

Coatlicue's Rules: Advice from an Aztec Goddess



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Rule 1: Beware of offers to make you famous.

I, a pious Aztec mother doing my own housework,
am now on a pedestal, "She of the Serpent Skirt,"
hands and hearts dangling from my necklace, a faceless
statue, two snake heads eye-to-eye on my shoulders,
goddess of earth, also, death which leads to

Rule 2: Retain control of your own publicity.

The past is the present. Women are women, balls, balls.

I'm not competitive and motherhood isn't
about numbers, but four hundred sons and a daughter
may be a record even without the baby.
There's something wrong in this world
if a woman isn't safe even when she sweeps
her own house, when any speck can enter even through
the eye, I'll bet, and become a stubborn tenant.

Rule 3: Protect your uterus. Conceptions, immaculate
and otherwise, happen. Women swallow sacred
stones that fill their bellies with elbows and knees.
In Guatemala, a skull dangling from a tree whispers,
"Touch me," to a young girl, and a clear drop
drips on her palm and disappears. The dew
drops in, if you know what I mean. The saliva moved

in her, the girl says. Moved in, I say,
settled into that empty space, and grew. Men know.
They stay full of themselves, keeps occupancy down.

Rule 4: Avoid housework. Remember, I was sweeping,
humming, actually, high on Coatepec, our Serpent
Mountain, humming loud so I wouldn't hear
all those sighs inside. I was sweeping slivers,
gold and jade, picking up after four hundred sons
who think they're gods, and their spoiled sister.

I was sweep-sweeping when feathers fell on me, brushed
my face, the first light touch in years, like in a dream.
At first, I just blew them away, but then I saw it,
the prettiest ball of tiny plumes, glowing green and gold.
Gently, I gathered it. Oh, it was soft as baby hair
and brought back mother shivers when I pressed it
to my skin. I nestled it like I used to nestle them,
here, when they finished nursing. Maybe I even stroked
the roundness. I have since heard that feathers
aren't that unusual at annunciations, but I was innocent.

After I finished sweeping, I looked in vain inside
my clothes, but the soft ball had vanished, well,
descended. I think I showed within the hour,
or so it seemed. They noticed first, of course.

Rule 5: Avoid housework. It bears repeating.
I was too busy washing, cooking corn, beans, squash,
sweeping again, worrying about my daughter,
Painted with Bells, when I began to bump into their frowns
and mutterings. They kept glancing at my stomach,
started pointing. I got so hurt and mad, I started crying.
Why is it they always get to us?

One wrong word or look from any one of them doubles me over,
and I've had four hundred and one without anesthetic.
Near them I'm like a snail with no shell on a sizzling day.
They started yelling, "Wicked, wicked," and my daughter,
right there with them, my wanna-be warrior boy.
And then I heard the whispers.

The yelling was easier than, "Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill."
Kill me? Their mother? One against four hundred and one?
All I'd done was press that softness into me.

Rule 6: Listen to inside voices. You mothers know
about the baby in a family, right? Even if he hadn't talked
to me from deep inside, he would have been special.
Maybe the best. But as my name is Coatlicue, he did.
That unborn child, that started as a ball of feathers all soft
green and gold, heard my woes, and spoke to me.
A thoughtful boy. And formal too. He said, "Do not be afraid,
I know what I must do." So I stopped shaking.

Rule 7: Verify that the inside voice is yours.
I'll spare you the part about the body hacking
and head rolling. But he was provoked, remember.
All this talk of gods and goddesses distorts.

Though this planet wasn't big enough for all of us,
the whole family has done well for itself I think.
I'm the mother of stars. My daughter's white head rolls
the heavens each night, and my sons wink down at me.
What can I say—a family of high visibility.
The baby? Up there also, the sun, the real thing.
Such a god he is, of war unfortunately, and the boy
never stops, always racing across the sky,
every day of the year, a ball of fire since birth.

But I think he has forgotten me. You sense my ambivalence.
I'm blinded by his light.

Rule 8: Insist on personal interviews.
The past is the present, remember. Men carved me,
wrote my story, and Eve's, Malinche's, Guadalupe's,
Llorona's, snakes everywhere, even in our mouths.

Rule 9: Be selective about what you swallow.

Coatlicue: in Aztec mythology mother of Huitzilopochtli, the sun god, who is born fully armed and slays his sister Coyolxauqui, Painted with Bells, who becomes the moon, and his four hundred brothers, Centzon Huitznahua, who become the stars.