

Rhetoric and History in Three Mexican Plays

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Auto magnate Henry Ford is reputed to have dismissed history as so much bunk, which would reveal a characteristically Yankee disdain for the past in favor of a golden tomorrow. Our own rather ahistorical society stands in bold contrast to that of Mexico, where history is obsessively omnipresent; where, as Carlos Fuentes writes in *Gringo viejo*, even the dust has something to tell about things preterite. And, when one considers the epic of Mexican history, it is hardly surprising that the Conquest has held a special fascination for Mexican playwrights. Celestino Gorostiza's *La Malinche* (1958), Salvador Novo's *Cuauhtémoc* (1962) and Rodolfo Usigli's *Corona de fuego* (1961) together cover events between 1519 and 1525.¹ In the tradition of Hegelian historicism, the playwrights turn to the past to make sense of or to come to terms with the present, and seem to end by saying essentially the same thing--that however painful and disruptive, the Conquest should no longer be lamented. Instead, it should be celebrated for the strong new race and nation to which it gave rise. This identical message, however, is encoded using quite different rhetorical strategies. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to explore how these strategies work to win an audience or reader over to the playwrights' point of view.²

In *La Malinche* Gorostiza interprets history through the tinted lens of romantic melodrama à la Hollywood and turns the Cortés-Malinche affair into a sixteenth-century love story. His method is quite clever, in that it plays with and off notions of love popularized by filmdom, setting them against the backdrop of an epic, "Cecil B. de Mille-esque" historical moment. Of course the theatrical medium cannot compete with celluloid in bringing to life the "agony and ecstasy," or the "pride and passion" of history's grandest episodes. But Gorostiza compensates for this with colorful costumes, Mexican exotica,

battles evoked by realistic offstage sound effects--all of which are part of a semiotic system that is meant to work on an audience's susceptibility to the picturesque and the theatrical, as well as its delight in epic adventure.

Gorostiza's biggest challenge in *La Malinche* is to make these infamous lovers attractive, and so he must immediately show them in a favorable light. With the opening scene he makes sure that there will be no misunderstanding about how one is to interpret the word "Malinche." In describing this talented Mexican translator to Cortés, one of his officers says: "Es una que se dice Malinali Tenépal. Y como es cacica e hija de caciques, y en verdad gran señora, los indios le dicen Malintzin o Malinche en señal de respeto" (446). The more popular usage that makes the name synonymous with traitor and "chingada" (with the cluster of connotations *that* word can have) will not figure here. Gorostiza then proceeds to confirm this positive verbal allusion to Malinche with an equally positive visual signifier, when Malinche makes her first and decisive entrance on stage: "Es joven y hermosa, de cuerpo muy bien formado, piel color canela, pelo muy largo que remata en dos largas trenzas y grandes ojos igualmente negros. Lleva un vistoso collar y grandes aretes de oro" (447). That is, she is as pretty a little thing as a young Dolores del Río in *María Candelaria*.³

Gorostiza takes full advantage of this film iconography and has his two lead characters fall in love at first sight: "Ella se vuelve, y queda frente a Hernán Cortés. Ambos, inmóviles, se miran largamente con admiración y simpatía. No es solamente el flechazo de un hombre y una mujer, sino el impacto de dos mundos predestinados el uno para el otro, que se encuentran por primera vez" (447). This wholly romantic and utterly anachronistic version of things borders on the soap operatic and is meant to tug at the heartstrings of audience members brought up on Hollywood romances. This is ploy, of course, to suggest that the couple's relationship was fated and that Malinche did what she did for love, a premise that is reiterated throughout the play, and one that is straight out of film scriptwriting. Amazingly, even Cuauhtémoc comes to see it that way: "Serás castigada. Malintzin. Ya has empezado a sufrir y sufrirás todavía durante los siglos. Los dioses no perdonan. Pero ellos mismos no han podido evitar nunca que una mujer sufra y muera por lo que ama" (489).

Gorostiza's methods of persuasion do not stop here, for he also makes Malinche the repository of two feminine qualities held sacred in Mexican society--devout Catholicism and motherhood. She is portrayed as a sincere convert to the religion of Rome, so much so that when Cortés's wife unexpectedly appears on the scene Malinche is easily persuaded that *she* must step aside, so as to not commit the sin of

concubinage! Yet it is her role as mother that most sanctifies her. If in the beginning Malinche conquers all for love of a man, later she will sacrifice all for her babe: "Por él viviré y lucharé contra todo y contra todos, a pesar de todas las amenazas, de todos los castigos, de todos los sufrimientos, hasta el martirio... ¡hasta la muerte!" (488).

In his efforts to make the audience side with his heroine, Gorostiza depicts La Malinche as a paragon of female virtue, but of the Christian and Western kind celebrated on the romantic silver screen. And although the play is not a total whitewash (there are scenes that confirm her complicity in the Cholula massacre, for example), Malinche is shown to be an innocent victim of historical circumstances. Whether Mexican audiences swallow such a contention is one thing; but another is the way that Gorostiza has stacked the deck so that if they do condemn *his* Malinche, they are also condemning what is held most holy about women in their culture; or at least what popular image-making says is most holy.

The tactics for making Cortés a sympathetic figure work in a similar manner. Many of the negative qualities popularly attributed to him are still in place, but very much watered down. He is hot-headed, but also a passionate, if somewhat trite lover: "¡Y tú! Tus ojos que interrogan, acarician, prometen y adivinan... Tu carne apretada y morena que hace temblar a esta carne blanca mía" (466); "Tú eres el ángel guardián que Dios me ha dado en esta empresa. Durante las batallas, cien veces habría huído o me habría entregado si al volver los ojos no te hubiera encontrado junto a mí, siempre sonriente, segura de ti, animosa" (472). If here Cortés makes Malinche sound something of a Revolutionary "soldadera," his highly emotional words are worthy of a medieval knight, but one of the Charleton Heston-as-El Cid variety.

When it comes to being cruel, this Cortés is reluctant and ashamed. In fact, he is shocked when it is first suggested to him that he should torture Cuauhtémoc: "¿Atormentar a este joven monarca? ¿El hombre más puro, más generoso, más noble y valiente que he conocido?" (504). This Conquistador also suffers from something very much like twentieth-century angst. He is alone, afraid and tired: "[E]stoy solo... completamente solo en el mundo... ¡Tengo miedo! ¡Me siento como una fiera acoralada!... Estoy cansado... infinitamente cansado" (464, 465), or so he confesses to Malinche. These existential woes are aggravated by domestic and love problems more of the twentieth, than of the sixteenth century--an unhappy marriage and a lover who must be sacrificed because of political and job pressures.

As he is depicted here, then, Cortés is very much a flawed romantic hero, something which helps make him more our contemporary, and for the good of Gorostiza's case, hopefully more palatable to the

Mexican audience he would persuade. For this does seem to be Gorostiza's real purpose here--to convince audiences that the Conquest was an *inevitable* and glorious blending of two worlds (with the ancillary thesis that as protagonists in it, Cortés and Malinche should be forgiven their sins and weaknesses). Malinche sees it all as predestined by her gods: "Así lo han dispuesto los dioses" (466); and for the European Cortés it is a matter of free will and of *his* God's protection: "Él nos protegerá. Con su ayuda venceremos todos los obstáculos" (466). Indian and Catholic religious beliefs are fused, and so too are their deeds on earth: for, as Malinche argues, the Spaniards are not doing anything that the Aztecs did not do before them: "¿Acaso no se han adueñado los mexicanos de todos los reinos que forman su imperio?... ¿Es más legítimo despojar y esclavizar a los hermanos que a los extraños?" (487). The motif of conciliation and harmony is, of course, most emotionally summed up in the signifier of the child born to Malinche: "Este hijo nuestro en el que estamos fundidos, que es un hombre nuevo y con el que empieza una raza nueva en un mundo nuevo" (511).⁴

While the message and the medium may be the same in Salvador Novo's *Cauhtémoc*, not so the rhetorical tactics. In the first place, Novo relegates the Cortés-Malinche affair to the background, and she makes only one brief stage appearance. Also, the portrayal of the Spaniards and of Cortés, in particular, is more consonant with popular stereotypes of them as arrogant, cruel, lustful, and greedy for gold, which as they say, "Vale todos los riesgos" (268). What Novo does is to foreground the person of Cauhtémoc, making *him*, and not Cortés's *mestizo* son, the emblem of what Mexico was to become. In formulating this statement, Novo borrows stage techniques from classical tragedy (all the actors, with the exception of the one portraying Cauhtémoc, wear masks), and from Brecht (the use of a narrator, episodic plot structure and a minimum of scenery). But these are only outer trappings, for the essence and purpose of Attic tragedy and Brechtian alienation are missing here. Although the masks have an important signifying function, they mostly provide a theatrical effect that, along with the period costumes and sound effects (e.g., the mournful Indian *caracol*, and offstage battles and skirmishes), create the kind of flavor considered appropriate for "historical" drama. The narrator provides no truly Brechtian dialectic, but rather, exposition and summary of historical events. His real function is to signify the play's *indigenista* rhetoric; for the actor playing the narrator should be an Indian, who in turn will also assume the role of Cauhtémoc. The narrator tells the audience that he and some friends, all of them theatrical neophytes, are putting on this play about Cauhtémoc not to tell it like it was, but rather, as they would have liked it to have

been: "Ya no podemos remediar que [las cosas] hayan ocurrido de un modo o del otro. Son cosas del pasado. Pero puesto que vamos a volver a vivirlas; a darles nuestra vida, es como si volvieran a suceder; y en eso sí tenemos derecho a hacerlas de otro modo--como deban ser: como nos gustaría que fueran; como nos gustará que sean; como serán cada vez que las representamos" (258).

In this interpretation, Cuauhtémoc is made to be a man with a very modern political sensibility, who tries to unite the Indian *caciques* in common cause against the Spanish invaders. He is rebuffed everywhere, as fatalism, factionalism and self-interest win the day, and in the process, lose the Empire. In his last-ditch, shuttle diplomacy, Cuauhtémoc pleads the case for rationality; for a national unity and solidarity based on sharing and mutual respect; and for man's ability to define his own destiny. As he asks Ixtolinque: "¿Crees de veras que no pueda el hombre contener la avalancha de una corriente que amenace ahogarlo? [...] Lo primero es la voluntad de resistir" (263, 265).

In this way, Novo equates Cuauhtémoc's failure in part with his people's failure to establish a united, democratic nation. Novo thus suggests that the Mexicas were not so unlike the Spaniards in their capacity for deceit, greed and cowardice. Neither seems a good example to follow, and this may well explain why the play ends with images of apotheosis and reincarnation and not of integration, as in *La Malinche*. But this rebirth is only of the fallen eagle Cuauhtémoc. As the narrator explains it: "Cuauhtémoc no ha muerto. Sé que está en mí; que vivirá siempre; en mí y en mis hijos--y en todos los que vengan después--a nacer en la tierra de México--formados con los huesos de nuestros muertos--nutridos como el sol con la sangre de nuestros muertos--nutridos como el sol con la sangre de nuestros corazones" (282). As he says this, all the actors remove their masks, to reveal their Indian faces, thereby signifying that what endures is an indigenous Mexico born of Cuauhtémoc's uniquely modern political dream; or better said, of Salvador Novo's twentieth-century version of that dream.

Novo's challenge in *Cuauhtémoc* is not as problematic as Gorostiza's in *La Malinche*, for the figure of Cuauhtémoc is already a very popular one. What Novo must do, however, is to make the audience see him from the same angle as the playwright. And to do this he makes of Cuauhtémoc an anachronism, an Aztec Garibaldi, if you will, who speaks of polity and nation in terms with which, at least in the abstract, few Mexican audience members would disagree. The Cuauhtémoc of *Corona de fuego* is cut of the same cloth, but it is more elaborately woven; for what is rather half-hearted classicism in Novo, now becomes a full-fledged attempt at modern tragedy à la T. S. Eliot

and Christopher Fry. If Gorostiza plays on an audience's sentimentalism and Novo on its civic ideals, Usigli hopes to cajole it to his point of view with theatrical fare of the grand kind that impresses an audience as being terribly serious and momentous. Of course, Usigli's tragedy is far from "authentic," nor could or should it be. Instead, this play conforms to what we today popularly *think* of as tragedy--and therefore, the elevated language, the use of verse, choric commentary and debate, the ponderous rhythm, and the larger-than-life characters caught in the web of seemingly fated events, all presented with suitable theatricality.

Indeed, this pseudo-Greek tragedy is an ideal vehicle for Usigli, since the Conquest and the figure of Cuauhtémoc already have assumed tragical dimensions in the Mexican mind. However, Usigli is being devious, in that he builds this tragical structure only to make it come tumbling down. He manipulates choric commentary, debate and other Attic devices to prove that Cuauhtémoc's martyrdom had nothing to do with fate and angry gods, and very much to do with human frailties and individual choices made in the face of historical circumstance.

Early in the play, two priests debate what the cacique Pax Bolón Acha should do as Cortés approaches their village during his long trek to the Hibuera. While one recommends taking defensive action, the other says that it would all be for naught, since their future has already been decided for them. Pax Bolón does end by accommodating Cortés, but because he is a greedy coward and *not* a plaything of the gods. Neither is the Indian Mexicaltzinco, whose lies give Cortés the excuse he needs to kill Cuauhtémoc. Pax Bolón and the treacherous dwarf are offered by Usigli as proof positive that the Indians were very much the makers of their own doom, as noted by the far braver and noble Temilotzin: "Nuestra soberbia y nuestra discordia/nos hicieron endeble yerba [...] para/el pie y la mano de los extranjeros. /Y los largos y ásperos caminos/son el fruto podrido de nuestra desunión" (46).

Cuauhtémoc is given the opportunity to change, or at least delay the course of events leading to his death. His entourage far outnumbered the Spaniards with whom they are traveling, and as is suggested to Cuauhtémoc, it could easily overpower them. But Cuauhtémoc chooses to do otherwise; he is a realist and knows that they would in the end lose *this* battle. Yet he is an optimist who banks on the future: "[Y]a no tenemos pasado/como ya no tenemos presente [...] /pero nuestros hijos, y los hijos/de nuestras mujeres y de estos hombres a caballo/deben vivir- y nos darán el futuro [...] /Un día ellos serán la nación mexicana" (55, 56).

Usigli even gives Cortés the chance to choose *his* destiny, as he debates with himself and his conscience (which is rather unbelievably

personified on stage) the pros and cons of executing Cuauhtémoc. Of the various options available to him, he chooses the most expeditious and self-serving one, even though his conscience warns that by doing so he values the present over the future, which now will indeed treat him badly. In other words, Cuauhtémoc's was the right choice, even if it meant temporary (if one can call centuries temporary) defeat. As he goes to his death, the image of a cross is projected onto the ceiba tree from which he will be hung--Usigli's theatrical shorthand for signifying the glory of the *mestizaje* made possible by Cuauhtémoc's death. As the sacrificial lamb himself says: "Por encima de todo veo luz,/por encima de todo miro fuego,/aun cuando la tierra es de lodo/y el cielo de ceniza y de silencio./Buenas noches y buenos días,/secreta, dulce nación mexicana" (90).

In *The Course of Mexican History*, Michael Meyer and William Sherman refer to the period between 1958 and 1964 as "the lull before the storm" (651-662), years during which the cracks in the myths of the Revolution became increasingly more difficult to cover up, cracks that would open into chasms with the violence of Tlatelolco in 1968. This is also the time during which these three plays were written. When placed within this context, it can be argued that they are only *apparently* about the Conquest, and more about the Revolution and one of its most powerful and lingering myths: that of Mexico as a unified, democratic nation of *mestizos*. For it is only with the rhetoric of the Revolution that the idea of the Conquest as the beginning of a new, cosmic race begins to take hold of the popular imagination in Mexico. But by the late 1950's this rhetoric had a hollow sound to it, as heard in novels like Carlos Fuentes's *La región más transparente* (1958) and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962). Fuentes, of course, is only one of many artists and intellectuals who at that time articulated severe critiques of so-called Revolutionary Mexico, and when compared to these, the three plays discussed here would seem very much like apologies for the tired official rhetoric of the less-than-revolutionary PRI. In other words, they would seem to make a very conservative and pro-*status quo* ideological statement, *if* that statement is read in the context of the present and not just of the historical past. On the other hand, they *could* be read as negative, or at least ironic statements, despite their ostensibly optimistic endings. Because they posit a future that never was, the reader or theatregoer might sense its absence precisely because of the ever-widening gap between Revolutionary rhetoric and praxis. In this context, then, these plays would work by indirection to severely censure, and not to legitimize the present. It is important to note that in 1952, six years before he wrote *La Malinche*, Gorostiza had written *El color de nuestra piel*, in which all claims to racial equality in Mexican society were debunked. It is

equally important to remember that throughout his career Usigli was a harsh and vocal critic of the "lie" of a radical Mexican Revolution. While questions of the dramatists' precise intentionality are difficult to answer, from the vantage point of *our* present, *La Malinche*, *Cuauhtémoc* and *Corona de fuego* do seem, however, like efforts to hold on to an unfulfilled dream, to patch up the crumbling plaster of Mexico's Revolutionary façade.

That historical plays can be as much about the present as about the past is hardly a novel observation. Yet when this connection is made, it often serves to support the notion of eternal truths, of cyclical history, of permanence rather than mutability. The point being made here, however, is of a different sort, in that it posits the question of why, at a certain moment in time, these three playwrights (among many others) chose to dramatize an identical episode in their national past. The answer, although only adumbrated here, is that this is probably not wholly coincidental, and that it can be explained in part by the *specific* socio-historical reality of Mexico in the 1950's and 1960's. As Edward Said has noted, artists and the artefacts they create are "wordly," in that they are "always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society" (35). Thus the three plays studied here are not only a lesson in the past, but also in the present that produced them. Nor is their subject matter the bunk that Henry Ford might have considered it. For as *La Malinche*, *Cuauhtémoc* and *Corona de fuego* demonstrate, history's theatrical offshoots are complex discourses that go well beyond the innocent, objective fact to influence (and some would even say to hoodwink) their public into a particular way of seeing the here and now through a far from transparent rendering of what once was.⁵

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Notes

1. Other plays of interest that also dramatize aspects of the Conquest are Sergio Magaña's *Moctezuma II* (1954) and *Cortés y La Malinche (Los Argonautas)* (1967); for a more recent approach to the theme, Juan Tovar's *Las adoraciones* (1981) is of special interest.

2. The term *rhetoric*, as used here, refers to the art of persuasion, of influencing the thoughts and actions of others. For a now classic study of rhetoric in fiction (some of which can easily be transferred to drama) see Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961).

3. María Félix is another possible referent, although her image was much more of the "hard lady" than the "sweeter" Dolores del Río. Indeed, when it was suggested to Sergio Magaña that María Félix might play the part of Malinche in his *Moctezuma II*, Salvador Novo jokingly said "Si ustedes quieren que María sea la Malinche, entonces debe ser la traductora no de Cortés, sino de Moctezuma. [...]"

Pero lo importante es que María haga de traidora." Quoted by Paco Ignacio Taibo I, *María Félix, 47 pasos por el cine* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1985), 128.

4. For an analysis of Gorostiza's *La Malinche* which stresses this theme of fusion and rebirth, but from a radically different perspective than the one taken here, see Isis Quinteros, "La consagración del mito en la epopeya mexicana: *La Malinche* de Celestino Gorostiza," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 19/1 (Fall 1985), 33-42.

5. Of course, the positivistic belief that history itself is transparent and innocent has been severely questioned; for example, by Hayden White in *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973), where the writing of history is seen as a poetic act. This would mean, then, that historical plays are but yet another imaginative elaboration on already distorted, or at least, subjective narratives.

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