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## Review/Reseña

Kathryn A. Sloan, *Runaway Daughters: Seduction, Elopement, and Honor in Nineteenth-Century Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

## Courtship and Community in Nineteenth-Century Mexico

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Kathryn Sloan's book, *Runaway Daughters: Seduction, Elopement, and Honor in Nineteenth-Century Mexico*, examines late nineteenth-century courtship in urban Oaxaca, a state in southern Mexico. This elegantly structured study also delves deeply into meta-historical questions such as the impact of liberalism on the state regulation of private life and, conversely, on the influence of gender and family relations on nation building. This book also makes important contributions to our understanding of the construction of class identities and emotion. Sloan's book joins a distinguished roster of studies addressing comparable topics, among them Katherine Elaine Bliss's *Compromised Positions: Prostitution,*

*Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City*, Sueann Caulfield's *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early Twentieth-Century Brazil*, and Christine Hunefeldt's, *Liberalism in the Bedroom: Quarreling Spouses in Nineteenth-Century Lima*. But while Sloan is well versed in the relevant comparative literatures on Latin America—as well as Europe and North America—and her ability to extract the core concepts from this historiography is impressive, more impressive still is her confidence in charting her own course.

Like many social historians, Sloan mines judicial records to expose social norms. She is masterful in establishing the particular political and legal context in Oaxaca—the cradle of Mexican liberalism—in order to analyze closely the role of the courts in mediating between parents and children over marriage choice. This question has animated the field of family history in Latin America since 1988, when Patricia Seed published her influential study, *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts over Marriage Choice, 1574-1821*. Sloan makes a significant contribution to this discussion and to legal history more broadly by showing convincingly that the court's decisions in favor of young couples against their parents were based on a new concept of childhood that granted rights to minors, on a commitment to the privilege of the individual in liberal doctrine, and on the interest of Mexico's secular state in the orderly formation of new families.

But the courts are only one of the venues that Sloan examines: she also makes significant contributions to the social histories of youth, family, and working-class communities. To that end, Sloan's chapters on love letters and gossip exemplify the combination of care and creativity with which she approaches her sources. In her chapter, "Making Love in Mexico: The Cultural Context of Courtship and Gender Relations," Sloan makes eloquent use of sources from popular culture. She draws especially on the visual and textual messages of Mexico's penny press to explore the values or moral economy that informed intergenerational relations and gender reciprocity between partners, and that also infused the expressions of emotion in correspondence between young lovers. In her chapter, "Bearing Witness: Courtship and Working-Class Neighborhoods," Sloan examines

“social relations through the prism of gossip and insult” (106) to expose the workings of honor (social reputation) and power within the city’s working-class community. As Sloan describes, private love affairs quickly became public. The practices of gossip and insult acted not only as surveillance of sexual behavior, but also as a way of shaping court testimony on the reputations of the couples who stood before the judges. The community held women to a higher standard of sexual morality than men, but men’s reputations for theft or violence also influenced court rulings. Testimonies in cases of seduction also referred to a suite of social gestures that symbolized intimacy or violence, consent, or resistance. Reading legal cases of seduction for gossip and insult thus allows Sloan to weave a rich tapestry depicting community life and to illuminate the difficult-to-document relations between often-illiterate neighbors, co-workers, and lovers.

Sloan’s work also offers fresh insights on the life stage on the cusp between childhood and adulthood, thereby linking the burgeoning literature on the history of childhood with studies of gender and sexuality. Indeed, the author has successfully bridged the divide that so often separates the history of gender from the history of the family. This gap is in part the legacy of women’s history: historians inspired by the women’s movement wanted to emancipate women as historical subjects from the confines home and family and, therefore, sought to document their public and political roles. In more recent years, the frequent conceptual link between gender and sexuality has pretty much left childhood out of the picture. Meanwhile, recent studies in the history of childhood in Latin America have focused on distinguishing proscriptive discourse on childrearing from actual children as autonomous historical subjects.

Working at the intersection of the histories of gender and childhood, Sloan examines the life stage that was just coming under the lens of doctors and social analysts during the period of her study: the years between puberty and full maturity, labeled “adolescence” in the late nineteenth century. Sloan takes on the question of autonomy directly—it is the engine of her study—as she explores, from multiple vantage points, the moment in which daughters struck out to establish their independence from their parents. Yet when they did, as she documents and convincingly

argues, they acted within tightly scripted social and cultural constraints. Similarly, Sloan explores the shifting legal and social discourses of individual rights, authority, and responsibility that framed parents' expressions of love towards their maturing children. Thus, Sloan's work advances the sub-fields of gender, family, and childhood history, while also developing a more complex paradigm that breaks down conceptual boundaries that can constrain our historical thinking.

Kathryn Sloan has produced a lively and engaging study that provides important insights for specialists in the fields of women's and gender history. It will also be accessible to advanced undergraduates. Clear maps orient the reader to the geographic and social terrain of the action, and well-chosen illustrations serve as evidence for key arguments and also provide a sense of the visual culture of the period.