

Moses, Caesar, Hero, Anti-hero. The Posthumous Faces of Hernando Cortés

Matthew Restall

‘There is so much to say about the prowess and invincible courage of Cortés that on this point alone a large book could be written.’¹ These words, written by Toribio de Motolinía, one of the first Franciscans in Mexico, were more far-sighted than the friar could have imagined.

When Motolinía penned that prophecy, Hernando Cortés (1485-1547) was still alive, and his secretary-chaplain, Francisco López de Gómara was soon to begin composing a ‘large book’ on the famous conquistador that would first see print a decade later as *The Conquest of Mexico*.² Using Cortés’s own so-called ‘Letters to the King’ as crucial building material, Gómara laid the foundation for a literary tradition that combined a narrative of the Spanish-Aztec War of 1519-1521, styled as a glorious, predestined Conquest of Mexico, with a life of the conqueror as a hagiography, hero-worshiping and legend-forming. Gómara’s book and Cortés’s Second and Third Letters were thereby planted as the urtexts, the trunk from which all branches of the traditional Conquest narrative grew.³

Blooms of intense popularity have periodically blossomed, but the topic’s essential popularity has remained deeply rooted for five centuries.⁴

¹ Written in his *Historia* first published in 1541, six years before Cortés’s death. I have used the translation in F.B. Steck ed., *Motolinía’s History of the Indians of New Spain* (Washington, DC 1951) 273. For the remainder of this article, unless otherwise stated, translations into English are mine.

² Gómara and Cortés met in the siege of Algiers in 1541; F. López de Gómara, *La conquista de México* (Zaragoza 1552).

³ I am borrowing from Rolena Adorno’s dubbing of the Second Letter as ‘the urtext on the conquest of Mexico’: R. Adorno, *Colonial Latin American Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2011) 43. The first publication of the Second Letter was H. Cortés, *Carta de relacio(n) e(m)biada a Su S. Majestad (etc.)* (Seville 1522), with dozens of full or partial editions in various languages following up to the present.

⁴ The following is a representative (not comprehensive) sample of literature in the tradition of Cortés biographies, sequenced chronologically by first editions, in Spanish, French, or English; some are straight-forward biographies (most but not all hagiographic), some are effectively such via histories of the Conquest, both apologist and critical (but I have included no editions of Cortés’s Letters): Gómara *Conquista*; G. Lasso de la Vega, *Primera parte de Cortés valeroso, y Mexicana* (Madrid

Serious attempts to uproot the legend, or see 'beyond' it (to quote the subtitle of one recent biography), are few and far between; almost every book has sought to lionize or demonize, to celebrate the hero or denounce the anti-hero. As the author of that recent biography noted, Cortés was long ago transformed from a man into a myth,

1588); B.L. de Argensola, *La conquista de México* (Mexico City 1940 [orig. 1620s]); B. Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid 1632); A. de Solís, *Historia de la conquista de Mexico* (Madrid 1684); W.H. Dilworth, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico, By the Celebrated Hernan Cortes*. (London 1759); W. Robertson, *The History of America*. 2 vols. (London 1777); J.M. Vaca de Guzmán, *Las naves de Cortés destruidas* (Madrid 1778); J. de Escóiquiz, *México conquistada. Poema heroico* (Madrid 1798); G. Spontini, *Fernand Cortez. Opéra (arrangé pour le piano)* (Paris 1809); J.R. Planché, *Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico. An Historical Drama, in Three Acts* (London 1823); T. de Trueba y Cosío, *Life of Hernan Cortes* (Edinburgh 1829); W. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico, with a Preliminary View of the Ancient Mexican Civilization and the Life of the Conqueror Hernando Cortés*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, intro. (London 1994 [orig. 1843]); L.F. Thomas, *Cortez, the Conqueror. A Tragedy in Five Acts. (Founded on the Conquest of Mexico)* (Washington, DC 1857); A. Helps, *The Life of Hernando Cortes*. 2 vols. (London 1894); J.S.C. Abbott, *Makers of History: Hernando Cortez* (New York, NY 1904); F.A. MacNutt, *Fernando Cortes and the Conquest of Mexico, 1485-1547* (New York, NY 1909); H.D. Sedgwick, *Cortés the Conqueror* (Indianapolis, IN 1926); H.M. Robinson, *Stout Cortez: A Biography of the Spanish Conquest* (New York, NY 1931); M. Solana y Gutierrez, *Don Hernando Cortés, marqués del Valle de Oajaca* (Mexico City 1938); J. Vasconcelos, *Hernán Cortés: creador de la nacionalidad* (Mexico City 1941); S. Madariaga, *Hernán Cortés* (London 1942); H. R. Wagner, *The Rise of Fernando Cortés* (Berkeley CA 1944); M. Alcalá, *César y Cortés* (Mexico City 1950); M. Collis, *Cortés and Montezuma* (London 1954); J.M. White, *Cortés and the Downfall of the Aztec Empire: A Study in a Conflict of Cultures* (New York, NY 1971); W.W. Johnson, *Cortés* (Boston, MA 1975); J.L. Martínez, *Hernán Cortés* (Mexico City 1990); R.L. Marks, *Cortés: The Great Adventurer and the Fate of Aztec Mexico* (New York, NY 1993); H. Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (London 1993); C. Elizondo Alcaraz, *El Escorpión de Oro: Luces y sombras en la extraordinaria vida de Hernán Cortés* (Mexico City 1996); C. Duverger, *Hernán Cortés: Más allá de la leyenda* (Madrid 2005); P.O. Koch, *The Aztecs, the Conquistadors, and the Making of Mexican Culture* (Jefferson, NC 2006); E. Mira Caballos, *Hernán Cortés: El fin de una leyenda* (Trujillo, Spain 2010); J.D. Lyons, *Alexander the Great and Hernán Cortés: Ambiguous Legacies of Leadership* (Lanham, MD 2015); A. Sandine, *Deadly Baggage: What Cortés Brought to Mexico and How It Destroyed the Aztec Civilization* (Jefferson, NC 2015).

a myth whose aspects have always been disputed by concurrent schools of thought and ideological rivals, in such a way that allowed each one to think of 'their' Cortés: demigod or demon, hero or traitor, slaver or protector of the Indians, modern or feudal, a greedy or great lord.⁵

To see 'beyond the legend', its nature must first be understood. To that end, the discussion that follows traces the posthumous development of Cortés as Caesar, Moses, Hero, and Anti-Hero. The latter pair are two sides to the same coin, for the Anti-Hero image has tended to maintain the Cortés myth rather than undermine or shatter it. I suggest that two mythical Cortesian qualities (identified at the essay's end) underpin his legend; upending them might lead to a deeper understanding of both the historical Cortés and the era of the Spanish-Aztec War of 1519-1521.

Caesar

The motto chosen by Cortés for his coat of arms was *Judicium Domini apprehendit eos, et fortitudo ejus corroboravit brachium meum* (The judgement of the Lord overtook them, and His might strengthened my arm). Taken from an account of the siege of Jerusalem by Titus Flavius Josephus, the line implied that Cortés had besieged and captured a second Jerusalem.⁶ The reference reflected Cortés's own embrace of the exalted notion that his actions in Mexico were divinely guided, that his role was that of a universal crusader. It also reflected the Spanish tendency, commonplace in the early modern centuries, to compare Spain's imperial achievements to those of the ancient Greeks and Romans.⁷

⁵ Duverger, *Hernán Cortés*, 27 (whose subtitle is referenced above).

⁶ Josephus' account of the Jewish War, which culminated in the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73) in 70 AD, would have been available in Latin to Gómara, who provided the full motto at the very end of his *Conquest of Mexico* (f. 139v; p. 410 in the 1964 English edition).

⁷ For example, Francisco de Jerez (who fought in South America) wrote in 1534 that Spaniards achieved more, against greater odds, than the armies of ancient Rome, and Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, a veteran conquistador writing at century's end, likewise argued that Spanish success was even more astonishing than the most famous feats of the Greeks and Romans, see: B. de Vargas Machuca, *Milicia y descripción de las Indias* (Madrid 1599) 25v-26v; K. Lane ed., *Defending the*

A specific leitmotif developed, within that larger pattern, whereby Cortés was compared to Julius Caesar. Cortés made no such claim, the purpose of his Letters was, after all, to display his undying loyalty to a king who, as Holy Roman Emperor, was *the* Caesar of the day. But the clerics and intellectuals who formed the pro-Cortés, anti-Bartolomé de Las Casas faction in Spain during the conquistador's final years pointed out three supposed similarities: both men were remarkable generals; both were unique literary figures for recording detailed accounts of their greatest campaign (Cortés's Letters; Caesar's *Gallic Wars*); and both had administrative vision, guiding the Mexican and Roman worlds respectively into new eras. Comparisons were not restricted to Julius Caesar – in his ode to Cortés of 1546, for example, Francisco Cervantes de Salazar also compared Cortés to Alexander the Great and to St. Paul – but, the Caesar reference tended to predominate.⁸

Gómara made much hay with the comparison to ancient Rome, featuring Cortés's coat of arms in the frontispiece to his *Conquest of Mexico*, and in his larger *History of the Indies* (see Figure 1). 'Never has such a display of wealth been discovered in the Indies, nor acquired so quickly,' enthused Gómara; not only were Cortés's

many great feats in the wars the greatest [of any Spaniard in the New World] but he wrote them down in imitation of Polybius, and of Salust when he brought together the Roman histories of Marius and Scipio.⁹

Conquest: Bernardo de Vargas Machuca's Defense and Discourse of the Western Conquests, T.F. Johnson trans. (University Park, PA 2010) 92-96; M. Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford 2003) 1, 27-28. On the larger topic of how early modern Spaniards viewed their world in relation to that of the ancient Romans, see: D.A. Lupton, *Romans in a New World: Classical Models in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America* (Ann Arbor, MI 2003).

⁸ Restall, *Seven Myths*, 15, citing: J.H. Elliott, 'The Mental World of Hernán Cortés' in: idem, *Spain and Its World, 1500-1700* (New Haven, CT 1989) full page numbers (hereafter: fpn): 39-41.

⁹ F. López de Gómara, *La Istoría de las Yndias* (Zaragoza 1552) 26v.



Figure 1: The frontispiece to Francisco López de Gómara's *La Istorja de las Yndias* [*The History of the Indies*], which was bound together with his *Conquista de Mexico* [*The Conquest of Mexico*]. The latter was first published (both in this form and separately) in Spain in 1552, and was a hagiography of Hernando Cortés. It remains foundational to the five-century Cortés legend, despite Cortés's name being absent from the title (but, significantly, that fact is in line with the tradition of many Cortés biographies taking the form of narrative histories of the 'Conquest of Mexico', and vice versa). The smaller shield in the center of the frontispiece is Cortés's coat of arms, surrounded by heraldic references to kingdoms of Spain's empire. Reproduced by permission of the John Carter Brown Library.

Gómara used his giddy comparisons of Cortés to the great generals of ancient Greece and Rome – and to their historians – as building blocks for his construction of the exemplary conquistador. By contrast, the other famous conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, was portrayed as illiterate, ignoble, and avaricious. This allowed Gómara to better promote Cortés as the noble, pious model of a literate man-at-arms, and his invasion of Mexico as 'a

good and just war.¹⁰ Gómara went a little too far – his criticism of the Conquest of Peru prompted his *History* to be quickly banned in Spain. But by century's end there were ten Italian editions, nine in French, and two in English, making it 'so widely read that it served, almost by default, as the official history of the Spanish New World.'¹¹

The Cortés-Caesar leitmotif lasted for centuries. In his 1610 account of the Spanish conquest campaigns in New Mexico, composed as an epic poem, Gaspar de Villagrà repeatedly invoked Cortés as the paradigmatic conquistador. When, in Villagrà's telling, Cortés's efforts to campaign in northwest Mexico were opposed by Viceroy Mendoza of New Spain, the conflict had classical echoes: 'Greed for power, like love, will permit no rival. Even as Caesar and Pompey clashed over their rival ambitions for world power, so now Cortés met with opposition.'¹² Similarly, the splendors and religious devotion of Mexico City were

'all due to the noble efforts of that famous son who set forth to discover this New World, whose illustrious and glorious deeds, after the years have passed, will surely be seen as no less great and admirable than those of the great Caesar, Pompey, Arthur, Charlemagne, and other valiant men, whom time has raised up.'¹³

The theme was prominent too in Bernal Díaz's history, as in Antonio de Solís's – the latter prefaced with the assertion that 'whoever will consider the Difficulties he overcame, and the Battles he fought and won against an incredible Superiority of Numbers, must own him little inferior to the most celebrated Heroes of Antiquity.'¹⁴ Solís's book was a bestseller in multiple languages for well over a century.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Cortés was promoted inside and outside the Spanish world as a model, modern Caesar. For example, in

¹⁰ López de Gómara, *La Istoria de las Yndias*, 2, 58.

¹¹ R. Kagan, *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore, MD 2009) 160.

¹² G. de Villagrà, *Historia de la Nueva Mexico* (Alcala 1610) f. 16v; G. de Villagrà, *History of New Mexico*, Gilberto Espinosa trans. (Los Angeles, CA 1933) 54.

¹³ My translation from Villagrà, *Historia*, ff. 30v-31r.

¹⁴ Prefaces to different editions expressed variations on this theme; I have here quoted the 1724 English edition A. Solís, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, T. Townsend trans. and ed. (London 1724), unnumbered first page of Preface.

¹⁵ Solís was partially replaced by Robertson (1770s on) and entirely by Prescott (1840s on); Kagan, *Clio and the Crown*, 268-273.

his *History of the Conquest of Mexico, By the Celebrated Hernan Cortes* (first published in 1759 but seeing dozens of editions into the twentieth century), W. H. Dilworth sought to improve and entertain ‘the BRITISH YOUTH of both Sexes.’ The book claimed to contain ‘A faithful and entertaining Detail of all [Cortés’s] Amazing Victories,’ with a story ‘abounding with strokes of GENERALSHIP, and the most refined Maxims of CIVIL POLICY.’¹⁶

From Dilworth to Prescott to modern authors (who have devoted entire books comparing Cortés to Caesar or to Alexander) the Spaniard has generally come off well in relation to ancient generals,¹⁷ be the focus on military logistics, governmental vision, or moral justification. For a 1938 Mexican biographer of the conqueror, Julius Caesar was more self-interested than Cortés: the Spaniard was not only glorified, but also sanctified, an ‘epic boxer’ and ‘mystical crusader’ who embodied his age more than his own personal ambitions.¹⁸

Other Latin American intellectuals suggested that Cortés ‘was a Caesar, but more like Caesar Borgia than Julius Caesar’ – meaning Cesare Borgia, the duke made famous by Machiavelli in *The Prince* – and that Cortés’s ‘political vision’ was so similar to Machiavelli’s that one imagines him reading *The Prince*. That is an impossible scenario, for the now-classic political treatise was not published until 1532, as literary scholars acknowledge. But some have argued that Machiavelli’s ideas were circulating before his book saw print, allowing Cortés to be ‘the practical Spaniard’ to Machiavelli’s ‘theoretical Italian.’¹⁹

¹⁶ Dilworth, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, title page, CAPS in original.

¹⁷ E.g.: Vasconcelos, *Hernán Cortés*; Alcalá, *César y Cortés*; Lyons, *Alexander the Great and Hernán Cortés*.

¹⁸ Solana, *Don Hernando Cortés*, 425.

¹⁹ ‘Caesar Borgia’ quote by the Argentine novelist and literary critic, Enrique Anderson Imbert, *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* (Mexico City 1962) 33; other quotes by the Mexican scholar José Valero Silva, *El legalismo de Cortés como instrumento de su conquista* (Mexico City 1965) 40; both quoted in: I. Mizrahi, ‘El maquiavelismo renacentista en las cartas de relación de Hernán Cortés’, *Dactylus* 12 (1993) 98-115. An earlier version of *The Prince* was circulated in 1512, but it was in Latin in manuscript form, and Cortés had already been in the Caribbean for eight years. It is possible, perhaps probable, that the ideas on political action that ended up being most closely associated with *The Prince* were circulating sufficiently in the 1510s that they reached Cortés in Cuba (as Mizrahi suggests); but by framing such a possibility not in terms of the larger context of the intellectual world of the pre-1520 Spanish Caribbean, but in terms of a specific Cortés-Machiavelli link, the

Moses

Following the logic of the Cortés legend, political disunity among Mesoamericans has traditionally been read as the conqueror's achievement, with the question being whether his 'divide and rule' strategy was influenced more by Julius Caesar, Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli, or the Bible.²⁰ The Christian element (Solana's 'mystical crusader') inevitably gave Cortés the moral edge over any of his possible influences (the Bible aside). Thus beginning with the earliest writings on the Conquest by Franciscans and other ecclesiastics, Cortés was promoted as a pious version of a classical general, better than the ancients because he carried the true faith with him.

'I do not wish to deride the noble achievements of the Romans,' wrote Diego Valadés in 1579. 'Yet one must exalt with the highest praise and with new and illuminating phrases the unprecedented fortitude of Hernando Cortés, and the friars who came to these new worlds.' Comparing the possessions of the Roman Empire with 'the parts of the Indies that have come into our hands, ours are infinitely greater.' But for Valadés, it was not just a question of size. The Cortesian achievement was a religious one, and thus 'the sign of how Cortés exercised his power for the good' was how he and the earliest friars destroyed temples, expelled priests, and prohibited 'diabolic sacrifices.' It was thus the nature, as well as the magnitude and speed, of the enterprise that made it 'the most heroic.'²¹

Valadés, the son of a Spanish conquistador and a Nahua mother from Tlaxcala, was the first *mestizo* to enter the Order of Saint Francis.²² His perspective was thus as much colonial Tlaxcalan as it was Franciscan. Valadés was one of the earliest to articulate the invented tradition that Tlaxcalans were the very first – at Cortés's urging – to receive baptism as new Christians in Mexico. Another Tlaxcalan mestizo, Diego Muñoz

tradition of Cortés as exceptional and foundational - as legendary - is merely reinforced.

²⁰ Alcalá, *César y Cortés*, 168; Mizrahi, 'El maquiavelismo renacentista', 109-111 (I thank Russell Lohse for sending me this article).

²¹ D. de Valadés, *Rhetorica Christiana* (Perusia 1579) 204-105 [sic]; translation from the Latin mine. Also see a Spanish version in E.J. Palomera, *Fray Diego Valadés, O.F.M., evangelizador humanista de la Nueva España: el hombre, su época y su obra* (Mexico City 1988) 413-414.

²² His *Rhetorica Christiana* was the first published account of the Spiritual Conquest of Mexico.

Camargo, likewise the offspring of a Spanish conquistador and Nahua mother, also contributed to this core element of the Cortés-as-Moses legend. His *History of Tlaxcala*, completed in 1592, recounted a meeting that supposedly took place in 1520 between Cortés and the four rulers of Tlaxcala in the middle of the Spanish-Aztec War. At the meeting, Cortés delivered a virtual sermon, confessing that his true mission in Mexico was to bring the true faith. Explaining Christianity and its rituals, he urged the lords to destroy their 'idols', receive baptism, and join him in a vengeful campaign of war against Tenochtitlan. The lords then persuaded their subjects, who all gathered for a public mass baptism, at which Cortés and Pedro de Alvarado acted as godfathers.²³

This incident, part of a mythistory that survived into the modern era,²⁴ was likely a combination of Muñoz's imagination and Tlaxcalan folk history.²⁵ But it took root as fact, because it placed both Tlaxcala and Cortés in positive light, promoting one as the voluntary starting point for Christian baptism, and the other as an effective agent of proselytization. This Cortés was a pacifier, not a violent conquistador, a spiritual conqueror who deployed the word not the sword, inspiring conversion without coercion.

This Franciscan promotion of Cortés as a New World Moses, both during and long after his lifetime, had three roots. First, the twelve founding fathers of Catholicism in Mexico were Franciscans, arriving in 1524 with Cortés's support. Second, many of the Twelve shared a millenarian vision of their mission; their goal was to convert indigenous Mexicans in order that Christ could return, a holy task made possible by Cortés.²⁶ Third, the

²³ D. Muñoz Camargo, *Historia de Tlaxcala*, Alfredo Chavero ed. (Mexico City 1892 [orig. 1592]) 189-205; Idem, *Historia de Tlaxcala*, Luis Reyes García ed. (Tlaxcala 1998 [orig. 1592]) 195-205.

²⁴ For example, see fray Juan de Torquemada: *Los Veynte y Un Libros Rituales y Monarquía Indiana, con el origen y guerras de los Yndios Occidentales* III (Seville 1614) 191-197; *Monarquía Indiana*. Miguel León-Portilla ed. (Mexico City 1986 [orig. 1614]) 3, 166-169; Book 16, Ch. XIII; narrative also promoted by Mexican Bishop Lorenzana: see S. Wood, *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico* (Norman 2003) 85-94; O.F. Pardo, *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua Rituals and Christian Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Ann Arbor, MI 2004) 20-24.

²⁵ C. Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (Stanford, CA 1952) 28-31; Pardo, *Origins*, 23.

²⁶ G. de Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, Joaquín García Icazbalceta ed. (Mexico City 1870 [orig. 1596]) 210-11, on Cortés's support for the Twelve; J.L. Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans of the New World* (Berkeley, CA 1970)

Cortés-Franciscan alliance became cemented by the political schism that divided Spanish Mexico in the 1530s. The Franciscans were forced to compete in Mexico with secular clergy and rival orders, especially the Dominicans, who aligned themselves with the first royal officials sent to govern New Spain, all critical of Cortés; the Franciscans penned narratives that praised him.²⁷

One such Franciscan was fray Gerónimo de Mendieta. He spent the last quarter of the sixteenth century composing his *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* in the Franciscan convent in Tlatelolco, once part of the Aztec capital and in Mendieta's day a Nahuatl neighborhood of Mexico City. Although Mendieta's history of the evangelization in Mexico was denied publication permission, it reflected opinion of the day and influenced subsequent chronicles and accounts of the Spiritual Conquest.

Mendieta believed that Martin Luther and Cortés were born the same year, and that this was part of God's plan for the Spaniard. This providential numerology was reinforced by the bloody orgy of human sacrifice that Mendieta thought occurred in Tenochtitlan that same year. God's remedy for 'the clamor of so many souls' and 'the spilling of so much human blood' was Cortés, dispatched to Mexico 'like a new Moses to Egypt.'²⁸ 'Without any doubt,' wrote the friar, 'God chose specifically to be his instrument this valiant captain, don Fernando Cortés, through whose agency the door was opened and a road made for the preachers of the Gospel in this new world.' Mendieta's nineteenth-century editor printed in the margin: 'Cortés chosen as a new Moses to free the Indian people.' Proof of Cortés's role, divinely appointed since birth, was another meaningful synchronicity with Luther: in the same year that the German heretic 'began to corrupt the Gospel,' the Spanish captain began 'to make it known

92-102; M. Restall and A. Solari, *2012 and the End of the World: The Western Roots of the Maya Apocalypse* (Lanham, MD 2011) 67-89.

²⁷ Pardo, *Origins*, 2-4.

²⁸ Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica*, 174-175. Mendieta was wrong, of course: Luther was born in 1483, two years before Cortés. Mendieta may have been influenced by Lasso de la Vega, whose epic elegy to Cortés included the statement that he was born the same year as Luther, see: G. Lasso de la Vega, *Mexicana, emendada y añadida* (Madrid 1594) XIII, 5. On subsequent repetitions of the birth-years error in Spanish literature, see Martínez, *Hernán Cortés*, 107-108.

faithfully and sincerely to people who had never before heard of it.²⁹ No less a ‘confirmation of the divine election of Cortés to a task so noble in spirit’ was the ‘marvelous determination that God put in his heart.’³⁰

Down through the centuries, authors writing in multiple languages wove these threads of Cortés’s religious devotion and the evidence of God’s intervention in the Conquest story. The conquistador guided indigenous people to the light so effectively that ‘the reverence and prostration on their knees that is now shown to priests by the Indians of New Spain was taught to them by don Fernando Cortés, of happy memory’ (as García put it in 1607).³¹ In the hands of Protestant authors in later centuries, the Moses leitmotif shifted into something slightly different – ‘religious fanaticism,’ one American historian put it in 1904 – but the core legendary element persisted. Upon assuming command of the expedition to Mexico, Cortés took up his ‘heavenly mission’ with the zeal of ‘a frank, fearless, deluded enthusiast.’ His destiny was ‘to march the apostle of Christianity to overthrow the idols in the halls of Moctezuma, and there to rear the cross of Christ.’³² In the less judgmental words of another turn-of-the-century historian, Cortés’s ‘religious sincerity’ was ‘above impeachment.’ Indeed, he was virtually a saint, ‘a man of unfeigned piety, of the stuff that martyrs are made of, nor did his conviction that he was leading a holy crusade to win lost souls to salvation ever waver.’³³ Later scholars were decreasingly

²⁹ Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica*, 174-75. Further proof was the fact that, just as God had given Moses an interpreter to speak with the pharaoh of Egypt, so did God ‘miraculously provide’ Cortés with interpreters (Gerónimo de Aguilar; and Malintzin, or Malinche, who later bore Cortés a son).

³⁰ Cortés showed ‘great zeal’ everywhere he went, ‘in the honor and service of God and the saving of souls’; he ‘toppled idols, raised up crosses, and preached the faith and belief in the one true God’; in subsequent passages, Mendieta mentions Cortés’s ‘zeal’ and ‘diligence’ in spreading the Gospel and promoting conversion; *ibidem*, 175-177, 182-184, 211-212, 228.

³¹ A. de Saavedra y Guzmán, *El Peregrino Indiano* (Madrid 1880 [orig. 1599]); G. Vecchietti, *Ferrante Cortese. Poema* (manuscript in British Library, London, Ms Add 30, 376) f. 49r; G. García, *Origen de los Indios de el Nuevo Mundo, e Indias Occidentales* (Madrid 1729 [orig. 1607]) 94.

³² These four quoted (1904) phrases are from Abbott, *Makers of History*, 44, although the argument is made to various degrees of subtlety from Robertson in the 1770s through the twentieth century.

³³ F.A. MacNutt in H. Cortés, *Letters of Hernando Cortés to Charles V I*, F.A. MacNutt, ed. and trans. (New York, NY 1908) 207.

adulatory, arguing that Cortés and his colleagues were, ‘so far as religion was concerned, simply products of their times.’ But many remained convinced that Cortés’s character and goals were, above all, religious, and that no other explorer or conquistador of the Americas could match Cortés ‘in the constancy or the depth of his zeal for the Holy Catholic Faith.’³⁴

Hero

Maxime heroicum – ‘most heroic’ – was how Valadés had summed up Cortés’s enterprise of military and spiritual conquest.³⁵ The term ‘hero’ was increasingly popular as a descriptor of Cortés from the late-sixteenth century onwards, typically tied to a set of adjectives that defined his heroic qualities: great, invincible, valiant. Although sometimes tied to religion (as Moses-Hero), the purpose of such praise was usually political and patriotic, to promote Cortés as an inspirational national hero. The Hero leitmotif ran thick through the familiar canon of conquest sources—from Gómara to Madariaga—as well as in a wide variety of other sources. One example is Villagrà, addressing the king, citing Cortés as the hero who ‘conquered an entire world.’³⁶

Cortés can be found in archival documents of the early modern centuries as a heroic reference, but a more natural and vivid medium for Cortesian adulation and legend-promotion was epic poetry.³⁷ One of the best examples – both for its quality of verse and its wide circulation for centuries – is Gabriel Lasso de la Vega’s *Valiant Cortés*, comprising over nine thousand lines of epic verse praising ‘the great Cortés.’ A second edition of six years later was more than twice as long. Five years later, a

³⁴ C.S. Braden, *Religious Aspects of the Conquest of Mexico* (Durham, NC 1930) 80.

³⁵ Valadés, *Rhetorica Christiana*, 205 (but ‘105’ erroneously printed as the page number).

³⁶ Waxing lyrically upon ‘the presumptuousness of man [who] attempts things which it seems are reserved for God alone’, Villagrà cites Cortés as the exemplar of ‘one in whom the spirit of adventure still burned with an unconquerable desire to discover not one more world but one hundred if possible’. Villagrà, *Historia*, f. 16, f. 18r; using the translations in *History*, 54-55.

³⁷ Obvious examples are in conquistador *probanzas* in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville (AGI), mostly in the Justicia section, but there are many less obvious ones; e.g. John Carter Brown Library, Codex Sp 138, f. 6.

Mexican-born Spaniard named Antonio de Saavedra rose to the challenge (he and Lasso were friends) and published a similar chronicle. *El Peregrino Indiano* (*The Indiano Pilgrim*) used over sixteen thousand lines of epic poetry promoting the Cortés legend, likewise built around a version of the traditional Conquest of Mexico narrative.³⁸

That put the ball back in Lasso de la Vega's court, and within two years he had published his *Elegies in Praise of Three Famous Men*—one of whom was Cortés, compared favorably to another, Jayme the Conquistador, King of Aragon.³⁹ Lasso's devotion to lionizing the legendary conquistador of Mexico was as much necessity as it was ideologically motivated; he was supported and sponsored by the Cortés family. One of them, don Gerónimo Cortés, was an amateur poet who contributed prefatory verses both to Lasso's *Valiant Cortés* and to Saavedra's *Indiano Pilgrim*. This example, included in the former of the two books, captures the tone both of don Gerónimo's efforts and the more elegant lines of the poets his family kept solvent:

Once again there pours forth
the sweet sound of the greatness,
the labors, dangers, and bravery, with which
my invincible grandfather won eternal fame.⁴⁰

'Invincible' was a favored adjective, used both by Saavedra and don Gerónimo, and as the caption to the portrait of Cortés printed in all three of Lasso de la Vega's hagiographies (see Figure 2).⁴¹ 'Valiant' was also popular – 'valorous, great gentleman and Christian'; 'illustrious and valiant gentleman' – as was 'fame'; Cortés was often 'the most famous and most adventurous Captain'.⁴² Above all, he was the 'great hero'.⁴³

³⁸ Lasso de la Vega, *Cortés valeroso*; idem, *Mexicana*; Saavedra, *El peregrino indiano*.

³⁹ G. Lasso de la Vega, *Elogios en loor de los tres famosos varones* (Zaragoza 1601); J. Weiner, *Cuatro ensayos sobre Gabriel Lobo Lasso de la Vega (1555-1615)* (Valencia 2006) 93-120.

⁴⁰ Lasso de la Vega, *Cortés valeroso*, f. 4v. Don Gerónimo was a grandson of Cortés.

⁴¹ Saavedra, *El Peregrino Indiano*, 20, 33.

⁴² Vargas Maduca (2010 [orig. 1612]) 92, 96; Díaz (1632) unnumbered prefatory material, ii; by fray Diego Serrano, head of the Mercedarians (*el ilustre y esforzado Canallero*); Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica*, 173. Torquemada, whose *Monarquía Indiana* drew heavily upon (by modern standards, plagiarized) Mendieta, has the same phrase in the Prologue to his Book 4 (1614) I, 373.

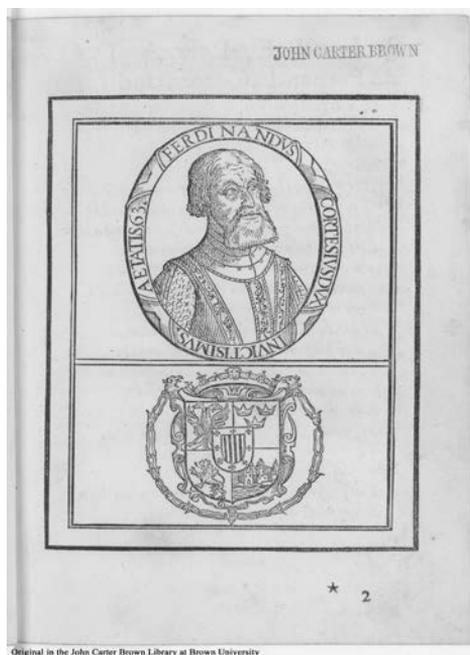


Figure 2: Portrait of Cortés used in all three of Gabriel Lasso de la Vega’s works praising the conquistador (1588, 1594, and 1601); this one taken from f. 2r of the first, *Cortés valeroso* (*Valiant Cortés*). The Latin caption reads: ‘Fernando Cortés, Invincible Leader, Aged 63’. Reproduced by permission of the John Carter Brown Library.

While Cortés never disappeared as a popular, patriotic topic, Cortesiana came in waves: that of the decades surrounding 1600; another in the reign of Carlos II (1661-1700), who commissioned and collected books and paintings on the Conquest of Mexico (Solís was his royal chronicler); and another in the late-eighteenth century. This latter wave can be explained generally in terms of Bourbon Spain’s more profitable, more robust empire, and specifically as a result of new Spanish publications of Cortés’s Letters to

⁴³ Another term that some poets could not resist was ‘courteous,’ because it played on the conquistador’s surname (e.g. Thevet 1676: 75; and the final lines of the Luis de Vargas Manrique sonnet that preceded the prologue to Lasso de la Vega 1594).

the King (most notably by Mexican Archbishop Lorenzana in 1770).⁴⁴ A larger cultural context was also the increased popularity of the epic poem, with Cortés as a traditional, fashionable subject. For example, in *Hernandia*, Francisco Ruiz de León wove themes from ancient Greek and Roman literature into the traditional narrative of Mexico's Conquest. The title may have been pithy, but the poem was a dense 383 pages of *ottava rima*, an Italian verse form associated primarily with heroic poetry. Although the poem's title suggested its topic was Cortés, in effect the conquistador was deployed as a figure from classical mythology, with the primary target being to praise Spain, the true faith, and heroism itself. By embodying that triad, Cortés was virtually deified, recognizable as a legendary icon, not a credible, historical human being.⁴⁵

In subsequent decades, more Spanish poets turned to the same theme and genre of verse. Two of them even used the same motif and title, *The Ships of Cortés Destroyed*.⁴⁶ One such poem, a sixty-stanza ode to 'the great Hero', won the Royal Academy's annual poetry prize. This giddily patriotic celebration of Spanish glory, as embodied in 'the new Cid, the Spanish Achilles', took Cortés's alleged destruction of his ships on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico as a symbolic moment that turned the Atlantic into a 'theatre' and 'fountain' of Spanish triumph. 'The great Cortés' thus brought to Spain national glory and global respect. Another poet, Juan de Escoiquiz, wrote over a thousand pages of stirring verse to praise 'the valiant Hernando'; *Mexico Conquered: Heroic Poem* included a prologue that

⁴⁴ From the late-sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, Cortés's Letters saw no new edition, but Lorenzana's volume inspired new editions in French, German, and Dutch within a few years. H. Cortés, *Historia de Nueva-España, escrita por su esclarecido conquistador Hernan Cortés, (etc.)*, F. A. Lorenzana ed. (Mexico City 1770). Some credit may also lie with the earlier inclusion of Cortés's four Letters in the sources compiled in: A. González Barúa, *Historiadores primitivos de las Indias Occidentales* (Madrid 1749). After the flurry of editions in the 1770s, there were regular reprintings or new editions in European languages through the twentieth century (too numerous to cite here).

⁴⁵ F. Ruiz de León, *Hernandia. Triunfos de la Fe, y gloria de las armas Españolas. Poema heroico. Conquista de Mexico, cabeza del imperio septentrional de la Nueva-España. proezas de Hernan-Cortes, catholicos blasones militares, y grandezas del Nuevo Mundo* (Madrid 1755).

⁴⁶ Nicolás Fernández de Moratín and Joseph María Vaca de Guzmán, in 1765 and 1778 respectively (*Las Naves de Cortés Destruídas*). The mythistory of Cortés's ship destruction has its own literature, stretching from the late-sixteenth through twentieth centuries.

proclaimed Spain's glowing record of moral rectitude, legitimacy, and generosity towards 'Indians' (see Figure 3).⁴⁷

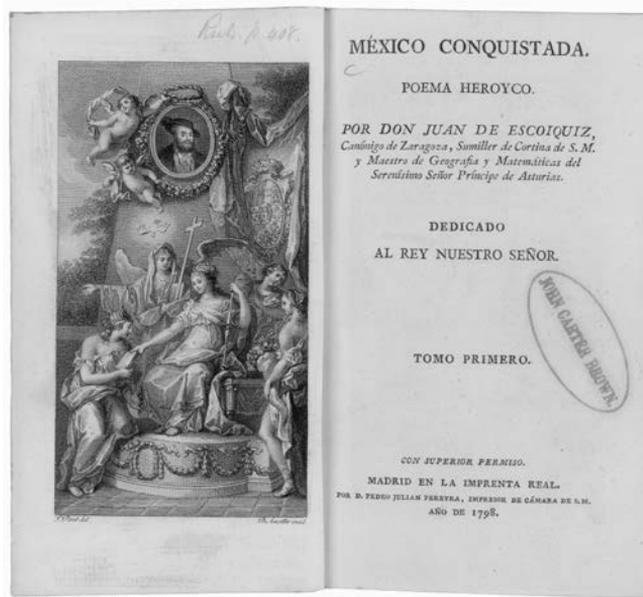


Figure 3: The frontispiece to Juan de Escoiquiz's epic poem of 1798, *México Conquistada: Poema Heroica* (*Conquered Mexico: An Heroic Poem*). Angels hold aloft a portrait of Cortés; below, a maiden queen representing Spain sits on a throne, handing a book (the word of God, perhaps) to another maiden, whose feathered headdress and subordinate position mark her as representing the Aztecs or 'conquered Mexico'. The providential theme of the engraving—with the Conquest not only justified by civilization's superiority over barbarism but guided and planned by God, using Cortés as His agent—is rooted in the late-sixteenth century creation of the Cortés legend and the Conquest's traditional narrative. Escoiquiz's poem, published a few years after Cortés's bones were reburied in a grand mausoleum commissioned by the Viceroy of Mexico, marked a perpetuation of that legend into the modern era. Reproduced by permission of the John Carter Brown Library.

⁴⁷ Vaca de Guzmán, *Las Naves de Cortés*, 1, 9, 8; Escoiquiz, *México conquistada: poema heroica*.

That prologue noted how favorable Spain's colonial record was in contrast to the dire reputation of other European empires, and in refutation of the lies spread by Las Casas and his foreign disciples. Anti-Las Casas apologias for Spanish conquest and colonialism formed a tradition stretching from Sepúlveda and Vargas Machuca, through the Bourbon era of epic poetry, into the early twentieth century – when a Spanish historian coined the phrase 'Black Legend'.⁴⁸ Yet despite this defensive tradition, and the abiding popularity of Las Casas's *Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, depictions of Cortés as Hero persisted in the Protestant world. For example, for Thomas Nicholas, the Elizabethan translator of Gómara's *Conquista*, the 'delectable and worthy' exploits of Cortés were a model and precedent to be emulated. Any Englishman contemplating the ambition of discovery and conquest could learn from the Cortés case, 'how Glorie, Renowne, and perfite Felicitie, is not gotten but with greate paines, travaile, perill and danger of life: here shall they see the wisdome, curtesie, valour and pollicie of worthy Captaynes, yea and the faithfull hartes whiche they ought to beare unto their Princes service.'⁴⁹

Nicholas presented Cortés as an exemplar but not an exception among his people. Indeed, there is nothing in his introduction to the *Pleasant Historie of the Conquest of the Weast India, now called new Spayne* that reflects Black Legend stereotypes about Spaniards in the Americas. Not only does he echo the praise for Cortés that he found in Gómara's text, but Nicholas suggests that something can be learned from the steely spirit of Spaniards as a whole. Englishmen, he implies, should seek to emulate a people so full of the 'zeal of travayle' that they have built a 'greate' and 'marvellous' empire.⁵⁰ A century and a half later, another English translator of a bestselling Spanish book – Solís's *Conquest of Mexico* – articulated a

⁴⁸ 'Black Legend' was coined in 1914 by Julián Juderías y Loyot; for the mid-twentieth century debate among U.S. historians Charles Gibson, Lewis Hanke, Benjamin Keen, and William Maltby, see: B. Keen, 'The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 49.4 (1969) 703-19; idem, 'The White Legend Revisited: A Reply to Professor Hanke's "Modest Proposal"', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 51.2 (1971) 336-55; for a more recent study that summarizes and cites earlier ones, see R. García Cárcel, *La Leyenda Negra: Historia y Opinión* (Madrid 1992).

⁴⁹ Nicholas in Gómara, *The Pleasant Historie of the Conquest of the Weast India, now called new Spayne*, T. Nicholas trans. (London 1578 [orig. 1552]) i-ii.

⁵⁰ Gómara, *The Pleasant Historie*, ii-v.

similar admiration for Spain's achievements, arguing that the English should even be grateful to their rivals; for 'the Discovery and Conquest of that new World have enrich'd *England* with no small Share of the wealth of it; which makes it a Point of Gratitude in Behalf of my Country to publish the Actions of this Hero . . . so illustrious a Conqueror.'⁵¹

The persistent perception of Cortés as a heroic figure in the Protestant West can in part be explained by the simple fact that a great story needs a great hero, and by the late-eighteenth century, the Conquest of Mexico came pre-packaged as a narrative with Cortés as that hero (sometimes flawed, but always triumphant), Moctezuma as the doomed and tragic half-hero, and Diego Velázquez (Cuba's governor and Cortés's nemesis) as the anti-hero. It is hardly surprising that the story was appealing to Spanish poets hoping a patriotic theme would bring them success. But it was equally attractive to the painters, poets, composers, and writers of the Romantic era. In particular, the Romantics found Malinche a compelling character, ripe for reinvention. She became central to the story by being transformed into a sort of female version of Moctezuma—a representative of the indigenous Mexican world who surrenders not through weakness or superstition, but due to the overwhelming emotions of romantic and sexual attraction. The effect was to transform Cortés, in turn, into a rugged leading man, sexually irresistible to women, a symbol of *machismo*, a modern hero, 'the Romantic Caesar', as Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos dubbed him.⁵²

Cortés the Romantic Hero would have been recognizable to Parisians who saw Gaspare Spontini's 1809 opera *Fernand Cortez*, as to Europeans who saw copies of Nicolas-Eustache Maurin's lithographs depicting scenes from the Conquest of Mexico.⁵³ In 'Clémence de Fernand-Cortès' (see Figure 4), the Spanish captain is the archetypal romantic hero—

⁵¹ A. Solís, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico*, unnumbered first page of Dedication.

⁵² Vasconcelos, *Hernán Cortés*, 172.

⁵³ G. Spontini, *Fernand Cortez. Opéra* (Paris 1809), which likely inspired Maurin; the opera was performed repeatedly in Paris, where Maurin lived, through the decades of both men's adult lives (they died within months of each other in 1850-51), and the style and content of the lithographs supports the claim of direct inspiration (also see the anonymous curator's commentary to the copies of Maurin's lithographs in the Museo de América, Madrid, accessible at mead.gob.es/museodeamerica). I accessed prints of two of the Maurin lithographs in the California State Library, Sacramento (CSL-Sac).

martial yet magnanimous, triumphant both on the battlefield and in love. Stated the caption: ‘placing himself proudly on the throne’ of the defeated and manacled Moctezuma, Cortés informs his captive that ‘your empire is destroyed, I am the sole master here,’ and ‘resisting Cortés will cost you your life.’ But there is hope for Moctezuma, in the form of Aláida – a fictional, pale-skinned Indian Princess, a stereotypical stand-in for Malinche. ‘Your heart is noble, Cortés’, declares Aláida, putting herself between the fallen emperor and his Spanish executioner: ‘It will also be generous, and this moment will determine if it is a magnanimous hero or a barbarous soldier to whom I have given my love.’⁵⁴



Figure 4: Nicolas-Eustache Maurin, ‘Clémence de Fernand-Cortès’. One of a series of early-nineteenth century lithographs depicting the Conquest of Mexico, albeit with fictional characters interspersed with historical ones. CSL-Saç, Rare Prints #2001-0019. Reproduced by permission of the California State Library, Sacramento.

The question is left hanging, as it should be. For Cortés is both of the above: the magnanimous, macho, barbarous, soldier-hero who seduces an empire and founds a nation. From Gómara’s day to Maurin’s, and through

⁵⁴ My translations from Maurin’s original caption to Figure 4 above.

the twentieth century, Cortés has retained ‘an uncontested place amongst the heroes of the nations’.⁵⁵ Hyperbolic evaluations of this heroism have grown, rather than faded, across these centuries. For some, Cortés was simply the ultimate ‘hero,’ for others his ‘inner greatness’ burned too bright to be contained. The ‘Conquest was a thing of superlatives and the men who took part in it were supermen,’ with Cortés *the* superman.⁵⁶ Even when modern historians and writers attempted to evaluate Cortés in a balanced way, to see him as both hero and villain, in both ‘bright light and shadow’ (as one Mexican biographer put it), he has remained a larger-than-life figure, a ‘truly extraordinary’ and ‘riveting character’.⁵⁷ Apologetic hero-worship has served only to give modern legs to the legend: ‘It may be impossible for us, nowadays, to approve of men like Cortes [sic] and the *conquistadores*, but we may at least admire their courage, resourcefulness, and strength.’⁵⁸

Anti-Hero

The dashing, handsome, beautifully dressed – yet ruthless – ladies man of Maurin’s lithographs survived in the popular imagination long enough to be played by Cesar Romero in the 1947 Hollywood movie, *Captain from Castile*. Although the consummation of romance is reserved for the subplot, Romero’s Cortés is smooth enough to seduce an empire into submission.⁵⁹ But by the time of the 2015 Spanish television drama, *Carlos, Rey Emperador*, Cortés had become more of a promiscuous predator, even an uxoricide

⁵⁵ MacNutt, *Fernando Cortes*, xii (earned by his ‘pre-eminent qualities both as a statesman and general’).

⁵⁶ J. Descola, *The Conquistadors*, Malcolm Barnes, trans. (New York, NY 1957 [orig. 1954]) 227; Madariaga et al., *Hernán Cortés*, 108.

⁵⁷ Elizondo Alcaraz, *El Escorpión de Oro*, 11; W.L. Schurz, *This New World: The Civilization of Latin America* (New York, NY 1964) 112.

⁵⁸ E. Berry and H. Best, *Men Who Changed the Map: AD 400 to 1914* (New York, NY 1968) 134.

⁵⁹ The 1947 Darryl F. Zanuck/Twentieth Century Fox movie, directed by Henry King and starring Tyrone Power (and Cesar Romero as Cortés) was based on the first half of the 1945 novel by Samuel Shellabarger.

reflecting the popular belief (going back at least into the nineteenth century in Mexico) in the conquistador as a macho, wife-killing brute.⁶⁰

Those two images of Cortés are arguably two sides to the same coin, for the Anti-Hero legend is often little more than the revision of his Romantic Caesar-Hero characteristics to emphasize brutality over boldness, cruelty over cunning, seizure over seduction. In specific, historical terms, three roots of negative perception created the Anti-Heroic Cortés: the Cortés-Velázquez feud; the Black Legend; and Mexican nationalism.

Here is not the place to explore the first of these, but suffice to assert that Cortés's complex and ultimately bitterly contentious relationship with Velázquez (Cuba's conquistador-governor) underpinned and influenced most of his adult life. For his last two and a half decades, Cortés was ensnared in a massive legal and political battle, both directly with Velázquez and with his allies after the governor's death. Dozens of private lawsuits were filed against Cortés in the 1520s-1540s, while his *residencia* (official administrative review by the crown) dragged on inconclusively. The feud with Velázquez was at the centre of a vast legal-political web whose numerous insinuations and accusations echoed down the centuries, where they could once more be alleged (making a wife-murder scene in a television show not only possible, but plausible to audiences).⁶¹

The second root to the modern Anti-Heroic Cortés is a similar set of sixteenth-century accusations revived centuries later. Although Las Casas was one of the most vocal critics of Cortés during the conquistador's lifetime and for years after it, his scathing denunciations were largely restricted to Spanish and Latin manuscripts not published until the late-nineteenth or twentieth centuries.⁶² Modern apologists for Spain's empire wrongly imagined past centuries of Protestant writers using Las Casas to demonize Cortés; ironically, after such apologists invented the Black Legend, the Dominican's criticisms did become part of a modern Cortesian

⁶⁰ Cortés is depicted as strangling his first wife, Catalina Suárez, in Episode 7 of the series, directed by Oriol Ferrer and produced by Diagonal TV for RTVE, Spain.

⁶¹ The Cortés *residencia* documents are in AGI Justicia 220-225, with scores of additional documents in Justicia, Patronato, México, and other sections of the AGI; also see the superb selection and transcriptions in J. L. Martínez, *Documentos Cortesianos* 4 vols. (Mexico City 1990-1992).

⁶² B. de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 4 vols, J.S. Rayon ed. (Madrid 1876 [orig. 1561]); *De Thesauris in Peru* published as *Los Tesoros del Peru*, A. Losada, ed. (Madrid 1958 [orig. 1561]).

Black Legend. The Anti-Hero myth may be ‘sterile, anachronistic, and ultimately false,’ but for a century it has been fueled by modern reinterpretations of past texts and events far beyond the discovery of works by Las Casas – fueled by a powerful movement that is Mexican nationalism (its third root).⁶³

For Ignacio Romerovargas, the mid-century Mexican champion of ‘Moctezuma the Magnificent,’ Cortés was no more than a ‘bandit,’ and his ‘invasion . . . an act of barbarism contrary to just law and a violation of the laws of human civilization.’⁶⁴ In an era in which Las Casas is hailed as anticipating the modern human rights movement, and Moctezuma and (his successor) Cuauhtemoc are periodically subject to attempts at rehabilitating them as national heroes, some see Cortés as something of a precursor to today’s monsters and megalomaniacs.

Over the last two centuries, Mexicans have sought to come to terms with the Conquest and Spanish colonialism as part of the process of forging a national identity. This ongoing process has been a complex political and cultural one, articulated in sophisticated terms by generations of intellectual figures from Lucas Alamán to José Vasconcelos to Octavio Paz. Along the way, Cortés has been tossed back and forth, denounced and defended in numerous ways, but in the end persisting as a highly ambiguous figure. Even the great muralists of the Mexican Revolution gave him varying treatment, from Diego Rivera’s deformed and syphilitic Cortés to the naked Cortés elevated by José Clemente Orozco into the Adam of a Mexican genesis.⁶⁵ On the 500th anniversary of Cortés’s birth, Paz commented on the paradox of Mexican feelings towards the conquistador as both violator and founder, asserting that ‘hatred of Cortés is not even hatred of Spain. Its hatred of ourselves.’⁶⁶ As another Mexican scholar noted, Cortés is ‘a very

⁶³ Enrique Krauze, *De héroes y mitos* (Mexico City 2010) 59.

⁶⁴ I. Romerovargas Iturbide, *Moctezuma el Magnífico y la Invasión de Anáhuac* (Mexico City 1964) 184, 186.

⁶⁵ Rivera’s version is in one of the scenes in the Palacio Nacional (completed in 1945); Orozco’s 1926 fresco painting is in the Colegio de San Idelfonso, both in Mexico City. As Krauze notes (*De héroes y mitos*, 72), the oldest public monument in Mexico City that shows Cortés is an 1887 monument depicting his torture of the last Aztec emperor.

⁶⁶ O. Paz, ‘Hernán Cortés: Exorcismo y liberación’ in: O. Paz and L.M. Schneider ed., *México en la obra de Octavio Paz: El peregrino en su patria* (Mexico City 1987) I, 101-6. Paz interpreted the Orozco fresco of Cortés and Malinche not as a peaceful

controversial character' because 'to Mexicans he represents that ambivalence, the presence of the destructive European; but he's also the great European warrior, the conqueror.' Likewise, even scholars in the English-speaking world whose sympathies lie with the Aztecs more than the conquistadors, have let slip their grudging admiration for the 'devious, masterful gentleman-adventurer'.⁶⁷

In other words, Cortés has evolved in modern times into a reluctantly but relentlessly admired Anti-Hero. Like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* or J.R. Ewing in the television drama *Dallas*, he is an Anti-Hero so compelling, so central to the story, so necessary to the formation of the other characters, that he draws our primary attention; in the end, we love to hate him.

Cortés the Anti-Hero, the modern monster, is of course no closer to being a credible historical figure than Cortés as Caesar, Moses, or national Hero. In Neil Young's song 'Cortez the Killer', Cortés is simply the medium by which the idyllic society of the Aztecs is destroyed, as if he were a weapon, not a man ('What a killer'). By the song's time, Cortés had become associated with destruction for so long as to be a well-recognized symbol of loss; and indeed the final verse reveals the Mexican subject matter to be merely metaphorical, with the paradise lost of Moctezuma's world standing for the romantic paradise that Young lost with the end of a relationship.⁶⁸

Initially banned in Spain, upon release there the song's title was softened to 'Cortez, Cortez'; the Cortés legend had come far enough for a song about a different kind of conquest and loss to be a battleground between images of Cortés as the Romantic Caesar, the National Hero, and the lethal Anti-Hero. A parallel battleground, fought on for centuries, has been that of Cortesian remains, statues, and monuments. It began with his

genesis but as evoking the sexual violence of the Conquest; see also M.A. Hernández, *Figural Conquistadors: Renriting the New World's Discovery and Conquest in Mexican and River Plate Novels of the 1980s and 1990s* (Lewisburg, PA 2006) 87.

⁶⁷ Felipe Solís interviewed in the 'Cortés' episode of the television documentary series *The Conquerors* (History Channel 2005); B. Keen in: A. de Zorita, *Life and Labor in Ancient Mexico: The Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain*, B. Keen trans. and ed. (Norman 1994 [orig. 1566]) 19.

⁶⁸ Neil Young and Crazy Horse, *Zuma* (Reprise Records 1975); also see the liner notes to *Decade* (Warner Bros 1977), on which 'Cortez the Killer' was included; D.A. Manrique, 'Los discos prohibidos del franquismo', *El País*, 20 January 2012, 'Cultura' section.

bones, buried, moved, and reinterred in every century since his death; it continued with the bizarre tale of the 1794 mausoleum and the modern mystery of the conquistador's bones;⁶⁹ and it has continued in more recent decades, with the controversy surrounding the 1982 sculpture of Cortés, Malinche, and their son Martín, denounced, vandalized, moved, and effectively hidden in Mexico City;⁷⁰ and the 2010 defacing of the 1890 statue of Cortés in his hometown of Medellín, Spain ('a cruel and arrogant glorification of genocide and an insult to the Mexican people').⁷¹

Within such a history there lies some semblance of a debate over the Spanish-Aztec War, but by and large the violence and tragedy of that war is masked behind political posturing and presentist squabbles, sometimes tinged with unintentional comedy. As long as the battleground is Cortés – not just his Hero or Anti-Hero status, but Cortés in any historical or posthumous form – the conflict is unlikely to result in a better understanding of the war that made him (in)famous.

Self-Preservationist

In a recent study of the recipients of the Carnegie Medal for heroism, two Harvard professors found 'almost no examples of heroes whose first impulse was for self-preservation but who overcame that impulse with a conscious, rational decision to help.'⁷² That last word is at the heart of our

⁶⁹ Duverger, *Hernán Cortés*, 21-26, 368-71, App. V; J. Martínez Ahrens, 'La tumba secreta de Hernán Cortés', *El País*, 3 June 2015, 'Opinión' section (I thank Kris Lane for sending me the link to this article); notes from my visits to the Hospital de Jesús, Mexico City.

⁷⁰ C. Krauss, 'After 500 Years, Cortés' Girlfriend is Not Forgiven', *New York Times*, Mexico City Journal, 26 March 1997.

⁷¹ The quote is my translation of an anonymous note left by the protestors who splashed red paint on the statue. Medellín's mayor bemoaned the vandals' 'lack of historical understanding'. The protestors also noted that red paint was significant because that very night the Spanish and Mexican national soccer teams were to meet in Mexico City (the Spanish team plays in red and is nicknamed 'La Roja'); A. Carvajal, 'Manchan con pintura roja una estatua de Hernán Cortés por ser un 'insulto a México'', *El Mundo*, 12 August 2010, 'España' section.

⁷² E. Yoeli and D. Rand, 'The Trick to Acting Heroically', *The New York Times* 30 August 2015, 'Sunday Review', 10.

understanding of heroism – to help others, to save their lives—and suggests that the opposite, the anti-hero, might be seen as a self-preservationist. For most of his half-millennium afterlife, Cortés, the urconquistador, has been seen as some combination of Hero, Moses, Caesar, or Anti-Hero – a genius general-of-letters chosen by God to save Spain from its enemies, and to save millions of ‘Indians’ from damnation. In the modern age, as civilization replaced religious salvation as empire’s justification, the hagiographies of Cortés continued to roll off presses; as the founding father of New Spain, and the father of a *mestizo* son, he was the civilizing progenitor of modern Mexico. At the same time, an Anti-Hero counter-narrative emerged, with ‘Cortez the Killer’ as a wife-murdering villain who brought apocalyptic slaughter, epidemic mortality, and cultural anomie.

Within that history (and the pages above offer but a glimpse into five centuries of sources in every imaginable medium), two core Cortesian characteristics have persisted: almost every description and depiction, regardless of the century or medium, promotes Cortés as exceptional and masterful. One composer of epic poetry put it colorfully:

If you want to see the valiant spirit, / that has given so much glory to
your nation, / prepared for risks and prudent, / resolute in
endeavors and bold, / a General of the Spanish people, / whose
valor the world has respected, / in the great Cortés you will see it
all.⁷³

Scores of scholars and writers, painters and composers, have chosen Cortés as a subject because in terms of his exceptionalism and his mastery of events, ‘you will see it all.’

Remove those two assumptions, however, and two things collapse: the heroic legend of Cortés; and the traditional narrative of the Conquest of Mexico. The two are inextricably bound up together, mutually dependent and explanatory. To paraphrase Octavio Paz, to dispel a myth, one must attack the ideology that spawned it.⁷⁴ If Cortés is no longer exceptional, nor in complete control, an opening is created – a whole world of openings – into which other people and other explanations can be discovered. Other Spaniards can be seen, with agency, making decisions, turning events. Indigenous protagonists become active, not passive, guiding developments,

⁷³ Vaca de Guzmán, *Las Navas de Cortés Destruidas*, 7.

⁷⁴ Paz’s actual words quoted in Krauze, *De heroes y mitos*, 73.

impacting outcomes. Those with traditionally small parts (or no parts) in the drama can periodically take center stage – non-Nahuas as well as Nahuas, lesser leaders as well as ‘kings’ and ‘generals’, women as well as men – in ways that dramatically shift our perspectives and understandings. Other explanatory factors, now well-known but often tacked on as secondary phenomenon that ‘helped’ Cortés, such as epidemic disease and indigenous ‘disunity’ or micropatriotism, can be seen as more central and human.⁷⁵

And then there is the war itself. Divorcing Cortés’s biography from the ‘Conquest of Mexico,’ and then leaving behind that phrase, with its connotation of a campaign that was a remarkable yet inevitable triumph, allows us to see the Spanish-Aztec War for what it was: an horrific conflict that raged for over two years, marked by civilian massacres and atrocities of all kinds, with mortality rates around two-thirds among Spanish invaders and Mesoamerican communities alike. Indeed, seen through the lens of war’s unpredictable chaos, the image of Cortés as exceptional and masterful becomes utterly absurd, divorced from reality, a portrait of a fictional commander of an imagined campaign. But viewed within the context of the war as it really was, Cortés’s exceptionalism recedes to one small but revealing fact: he survived. Not only was he one of the very few Spaniards to experience the entire Spanish-Aztec War, he survived additional expeditions and campaigns, dying a natural death in Spain (one historian has asserted he was the only conquistador in Mexico to do so).⁷⁶ In the end, perhaps Cortés’s greatest accomplishment was self-preservation.

⁷⁵ These ideas will be explored more fully in my book, *The Meeting* (subtitle to be finalized), forthcoming from Ecco/HarperCollins.

⁷⁶ ‘He was the only one of all the conquistadors to die in his bed’, see: C. Duverger, *Crónica de la eternidad: ¿Quién escribió la historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España?* (Madrid 2013) 25.