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~ *Colonial  
Spanish America*  
*A Documentary History*

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## *Alonso Ortiz's Letter to His Wife, Mexico City*

(1574?)

Alonso Ortiz's letter from Mexico City to his wife, Leonor González, in Zafrá, Spain, offers a rare glimpse into the life and concerns of one of the two hundred fifty to three hundred thousand people who left Castile for the New World in the sixteenth century. Ortiz's principal interest lay in making money, and it was for this end that he left for America. Yet, for the student of history, this surviving letter, probably written on March 8, 1574, makes him more than a name on a list of ship's passengers or a name on an inventory of stock in a warehouse. Ortiz emerges from this document as an individual with his own dilemmas and dreams, who seeks to maintain strong connections with his family in Spain.

The letter has a number of motifs. One of these is Ortiz's stress on the value of perseverance. Life has not been easy for him, not that he seems to have expected ease. He alludes to "difficulties" endured in Spain, where his family's movements might still be hindered by creditors waiting to be paid. Even in Mexico, he has clearly shifted occupations before taking up the tanning of animal hides and venturing a small business with a partner. He works hard and lives frugally, and advertises these facts to his wife. As Ortiz is well aware, for people like him, America habitually shattered more dreams than it fulfilled.

Related to his views on perseverance is Ortiz's stoical blend of longing for home and family with enthusiasm for his commercial ventures. For him, life seems to be a mixture prepared and stirred by an all-knowing God. Ortiz sees God's will in all that happens to him; God guided him to Mexico, led him to become a tanner, brought him a compassionate business partner, provides him with good health and the capacity to take advantage of it. "God does no harm," he reminds his wife, "and . . . even a leaf on a tree does not move without His will." Mexico, for Ortiz, is a place where one endures a number of personal privations in order to acquire wealth that would be barely imaginable for him in Zafrá. "I do suffer," he informs his wife, but "I also earn very abundantly." Communication between Mexico and Spain seems slow and unreliable. Ortiz reveals that letters sent sometimes never arrived. One senses his frustration at the lack of news from home and at seeing a number of his personal connections there fading away in his absence.

With only the remote prospect of a reunion in America, his family has been left behind. They receive letters like this one, telling of his loneliness, his accomplishments, and the survival and transformation of his hopes. Perhaps now, he writes, a new source of financial

support and a plan of action will bring his wife and children to him. Yet, even here, Ortiz seems braced for disappointment and the need for adjustment. At one point, he states bluntly that he will remain in Mexico, the place to which God has guided him and in which his business prospects are looking up. At another, he mentions that he has kept open a condition in his latest business contract that would allow an eventual return to Castile. The family reunion in Mexico planned and proposed by Alonso Ortiz depends ultimately on Leonor González's decision, her disposition toward travel and a life in New Spain for her family. One wonders whether the couple had spoken and written of this matter earlier.

His letter includes one paragraph in which the correspondent sets out to tell his wife "about things here." For him, this means money, that is, the amount and kind of rent he has paid on the house and tannery in

which he now lives and strives. Tanning was one of the most unpleasant and least prestigious trades, and Ortiz gives his wife little notion of what the work was like. His attitudes toward his "between six and eight" Indian workers are almost as veiled, although there may be hints of meaning in their manner of mention. At least from the evidence in this letter, Alonso Ortiz, on the subject of Indian laborers, is no Pedro de Gante (see Selection 12). Each Indian brings in an amount of money for Ortiz, and he keeps track. There is a great range in the profitability of the Indians' activity, with some bringing in thirty pesos and others only ten. His words on the subject end curtly: "About them [the Indian workers] I will not say more than that I pay them each week for what they do." Otherwise, Ortiz's letter is like most letters between husband and wife—personal and centered on the correspondent's own situation.

My lady,

Juan López Sayago gave me some of your letters, and I have others from a sailor who told me he got them from a certain de la Parra, who died at sea. From both sets of letters, I was most pleased to learn that you and all my children are well. Also, I was very happy to find among the letters given to me by Sayago a missive from my compadre Leonis de la Parra, because even though he wrote in his letter of having sent me others, none of them reached me. I will write to him with this fleet, and you can tell him for me that I have been negligent in not writing and that I ask his pardon. Up to now I have simply not been able to write. But be assured that in all I have done, I have asked God and His Blessed Mother to grant me health and, even more, the ability to take advantage of this time and my good health. Thus I have gone on, seeking first the things for which I have prayed; second, the tears that He has seen flow from my eyes; and finally—and most important—all that you, my lady, have prayed for, knowing as I do that I have not been forgotten, that you will have commended me to God and His Blessed Mother. And so they have done these things for me, and I also trust that they will have done as much—and more—for you and the children. Because, over here, even though it seems that one suffers much work and tribulation, one knows that God does no harm and that even a leaf on a tree does not move without His will.

I endured difficulties before God guided me here, to the place where I am and will remain. And all that I have suffered since coming is nothing to me because the troubles that you and my children have endured are what give me great sadness and torment, as well as those of your father and mother, and your brothers and sisters.

And I now feel it more than ever because God has led me to become a tanner, and there is no better position than this over here. Moreover, the great expectations which I brought, I still have. In order that I will make good use of the health with which God has blessed me, and that this time not be lost, I have worked, and I continue to work, with great care; I try not to spend money wastefully, and I earn much more than I need to make ends meet. There is, in all this, only one thing wrong, and this is that I do not have you and the children with me, because if I did have you here, and if God granted me health, saving even a thousand Castilian ducados each year would mean little to me.

To show you what I mean about things here, I have rented a house and tannery from April 1, 1573, until the end of March 1574. This has cost me ninety pesos de tipuzque, which are eight reales [one silver peso] each, and this I paid four months before the terminal date. And now, from April 1, 1574, I have rented another house for one hundred pesos de minas, which are thirteen and one-quarter reales for each peso, which I must pay in advance. In addition, I have between six and eight Indians who work with me, and each one that I have brings in thirty pesos, twenty, fifteen, or some only ten. About them I will not say more than that I pay them each week for what they do. I tell you all this so that you might consider that here, where I do suffer, I also earn very abundantly.

God has also brought me a partner so that I may not lose more time. He saw immediately my situation, and saw the distress I have over my wife and children, and he understands how much this afflicts me. And when I formed the partnership with him, I made no other condition than that if I wanted to depart for Castile within the three years of our contract, I could do so. He, who will not be leaving because he sees that much profit can be made in the long term, agreed to send 150 pesos to Seville with a merchant friend of his, a sum which is meant entirely for you, that you and the children may come. These pesos are meant to feed you, to pay for the preparation of your belongings and provisions for the trip, and for all other related business, and the money is yours from him. My partner tells me that he wants to provide for you from his house, and that the sum of money is to be understood as yours from him, so that certain people do not suggest that I sent it and that they neither hinder nor interfere with your coming, because your arrival would bring me great joy. So, if you decide to come, send your letter by the advance ship preceding the fleet on which you will sail. And to those men to whom I am indebted, you may say that on another fleet I will send one hundred hides that will be worth enough for everyone to be paid. With these letters will go also my power of attorney in order that you may act on my behalf, and that you can put me under obligation for the shipping costs, even if they amount to 200 Castilian ducats, that I shall pay upon your arrival. Dated in Mexico City on the eighth of March,

Alonso Ortiz