

**A New Evaluation of Hernán Cortés's Textual Strategies
in Light of Documents Written by and about Diego Velázquez**
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Abstract

During the conquest of Mexico, Hernán Cortés used textual and political strategies in his *Cartas de relación* that helped him achieve a position of power within the Spanish Empire. These strategies have been investigated and written about by historians and literary critics alike. Nevertheless, the textual and political strategies used in the *Carta de relación* of his rival, Diego Velázquez, have been largely ignored. Diego Velázquez was the conqueror of Cuba and Hernán Cortés's superior officer. This investigation focuses on a comparative analysis between the textual and political strategies of both Hernán Cortés and Diego Velázquez. This comparison not only reveals a new dimension to this famous rivalry, it also calls into question the origin of the textual and political strategies used by Hernán Cortés.

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Introduction

The mere mention of name Hernán Cortés brings to mind many forceful and enduring images which tell a conflicting story. Fierce and loyal warrior of the Spanish Empire. Treacherous outlaw. Crusader for the Army of Christ. Heartless murderer. Conqueror of the mighty Aztec Empire. Who was Hernán Cortés? The answers that we have are based more on myth than fact. What we know about him comes to us from a number of chronicles of the time and from his own letters to Emperor Charles I of Spain and V of Germany. Although these letters were considered legal documents that chronicled the events of the conquest, we must pause before accepting them as true and historic fact. In his chapter titled “The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact,” Hayden White explains his theory as it applies to the presupposed distinction between historical documents and literary fiction. He refutes the age old argument that myth and history are juxtaposed. White defines the process by which historical narrative is created as being the very same process an author uses when creating a work of fiction:

No given set of recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story. The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of some events and the highlighting of others by characterization, repetition, variation of tone and point of view, in short, all of the same techniques that we would normally expect to find in the employment of a novel or a play. (84)

When reading Cortés's letters to the Emperor—his *Cartas de relación*—one must be conscious of two things. First, White's view of history shows us that these documents are in fact subjective narratives that were—up to a point—created by an author much the same way a play or novel would be created. Secondly, the reader must bear in mind that Cortés had a political agenda that motivated which events he selected to highlight and which events to suppress. We know that these letters were a tool used by Cortés for the purpose of legitimizing his political ascendance in México. Within these letters, Cortés used a variety of textual and political strategies in order to solidify his newfound position of power in the burgeoning Spanish Empire.

In her book *The Armature of the Conquest: Spanish Accounts of the Discovery of America, 1492-1589*, Beatriz Pastor explains how Cortés used these textual strategies to create a fictionalized version of the conquest. According to Pastor, "The elements that articulate Cortés's fictionalized reconstructions were: selection of events, reordering of events and subjective redefinition of concepts and meanings" (69). She further elaborates on the reconstructions by explaining that Cortés, "excludes anything that cannot be suited to his objective and carefully reworks the material selected for inclusion. Cortés paints a character of himself, which is consistent with literary models to be found in the epic poetry of the time" (72). Pastor goes on to define this fictionalized account of the conquest as a "model" or "the perfect weapon for the acquisition of power, fame and glory" (100). Although Pastor does an excellent job of highlighting and defining this "model," we must look at Cortés's past in order to gain a more complete understanding of it.

Cortés first rose to prominence on the island of Cuba as the protégé and assistant of the Governor, Diego Velázquez. The two would later become bitter enemies once Cortés usurped his authority and set out on his conquest of Mexico. Velázquez is normally referred to, by historians and literary critics alike, within the context of the conquest of Mexico. He has been immortalized as Cortés's rival for power and as the victim of his textual strategies. However, it is important to point out that Velázquez was also a conqueror in his own right. He was the conquistador of Cuba before being awarded the governorship of the island. By taking a look at the letters and documents that Velázquez wrote during the conquest of Cuba, a new dimension of the model Pastor so eloquently defined becomes apparent. Many of the textual strategies that Cortés used during the conquest of México in the year 1519 are noticeably present in the writings of Velázquez during the conquest of Cuba in 1511. These similarities shed new light on the origins of Cortés's model and the relationship between the two men.

Some outstanding examples of these similarities are the silences that reverberate throughout Diego Velázquez's *Carta de Relación* and Hernán Cortés's *Segunda Carta de Relación*. Both men choose to eliminate horrific and bloody details about their campaigns in order to gain the favor of the Emperor Charles IV and King Ferdinand. Velázquez and Cortés were both cited, by various chroniclers, as having presided over at least one massacre of Native Americans. We know that Cortés ordered that thousands of Native Americans be slaughtered in the great city of Cholula. During the Conquest of Cuba, Velázquez presided over a similar massacre on the banks of the Caonao River. The importance of these episodes of brutality was silenced in their respective narratives. Nonetheless, we are able to reestablish their relevance by examining other chronicles from that era.

Purpose of the investigation

The purpose of my thesis is to bring about an expanded evaluation of Cortés as the “model conquistador” that is defined by Beatriz Pastor. The evidence suggests that the origins of the model he used to portray himself in writing are broader than has been previously discussed. They lie in the culture of the times and the individuals with whom Cortés came into contact throughout his early years in America. Elements of this model were used by Velázquez during his rise to power prior to the conquest of Mexico. I intend to prove that the relationship between Cortés and Velázquez was much more complex than a simple rivalry. We know that Cortés served as a soldier under the command of Velázquez and went on to serve as his personal secretary following the conquest of Cuba. It is therefore likely that Cortés was indeed a student of the textual and political strategies that were used by his superior, Diego Velázquez. What is truly extraordinary about Cortés’s use of these strategies is that he took them to new heights of complexity. What can be described as a simple bass line under Velázquez was remade into a symphony under Cortés during the conquest of México.

The Thesis Plan

This investigation will examine the similarities and differences of the textual and political strategies that were used by both conquistadors during their respective campaigns. The primary sources of evidence will be selections from the *Segunda Carta de Relación* by Hernán Cortés, the *Carta de Relación de la Isla de Cuba* by Diego Velázquez, the *Historia de Indias* by Bartolomé de las Casas and various other sources that were written by King Ferdinand, the Admiral Diego Colón, and Diego Velázquez himself.

The investigation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is divided into two parts. The first is the historical background of the Spanish conquest of America. This section of Chapter One aims to give the reader an understanding of the transitional cosmovision in which the conquistadors operated. The transition from a medieval mindset to Renaissance humanism is here defined, and a clear link is drawn between the cosmovision of the era and the ideology of the conquistadors. The second section of Chapter One focuses on the respective rises to power of both Diego Velázquez and Hernán Cortés leading up to the conquest of Mexico. The chapter seeks to examine the evolving relationship between the two men. Detailing this relationship lays the groundwork for a deeper analysis of their writings in the following chapters.

Chapter Two focuses on Cortés's fictionalization of the conquest of Mexico. The model established by Beatriz Pastor in her *The Armature of the Conquest* is thoroughly examined so as to compare it with the actions of Velázquez in the following chapter. Chapter Three is a comparative analysis that details the textual and political strategies used by Velázquez during the conquest of Cuba. Finally, in the conclusion, a direct link is drawn between the strategies used by both men. It is my hope that this investigation will make a contribution to Latin American colonial studies by shining a new light on the relationship between the two conquistadors, especially the way in which Hernán Cortés and his textual strategies were deeply influenced by his former superior Diego Velázquez.

Chapter 1

Defining the Historical Context of Hernán Cortés's Model Conquistador

If order to compare the textual strategies of Diego Velázquez and Hernán Cortés, one must attempt to recreate the historical backdrop that was present when these two actors made their debut on the world stage. The objective is for the reader to gain an understanding of the transition from the medieval mindset to Renaissance humanism, which had an enormous effect on the political climate of the conquest in which these two men participated. This chapter will also cover the history of the complex relationship that developed between the two conquistadors. Cortés's famous manipulation of the written word cannot be understood without a careful examination of this twisted rivalry between himself and Velázquez. It is a tale of two Renaissance men united by their common quest for fame and fortune. It is a tale of two ambitious conquistadors that came to see each other as an obstacle to their desires of unlimited wealth and power.

The Spain of the late fifteenth century was a society in transition. It had recently been unified under the control of the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel. Even though Spain was about to begin a new chapter in its history, its medieval past was slow to disappear. Seven hundred years of war with an Islamic occupier had formed a Christian warrior mentality that can only be understood by looking at the history of the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula.

After the Islamic invasion of the Visigoth kingdom in the year 711 A.D., most of the Iberian Peninsula fell under Muslim control. This new Muslim state was referred to as Al

Andalus and in its early years was considered a caliphate of Damascus (Kattán-Ibarra 40). In the northern and central region of the peninsula, four Christian kingdoms formed which remained free of Islamic rule. These four kingdoms began a slow and steady battle with Al Andalus to reclaim the land that once belonged to their Roman and Visigoth ancestors. The Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula lasted for centuries. Historian Juan Kattán-Ibarra explains that “the final nail in the coffin of Al Andalus came in 1492 when the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel retook the final Muslim kingdom of Granada. This event signaled the end of the reconquest and the beginning of a new order in all of Spain” (71).

The medieval Spaniard inhabited a world of fervent devotion to the Catholic Church. Religion dominated every aspect of public life as it was the ideology that motivated the war against the Muslim occupiers. The model medieval soldier was the *caballero cristiano* or the Christian knight. The Christian cross was as much a part of the battles against the Moors as the sword. In her book *El Cid y otros hombres de la guerra*, Margarita C. Torre explains how the proximity to a Muslim state helped Spain give birth to successive generations of holy warriors. According to Torre, “La Frontera Castellana resultó, a lo largo de los reinados de Fernando I, Sancho II y Alfonso VI, tal vez la mejor escuela de combate para formar a un joven caballero” (195). She also goes on to describe the Christian knight as one who exudes, “lealtad, honor, fuerza y valor” (196). The character Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar from the epic poem *El Cantar de Mio Cid* was a popular medieval hero that embodied these traits. According to the literary critic Bárbara Mújica, “En muchos episodios El Cid demuestra no solo su fuerza superior, sino su generosidad, su sentido de moderación y su lealtad al rey”(6). Characters such as Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, otherwise known as The Cid, captivated the Spanish public’s imagination and served

as a standard bearer for what was expected of a Christian warrior. Nevertheless, the Christian warriors of the late fifteenth century were slowly being introduced to philosophical, political and artistic trends that were taking the rest of Europe by storm.

The Renaissance and its humanist ideals were seeping into Spanish society at the same time the reconquest was coming to a close. In her article, "Algunas cosas de Hernán Cortés y México: una lectura humanista de la *Segunda carta de relación*", Dolores Clavero defines the humanist's attitude as placing value on such things as secularism, the pursuit of fame and fortune, individualism and the pursuit of science (213-222). This new cosmovision turned the medieval world view on its head. What had been a feudal and theocratic society was now faced with the ideas of human individualism, ambition, and scientific exploration usurping the idea of a pantocrator God. These were indeed contradictory times and this mix, of Renaissance and medieval worldviews, was what the conquistadors of America brought with them on their mission to conquer the New World. We can see evidence of this duality when we look at the expedition of the very first explorer and conquistador of the Americas, Christopher Columbus. In his article "The Middle Ages in the Conquest of America" Luis Weckmann states that, "the conquerors were notably Renaissance men in their fondness for visible, material things such as grandeur, wealth and fame" (130). Columbus was a man with a driving ambition to find glory through the discovery of a very profitable trade route to the East Indies. At the same time, he used medieval maps of Marco Polo and other explorers of Asia as navigation guides. He clung to the images and descriptions of Polo even when faced with a new and unknown reality. According to Weckmann, "in all his travels, when navigating through the Antilles or bordering the coasts of the American mainland, Columbus thought he was visiting the many islands which

were depicted in the medieval maps at the end of the Asian continent in the vicinity of Cathay” (131). He also signals Columbus’s religiously charged reaction to finding land ahoy as evidence of a medieval attitude. Weckmann describes Columbus’s reaction in the following way, “he rejoiced at the thought he had found a new land where the Lord can be served by the divulgation of his holy name and faith among so many new peoples” (132). Columbus’s juxtaposed realities set the precedent for the conquistadors that followed in his footsteps. Amongst this swirling cocktail of dueling cosmovisions, Diego Velázquez and Hernán Cortés entered stage left.

A rivalry for power develops

Historian Juan Miralles describes Diego Velázquez’s background in his book *Hernán Cortés: inventor de México*. He states that Velázquez, “provenía del grupo de hidalgos llegados con Colón en su segundo viaje. Era uno de los sobrevivientes de las hambres de la Isabela, la primera ciudad Española fundada en América, misma que terminó en desastre total” (19).

Although Velázquez did get off to a rough start in America we know that he eventually met with success. If we skip a few pages ahead in our storyline we see that he became a wealthy and influential colonist on the now pacified island of Hispaniola. *The Historical Dictionary of Cuba* describes Velázquez as, “an able administrator and former lieutenant to Nicolas de Ovando, Governor of Hispaniola,” and it goes on to describe Velázquez as, “one of the wealthiest land owners on the island of Hispaniola” (292). It was around this time, when an ambitious young man by the name of Hernán Cortés came ashore with his own visions of grandeur. He arrived penniless but he was astute. The perfect opportunity to make friends in high places fell into his

lap shortly after his arrival on the Island. In his work titled *Crónica de la Nueva España* Francisco Cervantes de Salazar describes the chain of events that led to Cortés climbing the first rung on the ladder of success:

luego de ahí a pocos días de llegar, se rebelaron las provincias de Aniguavagua Guacayarima, a cuya reducción y pacificación iba Diego Velázquez. Fue con él Cortés todo lo mejor aderezado que él pudo, lo cual fue causa que el gobernador le diese ciertos indios en tierra del Daygao y la escribanía del ayuntamiento de la villa de Achúa, donde Cortés vivió seis años dándose a granjerías y sirviendo su oficio a contento de todo el pueblo. (12)

In the year 1511 Diego Velázquez was tapped by Diego Colón, the Governor of Hispaniola, to head up an army of conquest into the neighboring island of Cuba. Once again Cortés was quick to volunteer his services. Both men saw this as an opportunity for economic advancement and for the acquisition of fame and glory. Velázquez saw an opportunity to ascend from being merely a wealthy land owner to the rank of a powerful governor. According to Juan Miralles, “Velázquez se encontraba a punto de dar un gran salto al recibir el nombramiento de gobernador que lo liberaría de la subordinación formal a Diego Colón. Aspiraba, además, a la adelantaduría, lo cual colocaría bajo su jurisdicción todos los territorios que descubriese ” (22). Cortés saw the opportunity to move up from a small time farmer and scribe to perhaps a wealthy land owner. His hopes were not unfounded considering he and most soldiers of conquest received a portion of land and spoils once the conquest was complete.

The conquest of Cuba was swiftly executed as the Spaniards met with little organized resistance by the natives. Once the Spaniards had established firm control over the Island, Diego Velázquez was awarded the title of Governor of Cuba. Cortés's immediate ambitions were also fulfilled. By the year 1516, Juan Miralles describes Cortés as a successful "minero, ganadero, agricultor, mercador y naviero" (75). He goes on to say that, "Su hacienda era de las mejores de la isla. Además estaba dedicado al comercio ultramarino en gran escala, dándose el caso de que en ese momento, de los cinco barcos que había al ancla en el puerto, tres eran de él. Uno de los navíos tenía en sus bodegas un cargamento de vinos, indicio de que recién llegaba de Europa. Ese era el nivel de los negocios que movía" (75). Not long after the campaign ended, Cortés was also given the prestigious title of personal secretary to Governor Velázquez. This is significant in that he would have been personally involved with Diego Velázquez's political dealings and correspondence. Considering that Velázquez's *Carta de relación* was written three years after the initial invasion of Cuba, it can even be suggested that Cortés had firsthand knowledge of this document. Shortly after being named Velázquez's secretary, Cortés began developing further ambitions. These fresh ambitions sowed the seeds of a new and very personal rivalry between these two men. Cortés soon tired of his role as subordinate to Velázquez and he began jumping at every opportunity that crossed his path to circumvent or undermine him.

Cortés seized his first opportunity to undermine the new governor not long after the conquest of Cuba. There was widespread discontent among Velázquez's men. Historian I.A. Wright explains that the discontent was caused by, "Velázquez's disability to assign the *cubeños* to servitude under the *repartimiento* system" (40). His soldiers were anxious to receive their

spoils of conquest. Some even felt that the spoils were not distributed fairly. A certain captain by the name of Francisco Morales, was a leader among the disgruntled crowd. He became a threat to Velázquez's ambitions. The new governor needed to be rid of him but he had to go about it astutely. Morales had been appointed by Diego Colón himself, so a simple dismissal was not in the cards. Instead, he cleverly accused him of atrocities committed against the native cubeños. Francisco Morales was then shipped back to Hispaniola in order to stand trial for these accusations. Even with Morales back in Hispaniola, Velázquez's political situation among his fellow Spaniards was far from stable. Many of them grew even angrier with Velázquez over his treatment of Morales. A group of Spaniards on the island of Cuba wanted to return to Hispaniola in secret to testify in defense of Francisco Morales and to complain about the leadership of Diego Velázquez. Cortés, ever the opportunist, took advantage of the situation and backstabbed his superior officer. He offered to escape from Cuba by canoe and represent the group's sentiment at the trial. This plot however was discovered and thwarted by Velázquez himself. In his *Historia de las Indias* Bartolomé de las Casas relates the entire episode in detail:

Entre la gente que allí con Diego Velázquez estaba, había dél y de su gobernación algunos descontentos, porque no les hacía, según ellos tan buen tratamiento como quisieron, en especial un Francisco de Morales. Diego Velázquez no le pudiese remover y viendo que su gobernación buena o mala se le perturbaba, hizo proceso contra el Morales y envióle preso al Almirante. Todavía las quejas del teniente Diego Velázquez crecían de cada día. En este tiempo vino a Cuba [...] los jueces de apelación, y acordaron los quejosos de Velázquez de hacer sus informaciones secretas y tomar sus firmas para enviar a quejar. Había de pasar a

esta isla en una canoa o barquillo de indio en un mar tan alta. Para llevar a tal información, no hallaron a otro más atrevido a cualquier peligro sino a Hernán Cortés, criado y secretario de Diego Velázquez. Estándose para embarcar en una canoa de indios con sus papeles, fue Velázquez avisado y hízolo prender y quísolo ahorcar. (527-528)

This was to be just the beginning of an intense rivalry that would carry on throughout the conquest of Mexico and the beginning of the conquest of what is now known as Honduras. It seems that Cortés, once he was caught in the act, was astute enough to know that he needed to regain Velázquez's friendship in order to see his ambitions bear fruit. Historian Juan Miralles puts a nice cap on the episode by stating; "finalmente cuando se pasó el enojo, el gobernador le concedió el perdón a Cortés" (62). Cortés now lay in wait like a predator waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce.

He saw his destiny fall into his lap when Velázquez tapped him to head an exploratory and mercantile expedition along the coast of the newly discovered Yucatan Peninsula. Unbeknownst to Velázquez, he had just cleared a pathway for Cortés to blaze his way to fame, glory and wealth. The chain of events gained such momentum that Velázquez's efforts to thwart them proved futile. Cortés did not harbor the simple mercantile and exploratory ambitions that Velázquez was calling for. His ambitions would later prove to be much grander when he usurped Velázquez's authority and conquered the newly found territory. If he were able to legitimize such an act in the eyes of the Emperor, he would be able to swipe the title of *Adelantado* away from Velázquez, thus gaining access to wealth and power few could ever

dream of possessing. Cortés began laying the groundwork for a conquest of unparalleled proportions.

As soon as he started preparing for the expedition, he began to deviate from the standard preparations an exploratory expedition would entail. An exploratory expedition would have required a limited amount of supplies and soldiers because the intention was not to colonize but to return to the ship's original destination with slaves, goods, and information. Cortés however, raised eyebrows with the unprecedented amount of money he was investing in this particular expedition. He was aggressively pursuing private investors to fund the operation and when that did not suffice he began spending his own money. When his own money proved insufficient, he took out loans and even went as far as offering his own hacienda as collateral. All this was done with the intention of setting his master plan in motion. In his biography of Hernán Cortés, Juan Miralles states that Cortés indebted himself to the likes of Andrés de Duero, Pedro de Jerez and Antonio de Santa Clara to the sum of 4,000 castellanos, which was an extremely large sum of money at that time (75). Not only were his spending habits drawing attention, his sheer number of recruits sent speculation about his true objectives flying. According to Cortés in his *Segunda carta de relación*, he recruited upwards of four hundred men to accompany him (16). Such actions were not lost on Velázquez. The gossip mill was churning and he was well aware of Cortés's strange behavior.

Velázquez was indeed suspicious but the preparations continued right under his nose. The whole situation came to a head on the day the expedition was scheduled to set sail. Velázquez showed up at the port to see the ship off and when he saw with his own eyes the

amount of provisions that were being loaded onto the ships he protested loudly. In his *Crónica de Nueva España*, Cervantes de Salazar paints an interesting picture of the confrontation. “llegó Diego Velázquez, caballero en una mula y dixo ¿Hijo que es esto que hacéis? ¿Qué mudanza es ésta? ¿Para qué os embarcáis con tantos hombres y sin tener pan suficiente para la jornada? Cortés contestó, Señor Dios queda con vuestra merced, que yo voy al servir a Dios y a mi Rey y a buscar con estos mis compañeros mi ventura” (8).

With that Cortés was gone. He had managed to slip through Velazquez’s fingers but he had yet to actually be in open contempt of his superior. Suspicious activity does not a crime make. It was not until Cortés set foot on Mesoamerican soil and founded the town of Veracruz that his treasonous act would be complete. The founding of Veracruz made him a criminal under Spanish law because it was a direct act of defiance against his superior Diego Velázquez. His orders were to explore, trade, and capture slaves. He was to immediately report and hand over his findings to Velázquez upon his prompt return to Cuba. By founding a town Cortés proved he had no intention of returning to Cuba. To prevent anyone in his army from returning to Cuba out of loyalty to Governor Velázquez, he destroyed his own ships once all his men were on land. He was there to make his own fortune, not add to Velázquez’s. Standing in his way however, were some pretty sizable obstacles. Not only would he have to wage war on a large and highly developed native civilization, but he also found himself to be an outlaw on the run from Spanish authorities back in Havana. What Cortés did to fix this legal predicament required some of the fanciest political footwork imaginable.

Chapter 2

Creating the Model Conquistador

The founding of Veracruz was a bold and audacious move for Cortés. His thirst for power and prestige are obvious to even the most objective of historians. His drive and ambition were symptoms of the burgeoning humanist ideals that were reverberating throughout the European continent. What followed this bold move was one of the most consequential military and political conquests in written history. Cortés, however, would need more than ambition in order to survive. He now found himself in a legal predicament that was tantamount to treason. He had defied his superior officer, Diego Velázquez. He was officially an outlaw on the run. Knowing his rebellion could have serious consequences, he needed to twist reality a bit. Somehow he needed to convince the King that his rebellion was not an act against the Crown but an act of faithful service to it.

Cortés found the perfect vehicle for his fictionalization of reality in the required legal correspondence to the Emperor known as a *carta de relación*. These letters were required by the Spanish Crown as a way to stay informed and control an ever expanding empire. Within each letter, the conquistador was expected to testify as a witness to the events that took place during the exploration or conquest. Because it was considered a legal document, its contents were considered to be true and accurate accounts of events as they unfolded (Merrim 59). However, Cortés would use this informative legal document as a vehicle of persuasion that would make his rebellion appear to be an act of service. Within his correspondence Cortés

twisted reality, and according to Beatriz Pastor, in *The Armature of the Conquest*, created a “fictional model” of a conquistador (72).

The purpose of this chapter is to deconstruct the process of fictionalization within Cortés’s *Segunda Carta de relación* into various textual tactics. These tactics, when examined collectively, make up the complex façade of Cortés’s model conquistador. This chapter will be broken down into five separate sections. Each section will be dedicated to dissecting and properly defining said tactics as separate parts that form the sum total of Cortés’s fictionalized persona. The first section will be dedicated to defining the formal façade of Cortés’s letter and how Cortés used certain forms of rhetoric to give his argument credibility. Section two will define the medieval code of vassalage and the concept of the medieval Christian knight. Section three seeks to demonstrate how Cortés used these concepts to discredit his rival Velázquez, and at the same time characterize himself as the embodiment of the ideal vassal and Christian knight.

The fourth section discusses two concepts by Wayne C. Booth in his book titled *The Rhetoric of Fiction* known as the *variations of distance* and *the unreliable narrator*. These concepts will be defined and (through direct examples from Cortés’s correspondence) we will see how he appropriately alternated between first and third person narration in order to distance himself from undesired outcomes and at the same time place himself at the forefront of all the campaign’s successes. Section five examines the concept of *authorial silence*, as defined by Booth. This section seeks to draw a direct link between Cortés’s silences and the careful crafting of his model. The conclusion of this chapter will be dedicated to exposing the

agenda behind the model, and will focus on the similarity between Machiavelli's Renaissance masterpiece *The Prince* and Cortés's model conquistador.

The Use of Formality in Order to Establish Legitimacy

The time Cortés spent as an assistant to Velázquez in Cuba and as a notary in Hispaniola served him well in many regards. In his article "The Mental State of Cortés" John Elliott explains why. He relates that, "there is no doubt that Cortés's two years of study in Salamanca, followed by a long period of training as a notary and secretary gave him a working knowledge of Latin and a close acquaintance with the methods of Castillian law" (3). According to Walter Mignolo in his essay "Cartas, crónicas y relaciones de descubrimiento" this knowledge helped him create a letter that conformed to the standards of the time. Mignolo states that, "sin lugar a dudas que estos informes autodenominados 'relaciones' se conforman al modelo epistolar" (67). By conforming to this epistolary model, Cortés began laying the ground work for his defense. Had he not followed the legal and rhetorical standards laid out in said model, his arguments may have been dismissed. On the contrary, to abide by them helped establish legitimacy. This section will highlight three distinct techniques that helped Cortés write a letter that complied with the necessary legal formalities that were common during the sixteenth century. These three techniques are the pillars of formality, which together made up the formal façade of Cortés's defense.

The first technique Cortés used was that of portraying himself as a reliable witness. During the late medieval era and early Renaissance, a narrative was generally accepted as true if the narrator was a firsthand witness of the events he was narrating. To illustrate this point,

we can contrast the works of three well known chroniclers of the time: the priest Bartolomé de las Casas, the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and the historian Francisco López de Gómara. Both Las Casas and Bernal Díaz were conscious of the fact that firsthand knowledge lends itself to credibility. Evidence of their compliance with this widely held view can be found throughout their respective works (e.g., *Historia de las Indias*, *Historia de la conquista de México*, and *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*).

Las Casas personally accompanied the conquistadors as a Catholic priest during the conquest of America. He relates his version of these events in his *Historia de las Indias*. In her recently published article “The Intellectual Legacy of Bartolomé de Las Casas” Margarita Zamora highlights his unusual narrative technique. She states that, “Las Casas narrates the early days of the colonization of Cuba and his personal experiences in the Island from no less than three different points of view: the testimonial first person singular, the second person singular and the second person plural” (5). Even though Las Casas does not always use the testimonial first person to describe the events that he witnessed, he clearly seems to have been aware of the prevalent perception of the era that viewed only firsthand witnesses as credible sources of information. Even when using the third person plural and singular, Las Casas cleverly inserts himself as another participant in the action. In the following passage from *Historia de Indias*, Las Casas narrates a scene in which he begins to consider the misery in which the native population is living. Peculiarly, he mentions himself by name as if he were a character in his own novel. He states, “Bartolomé de Las Casas, Ilegandose la Pascua de Pentecostés, acordó dejar su casa que tenía en el Rio de Arimao, [...] donde hacia sus haciendas, e ir a decilles misa. [...] Comenzó a considerar la miseria y servidumbre que padecían aquellas gentes” (III: 92).

Bartolomé de Las Casas was most certainly manipulating his narrative point of view for a reason. I will explore that reason in the last section of this chapter. The important point here is to underline the fact that the priest wanted to leave no doubt in his reader's mind that he was a reliable first hand witness, no matter from what point of view he chose to narrate.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo also participated in the conquest of the New World, but as a soldier in Cortés's army. Like Las Casas, he is always careful to make himself appear to be part of the events he narrates. A clear example of this can be seen in the way he describes the initial treatment the Spaniards received from the inhabitants of the city of Cholula and the suspicions the Spaniards harbored toward their hosts. According to Díaz del Castillo, “nos aposentaron y nos dieron muy bien de comer los dos días primeros, y aunque los veíamos que estaban de paz, no dejábamos siempre de estar muy apercebidos, por la buena costumbre que en ello teníamos” (43). He differs from Las Casas in that he does not refer to himself in the third person. However, his careful use of the first person plural has the same effect. It gives him credibility to speak not only as a first hand witness, but also as the voice for a group of witnesses. Perhaps Díaz del Castillo's boldest assertion of reliability can be found in his opening lines. He refers to himself as, “Bernal Díaz del Castillo, vecino y regidor de la muy leal ciudad de Santiago de Guatemala” (1). He goes on to assert his authority and that of his comrades, vis-à-vis other non-participant narrators, “por lo que a mí toca y a todos los verdaderos conquistadores, mis compañeros, que hemos servido a Su Majestad así en descubrir y conquistar y pacificar todas las provincias de la Nueva España [...] lo cual descubrimos a nuestra costa [...] y hablado aquí en respuesta de lo que han dicho y escrito personas que no alcanzaron a saber, ni lo vieron, ni tener noticia verdadera de lo que sobre este material

propusieron, salvo hablar a sabor de su paladar” (1).

Gómara, on the other hand, relayed secondhand information in his chronicles. His accounts were written some twenty years after the conquest. During the 1540's he worked as a chaplain to Hernán Cortés. He narrates events that were related to him by Cortés. While reading his work it becomes apparent that he, the narrator, is not present for any of the events he is describing nor does he have personal relationships with any of the protagonists other than Cortés. His third person narrative seems distant and removed from the action when he relates that, "Los de caballo fueron, y ya que llegaban junto al cerrillo, y los voceaban y señalaron que iban de paz, huyeron aquellos hombres, medrosos y espantados de ver cosa tan grande y alta, que les parecía monstruo, y que caballo y hombre era toda una cosa" (103). His distance from, and absence from, the events that he narrates are clearly visible. As a result, his credibility as a reliable source was dismissed both by Las Casas and Bernal Díaz. Las Casas states, "Gómara, clérigo, que escribió la historia de Cortés, que vivió con él en Castilla siendo ya marqués, y no vido cosa ninguna ni jamás estuvo en las Indias y no escribió ninguna cosa sino lo que el mismo Cortés le dijo" (II: 528). Bernal Díaz del Castillo also mentions him by name and accuses him of not being a true and accurate witness. Díaz del Castillo claims that, "me rogaron dos licenciados que se la enprestase para saver muy estenso, las cosas que pasaron en las conquistas de México y Nueva España y ver en que diferian lo que tiene escrito la coronista Francisco López de Gómara [...] porque todo lo que yo escrivo es muy verdadero" (495). In her book *The Armature of Conquest*, Beatriz Pastor explains that, "this rejection of Gómara's method implies that the only valid report is that of the eyewitness" (65). Both men were certainly not alone in their assessment of Gómara. This attitude was pervasive throughout the era and Hernán Cortés

did not stray from this norm. On many occasions, Cortés goes out of his way to conform to this expectation by mentioning that he has firsthand knowledge of an event or geographical location. This is first noticed in the exordium of his *Segunda carta de relación*, when he reminds the Emperor of what they had discussed in a prior correspondence. Cortés mentions that, “tenía noticias de un gran señor llamado Mutezuma, sobre lo cual los naturales de esta tierra me habían contado” (40). He makes sure to inject that he plans on verifying their accounts by seeing them with his own eyes when he states, “pensara irle ver a doquiera que estuviese” (40). Cortés makes such insertions throughout the letter with the express purpose of characterizing himself as a credible firsthand witness.

The second technique used by Cortés was the medieval practice of *ars dictaminis*. *La Manual de retórica española* describes this as, “el arte de escribir cartas con una modalidad que está integrada por fórmulas fijas” (Azaustre y Casas 15). Ronald Witt, in his article titled, “Medieval ‘Ars Dictaminis’ and the Beginnings of Humanism: a New Construction of the Problem” puts into perspective the expectations the Spanish Crown would have had for any correspondence received from a vassal like Cortés. He states that, “individuals writing to public powers could be expected to observe the rules of official rhetoric. Almost without exception the manuals of *ars dictaminis* devote a large portion of their discussion to fitting the proper salutatory formula to the appropriate social or political class of the addressee” (6). According to the formula, the letter consisted of four distinct parts known as: the *salutatio*, the *exordium*, the *narratio* and the *conclusio*. The *salutatio* is basically a greeting to the reader. The *exordium* is the actual starting point of the letter. Its main purpose is to secure the goodwill of the reader. The *narratio* comprises the main body of the letter and it provides a clear account of the

author's intended purpose. The *conclusio* provides a summary of the entire discourse of the letter. Witt describes the level of importance given to each section by signaling that, "a large portion of every manual is devoted to discussing the *salutatio* and *exordium* which consist of formulas to cast, to please, and convince the addressee. On the other hand, very little care is given to the *narratio*" (13). Cortés' *Segunda carta de relación* is consistent with this formula. Walter Mignolo demonstrates this by highlighting Cortés' apparent use of Latin syntax in the *salutatio* and his subsequent shift to common Castilian syntax in the less regulated *narratio*. He explains that, "las reminiscencias de la sintaxis latina se encuentran precisamente en la *salutatio*. En el cuerpo eso desaparece y sus frases cobran un rito más castellano; lo cual indica que Cortés era muy consciente de las exigencias retóricas impuestas en la epístola" (67). Latin syntax in the *salutatio* and *exordium* could be used to please the addressee because of Latin's association with status, classical poetry, and the fine arts. Cortés's most obvious examples of Latin syntax in the *salutatio* are the placement of the adjective before the noun. In plain Castilian syntax the adjective usually follows the noun; for example, *provincia grandisima*, *edificios maravillosos* and *laguna grande*. However, the opening lines of the *Segunda carta de relación* describe, "grandes lagunas, maravillosos edificios y una grandisima provincia" (39). This use of *ars dictaminis* gives his correspondence an air of compliance that helped to mask his rebellion by helping him appear to be a man that follows the established rules in any given situation.

A third technique of Cortés' *Segunda Carta* can be also be found in the *salutatio* and *exordium*. It is his use of *humilitas* in order to appease his lord the Emperor Charles V and put him at ease. The *Manual de la retórica española* defines *humilitas* as "un primer grupo de

tópicos tradicionales de persona lo constituyen las fórmulas para manifestar la humildad authorial especialmente utilizado en prólogos, dedicatorias e inicios de obras” (Azaustre 39). *Humilitas* is normally expressed by the author stating in some way that he is not as wise or learned as his Lord but that he hopes his efforts will be acceptable to him just the same. Cortés offers a good example of *humilitas* when he states that, “Si de todo a vuestra alteza no diere tan larga cuenta como debo, os suplico me mande perdonar; porque *ni habilidad* (my emphasis) *ni oportunidad de tiempo tengo para relatarlo todo*” (40). Cortés now appears to be a humble man who doubts his own abilities. It should be noted that Cortés’s use of *humilitas* was by no means original. By all outward appearances, he was merely complying with a standard literary technique of the era. What sets Cortés’s letter apart is the intention behind the ordinary compliance. By employing *humilitas*, Cortés began to effectively neutralize any charges of treason by portraying himself as a humble servant of the Emperor. His use of *humilitas* was not merely for the sake of following proper rules of etiquette and correspondence. It served as an important step in the creation of his fictional model. This step served the purpose of psychologically disarming the Emperor by appearing to be benign. The use of first person narration, *ars dictaminis* and *humilitas* make up the first step of the *Segunda carta*’s formal façade. This façade was crucial to establishing his credibility in the eyes of his Lord and Master.

Adherence to the code of medieval vassalage and the portrayal of a Christian Knight

The second step in Cortes’ creation of a fictional model built on legitimacy that was established by the formalities of rhetoric. The appearance of being a faithful servant was further enhanced by Cortés’s adherence to an established code of medieval vassalage and his

self portrayal as an ideal Christian warrior of the Crown. By using these concepts to define himself, Cortés was also able to frame Velázquez as his antithesis. This section seeks to define both the concepts of medieval vassalage and the Christian knight. It further seeks to identify direct textual examples of their use throughout the *Segunda Carta de Relación*. By identifying said textual examples, I will be able to demonstrate how Cortés effectively used them to portray himself as a hero.

The code of vassalage has a long, complex history in Europe that we need to examine closely in order to fully comprehend Cortés's motivations for using it. The first logical question is, "what exactly is a vassal"? A vassal is defined by the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española* as "súbdito de algún soberano o una persona que reconoce a otra persona por superior." All vassals owed their faithful allegiance to a superior Lord or monarch, a social structure commonly known as vassalage or lordship. In his article titled "Medieval Lordship," Thomas Bisson traces the roots of lordship back to the Roman Empire. He explains that, "lordship was deeply ingrained in the Roman legal and biblical cultures in which the Middle Ages began. It persisted tenaciously as an element of elite status and privilege" (746). The Roman legal system supported a society based on inequality and privileged nobility. While the culture of legal subservience was already well entrenched in western civilization when Christianity began spreading throughout Europe, Christianity added a spiritual facet to this ideology, reinforcing an existing social structure that had its origins in the Roman legal system.

The Christian religion of the Middle Ages preached subservience, obedience and reverence to God. One example (among many) of this ideology can be found in *The Book of*

Psalms 40:7: “ Lord, sacrifice and offering you do not want; but ears open to obedience you gave me, there is none equal to you.” Once society had embraced this attitude of loyal obedience towards the Lord, it mingled with the Roman legal ideology of obedience to one’s social superiors. Subservience toward a person of nobility took on a tone of religious devotion. Thomas Bisson used the writings of St. Benedict, a monk, about his superior the abbot, to illustrate this phenomenon:

Society spoke of the Dominus Noster Flavius; so that all people were placed in a state of inferiority before the Dominus, a word referring to the chief of the household. By the sixth century St. Benedict could speak of the abbot as called Lord and Abbot, because he is believed to act in Christ’s place. (747)

This way of thinking was not confined to the walls of a monastery. The monarchs of the time were revered in much the same way. Thus the boundaries were blurred between royalty and divinity. In her book *El Cid y otros señores de la guerra*, Margarita Torre gives a concise explanation of what medieval monarchs expected of their vassals. She elucidates that, “lealtad a toda prueba hacia la persona del monarca era la primera demanda del soberano”(197). The vassal was an idealized Christian warrior who was expected to go above and beyond all others in his loyalty to the Crown.

One of the ways Cortés was able to adhere to these royal expectations was by peppering his narrative with words and phrases that conformed to the standard rhetorical doctrine of the time. Throughout his letter, Cortés addresses the king reassuringly as: “Vuestra Alteza” and “Vuestra Sacra Majestad” (39). In the exordium he goes even further by referring to

the king as “Muy Alto y Poderoso y muy Católico Principe, Invictísimo Emperador y Señor Nuestro” (39). In their book titled *Retórica española*, Antonio Azaústre and Juan Casas refer to these types of address as a form of *captatio benevolentia* which aims to, “captar la atención y ganarse los afectos del auditorio” (73). Although the use of these forms of rhetoric were commonplace, Cortés was able to use them to psychologically disarm a suspicious Emperor and advance his political ambitions.

It is important to note however, that Cortés’s portrayal of a Christian vassal is much more sophisticated than the *captatio benevolentia* he used to address the Emperor. The conquistador’s entire narrative is a carefully crafted document that painstakingly paints a fictional portrait of himself as the perfect vassal and Christian knight. In fact, Cortés’s account of events seems to follow the well established themes of the literary genre known as epic poetry. This genre is defined by Bárbara Mújica in her book *Texto y vida: Introducción a la literatura española* as, “un poema extenso, de asunto heroico” (XV). In his book *The Hero and the King: An Epic Theme*, William T.H Jackson defines the various themes of epic poetry. He explains that “one of the most important of all epic themes is the conflict of hero and king. In all major epics there is a tension between a ruler and a major figure in the work. The formal situation in the epics is often such that loyalty to a ruler is demanded of a young and ambitious warrior” (3). We can clearly see this same dynamic between the Emperor Charles V and the young and ambitious Cortés. Another important epic theme that Jackson discusses is the chaotic political situation in which the plot develops. He elaborates that, “When patterns of civilization of long standing are being overturned, such as the clash between the Christian and Muslim world....out of this turmoil comes the conflict of the hero and the king” (3). Cortés’s

conquest of Mexico and the subsequent fall of the Aztec Empire certainly injects the theme of turmoil into the *Cartas de relación*. The third epic theme discussed by Jackson is that of exile: “There can be little doubt that one of the most common characters in the period of turmoil is the exile from one’s own culture” (5). This theme manifests itself in the *Cartas de relación* through Cortés’s disobedience of Velázquez. Although he was not exiled from Spanish territory at the time his expedition launched, he became a fugitive of the Spanish Empire the moment he disobeyed Velázquez by founding the city of Veracruz. The fourth and final epic theme presented by Jackson is “the intrusion of an outsider who often proves more powerful than the ruler to whose court he comes and who must be placated” (4). Prior to the conquest of Mexico, Cortés was not one of the governing elites in the Spanish Empire. By embarking on this conquest, Cortés became both a player and an intruder amongst the Spanish ruling class. Because of the great distance between Mesoamerica and Spain, it can be argued that Cortés became a more powerful entity (within Mesoamerica) than the Emperor Charles V. Ultimately Cortés placates the Emperor and successfully usurps Velázquez, but not before proving himself to be a mighty and powerful warrior.

To further illustrate just how closely Cortés’s *Cartas de relación* follow the mold of epic poetry we can compare them to one of literature’s most famous epic poems, *El poema de mio Cid*. This poem, which narrates the heroic triumphs of Rodrigo de Vivar otherwise known as The Cid, was well known in Spain during the medieval era. Long before Cortés was born, The Cid had achieved the status of folk hero. The similarities between the story of The Cid and Cortés’s fictionalized version of himself are unmistakable. The Cid was famous for his conquests in Moorish territory during the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Much like Cortés, he waged a

fierce battle against the infidels in the name of Christ and his king. He was also an exiled outlaw that was accused of treason. Just as Cortés did, he set out to prove his loyalty to the Emperor through conquest. Whether Cortés intentionally modeled himself after The Cid is a mystery only Cortés himself can solve. Nevertheless the similarities are worth discussing because they were sure to have had an emotional impact on his audience.

Throughout the epic poem, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar can be found invoking the name of God each time he enters battle: “Firidlos, Cavalleros, todos sines dubdança. Con la merced del Criador nuestra es la ganancia” (122). Cortés echoes this sentiment. He attributes each victory over the Mesoamericans to divine intervention. “Nos dio Dios tanta Victoria que les matamos mucha gente sin que los nuestros recibiesen daño” (*Segunda carta* 49). The Cid not only attributes his victories to God, but the descriptions of the battles at certain points take on the tone of a holy war. In pushing the Moors out of Spain, The Cid wins a victory for Christ. “Vinieste a mio Cid que á sabor de cavalgar, cercar quiere a Valencia por a christianos la dar” (161). Cortés made use of holy war rhetoric as well. Just as The Cid with the Moors, the conqueror of Mexico paints a portrait of the Mesoamericans as the enemies of Christ: “como cristianos éramos obligados en pagnar contra los enemigos de nuestra fe” (*Segunda carta* 51). Because the lines between divinity and royalty were blurred, The Cid is exemplified as a loyal vassal who fights in the name of God and the king. The spoils of each victory are not just for his own sake but are instead gifts to be shared with his men and sent to his lord and master. “Grandes son las ganancias quel dió el Criador/ févos aqui las senas [...] besavos las manos que los prendades vos/vosi rrazonas por vuestro vassallo e a vós tiene por señor” (173). Similarly, Cortés’s fictionalized character is never portrayed as a fortune seeking conqueror.

Mesoamerica and her spoils are laid at the feet of the Emperor Charles V of Spain; “estabámos en disposición de ganar para vuestra majestad los mayores reinos y señorios que había en el mundo” (*Cartas* 51).

By comparing *El poema de mio Cid* and the *Cartas de relación* of Cortés, it becomes clear that both works share some key ingredients of epic poetry. However, it is important to point out that the process of fictionalization is not unique to the writings of Cortés. Hayden White explains that fictionalization is indeed part and parcel of the universal process of creating a historical narrative regardless of the narrator’s credibility standing. According to White:

The reader, in the process of following the historian’s account of those events, gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another: romance, tragedy, comedy, satire epic or what have you. The original strangeness, mystery or exoticism of the events is dispelled and they take on a more familiar aspect, not in details but in their functions as elements of a familiar configuration.(86)

When reading Cortés’s *Cartas de relación*, one should consider carefully White’s assertion that a work of non-fiction is created by following the format of a work of fiction, That Cortés’s *Cartas* follow the mold of epic poetry is not in and of itself notable. What is notable is that his fictionalization was a deliberate intent to twist reality. Fictionalization was a mere tool that allowed him to craft a defense and build an empire. With the use of literary concepts, he was further able to create a fictionalized version of himself that was convincing enough to sway the course of world history.

Velázquez as the Antithesis of the Christian Knight

Once Cortés had successfully established his credibility through the use of formal rhetoric and his fictionalized portrayal of the perfect medieval vassal, he still had to complete the task of discrediting his rival, Diego Velázquez. By using the concepts of medieval Christian vassalage to define himself, Cortés was also able to frame Velázquez as his antithesis. He would have to use his *Segunda carta de relación* to portray Velázquez's actions as treasonous. This section seeks to expose the process by which this was accomplished.

According to Beatriz Pastor, "the very first stage of transforming his rebellion into an act of service is aimed at disqualifying Velázquez as a legitimate representative of the king" (76). Every action that Velázquez takes in his own defense is framed (within Cortés's letters to the Emperor) as an act of treason. In his *Segunda carta de relación*, Cortés carefully crafts his sentences to portray Velázquez's pursuance of him as a selfish act. Cortés argues that, "Diego Velázquez se había movido con aquella armada y gente contra mí porque yo había enviado la relación y cosas de esta tierra a vuestra majestad y no al dicho Diego Velázquez" (92). As the letter progresses, Cortés continues to assert this same narrative. However, his descriptions steadily become more audacious. He boldly draws a proverbial line in the sand. On one side he places those soldiers that are loyal to him. He describes them as being in service to the Emperor and being Christians. On the other side he places those that would turn against his conquest and side with Velázquez. Potential dissenters are described as disloyal infidels. According to Cortés, Velázquez wrote, "cartas de inducimiento a las personas que tenía en mi compañía en

servicio de vuestra Majestad, para que se levantasen contra mí y se pasasen a él, como si fuéramos los unos infieles y otros cristianos, o unos vasallos de vuestra alteza y otros sus deservidores” (93). In framing his rival as an untrue vassal, Cortés provided the Crown with a plausible justification for his disobedience to Velázquez. With the tip of a quill Cortés was able to successfully convert his rebellion into an act of faithful service to the Crown.

Variations of Distance and the Unreliable Narrator

Unreliable narrators are commonplace throughout the literary world. The term was first coined by Wayne C. Booth in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. He identifies a story as being told by an unreliable narrator when, “those stories are narrated, whether in the first person or third person, by a profoundly confused, basically self-deceived, or even wrong-headed or vicious reflector” (Booth 340). Cortés’s narrative in his *Segunda carta* most certainly qualifies as such. His Machiavellian quest for power and his creation of a fictional model as a tool for empire building, make the motive behind his narrative both unreliable and questionable. According to Wayne C. Booth, one of the identifying factors of an *unreliable narrator* is the fact that their “characteristics change in the course of the works they narrate” (156). One way this can be achieved is through the alternation between a third and first person narrative style within a single work. Indeed, Cortés was particularly adept at using changing perspectives and variations of distance to his distinct advantage. However, it is not his mastery of varying distances that separates the *Segunda carta* from so many literary classics; it is his use of them to achieve a political objective that makes his model conquistador truly extraordinary. Cortés’s reasons for changing the characteristics of his narrative are straightforward. The concept of the unreliable

narrator can be used to manipulate the perceived distance the author has in relation to the events of the narrative. Emile Benevise asks us to, “consider the effect on the meaning produced by changing certain verbs. We notice the nature of opposition between the pronouns of the verb. The third person exists and is characterized only by its opposition to the person I” (732). The following questions must then be answered. Why would an author want to be in opposition to the person I? Under what kind of circumstances would an author find it useful to distance him/herself from the events of the narrative?

An illustrative example of such circumstances can be found in the *Historia de las Indias* by Bartolomé de las Casas. He begins his account of the conquest and pacification of the island of Cuba in the first person plural. He describes his own participation in the Christianization of the island in the following way, “explanado queda lo que tuvimos entendido de la Isla de Cuba y de las gentes que la moraban o habitaban, resta ya referir de la pasada que a ella hicimos los cristianos” (II: 522). As the narrative progresses, a dramatic shift in narrative person takes place. In fact, the timing of the shift to third person can be traced to the description of the massacre of the natives at Caonao. Las Casas painstakingly describes how he attempted to halt the brutality that took place. However, he curiously refers to himself as “el clérigo” as if he were just another protagonist at the scene and not the one relating the story. “El clérigo, movido a ira, va contra ellos reprendiéndolos asperamente a estorbarlos y ellos que le tenían alguna reverencia, cesaron de lo que iban hacer” (II: 536). What happened to cause such a shift in narrative technique? In her article “The Intellectual Legacy of Bartolomé de las Casas,” Margarita Zamora suggests that this narrative shift paralleled Las Casas’s shift in attitude about the conquest. She explains that, “Las Casas came to the realization that he had been complicit

with the abuses of the conquest. He furthermore realized that he was living in a state of moral contradiction by keeping the *encomienda* he had been awarded. This led him to radically reorient his activities [...] to the public criticism of the colonial system and advocacy of Indian rights” (112). Las Casas was clearly uncomfortable with his connection to the brutal events at Caonao. The shift to a third person narrative allowed Las Casas to distance himself from events in which he had participated, thus he was able to maintain his integrity as a spokesman for the cause he later adopted.

Cortés was equally adept at alternating between points of view. He proudly boasts of his leadership during the Spaniards’ confrontation with the Tlascaltecan. His use of the first person singular is prominent. He describes his actions this way; “Y por ser yo el que acometía salí a ellos con los de a caballo y 100 peones y 400 indios de los que traje de cempoal y antes que hubiese lugar de juntarse, les quemé cinco o seis lugares” (48). His use of the first person plural clearly aids him in portraying himself as the sole commander of the Spanish forces in Mesoamerica. According to Beatriz Pastor, “The use of the first person singular creates a fictitious division between Cortés and the rest of the men. Cortés gives the appearance of being isolated, always successfully solving things thanks to one of his particular qualities” (87). Curiously, when things don’t go so well for the Spaniards in Tenochtitlan, he adjusts his narrative. When one of his officers suffered severe wounds and several of his men were killed in action, Cortés never mentions that they were acting on his orders. Gone is his commanding first person narrative that he used during the battle with the Tlascaltecan. In fact, he seems to place the blame on the officer that sustained the wounds. He describes the action using the third person singular which makes it appear that the officer went, of his own accord, into the ill

fated engagement: “Las flechas y tiraderas eran tantas que todas las paredes y patios estaban llenos...un capitán salió con 200 hombres y antes que se pudiese recoger, le mataron cuatro e hirieron a él y a muchos de los otros” (102). The third person singular allows him to strike a passive tone in his writings. He appears to be reporting what he observes and not that for which he is responsible. Unlike the case of his contemporary Bartolomé de las Casas, Cortés does not make use of variations of distance solely as a means of distancing himself from acts that made him uncomfortable. Cortés uses them as persuasive tools that could make or break his case for conquest in the eyes of the Emperor.

Authorial Silence and the Selection of Events

The fourth component of Cortés’s fictional model was the careful selection of which events to include in his letter to the Emperor and which ones to omit. The prior sections of this chapter have been dedicated to analyzing the content that Cortés chose to include. This section seeks to expose his silences. One of the most famous albeit horrific events of Mesoamerican conquest was the massacre at Cholula. The city was an ally of the Aztecs and its leadership was involved in a plot to ambush the Spaniards on their way to the Mesoamerican capital. In retaliation for their cooperation with Moctezuma, Cortés unleashed his fury on the native city of Cholula. In his book *Historia de la conquista de México*, Francisco López de Gómara gives a detailed account of the events:

Hizo disparar la escopeta, que era seña, y arremetieron con gran impetu y enojo todos los Españoles y sus amigos a los del pueblo. Hicieron como en el estrecho en que estaban y en dos horas mataron seis mil más [...] quemaron todas las

casas y torres que hacían resistencia. Echaron fuera toda la vecindad, quedaron tintos de sangre. No pisaban sino cuerpos muertos. (160)

According to Las Casas, the primary source for Gómara's account was Cortés himself (II: 528). To have received such detailed information about the massacre from the conquistador is revealing. The event certainly made enough of an impression on Cortés that he was able to relate it to Gómara years later in such detail. Strangely, the massacre at Cholula was not even a footnote in Cortés's *Segunda carta*. No matter how bloody, Cholula was both a strategic and psychological military victory. According to historian Hugh Thomas in his book *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico*, "this punishment was thought appropriate to secure the pacification of the island [...] when they (the Aztecs) knew what had transpired, the Emperor and the city returned to their mood of panic" (263-264). Why then did Cortés not include such an important event in his correspondence to Charles V? The answer is a simple one. It added nothing to the fictional model he was creating. According to Beatriz Pastor he, "excludes anything that cannot be suited to his objective and carefully reworks the material selected for inclusion (*The Armature of the Conquest* 72). Bloodlust and massacres would not have been helpful in convincing the Emperor Charles V that he was a holy warrior for God and the noble crown.

Conclusion

Cortés was undoubtedly both a man of his times and an astute opportunist. He was able to weave a fictitious web as the model conquistador. The model was created by following a complex process of fictionalization. If we consider Hayden White's assertion that all historical

accounts are created using a process of fictionalization, then we would have to conclude that Cortés's fictionalized narrative is unremarkable. Cortés however, sets himself apart. His fictionalized account is the carefully thought out product of a purpose. There is an agenda behind the façade. Beatriz Pastor states that, "The fictionalization is deliberate and oriented toward certain highly political rather than literary objectives" (*The Armature of the Conquest* 82). Cortés created a model conquistador as a means to an end. The motivation for the creation of such a model is the acquisition of political power, fame, glory, and wealth.

The façade and the motivating agenda behind it are associated with opposing ideologies. This duplicitous nature was indeed indicative of the times. The façade conformed to an inherently medieval mold while the agenda behind it was the embodiment of Renaissance humanism. The fictionalized version of Cortés is submissive to the will of God and king. The real Cortés behind the curtain used an approach that was both rational and secular. The appearance of the model is reminiscent of the epic hero The Cid. In actuality, the model has more in common with Machiavelli's Renaissance *Prince*. According to Beatriz Pastor, "both Cortés's model conquistador and Machiavelli's model prince represent the very foundation of the political realism of the Renaissance" (*The Armature of the Conquest* 83). Machiavelli did not publish his work until well after the conquest of Mexico, therefore Machiavelli's work did not directly influence Cortés. However, the political realism of the Renaissance behind Machiavelli's book most certainly did influence him. Cortés's process of fictionalization reads like a written example that follows Machiavelli's road map to power. In fact, Machiavellian concepts are found throughout each of the five textual tactics that have been discussed in this chapter.

Shifting narrative perspectives allowed Cortés to portray himself as a military genius. Through a first person narrative of the battle with the Tlaxcaltecs, Cortés puts his courage and valor on display. Beatriz Pastor has commented that, “Cortés’s undeniable personal valor appears as the sole factor leading to the success of the enterprise to the exclusion of all others” (*The Armature of the Conquest* 86-87). Cortés appears to us as a fierce warrior who has earned his command by the power of his own sword and the skill of his mind. These actions parallel the Machiavellian concept of the rise to power through the art of war. According to Machiavelli, “a prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study than war and its rules and discipline. This is the sole art that belongs to him who rules. It is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to one of rank” (66). Cortés was most certainly conscious of the fact that war would help him rise in rank, but he was also conscious of the fact that characterizing himself as a mighty warrior in his *Cartas de relación* would help him gain renown with his intended audience as well. This can be evidenced by the fact that Cortés distanced himself from situations that did not support this characterization. This was accomplished by switching to a third person and/or a first person plural narrative when the situation at hand was going poorly. Thus any culpability was shifted onto others or shared with them. Silences reverberate throughout Cortés’s *Carta de relación*. He selectively eliminated events (such as the massacre at Cholula) from his narrative that did not serve his purpose. Machiavelli offers a possible motive for such silences:

A prince ought to take care that he never lets anything slip from his lips that is not replete with fidelity and religion, that he may appear to him who sees and

hears him altogether merciful, faithful, humane, and religious. Everyone sees what you appear to be. Few really know what you are. For that reason, a prince will have the credit of conquering and holding his state. The means will always be considered honest and he will be praised because the vulgar are always taken by what a thing seems to be and by what comes of it. (81-82)

Cortés's portrayal of an epic hero similar to the Cid was a means to an end. The objective was not literary but political in nature. What would have motivated Cortés to base his narrative on the antics of epic heroes? Machiavelli provides a possible answer. He promotes the emulation of great men from history for the purpose of acquiring and maintaining power. He suggests that:

to exercise the intellect the prince should read histories and study there the actions of illustrious men, to see how they borne themselves in war, to examine the cause of their victories and defeat, so as to avoid the latter and imitate the former; and above all do as illustrious men did ...whose achievements and deeds he always keeps in his mind. As it is said, Alexander the Great imitated Achilles, and Caesar imitated Alexander the Great. (68)

Such a self characterization allowed Cortés to present himself as the perfect Christian vassal and Velázquez as its antithesis.

Cortés was also careful to present himself as a reliable witness that observes the rules of official rhetoric. This former was achieved by Cortés mentioning throughout his *Carta de relación* that he has firsthand knowledge of an event or geographical location. The latter was

achieved through his use of *ars dictaminis* and *humilitas*. Such concepts aided the conquistador in conforming to the expectations of the era. This gave his correspondence an air of compliance that helped to mask his rebellion. Machiavelli claims that such appearances are of the utmost importance. He states that, “it is unnecessary for a prince to have all good qualities, but he must do things that make himself appear to have them” (80).

By using Renaissance concepts such as these, Cortés was able to formulate not just a fictionalized façade, but a powerful political tool that had earth shattering consequences on world history. This political tool aided him in turning his rebellion into a service and establishing him in the annals of history as *the* model conquistador. While it brought him personal fame and glory, the model had tragic consequences for the Native American societies. By creating a work of fiction, Cortés contributed to the cultural blindness of his intended European audience. They were not able to see the Native American civilizations through any other reality save the fictional one. In her article “Silencio y escritura: la conquista de América” Beatriz Pastor sums up the situation perfectly:

El problema está en que la formulación de esas leyes de ficcionalización aseguran el control de la realidad americana por el conquistador europeo quien lleva consigo la aprehensión y clasificación de esa realidad en términos del pensamiento europeo. De hecho, esa misma razón que se presenta como vía del conocimiento objetivo funciona en relación a América como un instrumento de dominación más. Dominación que categoriza en terminos ajenos la realidad del Nuevo mundo, reduciéndola e instrumentalizándola. (142-43)

In the following chapter, I will highlight the writings and documented actions of the conquistador of Cuba: Diego Velázquez. Through a comparative analysis, I will lay out the similarities, and a few differences, between the works of Diego Velázquez and Hernán Cortés. Thus, the reader will gain a more profound perspective on the model conquistador as defined by Beatriz Pastor in her work *The Armature of the Conquest* (81).

Chapter 3

Exploring the Roots of Cortés's Model: A Comparative Analysis

Much has been made of the fictional model conquistador that Hernán Cortés created in his *Cartas de relación*. Cortés's conquest of Mesoamerica and his narrative concerning said conquest, are among the most written about and researched subjects in Spanish American history. This is with good reason. His ability to employ rhetorical techniques to aid in his rise to power is unmatched by any of his contemporaries. Yet the analysis of his political maneuvers gains a fresh and enhanced perspective when we focus on the political environment from which he launched his conquest. We are all products of our environment and Cortés is no exception. Our lives are shaped and influenced by the people close to us and the environments in which we live. Therefore, it is necessary to consider Cortés in the context of his relationship with Velázquez and the conquest of Cuba. In this final chapter I will draw a direct link between the political environment during the conquests of Cuba and Cortés's political techniques during the conquest of Mesoamerica. This will be done through a comparative analysis between the writings and political tactics of Diego Velázquez and those of Hernán Cortés. On the 1st of April 1514, Diego Velázquez penned a letter to King Ferdinand of Spain. Said letter, known as the *Carta de relación de la isla de Cuba*, narrates Velázquez's version of events that transpired during the Spanish conquest and colonization of the island of Cuba. This letter, along with various letters authored by King Ferdinand will serve as a tool of comparison to the model found in Cortés's *Segunda carta de relación*.

It is certainly true that the conquest of Cuba simply cannot compare to the conquest of Mesoamerica in terms of complexity and the size of the campaign. It is also true that the narrative written by Velázquez cannot compare to the narrative written by Cortés in terms of literary value, complexity, and length. I do not suggest that the actions of both men are an exact match. However, there are underlying themes that unite them. These common themes will be thoroughly explored in the five sections of this chapter. The first section will be dedicated to examining the formal façade of Diego Velázquez's *Carta de relación de la isla de Cuba* and the way in which he used certain forms of medieval rhetoric to establish a credible narrative. The second section will focus on Velázquez portraying himself as a loyal vassal and Christian knight. The third section will analyze how Velázquez used the concept of the loyal Christian knight to eliminate his political foe. Section four discusses Velázquez as an unreliable narrator that distances himself from potentially damaging situations. Section five will focus on Velázquez's authorial silence concerning a large scale massacre of Native Americans. Within each section, a direct link will be drawn to the same themes found in the narrative of Hernán Cortés during the conquest of Mesoamerica.

The Use of Formality in Order to Establish Legitimacy

During the conquest of Mexico, Hernán Cortés began penning a narrative to the Emperor with the express purpose of turning his rebellion into a service for the Crown. He was operating outside of the realm of Royal authority and his letters reflected this reality. He desperately needed to portray himself as a conformist to the expectations of the Spanish Crown. The legal and rhetorical standards of the time offered him an opportunity to legitimize

his image in the eyes of Charles V. Cortés went out of his way to carefully conform to the epistolary model of the era as will be evidenced in this section. This formal façade set the stage for his defense and gave his narrative an air of credibility.

The conquest of Cuba took place under very different circumstances than the conquest of Mexico. Diego Velázquez was executing the orders of his superiors, not rebelling against them. In the *Carta de relación de la isla de Cuba*, his narrative tone is much simpler and more subdued than that of Cortés. This is partly due to the fact that the conquest of Cuba was a much simpler endeavor than the conquest of Mexico. Mostly however, it is due to the fact that Velázquez had already obtained the royal blessing prior to the commencement of his military campaign. Cortés's use of reliable witness techniques, *ars dictaminis*, and *captatio benevolentia* is at times exaggerated, perhaps even over the top, when compared to the narrative of many of his contemporaries. For example, Francisco López de Gómara begins his narrative by simply stating the official title of the Emperor Carlos and dedicating the chronicle to him. He writes, "A Don Carlos, emperador de Romanos, Rey de España, Señor de las Indias y Nuevo Mundo" (39). However, Cortés opens his *Carta de relación* with much more hyperbole and colorful adjectives. He addresses the Emperor as, "Muy alto y poderoso y muy católico príncipe, invictísimo emperador y señor nuestro" (39). Although on a lesser scale, we can see that Diego Velázquez did indeed adhere to some of these techniques as well. Just like Cortés, he was participating in a financial endeavor on behalf of the Spanish Crown. Both men were operating in territory that was half a world away from the Spanish center of power. The political situation of the conquistadors was precarious because the distance and autonomy could have easily given the Crown good reason to become suspicious of anyone who did not give the impression of

absolute loyalty. Therefore, it was in the interest of both men to make good use of the epistolary models of the era.

Velázquez adheres to the standard practice of *ars dictaminis*. Within his *Carta de relación de la Isla de Cuba*, the *salutatio/exordium*, the *narratio* and the *conclusio* can be easily identified. Unlike Cortés in his *exordium*, Velázquez uses neither fancy wording nor Latin syntax. However, he does give thanks and reverence that is due a king. He opens his correspondence with a simple, “Gracias por la merced de la tenencia de la Asunción [the first capital of Cuba, founded by Velázquez] y por el poder para repartir los indios...Gracias en nombre de la isla por la merced que gocen todos franquicias que la expuesta” (1). If the purpose of the *exordium* is to establish goodwill with the recipient and reaffirm his loyalty as a vassal, then Velázquez’s *exordium* certainly accomplishes the objective. He had nothing to gain from exaggerated overtures of royal devotion. Velázquez is also compliant with the expectation that he be a reliable witness for the events he narrates. He carefully employs the first person when describing even the most mundane events concerning the conquest of Cuba. Thus, he gives himself an air of credibility by placing himself at the scene of the events in question. He narrates that, “ya que proveí en la Asunción lo conveniente, partí el 4 de octubre ‘513 con 15 hombres por mar en canoas por la costa N. Llegué a las provincias de Bany i Bacaxagua, do estuve 4-5 días porque acudieron caciques e indios. Partí por las provincias de Guaimaya i del Mayee haciendo lo mismo” (7). It is important to note that these rhetorical techniques were standard operating procedure for society at that time. What makes the narratives of these two conquistadors unique is that they both share a common political motive. Both men had

everything to gain from establishing credibility and everything to lose for portraying the lack thereof.

Adherence to the code of medieval vassalage and the portrayal of a Christian Knight

Although the conquests of both Cuba and Mexico were ambitious expressions of Renaissance Humanism, the culture remained rooted in the religious dogma of the medieval era (Weckmann 130). This culture caused the conquistadors to cloak their ambitions behind religiously charged rhetoric. Although the theme of self advancement was present in the actions of both Cortés and Velázquez, it was masked by a word selection that portrayed a devoted vassal that conquered only for God and the Spanish Crown.

Both narratives follow the established themes of the literary genre of epic poetry per the definition of William T. H. Jackson in his book *The Hero and the King*. The first epic theme outlined by Jackson is that which demands loyalty to a superior lord or monarch from a young and ambitious warrior (3). Just like Cortés, Velázquez is careful to never portray his own interests. All actions are for and on behalf of King Ferdinand. When he addresses the natives, he narrates that, “les hablo de parte de Vuestra Alteza” (8). When he sends his troops inland he writes that, “fuesen por la tierra para reconocer i pacificar con instrucciones para les hablar sobre la superioridad de Vuestra Alteza para que le reconociesen” (9). Although Velázquez’s personal ambition cannot be denied, the picture he paints in his narrative is that of a selfless and loyal vassal to the Crown.

The second and third theme of epic poetry as defined by Jackson has to do with the narrative taking place in a situation of political turmoil and exile from one’s own culture (3). Just

like Cortés, Velázquez arrived on foreign soil with the intent of disrupting the established political order and establishing a new one. He was at the head of a small army of a few hundred Spanish soldiers that were far from their home and their native culture. As the Spaniards came to shore on the island of Cuba, the clash of civilizations began. The enemy forces were headed by the Taino chieftain Hatuey, who had already been exposed to the ruthlessness of the Spanish forces. Historian I. A. Wright describes the situation as follows:

Hatuey, accompanied by his many subjects, had fled Hispaniola for eastern Cuba. He was there established as a chieftain [...] Immediately upon arrival, he commenced to incite the Cubeños to resistance. He maddened them with relation of what the Haytians had endured, outrage, slaughter and slavery [...] as a result, Cuba showed itself hostile to Velázquez and his men. They found themselves involved soon after their landing in an active campaign against the natives whom they hunted into the mountains. (26).

Hatuey was eventually caught and burned alive by Velázquez and his men. Historian José de Alcázar gives a solid illustration of the conflict's ending once their leader had been executed. "Este castigo terminó la resistencia de los naturales: los caciques fueron rindiéndose uno tras otro, y de esta suerte 300 españoles se hicieron dueños de aquella rica y extensa isla" (14). The descriptions of these events are relevant because they illustrate the similar situation both conquistadors found themselves in when they put pen to paper. Although Velázquez's *Carta de relación de la isla de Cuba* is not as long nor as complex as Cortés' *Segunda carta de relación*, it should be noted that both men were writing against a backdrop of turmoil and violence.

Jackson's final theme of epic poetry is the intrusion of an outsider to the reins of power (3). The outsider, in this case Velázquez, often gains great power through the course of the narration. However, he must first placate the established ruler. Evidence of Velázquez's growing authority and his placation of King Ferdinand can be seen in the letters that the king himself sent to Velázquez. In a letter dated December 15th 1512, King Ferdinand expressed the following:

He sido informado del cuidado y buena manera y recaldo que os habeis dado e daís en el buen tratamiento e conversión de los indios de la dicha isla...por relación del dicho Pasamonte, he sido informado cuan buen servidor eres, y cuan celoso de las cosas del servicio de nuestro señor. Ansí vos encargo e mando lo continuéis. Procurar de aprovechar las cosas de nuestra hacienda en esa dicha isla lo mejor que se pueda. (*Documentos inéditos* 31)

The king has been placated and the authority to continue his reign of power in Cuba has been given. Although it is not as illustrious and detailed as Cortés' *Segunda carta de relación*, Velázquez's narrative conforms to the norms of epic poetry as laid out by Jackson. Like the Cid before him and Cortés after him, Velázquez attributes his victory to divine intervention. His spoils are not for his own sake but for his Lord and Master, King Ferdinand. Velázquez narrates the consecration of Cuba's new Catholic church like this, "Nombré la iglesia S. Salvador, porque allí fueron libres los cristianos del cacique Yahatuey, porque con la muerte suya se aseguró y salvó mucha parte de la isla: señalé solares para las granjerías de Vuestra Alteza" (8). Here Velázquez is implying that their Lord and Savior (Salvador) was responsible for saving them

from the native attacks led by Yahatuey. Although the Spaniards are the invaders and the aggressors, Velázquez uses powerful imagery to frame his narrative. His description of the Christians being freed from Yahatuey gives the reader the psychological frame of reference that harkens to the then recent Christian Reconquest of Al-Andalus. In their book *Colonial Latin America*, Mark Burkholder and Lyman Johnson illustrate said frame of reference by stating that:

The Reconquest created a cultural legacy that the conquistadors and settlers carried to the New World [...]The final triumph over the Muslims in Granada reinforced the booty mentality that the Iberian Christians had developed during the long Reconquest. Victorious Christians enslaved fifteen thousand Muslim inhabitants of Málaga alone [...] Conveniently, the Christians saw their triumph as evidence that God actively supported their cause, a belief that they carried into battle against the native civilizations of the Americas. (23-24)

Velázquez is no exception. All of his actions are justified because he is doing the work and the will of God. He ends his *Carta de relación de la Isla de Cuba* by summing up the good work he is continuing with the now conquered cubeños. “Algunos caciques e indios muestran más inclinación que los de la Española a las cosas de la fe. Ay de ellos que saven el Pater Noster, Ave María, Credo i Salve. Ago poner en ello cuidado i con que se apliquen al trabajo” (13).

Velázquez never shows himself to be a soldier of fortune, even though he was indeed motivated by fortune and power. He has, through his narrative, created a fictional warrior for Christ. Of course, Hayden White’s theory about the process of fictionalization applies here as well as it does in the writings of Hernán Cortés. According to White, “the process of

fictionalization is not unique to the writings of any one person” (86). All narrators, whether they intend to or not, create fiction when trying to write history. What makes the narratives of both Cortés and Velázquez unique is that they molded their narrative into a fiction so that they could be used as tools for empire building.

Francisco Morales as the Antithesis of the Christian Knight and Vassal

Although Cortés’s fictionalized caricature of himself as the ideal Christian knight was an important part of his success, he still had an important obstacle to overcome. Diego Velázquez posed a serious threat to his objectives. Cortés used his narrative to the Emperor to politically neutralize his opponent. He achieved this by painting a fictionalized caricature of Velázquez as the antithesis of a Christian knight and vassal. He painted this portrait masterfully and ultimately achieved his goals. Was this tactic unique to Cortés’s situation or had Cortés been previously exposed to other conquistadors dealing with internal opposition in a similar manner?

Eight years prior to Cortés’s arrival in Mesoamerica, he was a mere soldier under the command of Diego Velázquez during the conquest of the island of Cuba. He would later serve as his secretary during the time that Velázquez was consolidating his power and authority. Velázquez’s rise to power in Cuba was not without its challenges. Once the conquest was complete, he began to face internal challenges to his leadership. Some of the soldiers under his command began to grow impatient with Velázquez. Many felt that they were not receiving the gold and slave labor they had hoped for in a timely fashion. In her book *The Early History of Cuba*, historian Irene Aloha Wright describes the situation like this: “his men insisted they must have their loot, especially those who remained at Baracoa engaged in the unromantic drudgery

of building up a town while Velázquez and Narváez [Velázquez's second in command] fared blithely forth to shed blood and perhaps to find more gold than they were finding [...] they threatened to abandon his dull camp at Baracoa and to leave the island, returning to Hispaniola whence they had come with anticipations of pleasanter things" (39). The ringleader of this discontent group of soldiers was Francisco Morales. As Morales' influence grew Velázquez took note. He recognized that Morales was a threat to his objective of consolidating his power and influence in the newly acquired territory of Cuba.

In his book *Historia de las Indias*, Bartolomé de Las Casas describes just how great a threat this situation posed: "las quejas del teniente Velázquez crecían de cada día [...] en este tiempo vino a Cuba [...] los jueces de apelación y acordaron los quejosos de Diego Velázquez de hacer sus informaciones secretas y allegar sus memoriales y tomar sus firmas, para se enviar a quejar a los dichos jueces, como a justicias superiores que enviaba el rey" (II: 528). Velázquez knew that this movement had to be decapitated if he hoped to achieve the governorship of Cuba. He would have to build a narrative that would frame Morales as the antithesis of a proper vassal and Christian knight in the eyes of the King. His opportunity came when Francisco Morales ran into trouble in the Cuban settlement of Maniabón. Morales attempted to capture some of the natives in this area with the intent of using them as slave labor. The natives rebelled against him and fighting broke out. The Spaniards, under the command of Morales, apparently punished the natives severely for their rebellion. Several dozen of them were put to death. This action was consistent with the behavior of all the men participating in the conquest of Cuba, Diego Velázquez included. For example, Velázquez had ordered the chieftain Hatuey to be burned alive for similar transgressions. In his narrative to King Ferdinand, he barely mentions

a similar massacre that took place at Caonao. Despite the fact that hundreds of natives were murdered at Caonao, not one Spaniard ever stood trial for that tragic event.

Velázquez clearly was no great defender of the Native Americans, yet he chose to inform the Royal Court of a massacre that took place under Morales in the province of Maniabón. Not only does he inform the court of the incident, but he conveniently pins the blame on Francisco Morales. He used this incident in Maniabón to his advantage so that he could politically eliminate Francisco Morales. We know for a fact that Velázquez had Morales arrested following the events in Maniabón. He was taken prisoner and returned to the island of Hispaniola for the purpose of standing trial for atrocities and abuses of the native population. Unfortunately, the letters that Velázquez wrote to the Spanish authorities accusing Morales of unethical treatment of the natives have been lost to history. However, King Ferdinand's letter of response to Velázquez's accusations has survived. It does a good job of filling in the blanks that were left by Velázquez's missing correspondence. Through the King's letter, we gain very good insight into what the content of Velázquez's original letter would have been. Based on his correspondence with Velázquez, King Ferdinand now believes that Morales is a violent and bloodthirsty man who was only interested in his own acquisition of wealth. On Dec 10th 1512, King Ferdinand penned his instructions to Velázquez as pertained to the legal situation of Francisco Morales. This document provides ample evidence of just how successful Velázquez was in making Morales appear to be untrue to Christian principles and the mission of the Crown:

Yo he sido informado que Francisco Morales, a quien vos enviastes a la provincia de Maniabón por vuestro logartentiente, ha fecho muchos excesos en el viaje que hizo, haciendo fuerzas e robos a personas de las que consigo llevaba, e alborotado los indios, e llevándolos atados por fuerza, e maltrantándolos a dondequiera, e hizo otros muchos males e daños dignos de mucha punció e castigo [...]e de todos ellos diz que fue acusado ante vos por los alcaldes e procuradores de la dicha provincia [...] proceded contra su persona e bienes por todo rigor de justicia. ("Colección de Documentos," 32)

Even though we are not able to see the original wording of Velázquez's letter, the results are identical to the results Cortés achieved during his subsequent campaign in Mexico. Cortés was able to eliminate the threat that Diego Velázquez posed to him in much the same way that Diego Velázquez was able to eliminate the threat that Francisco Morales posed. Both men effectively used narrative to neutralize their opposition by framing them as the antithesis of the Christian knight. What is on full display here is an effective Machiavellian tactic that uses religious dogma for the purpose of eliminating a political foe. This tactic was an important part of Cortés's fictional model conquistador. However, he did not invent such a maneuver. He had previously been exposed to it during the time he was under the command of Diego Velázquez on the island of Cuba. Ironically, the tactic that had worked so well for Velázquez in his own quest for power and wealth would be used against him later on during the conquest of Mexico.

Authorial Silence and the Selection of Events

Hernán Cortés's time in Mesoamerica was fraught with internal turmoil. He was, however, adept at selectively eliminating any political and/or military misstep that did not conform to his fictional model. The massacre of the natives at Cholula tells us that Cortés was a ruthless warrior that was skilled in the tactics of terrorism. His authorial silence on the matter tells us even more. Cortés's omission of the events in Cholula from his *Segunda carta de relación* tells us that these tactics, while effective on the battlefield, would not have suited his political objectives in relation to the Emperor Charles V. The selective elimination of events allowed Cortés to maintain his image as a Christian knight in the eyes of the Crown.

Elements of this same tactic can be found in the correspondence Diego Velázquez had with King Ferdinand during the conquest of Cuba. Velázquez presided over at least one known massacre of natives that was similarly edited for royal consumption. The massacre took place along the banks of the Caonao River. Bartolomé de las Casas describes the bloody incident like this:

Estando El Capitán en su yegua y los demás en las suyas a caballo y el mismo padre mirando cómo se repartía el pan y pescado, súbitamente sacó un Español su espada, en quien se creyó que se le revistió el diablo, y luego todos ciento sus espadas, y comienza a desbarrigar y a cuchillar y matar de aquellas ovejas y corderos, hombres, y mujeres, niños y viejos, que estaban sentados descuidados, mirando las yeguas y los españoles pasmados y dentro de dos credos no queda hombre vivo de todos cuantos allí estaban. Entran en la gran casa, que junto

estaba [...] y comienzan lo mismo a matar a cuchilladas y estocadas cuantos allí hallaron. (II: 536)

Although the events that Las Casas describes are astoundingly brutal, they were more than likely not out of the ordinary. The realities of a war of conquest in unfamiliar territory, where they were outnumbered, were sure to have kept the Spaniards permanently on edge. Drastic measures of intimidation and terror were sure to have proven useful in a multitude of circumstances. However, the religious nature of the conquest complicated matters for these soldiers of fortune. King Ferdinand, the Catholic monarch who had successfully expelled the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, was always mindful to attach the cross to any conquest made in his name. There was a clear contradiction between the violence necessary to pull off such an endeavor and the human compassion that Christianity espouses. One only needs to read the correspondence between Velázquez and the king to see evidence of this duality. The Real Academia de la Historia Española maintains a collection of such correspondence. In one of the letters, dated 12 December 1512, King Ferdinand clearly dictates his expectations for the treatment of the natives to Velázquez. He states, “Tengáis mucho cuidado y vigilancia en el buen tratamiento y conversión de los Indios de la dicha isla” (“Colección de Documentos,” 31). Velázquez was expected to conform to the preexisting model known as the *Christian warrior and vassal*. However, when crafting his required *Carta de relación de la isla de Cuba*, he found himself in a predicament that was very similar to what Cortés would experience just a few years later. The truth would have to be tweaked and the contents of his *Carta de relación* edited accordingly.

Velázquez begins his version of the events in question with the departure of a rescue mission. He sends one hundred soldiers to the banks of the Caonao River in search of nine missing Spaniards who had disappeared after their ship capsized off the coast of Cuba in 1509. Velázquez makes a concerted effort to highlight the good intentions his men had toward the natives at the onset of their expedition:

Embie a la costa abaxo 100 ombres en busca de 9 christianos que se han ausentado de la gente que iva con Seb. d' Ocampo. Mandeles todo buen comedo con los naturales: estos en el N^oV^o [Nombre Vuestro] les hicieron mui buen acogimiento, les dieron de comer como si fueran deudos por decilles según les previne que en el N de V.A. [Nombre de Vuestra Alteza] les enviaba a ver aquella provincia y que todos havían de ser vasallos y servidores de V.A. i tuvieron buen propósito y voluntad orque la intención no era dañarlos sino de tornarlos cristianos para que sirvieran a Dios y a V.A. (1)

His good and peaceful intentions were expressed to satisfy the expectations of the King and soften the blow for the event that follows. His narrative takes a sudden and jolting turn following the initial departure of his troops. Velázquez receives a letter from his soldiers in Caonao stating that they were in distress and that they feared for their lives because of the high population of natives. According to Velázquez, his soldiers recommend a preemptive strike and he responds by sending reinforcements. He moves from good intentions to the lack of mention of a massacre in a single sentence. He omits any details and instead offers a vague excuse for sending reinforcements. He writes, “Tuve cartas dellos [...] y pensaron que tanta corría de

Indios era por les matar sobre seguro [...] y les envie socorro de 50 ombres y 10 cavallos ques cosa q. han mucho miedo” (2). He never explains what the natives did to scare them nor how any of the events transpired. The massacre of hundreds of Native Americans is reduced to a skeletal explanation of four sentences that offers nothing more than a dubious justification. What we can be sure of, is that his silence is no accident. For both Cortés and Valázquez, these silences were a powerful tool that allowed them to shape a fictional narrative to suit their political objectives.

Variations of Distance and the Unreliable Narrator

In the previous chapter, Wayne C. Booth’s *unreliable narrator* was defined as a narrator that should not be trusted either because he/she is confused or because they are intentionally deceitful. One of the hallmarks of this type of narrator is the changing characteristics throughout the narrative. I have discussed Hernán Cortés as fitting of this description and his alternation between first person and third person narrator as a symptom of his unreliability. When events are unfolding favorably he uses only the first person singular to narrate. This gives him the appearance of a hero, such as the Cid, that is always in command of the situation. However, he switches to third person as soon an unfavorable situation unfolds. This was done to manipulate the perceived distance Cortés had in relation to the events.

Diego Velázquez also fits the mold of *the unreliable narrator* because of his underlying motives to adapt his story. During the time of the conquest of Cuba, he was a man with his sights set on a governorship and a large fortune. His *Carta de relación de la isla de Cuba* would have to be worded carefully to further his rise to power. The events in question and how they

were portrayed would have been of the utmost importance. In this aspect, his situation was very similar to that of Cortés. Just as Hernán Cortés's success depended on the good graces of the Emperor Charles V, Diego Velázquez depended on the good graces of King Ferdinand. While Velázquez probably never used the first person to portray himself as a hero, he did indicate that he was responsible for events that unfolded in a favorable manner for the Spanish Crown. He credits himself alone for resolving the rather pesky issue of the natives fleeing following massacres. He portrays himself as the hero and the only Spaniard the natives trusted. He alone convinces them to come out of hiding once the other Spaniards had scared them. He testifies, "se fueron a los montes con sus mujeres, hijos i haciendas, pero yo fui a la provincia de Guamuhaya i los aseguré" (2). He is the lone resolver of all problems on the island, yet he mysteriously manages to remain distant from anything that goes awry. He manipulates his narrative to distance himself from certain events. Both Cortés and Velázquez shared a powerful motive for distancing themselves from events that did not suit their purpose.

Cortés uses the third person to shift blame and absolve himself from culpability; so too does Velázquez. Cortés used the third person for the setbacks during the battle for Tenochtitlan. Velázquez carefully chooses to employ the third person while narrating the events that transpired along the Caonao River. However, he distinguishes himself a bit from Cortés in that he actually says outright that the massacre was done against his orders. Cortés implies that he was not responsible by using the third person narrative. Velázquez goes one step further and flatly denies any involvement. He states, "les guiaron por el Puerto [...] do havia celada de mucha gente; aunque contra mi orden les fue forzado pelear i mataron 100 indios "(2). This massacre happens once Velázquez has received word that his soldiers are fearful and he sends

reinforcements. His own soldiers even request a preemptive strike before he sends reinforcements. Is it probable that a commanding officer, sending reinforcements as an answer to a terrified plea for help, would somehow be sending them on a good will mission? Is it probable that a commanding officer would have such little knowledge of the situations his troops were encountering? Velázquez was living and fighting in the same conditions as the soldiers under his command. I believe it is not probable that Velázquez innocently sent reinforcements to secure the peace. In all probability, he reacted with the instincts of a battlefield commander who sent additional soldiers to secure the mission at all costs. There was a small problem when it came time to report the events to the king. The King's orders pertaining to the treatment of the natives and the punishment for those that violated his orders was not unknown to Velázquez. It is very likely that he adapted his story to fit the model the king desired. The truth about the extent of Velázquez's involvement in the massacre has unfortunately been lost to history. What is clear however, is that the narrative Diego Velázquez used to describe the events at Caonao helped him effectively distance himself from a potentially career ending situation.

After having explored how Velázquez's narrative may have served as an example for Cortés's *Segunda carta de relación*, the following chapter will be dedicated to gathering conclusions about the link between these two men and their respective narratives.

Conclusion

The complex and volatile relationship that developed between Diego Velázquez and Hernán Cortés played out against a backdrop of a society in transition. Spain's medieval past was slow to disappear. At the dawn of the sixteenth century, Spain had just completed the religious reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula after several hundred years of warfare against an Islamic occupier. The nation was now unified under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Catholic monarchs. The Spaniard of the sixteenth century maintained the fervent religious devotion to the Catholic Church that had been present during medieval times. At the same time, the Renaissance and its humanist ideals were spreading across the European continent. The concepts of individualism and human ambition had suddenly appeared next to an all-powerful medieval God. It was against this backdrop of Renaissance humanism and medieval religious dogma, that Cortés and Velázquez set sail for America. It was against this backdrop that both men would participate in a religious and military conquest of the New World that would carry them both to new heights of fame, fortune and glory.

In the New World, a model for success was established. Because the conquest of Mexico involved a large geographic area and more complex military and political maneuvers, most historians have focused on Cortés as having set the precedent. In her book *The Armature of the Conquest* Beatriz Pastor eloquently dissects the fictional model that was followed by Cortés. She states:

In the *Letters*, the fictionalization of events and characters is governed entirely by Cortés's need to legitimize his venture and consolidate his power. Its structure is calculated and impeccably rational. The narrative takes a form usually associated with an official document, suggesting a direct equivalence between the content narrated and the truth. At the same time, the philosophy implicit between the lines appeals to a Renaissance ideology that would hold from Machiavelli to St. Ignatius of Loyola that the end justifies the means and that legitimacy of an action is determined by its success. Within this framework, Cortés creates a fiction by selecting, reorganizing, and reworking the material. (99)

Although Pastor provides an insightful and accurate description of Cortés's model conquistador, I believe that we can gain even more insight into this model when we delve into Cortés's past and the environment from which he launched his famous conquest of Mesoamerica. The roots of Cortés's model can partly be found in the conquest of the Caribbean islands of Hispaniola and Cuba. During his time on both of these islands he worked under the command of Diego Velázquez. On the island of Hispaniola, he soldiered under Velázquez during the native rebellions in the provinces of Aniguavagua and Guacayrima. He fought alongside him during the conquest of Cuba and later served as his personal secretary. Cortés had a personal connection to Velázquez's ascendance to power. It should come as no surprise that the ambitious Cortés observed and learned a few lessons along the way. When observed closely, Cortés's model conquistador bears a striking resemblance to the path that Velázquez followed to power. Both men made use of reliable witness techniques, *ars dictaminis*, and *captatio benevolentia* as a

means of establishing the appearance of legitimacy. Both conquistadors, through their narrative, carefully crafted an image of an obedient Christian vassal. Within their narratives they painted their enemies as the antithesis of a loyal vassal, with the express purpose of politically eliminating them. When crafting their respective narratives, both men carefully included only the events that enhanced their fictional images as model conquistadors. Liabilities, such as the massacres at Cholula and Caonao were either eliminated entirely or glossed over to make them palatable to a royal audience. When total elimination of these negative events was not possible, both conquistadors used narrative techniques to distance themselves from the action. Thus, they escaped responsibility for any events that did not fit the model. They also shared a very powerful motive for creating this fictional model conquistador. In his book *The Prince*, Nicolo Machiavelli sheds light on the agenda behind the model:

It is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated but it is very necessary to appear to have them. I shall dare say this also, that to have these qualities and to always observe them is injurious and that to appear to have them is useful. For this reason a prince ought to take care that he never lets anything slip from his lips that is not replete with these qualities, that he may appear to him who sees and hears him altogether merciful, faithful, humane, upright, and religious. There is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this last quality, inasmuch as men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because it belongs to everybody to see you, too few to come in touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, few really know what you are. (81)

The model conquistador was a fiction that masked a Machiavellian plot for the acquisition of fame, power and wealth. Although *The Prince* was published after the conquest of Mexico, Cortés no doubt absorbed the spirit of the Machiavellian tactics that were being employed by his superior, comrade in arms, and fellow conquistador Diego Velázquez. However, both men were acting out a wider dynamic that belonged to the conquest of the New World as a whole. In her article titled “The first fifty years of Hispanic New World historiography: the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America” Stephanie Merrim sums up this dynamic perfectly:

Failure required justification, trespasses reparation, errors and confusions explanation, inequities redressing. Many of the earliest historiographical writings from the New World were motivated not only by the desire to recount victories but to an important degree by the need to seek pardon, legitimation, power, and reward, which needs would lend special urgency to their writings. Special urgency and narrative interest-for out of necessity the actor-chroniclers of the New World contrived complex verbal strategies in mounting their self defenses and petitions. Rather than being ancillary to action, writing was an essential form of action. A sense of what their words would do weighed heavily upon these early writers. So it was that men of arms, at times ill prepared for the task, became men of letters, who could create texts as nuanced and strategically crafted as many works of literature. Carefully couched in the language of success, they would proffer their failures. (58-59)

Much of what we see in Cortés's fictional model was already part of the culture of the New World conquest as a whole. However, the complex political situation specifically surrounding the conquest of Mexico required a more complex narrative than had been previously used. Cortés simply rose to the occasion.

I expect this thesis to contribute a more expansive view of the previously defined model conquistador in Beatriz Pastor's *The Armature of Conquest: Spanish Accounts of the Discovery of America 1492- 1589*. While the tactics Cortés used may not have been original—owing much to Velázquez and to literary and political traditions, the size, scope, intricacy and detail of his narrative put him into a class all his own. Hernán Cortés's *Cartas de Relación* stand alone both for their literary value and for their political outcome. Cortés's fictional model conquistador was as important as the sword in the execution of one of the most consequential military conquests in world history.

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