196-196v, (henceforth referred to as AGN).

system that emphasized that a wife was to obey and be submissive to her husband and endure even physical abuse was the most difficult aspect of official marriage to garner indigenous acceptance.[17] Richard Boyer documents that most female bigamists of all ethnicities ran from their first marriage due to domestic violence.[18] Some women turned to magical potions to influence the behavior of their male partners, making them kinder or less likely to fight physically.[19] Women, as Jessica Delgado has shown, also turned to the courts to seek redress, but judges routinely acted to uphold the institution of marriage. [20] Some women decided to cohabitate with their lovers rather than marry in an official Church ceremony; or they chose to remain single or enter a convent.[21] Only widows (and those over 26) gained legal rights; and, although poverty could threaten their ability to survive, they could live without the permission and control of a husband. According to Amos Megged, a significant percentage of the female population in the capital lived in female headed households. They belied all the societal emphasis on the supposed benefits of marriage for women.[22] Cohabitating outside of

---

[17] Lisa Sousa, "The Devil and Deviance in Native Criminal Narratives from Early Mexico": The Americas, 59 (2002), pp. 168-69, 173; and Lisa Sousa, The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar and Other Narratives on Native Women in Archives in Colonial Mexico, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, pp. 80-81, 83.

[18] Richard Boyer, Lives of the Bigamists: Marriage, Family and Community in Colonial Mexico, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995, pp. 132-140; and Steve J. Stern, The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men and Power in Late Colonial Mexico, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995, pp. 246-249.

[19] For examples of such taming spells, see AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1551, 2a pte, exp. 29, folio 403; vol. 360, 2a pte, exp. s/n, folio 616; vol. 403, exp. 3b, folio 454; and vol. 360, 2a parte, folio 616.

[20] Jessica Delgado, Laywoman and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630-1790, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018, especially chapter 2.

[21] Delgado, Laywomen, p. 81; and Amos Megged, Rituals and Sisterhoods: Single Women's Households in Mexico, 1560-1750, Louisville: University of Colorado Press, 2019, p. 11.

[22] Brianna Leavitt-Alcántara, Alone at the Altar: Single Women and Devotion in Guatemala 1670-1810, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018; and Teresa Vergara Ormeño, "Growing Up Indian": Ondina E. González / Bianca Premo, Raising an Empire. Children in Early Modern Iberia and Colonial Latin America, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007, pp. 75-106. See Megged,

wedlock, leaving a spouse, using magic to alter their behavior, all undermined patriarchal notions about the dutiful and long-suffering wife who owed obedience to her husband; these actions sometimes played out in public, ostensibly scandalizing neighbors and serving as fodder for gossip.

Civil and religious records indicate that unhappy wives did seek affection from other men. A lack of love, sexual fulfillment, and passion might have also contributed to unfaithfulness in marriage. Noemí Quezada claims that matrimony in colonial Mexico was lacking erotism and that pleasure and satisfaction for women were considered sins.[23] To make matters worse, religious writers advocated a marriage without passion or romance but rather one between companions.[24] For example, writer Nicolas de Ávila, claimed that excessive love even within marriage was as dangerous as illicit love. Moralist Enrique Zúñiga even instructed husbands to avoid passion when expressing their love for their wives.[25] It is no wonder then that, in 1672, Josefa Lorenza, a free woman of color in the capital, did a brisk business in magical remedies, using flowers and herbs, for those who sought to cheat on their spouse.[26] Patricia Seed demonstrates, however, that many young people sought to marry for romantic love, even if they were forced to elope against their parents' wishes and risked disinheritance.[27] Nonetheless, the idea of a marriage lacking passion

---

Rituals and Sisterhoods, pp. 66-68 (for tables based on census records of the 17th century).

[23] Noemí Quezada, Sexualidad, amor y erotismo. México prehispánico y México colonial, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1996, p. 195.

[24] Mary Beth Rose, The Expense of Spirit. Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 3.

[25] Luján, Coloquio*s*, p. 43. For Ávila and Zúñiga, see Elizabeth A Lehfeldt, "Ideal Men: Masculinity and Decline in Seventeenth-Century Spain": Renaissance Quarterly, 61: 2 (Summer 2008), p. 478.

[26] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 456, exp. 1, folio 55 transcribed in Celene García Ávila, "Amuletos, conjuros, y pócimas de amor: un caso de hechicería juzgado por el Santo Oficio, Puebla de los Angeles, 1652": Contribuciones desde Coatepec, 17 (julio-diciembre 2009), pp. 47-48.

[27] Patricia Seed, To Love Honor and Obey in Colonial Mexico. Conflict over Marriage Choice, 1574-1821, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. Also see, Nicole Von Germeten, Violent Delights, Violent Ends. Sex, Race, and Honor in Colonial

was part of Novohispanic discourse especially for arranged marriages like Josefa's. Perhaps, not surprisingly, in the 1661 trial, witness Doña Ana Díaz de Barragán accused Josefa of infidelity.

A very public case of a wife's infidelity was among the most scandalous of events in Novohispanic society. As Ann Twinam points out scandal could be mitigated in private or, perhaps better said, deeds done in private could be managed without public dishonor.[28] However, Josefa was not discrete about her affairs, adding to the scandal at her house (and at the recogimiento). In general, a husband who cheated on his spouse publicly received little condemnation; but women who did the same could be vilified. A married woman who engaged in an affair also feared her husband's response to her infidelity. For men, sexual prowess, virility, the ability to attract and hold onto a woman, all were essential to personal and especially public ideas about male honor and masculinity. A publicly shamed husband might turn to violence, strive to kill his spouse or her lover, or turn to the courts to seek a permanent separation.[29] Others, like Juan Vilches, Josefa's husband, confined their scandalous wives to a recogimiento, as punishment and as a corrective measure, hoping that enclosure would instill in them the characteristics of a dutiful and submissive wife and thereby end all talk of scandal.

The Recogimiento and Regulation of Female Conduct

Many recogimientos sought to enforce the regulation of women thought to be particularly dangerous due their libidinous and/or quarrelsome nature. The idea was to discourage idleness or uncontrolled sexuality, especially those connected to scandal. Women would be enclosed and separated from the body politic.[30] The recogimientos were modeled off

---

Cartagena de Indias, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013, pp. 85, 87-89.

[28] See her Public Lives, Private Secrets. Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

[29] For example, in 1617 Mexico City, Lorenzo Valderrama killed Miguel Gomez because he was having affair with this wife, Thomasina Ribera Carcamo. See AGN, Inquisicion, vol. 295, folios 178-180.

[30] María Pérez Alvarez, "Respectable and Disreputable Women: Mechanisms of Relief for and Opression of Women in Spain in the Early Modern Period": Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences, 16: 1 (2014), p. 170.

convents, encouraged monastic discipline, and created a single sex environment to address certain moral deficiencies to produce a morally rehabilitated woman. Women were made to dress simply; and, singing or dancing were prohibited. For the married woman deposited by her husband for a variety of "problems", this meant a process of moral preparation to return to married life chastened and obedient. Thus, recogimientos connected reflection and interior piety with social control and public order and were designed to not only eliminate scandal, but also to prevent future disorder.[31] Although their stay was meant to be of short duration, the women were subject to the authority of archbishops and other religious authorities. In Josefa's case, she found herself at the Recogimiento at the Hospital de la Misericordia that housed "enamoradas o alegradoras," (coquettes and fun-loving women when it came to men) and public sinners sent against their will. A portion of the recogimiento was set aside for prostitutes; that wing was known as the Magdalena and served as a precursor to the Recogimiento de la Magdalena that would open in 1692. Although they were theoretically separate, the witnesses and the Inquisitors referred to the recogimiento as the Magdalena.[32]

Josefa Angulo and a Proper Education

Josefa's story begins at the Colegio de Niñas de la Caridad in the capital, another example of female enclosure, founded to facilitate proper marriages and instill traditional gender norms in its students. The Colegio enrolled Spanish girls under the patronage of the members of the powerful Cofradía del Santíssimo Sacramento who represented the elite of Mexico City society. They provided dowries for marriage or the convent and paid the stipends for a select group of students to attend the school. Throughout the 17th century, no more than 30 young women

[31] Margaret E. Boyle, Unruly Women: Performance, Penitence, and Punishment in Early Modern Spain, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 4. Also see Josefina Muriel, Los recogimientos de mujeres. Respuesta a una problemática social novohispana, Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1974, pp. 48-49, 51, 54.

[32] Also see Robin Ann Rice, "Recogimientos femeninos en Nueva España y su papel como cárceles para mujeres marginadas": Edad de Oro 39: 38 (2019), pp. 235-247.

resided at the school at a time.[33] The curriculum at the school trained girls, for what Jacqueline Holler, called a "perpetual life of minority", (a life lived under the control of the father and then that of the husband) and emphasized the domestic arts such as sewing and embroidery, and religious instruction.[34] Like many schools in the Iberian world, curricula for girls was influenced by Juan Luis Vives's conduct book, The *Education of Young Women and Girls* that set the limitations of female education in Early Modern Spain and colonial Latin America. The colegios were designed to circumscribe the movement of women, to enclose them in the school, under the watchful eyes of teachers and companions.[35] Thus, Josefa was among a privileged few at an institution that educated girls to value reclusion, and piety, and the female virtue of subordination to a husband or religious authorities. Given that emphasis, it was the last institution expected to graduate a woman who would be at the center of so much scandal.

At the school, writing and the reading of select religious texts were encouraged to increase devotion. The girls at the Colegio de Niñas were not the only female readers in the Novohispanic capital.[36] In the 1600s, girls learned to read at home with tutors, at convents as female boarders, as novices in a convent, or at small private schools.[37] In almost all cases, however, education depended upon the permission of the male guardian (usually a father or husband).[38] Many men worried about the consequences of teaching women to read because of what texts they

---

[33] For more on the school, see Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, Las mujeres en la Nueva España: Educación y vida cotidiana, Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1987, pp. 154-56, 159, 164; and Delgado, Laywomen, pp. 145-150.

[34] Jacqueline Holler, "Flight and Confinement: Female Youth, Agency, and Emotions in Sixteenth-Century New Spain": Elizabeth S. Cohen / Margaret Reeves (eds.), The Youth of Early Modern Women, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 101.

[35] Teresa Elizabeth Howe, Education and Women in the Early Modern World, New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008, p. 110.

[36] For 16th- century female education efforts, see Howe, Education and Women, pp. 117-118, 121.

[37] Nor was the ability to read limited to Spaniards or criollos; for example, in 1657 Mexico City, a mulata seamstress, Anica María de Azevedo read and discussed books. See AGN, Inquisición, vol. 445, exp. 3 (v. 2), folios 423-469.

[38] Muriel, Los recogimientos, p. 144. For readership, see Irving A. Leonard, Baroque Times in Old Mexico, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966, p. 93.

might read. For example, Antonio de Espinosa, in his 16th -century treatise on how to live a good life, worried that literate women would be tempted to read their husband's correspondence with dangerous ramifications, because by doing so they would have access to privileged knowledge.[39] Reading sparked the imagination and exacerbated fears that women, so susceptible to the temptations of the devil, would be unduly influenced. Certainly, reading could be an intellectual escape from the physical confinement and strict curriculum of such schools (and convents). In particular, the administrators of the Colegio feared that women would read popular works – specifically the "novelas cortas" or novelettes - that explored adventures, love, and even the erotic. They feared that such works (along with plays) raised false expectations about marriage and romance.[40] The novelettes were small enough to hide in bags, sleeves, and pockets and were less expensive and more readily available than the traditional long novel.[41] We do not know whether Josefa managed to read such works while at the Colegio, but we do know that once married she became an avid reader. Consequently, she could have read about fictional romance, marriage, adventure, and female behavior that differed from the patriarchal norms espoused by her teachers, priests, and her future husband, fueling perhaps a desire to act independently.

Regardless of possible extracurricular readings, her parents and her future husband placed their faith in the education at the Colegio thought to be the best guarantee of a woman's virtue, emphasizing modesty, chastity, and obedience that would ensure a good marriage for her. As Sonya Lipsett-Rivera points out parents sought to provide an education or training for their children, to teach them proper manners, and set a

[39] Antonio de Espinosa, "Reglas de bien vivir muy provechosas": Pedro de Cátedra / Antasio Rojo (eds), Bibliotecas y lecturas de mujeres, Siglo XVI, Salamanca: Instituto de Historia del Libro y de la Lectura, 2004, p. 54.

[40] Luján, Coloquios, p. 42. Also see Asunción Rallo Gruss, "Invención y diseño del receptor femenino en las Novelas a Marcía Leonarda de Lopé de Vega": Dicenda, 8 (1989), pp. 161-179.

[41] Armon, Picking Wedlock, p. 111; and Hortensia Calvo, "The Politics of Print: The Historiography of the Book in Early Spanish America": Book History, 6 (2003), pp. 277-305.

good example.[42] Securing a good marriage for a daughter was the central obligation of parents and guardians during the colonial period.[43] For example, mothers were active in finding a good spouse for their daughters and sometimes visited priests to ascertain the character of suitors; and, most Native American parents selected a husband for their daughters.[44] Some young people did elope to marry their beloved outside of parental approval. Nonetheless, it seems that Josefa had little agency in this case. The male members of a prestigious confraternity selected a husband for her.

After spending five years enmeshed in the Colegio's curriculum, at age 19, Josefa graduated from the school and promptly married 52-year-old Juan Vilches. Juan's daughter, Doña María de Vilches who provided testimony about Josefa at the Colegio, claimed that her father found Josefa "to be beautiful and charming and he fell in love with her at first sight."[45] Vilches expected his new wife to maintain both his house and decorum and care for his children from his previous marriage; she would perform her prescribed role as a wife of a prominent businessman and community member. According to Doña María, her father's expectations were directly linked to the education that he believed Josefa had received at the school, an education that emphasized the female virtue of submission to a husband.[46] María provided no insights about Josefa's emotions at the time. Thus, we do not know whether Josefa felt any affection for her much older husband, whether she opposed the marriage, felt coerced, or appeared resigned to her new status. We can only speculate about her expectations regarding her arranged marriage based on the scandal that followed.

---

[42] Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, "Model Children and Models for Children in Early Mexico": Tobias Hecht (ed.), Minor Omissions: Children in Latin American History and Society, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, p. 61.

[43] Deborah Kanter, Hijos del Pueblo: Gender, Family, and Community in Rural Mexico, 1730-1850, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009, pp. 58-59.

[44] For examples, see Huntington Library (henceforth referred to as HL), Manuscript Collection, Manuscript HM 35100, folio 25v and Manuel Pérez, Farol indiano, y guía de curas de indios…Summa de los cinco Sacramentos que administran los ministros Evangelios en esta América, México: Francisco de Rivera Calderón, 1713, pp. 165-166.

[45] AGN, Inquisicion, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 228v.

[46] AGN, Inquisicion, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 228v.

Josefa’s Married Life

What Vilches expected and what happened were dramatically different. Juan Bueno, Vilches’s son-in-law, claimed that the problems in the marriage began immediately. Vilches travelled often for his business, and, in his absence, Josefa hosted parties, book discussions, and poetry contests, and neglected her stepchildren. For Josefa marriage might have meant liberation from the confines and supervision of the Colegio. As a married woman, she had access to funds, a home and servants, and a husband who apparently loved her. However, he was mostly absent and therefore did not effectively exercise his role as husband and patriarch of the family. Josefa now apparently had the opportunity to pursue pastimes in ways never possible at the Colegio. The results proved scandalous for Vilches.

In Josefa’s defense, reading, composing, and reciting poetry were popular in colonial society and not scandalous per se. Many individuals commissioned poetry for birthdays, saint days, and anniversaries that were dedicated to their loved ones. Several city-wide poetry contests were hosted each year, the most famous being that of the university students.[47] Poetry events at home might even include lascivious dancing or bawdry poetry or romantic lyrics that emphasized the all-consuming passion of love.[48] But, it all was done discretely, in private, among friends. However, Juan Bueno, labeled Josefa “una loca desatinada” (a crazy and careless woman).[49] His reference to carelessness, most likely, was his way of pointing out that her actions were scandalous even though they were done privately. Afterall, the events repeatedly took place with many attendees without her husband’s knowledge and approval, thereby raising questions about his ability to control his wife and the goings-on at his own house.

More scandalous to Vilches’s daughter, Petronila de Herrera, was the fact that Josefa turned parts of their home into a gambling den for the amusement of those same friends. Gambling with dice and cards was a

[47] For the university poetry contest, see Jorge Gutiérrez Reyna, “El Coloso elocuente (1747-1748): un certamen poético del ultra barroco novohispano”: Etudes romanes de Brno, 2 (2018), pp. 103-133.
[48] For examples of love poems, see AGN, Inquisicion, vol. 546, exp. 1, folio 88; and vol. 1004, exp. 1, folios 149v-172v, 179-179v, 182-182v.
[49] AGN, Inquisicion, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 214.

popular form of entertainment. The royal government licensed official gaming houses, but others were unlicensed establishments in someone's home. More important, coding gambling houses as masculine spaces, royal decrees banned women from frequenting such locations. Some civil and church officials (and the Crown) believed that the participation of women in such pursuits was truly scandalous and a damage to the public good. Historian Javier Villa-Flores posits that gambling also posed spiritual danger to participants because of the frequent use of blasphemous speech and gestures, excess alcohol, brawls, and theft. Nonetheless, even city councilmen sometimes turned their homes into gaming houses.[50] As Josefa's case demonstrates, women certainly gambled and even set up their own gaming rooms in their homes for entertainment. However, Josefa stepped outside the bounds of the expectations of the dutiful criolla wife because she hosted such events without Vilches's knowledge or permission and utilized household funds to pay for the repeated events at the house.

Josefa and the Theater

Juan Bueno pointed out that Vilches eventually put a stop to the scandalous events at the house; he sought to exert control over his wayward wife. In turn, she sought to bypass his orders to confine her to the house. She escaped at night and visited gambling houses; now unable to access the family funds, thanks to her husband's intervention, she began to steal items from the house to fund her gambling.[51] In 1661, Petronila claimed that Josefa's gambling and other expenditures "were the financial ruin of her father."[52] Josefa also spent money attending theatrical productions. The fact that she became a fan of the theater was not surprising. Going to the theater was "the" most popular pastime and Mexico City was home to several venues, so many that it was possible to watch different productions weekly. Although it was not scandalous to attend the theater, the playhouse environment was rather raucous, where all members of society intermingled, and, where particularly the intermission fare, was known to be risqué. Importantly, plays about

[50] Javier Villa-Flores, Dangerous Speech: A Social History of Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006, pp. 86-87, 90-91.
[51] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 224v.
[52] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 230.

romance, although simple and somewhat formulaic, were the bread and butter of the theatrical houses and itinerant acting troupes.[53]

The most striking aspect of many of the plays was the clever subversions of the heroine. Spanish moralist Ignacio de Camargo railed against the theater for its ability to unsettle established gender norms:

> "Constancy and fidelity in a married woman are called stubbornness and harshness; easy virtue is called refined reciprocity and the obligatory price of gratitude. Audiences applaud efforts to deceive a father and husband for the care and skill it takes to refer to it as the glorious triumph of love, that is, promiscuity intent on abandoning decorum."[54]

Theater then appeared to celebrate somewhat clever women, motivated by romantic love, who experienced adventures, who donned male clothing in disguise and moved about society without the usual confines, and who had passionate romances. The presence of non-normative female characters offers support and critique of traditional values even though characters either ended up rehabilitated, married, or dead. Furthermore, women came to comprise half of acting troupes and were connected in the minds of officials, to lax morals, extramarital affairs, the blurring of class lines, and scandalous behavior (which also might have made their performances more interesting to the audience).[55] Audience members, like Josefa, no doubt viewed characters and their actions on stage as pure entertainment, a temporary respite from the vicissitudes of their lives. However, theater, like the novelettes, provided an example of female agency and romantic marriage in contrast to the traditional ideas regarding gender relations. Here was a

---

[53] Mexico City inhabitants were not only avid theater goers but were voracious readers of single plays and collections found in local bookshops starting in 1605. See Antonio Magaña Esquivel, Imágen y realidad del teatro en México (1533-1960), Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2000, pp. 62, 63, 66; and, Hildburg Schilling, Teatro profano en la Nueva España, Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Imprenta Universitaria, 1958, pp. 154, 156, 157. For the purchase of plays, see Leonard, Baroque Times, p. 106.

[54] Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España, Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1997, p. 126.

[55] For examples of scandalous actresses, see my "Josefa Ordóñez: The Scandalous Adventures of a Colonial Courtesan": Jeffrey M. Pilcher (ed.), The Human Tradition in Mexico, Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003, chapter one. Priests promoted the popular trope of the immoral actress who later repented of her sinful life. See Boyle, Unruly Women, pp. 10-11, 98.

regular cast of female characters acting in scandalous but humorous ways. Such role models coincided with ideas Josefa already entertained in real life.

A case in point was Josefa's ability to exercise agency and to move about the capital at night, during an era when the stated expectation for married Spanish and criollo women of some standing was to remain at home at night unless accompanied by a husband (or a male relative), but it was often a regular feature of plays. Josefa repeatedly rejected her husband's authority in a very public manner. We can assume that Josefa had comrades who helped her escape her house and accompanied her to these events. But, her presence, without her husband, at gambling halls and playhouses appeared to have been a regular public occurrence. Josefa, like many women during the colonial period, chafed under the strictures of confinement. Perhaps the most famous women to thwart the limitations regarding female mobility were the anonymous *tapadas* (the covered ones), women of Lima who sallied forth at night with partially covered faces to flirt with men, meet lovers, or visit playhouses or gambling dens, constituting a social problem for officials, but also a source of entertainment in fictionalized form on stage.[56] Even if she was unaware of the tapadas, Josefa had an interesting example closer to home: Catalina de Erauso, the famous Lieutenant Nun. During the early 17th century, here was a real swash-buckling woman who dressed as man, fought battles, traveled, and had romantic adventures, a woman who performed the classic traits of masculinity, immortalized, in the 1625 play by Juan Pérez Montalván.[57]

According to Juan Bueno, Vilches attempted to stop the nightly adventures of his wife, but he was unable to do so; she simply kept running away.[58] At some point, according to Doña Ana Díaz de Barragán, she also took a lover with whom she exchanged passionately worded poems and letters and who most likely accompanied her on these escapades. Her husband was apparently shocked and angry when he

---

[56] For more details, see Laura R. Bass / Amanda Jaye, "The Veiled Ladies of the Early Modern Spanish World: Seduction and Scandal in Seville, Madrid and Lima,": Hispanic Review, 77: 1 (2009), pp. 97-144.

[57] See, Juan Pérez de Montalbán, La Monja Alferéz, Barcelona: Linkgua Ediciones, 2021.

[58] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 224.

saw the letters.[59] This very public case of infidelity was the last straw for Vilches. According to Juan Bueno, Josefa was a "woman out of control, of poor judgement, and lacking self-control" who had consistently dishonored Vilches for three years.[60] Consequently, Vilches deposited Josefa at the recogimiento of the Magdalena. Sending her there appeared to be the logical choice for his disobedient wife. By doing so, Vilches finally ended all the scandal at his home and defended his male honor in the process.

Josefa at the Magdalena

If Vilche's goal had been to confine his wife to make her more obedient and put a stop to the scandal connected to his family, such would not be the case. Instead, the scandal merely transferred from his house to the recogimiento. Within months at the recogimiento, Josefa appeared to exert substantial influence. She made pivotal friendships with the home's director, Doña María Díaz Bonafacio, the director's daughter, Doña María de Carreaga, who also served as the doorwoman to the institution, Marcos de Mendoza, the almsmen who collected donations for the home, and Juan Eligio de Paredes, the sacristan. She became a leader of the other women at the recogimiento, her fellow *recogidas*. Perhaps their activities did not start out as premeditated rebellion against the norms of the recogimiento, but their actions directly challenged ecclesiastical authority; the situation escalated quickly, and it all centered around popular entertainments and how the women lived their lives at the Magdalena.

Entertainment at the Recogimiento

According to Palmares, thanks to the almsmen and the director, funds meant for the maintenance and upkeep of the buildings mysteriously disappeared. Nonetheless, there were funds to purchase books, refreshments, decorations, chocolate, and costumes. The women discussed popular works and performed (and sometimes wrote) plays about romantic cloak and dagger intrigue, modeled off plays in theaters.

---

[59] AGN, Inquisicion, Vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 227-227v.
[60] AGN, Inquisicion, Vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 224v.

They invited friends, family, and romantic interests to attend the events. They performed the plays in church before a coed audience. The women also invited their male friends to act in the plays and handed out scripts accordingly. The women donned male clothing made of velvet with hats decorated with sumptuous plumes and wore bejeweled daggers at their waists.[61] Their productions were lavish, perhaps in imitation of those at the local playhouses.

The recogidas under Josefa became independent readers or listeners, artistic producers, and performers and created a unique female space for cultural expression. Even within the confinement of the recogimiento, they exercised agency. They transformed what was intended to be a place of penance and religious devotion into a female space for literary culture and entertainment. They had a type of freedom from male scrutiny and authority. It was not unusual for women to put on plays in their homes or within their parish churches, but recogimientos were theoretically designed as locations of extreme pious enclosure.[62] However, as historian Nancy van Duesen points out in her work on recogimientos in Peru, "what occurred in institutions often reproduced patterns in secular society."[63] Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt demonstrates that not even nuns in convents lived outside the influence and cultural patterns of everyday life.[64] Nuns in some convents dressed like secular women, played cards and dice, and gambled. They hosted poetry contests, music recitals, and literary discussions. Residents in the more elite convents, according to historian Josefina Muriel, appeared to value being "mujeres cultas" (cultivated women) and maintained a continued interest in "modas y novedades llegadas de ultramar" (fashion and new things coming from abroad).[65] So common were theatrical performances of all kinds that as early as 1620, the Spanish king admonished the archbishop of Mexico about theatrical

[61] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 126.
[62] For an example from 1617, see AGN, Inquisición, vol. 330, folios 14-16v.
[63] Nancy Van Deusen, Between the Sacred and the Worldly: The Institutional and Cultural Practice of Recogimiento in Colonial Lima, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 7.
[64] See her Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister, New York: Routledge, 2017.
[65] Gonzalbo, Las mujeres, pp. 236, 238, 240.

performances in convents that were "indecentes" (indecent).[66] Miguel de Palmares, the new confessor at the recogimiento, was scandalized by what he saw; and he contacted Archbishop Mateo Sagade Bugeiro, "requesting that he send representatives in secret to monitor the goings-on at the Magdalena."[67]

It was at this very moment that the recogidas apparently decided to put on a religious play for their audience. According to Palmares and Don Francisco Cumel, this was the most scandalous play performed at the recogimiento: about the life of Mary Magdalene. The saint was uniquely tied to recogimientos as in traditional Catholic doctrine she was a prostitute who, upon meeting Jesus, reformed her life. She was the quintessential example of the reformed and repentant woman and recogimientos de la Magdalena were founded in major Spanish and Mexican cities.[68] Religious plays documented her life and conversion and highlighted female redemption through devotion to Christ, thus providing a moving model of penance for the recogidas. However, Josefa's version was so outrageous that the archbishop's representative/spy, the notary Cumel, shut down the play in mid-performance and ordered the audience to leave immediately.[69] According to Palmares, as part of the performance, Josefa, dressed as a man, "danced, moving her body with jerking motions", perhaps imitating the sex act, exciting the audience in the process and scandalizing the religious authorities.[70] This was a clear case of gender performativity often used by women dressed on stage as men to perform a humorous hyperbolic imitation of normative male behavior. The recogimiento, however, was the most unlikely place to countenance

---

[66] The letter is reproduced in Manuel Ramos Medina, "De lo que hacían las otras monjas novohispanas": Margo Glantz (ed.), Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y sus contemporáneas, Mexico: UNAM, 1998, pp. 50-51. For plays, see María Sten / Raquel Gutiérrez Estupián, No sólo ayunos y oraciones: piezas teatrales menores en conventos de monjas (Siglo XVIII), Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2007, p. iv and Asunción Lavrin / Rosalva Loreto López, El universo de la teatralidad conventual en Nueva España, Siglos XVII-XIX, Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México San Antonio, 2022.

[67] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 168v.

[68] Boyle, Unruly Women, p. 40.

[69] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 172v.

[70] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 172.

such a performance in a religious play. In the eyes of the clerics, it was simply outrageous, blasphemous, and sinful.

Sensuality on stage also apparently mimicked activities off stage at the Magdalena. Palmares, Chaplain Martín de Esguerra de Rojas, and Chaplain Nicolás de Texeda pointed to the fact that the doors of the recogimiento were open to male visitors who remained inside the Magdalena for long periods of time. Palmares argued publicly with the director, her daughter, Mendoza, and Eligio de Paredes because they let men into the recogimiento.[71] Even without admittance inside the home, male visitors such as Don Nicolás de la Barreda, and his servants came to the *reja* (a rod iron grid fitted to a large window or doorway that allowed individuals to chat with people outside), and chatted with the women, sometimes making rude and lascivious gestures, sending kisses, gifts, and notes, and pressing themselves physically against the *reja* to touch the women and be touched in return. Palmares, who decided to spy on the women, claimed that Josefa specifically was seen publicly chatting with a variety of men, some very highly placed in society. She also walked out of the recogimiento to visit friends and perhaps even lovers.[72] He claimed that one day, he caught Barreda and chastised him, stating "people are watching and would judge him severely to see him acting illicitly in a place dedicated to God."[73] Barreda, perhaps fearing another meeting with Palmares, sent his servant, who Palmares caught and physically assaulted, forcing him to leave.[74] The recogidas lived a life of romantic courtship with trysts, gifts, chocolate, the quintessential drink of love, sensual language, and flirting. Palmares claimed that Josefa, as the ringleader, was "out of control," and "that she manipulated the other women" to engage in these impious acts.[75] Chaplain Martín Esguerra de Rojas pointed out to the inquisitors that this bad behavior was to be expected because "the women were not good but rather lived a bad life and due to the scandals [they had caused] were taken to the recogimiento like men are sent to galley service" (on ships for their crimes).[76] In the eyes of the

[71] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 164v. 166, 168.
[72] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 167-167v.
[73] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 167-167v.
[74] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 167v.
[75] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 165.
[76] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 236.

ecclesiastical authorities, Josefa and the women had turned the goals of the institution upside down; there was no reclusion, no chastity, no pious reflection, no penance. There was instead scandal.

At one point, during a heated argument in the middle of the church, Palmares claimed that he had asked the recogidas: "did they not wish to return to their husbands?" They yelled at him and cursed him, defiantly refusing a return to married life. Chaplain Nicolás de Texeda, who recommended Palmares for the job of confessor, testified that

> "the situation was so bad that he had all the legs removed from the benches by the door and the reja to stop the women from sitting there and chatting with men."[77]

He stated that all the women wanted to do was "have fun with men."[78] He also claimed that they were such a bad influence that "a good man like himself purposely had to live far from the recogimiento," as though sheer proximity to the women would breed sinfulness.[79] He thus left Palmares to attempt to control the women and put an end to their scandalous actions in 1645.

The 1645 Denunciations

Palmares and the archbishop moved to stop the scandalous goings-on. The archbishop appointed Antonio de Esquivel to investigate what Mendoza was doing, assess the state of the buildings, review the accounts, and stop unwarranted expenditures.[80] A battle of wills now ensued between, the employees and the women at the recogimiento, on one side, and ecclesiastical authorities, on the other. At one point, Palmares asked to be removed from his post as confessor because the women, on strike, refused to confess or attend mass. Chaplain Nicolás Texeda claimed that the director Díaz de Bonifacio and the almsman Mendoza "were panicked" by the involvement of the archbishop and asked him to remove Palmares from his position. Texeda refused stating that "Palmares was exactly what was needed to bring order to the

---

[77] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 237v.
[78] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 237v.
[79] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 237v, 238.
[80] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 168v.

recogimiento."[81] It is during this battle, that, on June 8, 1645, Mendoza came before the inquisitors and claimed that he had witnessed an argument between the director Díaz Bonefacio and the priest Palmares. He admitted that he turned to Josefa for an explanation: Palmares had solicited the director's daughter in the confessional. Mendoza compelled "as a good Christian and a Spaniard", came before the Holy Office to denounce the priest, although he talked to the director before he did so. He then accused Palmares of soliciting not only the director's daughter but also Isabel García.[82] Two days later, sacristan, Eligio de Paredes, provided more details about Isabel. According to him, Isabel had been repeatedly solicited by Palmares "who claimed to love her and promised her gifts."[83] Then Carreaga, the daughter of the director, provided her testimony; she claimed Palmares had repeatedly called her to the confessional to seduce her. She was always accompanied by Josefa. On August 7, Josefa claimed that, at one point, María asked her stand right next to her during her confession. Palmares not only solicited María but solicited her as well.[84] Josefa claimed that women refused the priest's overtures, stating that "the confessional was no place for committing sins but rather a place to confess them."[85]

María de Carreaga pointed out that the recogidas discussed the solicitations and they sought counsel from Josefa, hinting that their testimonies were prepared in tandem to purposely discredit Palmares.[86] This raised suspicions about the veracity of the testimonies, a fact later confirmed by the Inquisitors. Afterall, it would not be the first time that a charge of solicitation was utilized to attack a priest and to procure his removal from his post.[87] More important, the denunciations shifted the idea of scandal from the women to the priest. Palmares's violation of the sacrament of confession and the involvement of the Inquisition was more egregious than the women's actions at the recogmiento. Priests were "the" representatives of the Church, offering counsel on any number of matters including political

[81] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 237, 237v, 238.
[82] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 131-132.
[83] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio, 133v.
[84] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 135-136v., 138.
[85] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 138-138v.
[86] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 131, 131v, 133-133v, 135-135v.
[87] For an example, see HL, Manuscript Collection, HM 35110.

and economic issues, to both commoners and the local ruling elite. Ideally priests were to serve as moral guides, advisors, and protectors to their parishioners. Priests that egregiously violated the confessional greatly injured the role and image of the Church in society. Solicitation also placed the soul of the penitent in jeopardy because confession was essential for eternal salvation. Palmares alleged solicitation at a recogimiento was doubly concerning because the recogidas needed religious guidance to amend their scandalous ways, not encouragement to sin more gravely, and generate even more scandal.

Interestingly, Josefa's husband died during 1645; and she left the recogimiento, presumably a somewhat well-off widow, legally independent. In the meantime, the archbishop fired the employees and hired new ones that were dedicated to the mission of the recogimiento. The days of theater, romance, and scandal ended at the recogimiento.[88] Josefa returned to the marital home, and there, according to Díaz de Barragán, she continued her life with the friends, especially Doña María de Carreaga, that she had made during her stay at the recogimiento. Like before the recogimiento, she hosted plays, gambled, and entertained prominent male suitors including Don Diego Colón and a certain Don de Monroy. Díaz de Barragán claimed that both men often stayed the night.[89] Thus, scandal once again came to define the Vilches's house. At some point, she decided, or more likely was induced, to leave the capital. According to Joseph Varela, carriage driver, she traveled to northern Mexico (Parral). It is unclear why Josefa went north; perhaps she had relatives there or it provided an opportunity to relocate to a frontier, where she was not well known. No matter the reasons, she clearly continued her actions there because she was exiled twice by Governor Luís Valdés for her scandalous activities.[90] She returned to central Mexico and disappeared from the historical record.

The 1661 Inquisition Case.

Josefa's strategy to remove Palmares did not quite work because the inquisitors did not arrest him in 1645. During the 1640s, the inquisitors were consumed with prosecuting secretly practicing Jews throughout

[88] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 239-239v.
[89] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 227v.
[90] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 146.

the colony. Historian Solange Alberro even provides a list of the activities of the inquisitors during this period as they questioned, investigated, arrested, and prosecuted hundreds of individuals.[91] However, in 1661, the inquisitors were likely reviewing cases that had been sidelined earlier; and, they searched for the original 1645 witnesses to ratify their testimonies, but none, including Josefa, could be located.[92] This fact did not stop the trial, a testament to Inquisitors's concern regarding solicitation at a recogimiento. Palmares, shocked and panicked, could not understand why he had been arrested. He begged for mercy and cried before the inquisitors. He became so distraught that the Inquisition jailors feared that he might be losing his mind and suggested that he receive a cellmate to keep him company. The inquisitors complied and later, the jailors provided him with a draught to help him sleep because he was so anxiety-ridden that he stayed awake all night.[93]

On September 20, 1661, the inquisitors listed the formal charge of solicitation against Palmares; and, he endeavored to launch his defense, regarding events that had taken place so many years earlier. He claimed that he was a victim of a conspiracy masterminded by Josefa. A standard defense strategy during trials was to claim that the defendent was a victim of rivalries, hatred, enmity, etc. Yet, he catalogued his fights with the director and her daughter, his run-ins with Montero and Elias de Paredes, and their efforts to thwart his attempts at reform. He claimed that Josefa was a "constant problem", a fact well known by the then archbishop, the solicitor of the archbishop's court Don Pedro de Barrientos, as well as the Antonio Esquivel, Don Francisco Cumel, Nicolás Texeda, the current director of the Magdalena, Doña María de Mendoza, and chaplain Martín Esguerra de Rojas.[94] The latter three testified in his defense but four unsolicited witnesses arrived: Vilches's grown children and family friends, namely Juan Bueno, Doña Ana Diáz de Barragán, Doña María de Vilches, and Doña Petronila de Herrera. Interestingly, gossip had reached them about the case. Of their own volition and to "save a good priest from the maliciousness of a bad

---

[91] Solange Alberro, Inquisición y sociedad en México, 1571-1700, México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988, pp. 533-585.

[92] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 247v.

[93] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 150, 157-158, 158v, 159.

[94] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 165.

woman", they appeared before the tribunal to give testimony about Josefa's conduct while under their father's roof and after her release from the Magdalena, emphasizing that whatever she claimed should not be taken as fact.[95]

Still the Inquisitors debated whether Palmares was guilty. He had admitted that years earlier (before becoming a priest), he had had a relationship with his cousin that produced a son. In the eyes of the inquisitors, this incest served as proof of his "weak, lascivious, and natural[ly] voluptuous" character, predisposing him to violate the confessional for sexual gratification.[96] Prosecutor Juan de Ortega de Montañés strongly believed that Palmares was guilty and that any enmity that existed with the employees and the women at the recogimiento did not shield the priest from punishment. Whatever sinfulness the women were guilty of did not outweigh the egregiously scandalous actions of the priest. He even stated, "that the moral state of the women at the recogimiento did not invalidate the fact they Palmares had committed incest."[97] Thus, to Ortega de Montañés, Palmares actions were far more serious than those of licentious women who challenged male authority. The inquisitors eventually overruled Ortega de Montañés and decided, based on the defense testimonies, that Josefa, Mendoza, Carreaga, and Eliade de Paredes were all enemies of the defendant, and their testimonies would be voided. They absolved Palmares of all wrongdoing on November 4, 1662, and set him free.[98]

Scandal Revisited

What made Josefa's actions so scandalous? Josefa was a young criolla in an arranged marriage with an older prominent businessman. Given her education at the Colegio de Niñas, Vilches (and everyone else) expected her to model ideal behavior for a wife: manage the household, care for children, live a quiet life of domesticity and piety, and be the epitome of a loving and obedient helpmate to her spouse, even if she was in loveless arranged marriage. She did none of these. Instead, she appeared to engage in the very female behavior feared by religious writers, priests,

[95] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 213v.
[96] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 163.
[97] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 247v. and 248v.
[98] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folios 248v, 247v, 250.

and civil authorities: unbridled sexuality (affairs and flirting at the reja), flagrant disregard for male authority (her defiance of the archbishop, Palmares, her husband), and public disorder (gambling, theft, nightly escapades at the theater, violating the enclosed nature of the recogimiento). In their eyes, she dishonored the very saints (Mary Magdalene), demonstrated a lack of piety, most likely colluded to misappropriate funds, and indirectly caused the dismissal of the institution's staff.

Furthermore, her transgressions were egregious because they were so frequent and boldly done in public. Given her socio-economic status, her adventures were of particular interest to onlookers, and they occurred at the playhouses, on the streets, outside the recogmiento, indoor venues with many guests, and gambling joints, making her well known to many individuals. Afterall, the Vilches children learned of Palmares's plight due to gossip, a testament to her renown even after 16 years. Everywhere she resided, Josefa continued to live her life as she saw fit and refused to obey directives to alter her behavior. As we might expect her "scandalous actions" merited serious responses from Palmares, the archbishop, Texeda, Valdés, and her husband. In their minds, Josefa transgressed well beyond the boundaries for the gendered norms of the time, created disorder in the body politic, and served as a ruinous example to others (who seemed to follow her blindly). Yet, she endured, due to cleverness (the strategy of solicitation charges against Palmares), sheer luck (the timely death of her husband), and her own rebellious nature.

In 1645, Josefa's actions were completely outside of the boundaries of expected female behavior for all the witnesses. The priests and the archbishop worried about their authority, the future of social control projects like recogimientos, and increasing unwanted public interest in activities at the Magdalena. Their beliefs were undermined by women who refused to obey and who transformed enclosure into female controlled spaces that highlighted fun rather than duty and piety. In addition, Josefa apparently used recogimiento funds to transform that gendered space for entertainment. Josefa's stepchildren suffered a loss of reputation due to her actions and saw their familial honor besmirched. They blamed her for their diminished fortune; after all she spent her husband's money on gambling and entertainments, and then most likely inherited a portion of whatever was left of his estate. For

three years, she emasculated their father because of his inability to control her; and they felt righteous indignation on his behalf. They may also have entertained personal grudges against her, having perhaps sought kindness and nurturing in a new (step) mother and found only parental neglect and Josefa's personal quest for freedom and fun. They did welcome her back to the family home in 1645, hoping perhaps for an improved relationship with Josefa. Nonetheless, their testimonies could not alter her past behavior in 1645; but, in 1661, they could air their grievances before powerful religious authorities and at least save Palmares from further scandal.

Josefa's case also demonstrates that institutions could be utilized in ways not intended. Parishioners or rivals disgruntled with a priest had several strategies at their disposal: contact his superiors and ask for his removal, refuse to attend mass and confession and other religious rituals, or charge that priest with solicitation in the confessional before the Inquisition. Josefa and the recogidas tried all three. The Inquisition's involvement, however, was the most effective way to remove a priest from his post. The accusations were still powerful 16 years later, long after Josefa had left the city. Whether the trial occurred in 1645 or 1661, the charges against Palmares and his arrest would have upended his life, and effectively shifted the nature of scandal to a priest who allegedly violated a sacrament, a vow of chastity, and codes regarding incest. Regardless of his supposed guilt, his reputation, health, and mental state would have been greatly damaged. Regarding recogimientos, officials designed them to stop scandalous and lascivious behavior, enforce patriarchal gender norms, punish, and reeducate women to a life of order, obedience, and piety. Josefa created, albeit temporarily, a cultural center for women and a space for sensual pleasures, transforming the space, emphasizing her desires, exerting her power, even though the type of transgressions, their frequency, and their public nature were anathema to a recogimiento.

Josefa's actions, her love for gambling, the theater, reading, dramatic performances, and poetry were pastimes and entertainments that were shared by many men and women in the capital (even in convents). Even if we assume some exaggeration, the 1661 witnesses consistently emphasized these pastimes and escapades. To them, these activities were the most scandalous aspects of her lifestyle along with her licentiousness. In a classic case of a double standard, they were all

actions that for a man would not have merited such extreme disapproval in the 17th century but were deemed outrageous for a young married criolla without her husband's presence or permission. Characters in novels and on stage perhaps even served as inspiration for the life she sought to live. Her antics evoked the famous pícaro, Martín Garatuza, who practiced his roguery about the same time in and around the capital, and the Lieutenant Nun, Catalina de Erauso, both of whom became characters on stage.[99]

Many men and women joined her activities: the director of the recogimiento, the employees, the recogidas, and all the guests who attended the events at her home, on her nightly escapades, at the Magdalena, sought her counsel, and appeared to follow her lead. Furthermore, both elite and commoners joined her and were active in undermining the power of officials and her husband. They perceived things differently than the religious officials and the Vilches family. Sadly, their voices did not form part of the case in 1661. However, Joseph Varela, the carriage driver, was unperturbed by Josefa's scandalous life. He reported that she was exiled for being a "bad woman," not that he believed her to be such.[100] Interestingly, Díaz de Barragán pointed out that María de Carreaga was much worse than Josefa, although they were both scandalous. María "feigned piety and seemed so refined and then did bad things, whereas Josefa was more honest in her actions and didn't pretend to be good."[101] In this fashion, she demonstrated grudging respect for Josefa. Even the current director of the recogimiento, María de Mendoza, admitted that "Palmares had been too zealous with the recogidas," implying that all the unpleasantness could have been avoided had he been more tolerant of their activities.[102] Finally, life in the capital provided myriad examples of women who lived outside the strict boundaries set for the well-behaved wife. Josefa could count herself among women who had affairs, gambled, escaped their abusive husbands, used magic to secure lovers, refused an arranged marriage for one based on passion, became

[99] See my "A Rogue's Tale: Martín Garatuza and the Cultural Landscape of 17th-Century Mexico City": Cheiron: materiali e strumenti di aggiornamento storiografico, 1 (2021), pp. 90-117.
[100] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 146.
[101] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 227v.
[102] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 240.

courtesans, read fiction, acted in plays, or worked outside the home to survive in the capital in the 17th century.

In conclusion, Josefa's case illustrates the nature of normative codes of conduct for women and the powerful tools at the disposal of those vested in the continued implementation of those codes. Deviation from those expected modes of behavior led to scandal and powerful efforts to enforce compliance to end that scandal and control (and remove) the offender from the body politic. Yet, the definition of scandal depended upon several variables including the gravity of the acts, the frequency of those acts, and the public nature of that transgressive behavior. Furthermore, views regarding what constituted scandal were not uniform and many people were willing to embrace the behaviors deemed scandalous by others. Scandal also functioned on a continuum in which a wayward wife disobeying and tarnishing the reputation of her husband and family (and a recogimiento), did not have the same scandalous impact as a priest allegedly violating the sacrament of confession, an act that irreparably harmed the reputation of the Church and placed souls in jeopardy. Josefa's life demonstrates that societal norms were sufficiently flexible in the capital to accommodate, at least temporarily, a very clever independent woman who not only refused to comply but had a transformative effect wherever she went. On a final note, Joseph Varela, the carriage driver, claimed that Josefa had decided to change her surname to Avila, raising questions about whether she now desired to start anew devoid of scandal and notoriety.[103] However, that name change in 1646 did not necessarily mean the single 23-year-old planned to alter her scandalous ways. It is quite conceivable that Josefa remained bold and defiant until the end.

---

[103] AGN, Inquisición, vol. 583, exp. 2, folio 146.