

Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*  
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

the world was a dangerous place. “On earth we live, we travel, along a mountain peak. Over here is an abyss, over there is an abyss. If you go this way, or that way, you will fall in. Only in the middle do we go, do we live.”<sup>54</sup>

The image of mothers teaching their children to live with these realities is a compelling one. Everything we know about the Mexica tells us that mothers valued their children dearly, more than anything else in life—they said that they were precious, like polished gems, or iridescent feathers, treasures fit for high kings. They warned them of dangers and begged them to be responsible, to care for themselves and their communities so that the *altepetl* would go on forever.<sup>55</sup> And children heeded their mothers’ words. This was far from a world in which maternal figures were disparaged or in which women appeared as interchangeable sex objects. In the first place, it was generally only the men of noble families—those of the *pilli* class, the *pipiltin*—who had the right to take numerous wives and bring home captive women from the battlefield, for one had to be rich to afford to do such a thing. Even in that situation, who one’s mother was mattered to an enormous degree to each child; but one has to admit that from an elite man’s point of view, the women may have been somewhat interchangeable. That, however, simply was not the experience of the majority. The majority of the people were of the *macehualli* class, the

*macehualtin*, and in their families, one husband lived with one wife, whose cloak had been tied to his in a formal ceremony. Sometimes a household was multigenerational or contained several siblings, but even there, each woman had her own hearth in her own adobe apartment facing onto the common courtyard. A woman raised her own children, teaching them to help her in the labor that everyone recognized was essential. In a world without day care, restaurants, vacuum cleaners, or stores, who would have dared to think that childcare, cooking, sweeping, and making clothes were inessential activities? No one, it seems, for the indigenous sources leave no record of disrespect, or even of veiled misogyny. Women's roles were complementary to those of men, and everyone understood this to be so; the house, the four-walled *calli* was symbolic of the universe itself.<sup>56</sup>