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The Importance of Letter Writing in the Letters of Hernán Cortés

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Abstract

The various individual methods utilized by Hernán Cortés have been previously documented by multiple scholars. However, while the "tools" Cortés used—such as a reliance on legal precedent and religious allusions in the tradition of conquest rhetoric—to craft his narrative have been dissected, the use of those tools to create a narrative in letter format has not been discussed as much if at all by these scholars. While Cortés utilized previously established literary devices to prove his loyalty, his narrative was only as effective as it was because of his decision to place it in a literary format. This gave Cortés the narrative freedom and personal correspondence with the king, and the public, that made his letters a truly convincing personal narrative. Furthermore, the use of letters as a format allowed Cortes to tap into the network of letter writing that already existed in Europe to bring his story to many people across the continent.

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Comments

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The Importance of Letter Writing in the Letters of Hernán Cortés

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

The various individual methods utilized by Hernán Cortés have been previously documented by multiple scholars. However, while the "tools" Cortés used—such as a reliance on legal precedent and religious allusions in the tradition of conquest rhetoric—to craft his narrative have been dissected, the use of those tools to create a narrative in letter format has not been discussed as much if at all by these scholars. While Cortés utilized previously established literary devices to prove his loyalty, his narrative was only as effective as it was because of his decision to place it in a literary format. This gave Cortés the narrative freedom and personal correspondence with the king, and the public, that made his letters a truly convincing personal narrative. Furthermore, the use of letters as a format allowed Cortes to tap into the network of letter writing that already existed in Europe to bring his story to many people across the continent.

The letters of Hernán Cortés, the skill, and craftsmanship that went into them, were not just accounts of Cortés's conquest, but carefully worded and structured petitions to the king. Cortés wrote them purposefully, with allusions to legal precedent and religion in letter format to provide narrative structure. They were intended to prove that he was a loyal subject to king and argue that he should retain his power in New Spain., Cortés utilized legal precedent to portray himself as loyal to the law of the king and state. His use of religious symbolism displayed his alignment to the faith of the king, who as Holy Roman Emperor had a vested interest in spreading the Catholic faith. The use of law and religion aligned Cortés's letters with previous conquest rhetoric in Spain utilized to portray heroes. They also helped to bolster the intimacy of the letter format where Cortés spoke to the king as a person, giving advice, and aligning himself with the king's aims to prove both his honorable intentions and personal investment in achieving those aims for the king.[1]

Although the King of Spain was the most important member of the audience for Cortés, he was not the only one. Cortés had more than just power and wealth in mind when he set off for Mexico; he also wanted a legacy. With much of his work an ocean away, his letters, with all their flourish and extravagance, were the only way for Cortés to reach what could be his adoring audience. The personal nature of his letters, their allusions to law and religion, they were repurposed for the public. Rather than a display of Cortés's alignment with the interests of the public as they did for the king, they were used to show the public a daring man serving his, and their, country bravely (and legally) through terrible conditions and long odds. There would be no

[1] Viviana Díaz Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor: Hernán Cortés's Second and Third Letters to Charles V," in *Invasion and Transformation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico,* eds. Rebecca P. Brienen and Margaret A. Jackson (Louisville, Colorado: The University Press of Colorado, 2020), pp. 61, 70-71.

better way to convince them of his heroism, and possibly to lobby on his behalf to the court, than to become a type of idol in their eyes. It was for both audiences Cortés wrote his letters, and only through letters could he have crafted his narrative as effectively as he did for both audiences.

The five letters of Hernán Cortés were written by Cortés while in the New World and sent to the King of Spain Charles V between 1519 and 1526. While many countries and states had rules and protocols to communication with the crown, Spain allowed its subjects to send letters to the king, including Cortés. Cortés would sometimes write aggressively, and even threateningly to the king, his warning against bestowing power upon Diego Velázquez in 1519 was a clear example. However, his tone normally remained calm, and he ended his letters with personal expressions of loyalty and devotion to the king and Spain.[2] While it was unlikely that Charles V appreciated the rough tone Cortés sometimes used to make his point, it could have also been seen as an expression of Cortés's devotion to the king. After all, his warning was meant to keep power out of a corrupt official's hands, not to demand power from the king. But the dwindling power Cortés enjoyed after his era of conquest was over indicated that no matter how loyal he claimed to be, or how many letters he sent, the Spanish Crown was not willing to let one man hold enough power to challenge it.[3]

The first letter Cortés wrote to the king was written from the perspective of the whole company Cortés brought with him on his expedition. In that letter the narration or the narrator always referred to themself as "we," but this letter was at least directed by Cortés if not directly

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[2] Anthony Pagden, "Introduction," in *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), p. xlix.
[3] John H. Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," in *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico,* trans., and ed. Anthony Pagden (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.

written by him.[4] The first letter was also the shortest of the letters, only numbering forty pages while the others are about one hundred pages each. The other four letters were written from the perspective of Cortés himself. The first three letters were written prior to the day Cortés had received his authorization and recognition as governor of New Spain from the king and therefore are mainly meant to argue in favor of that recognition. However, the first three letters also portrayed Cortés's exploits as a heroic narrative that gained Cortés popularity with the masses across Europe. The last two letters, written after his recognition, dealt more with issues with governance and his deteriorating relationship with the crown. These last two letters had less to do with this thesis and have been utilized less than the first three.

The traditional narrative of the conquest of Mexico has been the story of Hernán Cortés, his skills as a conqueror, and his small band of daring Spaniards. Although they did not make up a real army by any means, they had the determination to follow through rough conditions to conquer new lands for Spain and to acquire profit for themselves.[5] However, this narrative has been challenged and thoroughly dissected by many historians who have replaced it with a much more nuanced understanding of the conquest and of Cortés himself. In the place of Cortés's ingenuity in military tactics in the New World, historians have shown that he followed previously established procedures. From scuttled ships to the foundation of Vera Cruz, Cortés was not the inventor of his tactics, but an attentive student of previous conquistadors.[6] Yet, this new interpretation does not indicate that Cortés was incompetent. While he was not truly a brilliant inventor of strategy as historians originally believed, Cortés was a master in adapting

[4] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," pp. xviii, xx.
[5] Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2004), p. 19.
[6] Restall, *Seven Myths*, pp. 18-20.

and applying what he had learned. Outside of military tactics, he effectively utilized knowledge of multiple different legal documents such as the *Siete Partidas,* a thirteenth-century document drafted under the reign of Alfonso X.[7] Another document Cortés used was the *requerimiento,* a sixteenth-century legal document that had to be read to be read to the indigenous peoples of the New World before military conquest.[8] Both were used to convince the king and other Spaniards of his legal justification, to the ire of Diego Velázquez.[9]

For Cortés, the goal was not comfortable living, but wealth, honor, and above all, legacy. While he was stuck as a subordinate to Diego Velázquez, these were not attainable to the degree that Cortés desired. When Cortés was given the opportunity to lead an expedition into what is now Mexico, he knew he had a one-time opportunity to make a name for himself through conquest, but only if he could justify his actions.[10] Unfortunately for Cortés, to gain that justification would be difficult as Diego Velázquez had already begun the process to acquire the right to conquer Mexico for himself.[11] The race back to Spain to begin to argue in favor of each side would be won by Velázquez, but he could not stop Cortés from undermining his position and eventually winning the favor of the king, which awarded Cortés the governorship of New Spain.[12] Yet, even after Cortés was awarded the governorship, the feud between the two men did not end. Even the death of Velázquez in 1524 did not stop his proxies from being a thorn in the

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[7] On the *Siete Partidas* see Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xviii.
[8] On the *requerimiento* see Anthony Pagden, *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), pp.453-455n27.
[9] Hernán Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, in *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico,* trans., and ed. Anthony Pagden (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 59-60.
[10] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," pp. xiv-xv.
[11] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xiii.
[12] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," pp. xix, xxx-xxxii.

side of Cortés, a thorn that would eventually cause Cortés to lose the power he struggled so hard to achieve.[13]

Despite all the obstacles and enemies that survived and stayed in power after Cortés's fall from grace, Cortés's image has remained one of a great man and a skilled conqueror for a long time, rather than a lucky one. Cortés's rhetorical skill in the portrayal of his actions, as displayed in his letters, was likely the reason most scholars viewed him as such a skilled conqueror. Cortés's letters, which he wrote to the King of Spain, Charles V, were unique among other conquistadors. Others filed reports, *relaciones,* that detailed their achievements, but Cortés crafted a narrative in his letters where he spoke directly to the king explaining his actions and experiences.[14] While it is unknown whether the king ever read these letters, the fact that copies of each letter were included in the imperial library, does suggest they were given higher status than the reports of other conquistadors.[15] Cortés also moved to have his letters printed. While it is not likely that the letters were intended to justify Cortés's position to the public in order to gain recognition from the king (because they were only published after Cortés gained that recognition), Cortés certainly intended them to provide himself with a legacy, which they did.[16]

Cortés, Velázquez, and Charles V

Cortés was initially ordered to explore Mexico in the search of a previous expedition that had not reported back. While there he was there, he was instructed to only trade with the natives

[13] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xxxiv.
[14] Pagden, "Introduction," p. xlix.
[15] Pagden, "Introduction," pp. xlix-xl.
[16] Pagden, "Introduction," pp. xl-xli; Barbara E. Mundy, "Mapping the Aztec Capital: The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, Its Sources and Meanings," *Imago Mundi* 50 (1998): p. 29, footnote 1. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1151388.

rather than settle any land as Velázquez, who gave Cortés the orders, did not have the right to settle or conquer land.[17] Once Cortés had decided to violate the orders of Diego Velázquez, the Governor of Cuba and his direct superior, Cortés needed to figure out how to justify his actions so that Velázquez could not simply arrest him on the grounds of treason. For Cortés, the solution was to go right over Velázquez's head, and ask the King of Spain, Charles V, for that justification. To acquire that type of justification would be no easy task, so Cortés framed his first letter carefully. At the beginning of the letter, Cortés made sure to write that his report was a "very true and trustworthy account."[18] Such an inclusion may seem trivial as Cortés needed to be taken seriously and an untruthful account would not benefit him at all. But Cortés was at a disadvantage when it came to the truth in 1519 because Velázquez had already been swaying the Spanish Court in his own favor to gain the right to conquer land in Mexico. It would be hard to beat the influence of Velázquez's chorus of allies already seated in the Imperial Court.[19] Cortés was therefore already positing his account as the true report of what was happening in Mexico in 1519 as his counterargument to Velázquez, and as a way to discredit the charges levied against him.

For example, Cortés described Velázquez as "moved more by cupidity than any other passion," when he had the opportunity to engage in trading with the Native Americans in Mexico.[20] Cortés even claimed that Velázquez would have gone through with the trading enterprise even "if it should not have pleased Your Majesties to grant the requests," that

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[17] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xiii.
[18] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 4.
[19] Elliott, "Cortés, Velazquez, and Charles V," p. xxiii.
[20] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 5; It is possible that some do not know the definition of "cupidity" (see the Author of this paper). Which means eager or excessive desire, specifically for money.

Velázquez had asked for.[21] Cortés made his case against Velázquez as clear as possible near the end of his first letter when he, speaking through the mouthpiece of his entire company, wrote that the king and queen were

> …on no account to give or grant concessions to Diego Velázquez… of *adelantamiento* or governorship… and if any shall have been given him, that they be revoked, for it is not to the benefit of the service of Your Royal Crown that the aforementioned Diego Velázquez, or any other person, should have authority or be granted concessions…[22]

Cortés followed this statement with reports of the harmful things Velázquez had done in the New World, such as "ruining many good men and reduced them to great poverty," by taking all the native slaves and gold for himself.[23] Such a report would have destroyed Velázquez's case if it were believed in its entirety, for Velázquez claimed that Cortés was acting in opposition to his orders and against the king.[24] However, Cortés needed to provide more than just accusations to prove his loyalty and trustworthiness to the king and the Spanish Court, which he accomplished through his narrative in his letters.

Legal Precedent

The first aspect of the narrative Cortés made to prove himself was the use of legal precedent to give his actions at least some legal standing, without which, there would be no way to defend his actions. A prime example of his use of legal precedent was the foundation of Vera Cruz, written in the first letter Cortés sent to the king.[25] In his first letter, Cortés claimed that it

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[21] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 6; This first letter was addressed to both Charles V and Dona Juana, referred to as "Your Majesties" in this quote.
[22] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 37.
[23] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 38.
[24] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xxiii.
[25] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, pp. 24, 26; Vera Cruz, or Villa Rica de Vera Cruz, was a city that Cortés claimed to have founded in Mexico but he, or his company, did not really establish any settlement. The purpose was to provide Cortés the legal basis to remove

was Cortés's company rather than Cortés himself that came up with the plan to establish a city in Mexico.[26] It was the desire of the company to serve the King and Queen of Spain in Mexico by "increasing Your Royal Highnesses' dominions and revenues," through the founding of Vera Cruz rather than the influence of Cortés that caused it to happen.[27] Although they—the company—admitted that they not followed Velázquez's original plan, which was only to trade with the Native Americans, the letter argued that if they had traded "for as much gold as possible," and returned to Fernandina, only Velázquez and Cortés would have benefitted.[28] Because Cortés explained that he rejected personal gain and gain for Velázquez, he was able to claim that his actions were in the interest of the king and against the interest of Velázquez, who stood to profit much more from trade than settlement for the king. By founding a city, and through his election as chief justice and *alcalde mayor*, Cortés was conveniently placed outside of Velázquez's reach. As Velázquez saw it, and as he argued to the Spanish Court, this was an act of rebellion. Yet, through his letter, Cortés argued that it was Velázquez who had acted in his own self-interest, if not rebelliously. Therefore, Cortés could argue that the decision to establish a city was a decision made to benefit the king by ignoring Velázquez's commands.[29]

For Cortés to have written that the decision to establish a city (and his election) was a group decision in the interest of the Crown rather than in the interest of Velázquez was important

himself from Velázquez's reach and as part of his argument to claim loyalty to the king specifically by ignoring the allegedly self-interested commands of Velázquez in favor of acting in the interest of the king. By breaking from Velázquez on those grounds, rather than a rebel, Cortés hoped to be seen as incredibly loyal.

[26] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, pp. 24, 26; Cortés's company in this case refers to his group of men, sometimes referred to as his army or community by Cortés in the letters. This paper will refer to them as Cortés's company as they were not soldiers (at least not all) or uniform in any singular way more than a part of Cortés's expedition.

[27] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 26.

[28] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 26.

[29] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," pp. xvii-xix.

for his legal justification for his actions. Otherwise, he could not have relied upon the *Siete Partidas* for protection.[30] While the *Siete Partidas* did allow for laws to be broken to protect the king from self-interested officials, it could only be done when all the good, Spanish, men in the land demanded it. That was because the goal of the *Siete Partidas* was to ensure that the king and his subjects were protecting one another from harm inflicted by self-interested officials. If laws were standing in the way of protecting someone like the king from serious harm from corruption (not physical in this case) then those laws were to be superseded in the interest of helping the king. In Cortés's case, his company were the only men that had any say as they were the only Spaniards in Mexico.[31] But Cortés made sure to point out that he was not forced to do what the company suggested and had done so because he believed it to be in the best interest of the Crown. Cortés stated in his first letter that the company "saw that what we [the company] asked was beneficial to Your Royal Highnesses' service," and decided to forgo his more personally lucrative option of trading to serve the cause he was most devoted to, that of the Spanish Crown.[32] That way, Cortés was not just a pawn of his company of Spaniards, but an active agent who did what was right for the king and queen against the wishes of a self-interested official (Velázquez) while adhering to long established legal precedents. If Cortés ever hoped to keep his power in Mexico, he had to be recognized by the king as the legitimate governor of the newly established province. By acting on the king's behalf in this instance, on his own volition, Cortés attempted to prove that his loyalty to the king was greater than any individual ambitions he had.

Yet, this was not an example of political or legal ingenuity by Cortés, as other conquistadors before him had "founded" towns like Vera Cruz before. The towns were founded

[30] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xviii.
[31] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xix.
[32] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 26.

in name only to create the framework to ask the king for the approval to govern and conquer the land they had taken. For example, Matthew Restall observed that Havana and Santo Domingo (officially established in 1519 and 1498 respectively) were both "founded" in the same manner as Vera Cruz was prior to their official date.[33] Cortés was not the first conquistador to come up with the idea to establish a city for legal purposes, and Restall's work indicates that Cortés likely copied the idea from others who had done their conquering before him, and likely used a similar line of reasoning to justify themselves.

Of course, Cortés did not merely stop with one example of legal precedent to show his loyalty. His second letter, which focused mainly on the conquest of Mexico, involved many accounts of battles with the Native Americans who lived in Mexico. According to Spanish law, the Native Americans were officially subjects of the Spanish Crown and therefore could not simply be attacked or enslaved without justification. This necessitated a document aptly referred to as the *requerimiento*, or the requirement, which was meant to be read to Native Americans prior to any attack made upon them. The document itself was in part a history of the world that led to the creation of the papacy and the "donation" of the New World to Spain. It also included a requirement for the natives, which gave the document its name, to accept the Spanish as their rulers and to convert to Christianity.[34] While it did lay out Spanish claims, it was not that effective in dissuading attacks, likely because few Native Americans that could hear it (if any could) did not speak Spanish.[35] It was, however, still required by law to read such a document whenever an attack was to be made upon the natives. Cortés, who needed to show that he was a loyal, law-abiding citizen, emphasized his observance of this law.

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[33] Restall, *Seven Myths*, p. 20.
[34] Pagden, *Hernán Cortés*, pp. 454n27.
[35] Pagden, *Hernán Cortés*, pp. 453-455n27.

For example, Cortés wrote that after the Tascaltecans began to attack him, he "began to deliver the formal *requerimiento* through the interpreters who were with me and before a notary."[36] Even though Cortés was being attacked, he made sure to explain that he did read the requirement and do it through an interpreter with a notary present. In this case he not only fulfilled his obligation by reading it, but also made sure that he could not be accused of reading it in Spanish so the natives would not have understood him (one of the few times he mentions interpreters at all). On top of all that, he added legal evidence to his statement by stating a notary was there as witness, who would have created a legal written document.[37] All that Cortés wrote was in line with the exact way conquistadors were supposed to act in the New World.

Cortés included other examples of his company reading the *requerimiento* to the Tascaltecans, one particularly unsuccessful attempt was included in his first letter. Cortés explained that he had read the *requerimiento* through interpreters and with a notary present and told the natives "that we did not desire war but only peace and love between us, they replied not in words but with a shower of arrows."[38] Cortés then proceeded to engage in combat with the natives, and pacify the region after the local chieftains had communicated that "they wished to be the vassals of those monarchs of whom we had spoken."[39] In this instance, just as Cortés wrote about his conduct in Tascalteca, he explained that he never wanted to conquer or kill indiscriminately, but that he was always forced into the combat. Cortés followed the laws of the land, and even forgave the natives after they accepted the sovereignty of Spain as they became vassals rather than continue his attack. Both of those actions served to prove to the king that

[36] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 59.
[37] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 59.
[38] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 21.
[39] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 22.

Cortés was truly acting in the interest of the Spanish Crown rather than Cortés's own interest. If Cortés had not explained his process, the omission could have been used as further evidence that he was not following the law as it was laid out by the Crown by his enemies like Velázquez.

Yet again, this was not something unique to Cortés, as many other conquistadors, before and after Cortés, also made sure to record their own reading of the *requerimiento* for the king.[40] Whether it was often followed or not, it was a law, and the failure to adhere to it could result in consequences for hopeful conquistador. Therefore, it had to be written down in each report to achieve the proper legality. Evidence of the seriousness the *requerimiento* had can be seen in Cortés himself, as he was charged with not reading the *requerimiento* at Cholula by Crown officials at his *residencia*, after he had been awarded his governorship and legitimized by the king.[41] Therefore, this was not merely a tool that Cortés used to win favor with the king, although its inclusion would help, but a reality of his position as a subject of the king and his laws, and one that was shared by all conquistadors.[42]

However, that did not prevent Cortés from creating a bit more goodwill when he followed his statement on the *requerimiento* with his description of the fighting. He claimed to only engage in actual combat after he realized "nothing was to be gained by the *requerimiento* or protestations."[43] In this statement, Cortés provided what he hoped would be seen as proof he was following the law, but also indicated that he did not intend to do harm to the natives, who were still subjects of the king, if possible. This sharply contrasted with Cortés' description of

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[40] Restall, *Seven Myths*, p. 20.
[41] Pagden, *Hernán Cortés*, p. 454n27; *Residencia:* a trial regrading conduct of a Spanish official in this case Cortés's residencia concerned itself with his conduct in the New World; Cholula: this was one of the native cities Cortés attacked.
[42] Restall, *Seven Myths*, p. 20.
[43] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 59.

Velázquez who, Cortés claimed, enslaved the natives at will, dealt "justice to no one except as it pleased him," and punished "those who he chose out of anger or animosity rather than justice or reason."[44] Therefore, Cortés not only provided evidence, in narrative form, of his loyalty to the king through his adherence to law and legal precedent, but he contrasted himself to his now ex-superior who was far more interested in his own well-being and power than that of the king.

God's Favor

While the provision of a legal basis for Cortés's actions was vital to Cortés's eventual legitimation by the king, it was also a rhetorical device. All the legal maneuvers and decisions Cortés made in his letters argued that he was the best man to oversee Mexico for the king, in much the same way that Cortés wrote about his success in battle to prove his tactical brilliance.[45] Furthermore, Cortés's narrative contrast between himself and Velázquez indicated that there was both a correct and incorrect way to conquer the New World.[46] Cortés had created a hero in his own image, a hero that brought order to the chaos of ineffective, inept, and destructive conquistadors, just as Bernal Díaz alluded to when he wrote that Cortés wished for the same fortune as "the Paladin Roland."[47] Yet, legal precedent was not the only form of rhetoric Cortés used to his advantage in his letters, as he also relied upon proving his worth through religious imagery.

Closely related to his record of reading the *requiremiento,* Cortés also wrote that his victories in battle came not just from his own understanding of tactics, but from the favor Cortés

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[44] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 38.
[45] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," pp. 61-62.
[46] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," pp. xvi-xvii.
[47] David A. Boruchoff, "Beyond Utopia and Paradise: Cortés, Bernal Díaz and the Rhetoric of Consecration," *MLN* 106, no. 2 (1991): pp. 333-334. https://doi.org/10.2307/2904863.

enjoyed from God himself. For example, in Cortés's second letter, he made several references to the strength of God. He stated that when campaigning in Tascalteca he was "secure in the belief that God was more powerful than nature."[48] His faith was soon rewarded when he attacked some towns who "begged me [Cortés] to do them no more harm, for they wished to be Your Highness's vassals and my allies."[49] Furthermore, when he faced armies that outnumbered his company, although the number of his native allies is usually omitted, Cortés attributed the success and survival of his company to God. In one instance Cortés stated his company was "carrying the banner of the Cross and were fighting for our Faith and in the Service of Your Sacred Majesty in this Your Royal enterprise," to be rewarded by God with a resounding victory and few casualties.[50] When Cortés and his company retreated from Tenochtitlan following the *Noche Triste,* Cortés explained that it was not too long after that they were again engaged in battle. Tired and already wounded the company and Cortés had to fight "such a multitude of Indians that the fields all around were so full of them that nothing else could be seen."[51] Cortés then attributed their victory to God who "was pleased to how His power and mercy," when the tired band of Spaniards broke the onslaught of native warriors.[52] Cortés even made sure to praise God for saving his life when he had to retreat from battle during the campaign to retake Tenochtitlan. Cortés wrote that "were it not for… a youth in his [a captain's] company, who, after God, was the one to save my life, and… gave his own."[53] Once again, although through a youth, Cortés's favor from God had appeared in a clear and visible episode of the narrative.

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[48] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 62.
[49] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 62.
[50] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 60.
[51] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 142.
[52] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 142.
[53] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 239.

Cortés was not the only one in his company that wrote about the favor of God the company enjoyed. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, for example, also wrote about the fighting in Tascalteca and said that the company "gave thanks to God, who had delivered us from such great danger."[54] Díaz also wrote that, other than their horsemen, it was God that protected them from so many enemies and that it was "the mercy of God which gave us strength to endure," during their fight in Tascalteca.[55] During the *Noche Triste* Díaz explained that the company of Cortés believed it was God that had saved them as they gave "many thanks to God for having escaped from such a great multitude of people."[56] While Díaz was not concerned with convincing the king of his righteousness, his account had many similar allusions to the favor of God that Cortés included in his account. The religious allusions in Díaz's account shows that the idea that God favored the Spanish in their conquest of Mexico was not something unique to Cortés's account, but something Cortés weaponized in his own favor.

When Cortés invoked the favor of God to explain his success in the name of the king, Cortés aligned himself with the interests of the king to gain his favor. Charles V was the Holy Roman Emperor, and Cortés's victories in the name of the Catholic faith would have been welcome as a sign of both the Catholic Faith's and the king's favor in the eyes of God. Furthermore, Cortés had done so in a royal enterprise, which implied that the actions of the king were also seen favorably by God. But Cortés had also done something even more important, and intelligent; he had placed himself as the favored commander of God in Mexico. As long as Cortés made sure that Charles V did not believe that Cortés was challenging his power, this was

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[54] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), p. 83. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[55] Díaz, *Historia Verdadera,* p. 85.
[56] Díaz, *Historia Verdadera,* p. 168.

a brilliant move. Cortés avoided this challenge when he wrote that his successes were not done in his own interest, and instead they were intended to help the king. For example, Cortés qualified his success in Tascalteca with the statement that the company was fighting for "our faith and in the service of Your Sacred Majesty."[57] Therefore, Cortés could claim that his actions were so righteous that God himself had provided him success, despite all the odds against him from both Spanish and native threats.

But allusions to religious favor were not something that had been invented specifically for Spanish conquest in the New World; they had been present in European culture for a long time. The prevalence of religious language and allusion can be clearly observed in a letter written in 1520 by Hernando de Castro to his senior partner in Seville.[58] Castro was not a conquistador, soldier, or even a servant of the crown. He was a merchant that wanted to succeed in his profession while he worked in the New World.[59] While not a document meant to argue Castro's case for governorship to the king, this merchant letter contained many references to the favor of God, and the belief that such favor would bring him success. In this case, the use of God's favor may not have been a conscious way to legitimize Castro's actions. For example, when Castro wrote "But I expect through God to do better than average in the end," he merely hoped God's favor would smile upon him.[60] But changing the context of the letter, from an update outlining the next goals of Castro to a form of report on conquest to the king, made it easy for Cortés to

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[57] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 60.
[58] James Lockhart and Enrique Otte, eds., *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies: The Sixteenth Century* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 24.
[59] Lockhart and Otte, *Letters and People*, p. 24.
[60] Hernando de Castro to Alonso de Nebreda, August 31, 1520, in *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies: The Sixteenth Century*, James Lockhart and Enrique Otte eds. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 29.

adapt these common phrases and literary elements into a form of legitimation. One that was familiar to the king and to the common tropes of letter writing at the time.

The Importance of Letter Writing

The fact that such tropes were common to letter writing may not have been a mere coincidence on Cortés's part. Cortés's choice of writing format was much different than other conquistadors at the time who filed their *relaciones* as formal reports rather than through the medium of letters.[61] In the situation Cortés found himself, as a borderline rebel to the crown who could prosecute him for his accused crimes, he needed to make his case as well as he possibly could. Writing his report as a letter allowed Cortés to place his constructed narrative in a format that would be more personal than a report, only to be read by the one person whose opinion mattered. That was the king, as he was the only person that could decide on Cortés's status.[62]

Scholars such as Vivian Díaz Balsera and Ricardo Padrón have previously explored the way in which Cortés utilized his rhetoric to tie his legal and religious bases together. Yet both stopped short of explaining why these narrative and rhetorical choices could not have been utilized in a normal *relación* rather than in the letter format that Cortés eventually chose. The key, in part, was explored by John Elliott when he explored the dichotomy of the "good and bad" approaches to conquest. This was an invented dichotamy that Cortés invented in his letters to differentiate the "good" conqueror, Cortés, and the "bad" conqueror, Velázquez.[63] While effective in painting his opponent as everything wrong with other conquistadors compared to Cortés, it could only be done with a certain amount of narrative license, which Cortés tapped into

[61] Pagden, "Introduction," p. xlix.
[62] Pagden, "Introduction," p. li.
[63] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," pp. xvi-xvii.

through his use of letters. To understand the construction of the letters, the significance of the format of the account Cortés chose must be explored.

Cortés's narrative, expressed personally to the king, delved into each of Cortés's escapades with specific language intended to evoke a sense of heroism and purpose.[64] Cortés's dispassionate or detached tone when he wrote of battle showed him to be controlled, restrained, and with clear mind when dealing with obviously stressful situations, yet he does not doubt or hesitate to act.[65] Cortés's description of fighting in Tascalteca was just one example.

> But as I was well prepared I saw them, and it seemed to me that it would be disadvantageous to allow them to reach the camp; for at night they would be unable to see the damage my people inflicted on them, and would be all the more intrepid. I was also afraid that as the Spaniards would not be able to see them, some of them might show less boldness in their fighting.[66]

The calm way Cortés described his thought process exemplified the characteristics of a good leader and commander when in the heat of battle, like the calm and collected Paladin Roland that Bernal Díaz claimed Cortés wished to emulate.[67]

The same dispassionate tone arose when describing his legal actions, whether founding a city or reading the *requerimiento* Cortés wrote calmly. In doing so, Cortés once again displayed his calm presence of mind, but also his fealty to the king.[68] Cortés's focus on his company as the originator of the idea to establish a city, and his clear deliberation on the benefit to the king and not himself, were clear when Cortés wrote:

> …as the Captain saw that what we asked was beneficial to Your Royal Highnesses' service…he disregarded his personal interest in continuing trading…and was pleased and

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[64] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," p. 60.
[65] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," p. 60.
[66] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 61.
[67] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xvi.
[68] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," p. 61.

> willing to do all that we requested, for it would greatly benefit the services of Your Royal Highnesses.[69]

This dispassionate tone, when used to refer to the legal basis of his actions, bolstered the case that Cortés had made with his use of religious imagery, as they both displayed his full alignment with the king and his laws. The tone showed that Cortés was fully aware and cognizant of his actions even under duress. Even under extreme conditions, he was not rash or impatient and instead relied upon his connection and adherence to the goals and laws of the king and God, in addition to his own skills, to navigate through his problems. As a narrator, the calm and collected manner of writing, combined with the claimed skill as a legislator and commander created a level of "self-referentiality," according to Viviana Díaz Balsera, that provided credibility and authority to Cortés's account.[70] In other words, Cortés's apparent complete understanding and relation of what had happened made him seem to be a reliable narrator to his audience, the king. This credibility helped to prove to Charles V that Cortés was not some rebellious subject, but instead a loyal subject who remained so even when it would be easy to ignore or overlook the desire and interest of the king in favor of Cortés's own benefit or survival. As a result, the king could trust that what Cortés said about the context of his actions were true, and that his use of legal precedents and religious allusions were honest. But the dispassionate tone was not the only way Cortés knew how to write, and it contrasted sharply with Cortés's tone when he described the city of Tenochtitlan.

Cortés wrote as an alert and attentive observer of the city, and included a lot of detail in a neutral, if somewhat wonderous tone when he attempted to describe the size and layout of the city. But he also utilized a more emotionally charged tone as he described the unparalleled

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[69] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 26.
[70] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," p. 61.

beauty and riches of the city. For example, Cortés wrote that the gold and silver feathers were so realistic "that no smith in the world could have done better" and that there were "jewels so fine that it is impossible to imagine with what instruments they were cut so perfectly."[71] In effect, Cortés allowed his narration to overflow with the wonder of the city for effect. The dispassionate and attentive narrator did not leave the letter but was overwhelmed. The intended effect was to create that same sense of wonder in the king himself when reading the letter. Without the city in his possession when he wrote the letter, Cortés could not offer the king much more than a sense of wonder and desire. But by creating that desire, Cortés could at least convince the king that continued efforts to retake the city would be worth the reward to be gained through success.

Cortés then compounded the magnificence of the city with the immensity of its loss. It was here that Cortés wrote of all the losses his army, and for once his native allies, had endured as "the harm which both the Spaniards and the Indians of Tascalteca who were with us had received was beyond compare, for nearly all had been killed."[72] While Cortés would later write that it was with God's help and favor that the army survived, it was only survival, not victory, that Cortés achieved.[73] Cortés's description of the loss of Tenochtitlan had to be as sobering as possible, for it had to mirror the disappointment the king would feel after the riches of Tenochtitlan were ripped away from him. This could inspire the king to renew his efforts to take the city by bestowing upon Cortés the power and authority he sought, but it could also cause the king to blame Cortés and call for his arrest.

The loss of Tenochtitlan hurt Cortés's case that he was not only the best man for the job in New Spain, but that he was the favored commander of God to fight for both Spain and the

[71] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 108.
[72] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 138.
[73] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," p. 66.

Catholic faith. Cortés needed a scapegoat for this debacle, the prized jewel of Mexico had been taken and, if it was his fault, Cortés would be replaced with someone else and likely arrested for his previous crimes. However, Cortés was able to skillfully deflect the blame onto his original rival, Diego Velázquez, through Panfilo de Narvaez who operated under Velázquez's orders. This deflection not only freed Cortés from a damaging argument against his hopeful recognition as governor, but further supported his case as Velázquez's reputation was further damaged through his implication.

Cortés pinned the blame on Panfilo de Narvaez as the cause of the natives rebelling against Cortés's rule, as he had sent men to Vera Cruz "to speak to the people there on his behalf and see if they could win them over…and make them rise against me."[74] Cortés portrayed this act as a form of incitement to rebellion against not only Cortés's rule, but that of Spain and Charles V. The resulting rebellion, which took Tenochtitlan from Cortés's control was therefore the result of subversive elements from Spain rather than incomplete or incompetent conquering or pacifying by Cortés. Because Narvaez was under the command of Diego Velázquez, so both Velázquez and Narvaez shared the blame for the rebellion that followed.

As a result of the rebellion and threat Narvaez posed, Cortés had to leave Tenochtitlan under the protection of a fraction of his army while he went to deal with Narvaez.[75] Cortés explained that not only were these actions detrimental to the service of the king, but they were also acting outside Spanish law. He wrote that Narvaez should bring his decree from the king, supposedly stating Narvaez had the right to arrest Cortés and take his land, "before me and the municipal council of Vera Cruz in accordance with the practice in Spain."[76] Of course, when all

[74] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 116.
[75] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 119.
[76] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 123.

was finished, Narvaez's men realized their deception once Cortés provided his notarized actions to them, and they soon joined Cortés, another example of Cortés's true loyalty and correct motivations.[77]

Although these events were described before Cortés wrote how he lost Tenochtitlan, it set the stage for the difficulties Cortés had to endure when other actors attempted to remove him from power. The message to the king was clear from the narrative Cortés provided in his letters. Cortés had followed the law to its exact letter and had been rewarded by God for being a loyal subject with the discovery of such vast riches in Mexico. Without interference from malicious third parties, the king would be in possession of so much more of the riches he had already received from Cortés.[78]

The narrative Cortés constructed has impressed and intrigued many people. Yet, like most elements of Cortés's narrative, his narrative was not based solely on his own intelligence. Much of the legal and religious framework Cortés used came from the traditions of Castile in the Reconquista. Specifically, Cortés tried to create a barbarian frontier that he could conquer, and civilize, in the same manner as Spanish heroes of the Reconquista (e.g., Roland) had done. In order to do that, Cortés needed to create a frontier that his audience would recognize as a frontier, which required Cortés to take some narrative liberties when he described the natives of Mexico.[79] Cortés wrote in his first letter that the natives wore "thin mantles decorated in a Moorish fashion," and that their rooms were "small and low in the Moorish fashion," as well.[80] These details may seem small, but they served the larger purpose of filling in an unfamiliar

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[77] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, pp. 126-127.
[78] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xxv.
[79] Ricardo Padrón, *The Spacious World: Cartography, Literature, and Empire in Early Modern Spain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp.103-104.
[80] Cortés to Dona Juana and Charles V, July 10, 1519, p. 30.

world with what the reader already knew, if only by implying they were the same. By familiarizing his audience with what he described, Cortés made this unfamiliar story seem much closer to home, much more recognizable and, as he hoped, much less rebellious. By sticking with the previous framework of heroes in Spanish culture, such as Roland who fought his own battles to conquer land while seen as a possible rebel to the King of Spain, his narrative was more than just his account with other elements to prevent arrest. In fact, the entire narrative, the legal precedents, and religious allusions included, were ripped from the rhetoric of Iberian conquest, and placed into letter format to tell the story.[81]

Cortés's narrative was written in a way that was unique to letters at the time as one of, if not the, only way to communicate personally across distance and time. Whether he used Vera Cruz as a mouthpiece, or himself, Cortés portrayed himself as a loyal subject of the king through his written narrative. Cortés relied on previously established conquest rhetoric that required legal precedent and religious allusions to prove that he was a true follower of the king and God and therefore could be trusted. This rhetorical basis also served to ground Cortés's brilliance in the world familiar to the king and his court, as it served as the beginning of empire building according to Ricardo Padrón.[82] But it was Cortés the narrator that provided the letters the story and emotion that contextualized each legal document's place or each religious allusion's purpose and substantiated or legitimized them. Letters were inherently more personal, writing them was an individualizing activity that made them a reflection of the author to a certain extent.[83] In that way, Cortés's letters were a way of personally visiting the king and providing a reminder of his

[81] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 103.
[82] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 104.
[83] James Daybell, *Women Letter Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 152.

visit in the physical letter.[84] By utilizing letters as a format, Cortés allowed each scene to read like a story where Cortés would prove his brilliance and loyalty time and time again against antagonists that were as cunning as they were malicious. The emotion and tone Cortés wrote into his letters were not something he could have included in a simple report, nor would it have been as effective if his narrative existed in the same format as other *relaciones* of the time and may have been better served as a minstrel song rather than a letter.

Other *relaciones* were carried out without much care or thought about what they entailed further than a list of "services rendered" to the king.[85] In effect, they lacked the conscious narrative structure that Cortés so notably included. Cortés's personal narration wrapped everything he did in the personality that was Hernán Cortés. Every success was his, Cortés possessed every virtue, and his presence normally left no room for other actors, even if they were his allies. It was a window into how Cortés saw his actions, or the way he had to see them to convince the king. While portraying his narrative in another format may have been possible, it was far more successful for Cortés to do so given the personal nature of the communication and narrative license the author of a letter had when writing. Cortés wrote to the king himself, to prove his loyalty in a personal narrative, of which he was effectively the sole narrator through the letters. By utilizing legal precedent and religious allusion, Cortés was able to construct his letters with a narrative that convinced the king of his loyalty and skill.

[84] Daybell, *Women Letter Writers*, p. 164.
[85] Pagden, "Introduction," p. xlix.

Cortés and the Public

Cortés's letters may have effectively convinced Charles V that he was not a rebel and could be trusted, but that was not their only goal. Cortés was not only interested in gaining power and influence, but with building a legacy for himself.[86] Cortés said himself that even if he eventually fell completely out of favor with the king he would "be content with doing my duty and knowing that all the world knows of my services and the with which I perform them."[87] Cortés recognized his actions' place in his family's history as well when he continued to say that he wanted "no other inheritance for my children save this."[88] The manner in which Cortés had written his letters, as a narrative story based in familiar rhetoric to the Spanish people provided his letters the necessary language for people to understand and find interest in his story. His father made sure to keep Cortés's letters, or a copy of them, for publication in Spain.[89] The increasing use of the printing press allowed Cortés's letters to quickly find their way into multiple languages and multiple countries across Europe, which ensured the public would be aware of his actions.[90] Through his rhetorical skill and the opportunistic use of the medium of print, Cortés was able to create a legacy for himself that surpassed that of the heroes of Spanish legend he modeled his narrative after.

Of course, the idea that Cortés had other audiences in mind when he wrote to the king has been discussed by historians, notably Anthony Pagden, who explained that Cortés was both

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[86] Pagden, "Introduction," pp. l-li.
[87] Cortés to Charles V, September 3, 1526, p. 447.
[88] Cortés to Charles V, September 3, 1526, p. 447.
[89] Pagden, "Introduction," p. l.
[90] Renate Pieper, "News from the New World: Spain's Monopoly in the European Network of Handwritten Newsletters during the Sixteenth Century," in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe,* eds. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Boston: Brill, 2016), p. 507. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h1ng.28.

aware of the power of public support in his case to the king and to preserve his legacy.[91] Other historians, such as Ricardo Padrón, have noted that Cortés had written his narrative in a similar fashion to that of the heroes of the Reconquista to make his story familiar and familiarly heroic to those in Spain.[92] Additionally, Renate Pieper's work on the network of communication on the New World centered in Spain proves Cortés was entering a wide world of discourse with his letters.[93] Yet, these historians seem to have either not focused on, or danced around, the place of letters in this network of communication and effort to preserve a legacy. And it is this aspect of Cortés's account that deserves further exploration.

A Heroic Story for the Public

Just as Cortés fashioned his letters with personal flair to make his case more compelling to the king, he did the same for the public, although not in the exact same fashion. Cortés had to include other aspects besides legal precedent and the stipulation that Velázquez was a corrupt official to create the type of public following he obtained after his return to Spain in 1540.[94] One aspect of his letters that appealed to the wider public was his use of his personal account of events to portray himself as the principal explorer and hero of his own story.[95]

Cortés's self-depicted heroism was also a tool used to convince the king of his skill, which demonstrated through his dispassionate tone when he described combat. Not only was the king influenced to believe Cortés's skill and clarity of mind by his dispassionate tone, but it also created the image of the confident, and almost all knowing, leader and narrator for the more

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[91] Pagden, "Introduction," pp. l-li.
[92] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, pp. 103-104.
[93] Pieper, "News from the New World," p. 507.
[94] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xxxvi.
[95] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, pp. 104.

general audience. Cortés portrayed himself as a leader who accomplished great deeds that would have awakened vanity in less virtuous men, and a narrator that fully explained the events to the audience.[96] An example of this tone used in conjunction with his great deeds was present in Cortés's third letter where he described his attack on Tenochtitlan. Outside Cortés's calm recollection of the destruction he caused and the large battle he fought, he cemented his status as a conquering hero when he "climbed the highest of those [temple] towers, for the Indians recognized me and I knew it would distress them greatly to see me there."[97] Cortés wrote this without claiming he was a terrifying force with great pride, but simply explained his rationale in the heat of battle. Yet, the image of Cortés inspiring fear in the Native Americans he fought would have been a startling image of his recognized skill by his enemy. Still, Cortés did not write with the same extravagant flair that he used to describe the city in his second letter but relegated this to his dispassionate tone of battle. Rather than a vain and self-indulgent conqueror, Cortés had portrayed himself as a virtuous man only concerned with victory rather than personal glory.

Vanity would not have been appropriate for the hero of Cortés's story after the many setbacks and defeats he endured in retaking Tenochtitlan. He wrote that he and his allies were routed and suffered heavy casualties one day when attacking the city. While their dead and wounded were sacrificed to Aztec gods in full view of the Spanish army, they were forced to make a difficult retreat.[98] Cortés explained "All during that day and the following night the enemy celebrated with drums and trumpets so loudly it seemed as if the world was coming to an

[96] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," p. 61.
[97] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 249.
[98] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 241.

end."[99] Cortés was not invincible in his narrative, and even allowed himself to express something near despair when the sacrifice of Christians was conducted as he described the feeling of his men that they would have taken the city had "God, on account of our sins, not permitted such a great disaster."[100] Yet such an image only added to his heroism as the stakes in his narrative were real, the outcome not guaranteed, and the brutality tangible. Cortés made sure to make the brutality tangible in this case when he described that the Spaniards were when Native Americans opened "their chests and [tore] out their hearts as an offering to the idols."[101] Narratively, this was required to intrigue his audience and to create the following and legacy he desired. The tale of Cortés would not be quite as intriguing if Cortés had simply won by attending what would have amounted to a bloodless chess match. Cortés had already used this emphasis on defeat in his second letter when he described the retreat from Tenochtitlan. It served to reinforce his commitment to the cause and the glory to gain when he finally succeeded in reconquering Tenochtitlan and the surrounding territory if he could reconquer them.[102] This episode in the siege of Tenochtitlan was just another instance of framing in a personal narrative.

Of course, Cortés eventually did succeed. But only after even more hardship and brutality, including what Cortés claimed to be the death of "forty thousand" inhabitants of Tenochtitlan killed in one day.[103] He further claimed that the wailing of women and children was so loud that "there was not one man amongst us whose heart did not bleed at the sound…we had more trouble preventing our allies from killing with such cruelty than we had in fighting the

[99] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 241.
[100] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 241.
[101] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 241.
[102] Balsera, "The Hero as Rhetor," pp. 66-67.
[103] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 261.

enemy."[104] Indeed, the suffering of the natives of Tenochtitlan was so great "that it was beyond our understanding how they could endure it," according to Cortés.[105] With the victory of Tenochtitlan came the destruction of most, if not all, of the city and the death of thousands of its inhabitants. Rather than remain dispassionate, Cortés displayed sympathy for the enemy he had so often characterized as barbarian even in his victory.

Cortés's story in his third letter is as destructive to the people and place of Tenochtitlan as it was heroic. It may be because of the destruction that it was heroic, as both Cortés and his native enemies were so determined to continue fighting over this great city, Tenochtitlan, that they were willing to destroy the city to have it. In the end, the magnificent city was destroyed, and the wonderous treasure looted by the Spanish to return to the king.[106] Yet, Cortés expressed his belief that the city would return to its former glory under Spanish management. He wrote to Charles V that "each day it [Tenochtitlan] grows more noble, so that just as before it was the capital and center of all these provinces so it shall be henceforth."[107] In the letter, Cortés returned the value of the land to the king and the value of his conquest to the general audience.

Scholars like Elizabeth Wright have noted that Cortés's letters often bore striking resemblance to the narrative structures of Roman literature, particularly that of Livian imperial writing.[108] The Livian imperial style came from the works of Livy where he described the process of empire building for Rome in the combat and aftermath of the First Samnite War. It focused, just like Cortés's letters, on the heroism and grit of soldiers who fought a wealthy,

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[104] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, pp. 261-262.
[105] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, pp. 263.
[106] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 265.
[107] Cortés to Charles V, May 15, 1522, p. 270.
[108] Elizabeth Wright, "New World News, Ancient Echoes: A Cortés Letter and a Vernacular Livy for a New King and His Wary Subjects (1520–23)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): p. 741. https://doi.org/10.1353/ren.0.0240.

powerful, and previously unknown entity.[109] This style contained elements that could also be observed in Cortés's letters, such as the focus on empire building, in the first and second letters especially, and the focus on the hero, or central figure, remaining virtuous and skillfully dealing with each situation that arose.[110] Yet, where the Roman literature differed from Cortés was that these authors wrote about things from a far more distanced perspective, in both time and experience, than Cortés had done in his letters. Rather than a compilation of accounts that involved some flair of questions and suspense from ancient writers, Cortés shaped his own narrative by writing his letters. The most personal account that people could make at the time were in letters, his account to the king was in the same format, but not intended for the same purpose.

Cortés may have been influenced by ancient writers in his account, but his decision to use letters to convey his personal narrative allowed each episode of heroism to be seen by the audience through his eyes. If Cortés had indeed been influenced by the Livian example, he may have known that such a narrative invited the audience to learn about the subjects he discussed, the military tactics he used, and even to allow themselves to be swept in by the emotional descriptions he gave of both beauty and brutality.[111] Such emotional involvement from the audience would have been highly effective in the third letter where the descriptions of brutality and destruction were commonplace as was Cortés's skill and final success.

Therefore, Cortés's choice to use the letter format was important to his legacy as it allowed him to control the narrative around the events as the sole authority when they were published. Cortés's writing provided just enough allusion to the Livian style of writing to both

[109] Wright, "New World News," p. 741.
[110] Wright, "New World News," pp. 742-744
[111] Wright, "New World News," pp. 743-744.

intrigue and engross the public in his narrative, which they could get nowhere else. Every defeat or success, beautiful description and brutal tragedy toyed with the emotions of his audience and brought them in line with his written account through their shock, surprise and even elation at his successes. The narrative Cortés invented was, in a sense, purpose built to make it the most personal account a narrative of combat could have and involve the audience in the experience of the New World as much as possible. While this was intended to convince the king of Cortés's skill for the job, it also showed the public the great deeds of a hero and cemented the legacy of Cortés in the Spanish consciousness, and eventually that of Europe.

Publishing the Letters

Cortés may have written a compelling story in his letters, but he still needed to put the story in front of the public. At the time, the best way to spread any written document was to print it and begin circulation, and Cortés decided to take full advantage of the medium of print. While some scholars, notably Anthony Pagden, have noted that Cortés took advantage of the medium of print with the help of his father, they have not explored how letters, as a medium, helped Cortés make his letters popular.[112]

The first, and most important, aspect of letters that assisted Cortés was the network of letter exchange in Europe, specifically the exchange focused on transmitting information about the New World. Centered in Madrid, the exchange of information from Spain to other Europeans cities transmitted the news of Cortés's exploits in the New World to the entire continent.[113] News of Cortés's success was not unknown outside of Mexico in the 1520s, but an actual account from

[112] Pagden, "Introduction," p. l.
[113] Pieper, "News from the New World," p. 507; Restall, *Seven Myths,* p. 12.

Cortés was unavailable until 1522 when, presumably, Cortés's father had arranged for the second letter to be printed in Seville.[114] The desire to keep up to date and transmit news across established social networks drove people to seek out copies they could read themselves.[115] This desire for more editions to increase the audience was somewhat answered by an edition of the second letters published in Nuremburg in 1524 which contained maps of the New World, not just Cortés's descriptions.[116] However, as time went on, people still wanted to read the letters and they were eventually translated and published into five different languages, not including Spanish, by the 1560s.[117]

By placing his narrative in letter format, Cortés entered a world of published correspondence that had grown in popularity since the introduction of the printing press.[118] Yet, that meant that there were many people who were willing and able to read Cortés's letters that did not have access to any maps on the New World in general, let alone a map of Tenochtitlan.[119] As a result, the only way that many readers could interpret the New World was through Cortés's descriptions of what he saw. Yet, in this case Cortés's desire to characterize the New World in familiar terms created a sense of understanding for those who read the letter, even if it may not have been accurate. Even the cities he conquered were reimagined through the European lens and Cortés's descriptions, and the people described in European terms.[120] In a sense, Cortés, and those that came after him, described everything about the natives as if they were Spanish. [121] To

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[114] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 117.
[115] Daybell, *Women Letter Writers*, pp. 152, 164.
[116] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 117.
[117] Restall, *Seven Myths*, p. 12; Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p.117.
[118] Lisa Kaborycha, "Introduction," in *A Corresponding Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 8.
[119] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 117.
[120] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 103.
[121] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 105.

that end, Cortés wrote that "these people [natives] live almost like those in Spain."[122] It was a sentiment only reinforced when Cortés explained how other natives requested help from him and applied to be vassals in the same manner as Spanish subjects.[123] One specific example of the Europeanization of the natives was written in the second letter where the native Tascaltecans offered "themselves as vassals in the Royal service of Your Majesty," without any proof that the natives knew what this meant.[124] Another example was Montezuma's speech that claimed the Aztecs had always believed "that those who descended from him [ancestral chieftain] would come and conquer this land and take us as their vassals."[125] Once again, there is no indication Montezuma fully understood what this meant, but it was even more likely a fabrication by Cortés based off of the speech of Donation of Constantine.[126] Otherwise, it would have been difficult to understand how Montezuma could have utilized European and Gospel formulae so well. It also provided some European familiarity and legal precedent for the transfer of power Montezuma had made with Cortés.[127]

Furthermore, Cortés wrote his letters as if he were fighting a holy war against a foreign enemy in the same manner as Spaniards had done in the Reconquista.[128] Such language and actions as raising the banner of Christ before battle and replacing the Aztec idols with that of the Virgin Mary both show the religious factor working against the barbarians who sacrificed humans to their idols.[129] The conversion of the barbarian natives was quite familiar to those in

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[122] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 108.
[123] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 105.
[124] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 67.
[125] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, p. 86.
[126] Pagden, "Introduction," p. lxvii.
[127] Pagden, "Introduction," pp. lxvii-lxviii.
[128] Padrón, *The Spacious World*, p. 104.
[129] Cortés to Charles V, October 30, 1520, pp. 60, 106-107.

Spain, as they had experienced centuries of war under the banner of the Catholic God attempting to do the same in Spain to the Muslim population.

Lasting Effects

Overall, Cortés's use of letters in print provided him the opportunity to spread his narrative across Europe with the previously established network of communication centered in Madrid, Spain. From there, his letters would be transmitted across borders to the major centers of news in the major cities in Europe in the form of newsletters and eventual translations.[130] His personal narration of the letters allowed Cortés to show his audience the New World through his eyes, which became important for their conceptualization of this foreign world that many had never even seen on a map. Both aspects of the letters were important to their acceptance by Cortés's European audience as even in contemporary society, media must be available and comprehendible by the average person to become a popular form of media.

In the end, Cortés was able successfully to create a legacy through his letters. For evidence one must only note that Cortés's letters were banned in Spain by the Crown in 1527, yet later admirers still conducted regular "pilgrimages," according to Matthew Restall, to his residence in Spain as his letters and later biographies of Cortés continued to circulate.[131] The biography of Cortés written by Gómara in 1552 and the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún's account of Cortés's conquests in 1585 only served to restimulate this cult of admiration while the Spanish government attempted to suppress it.[132] While Cortés was careful to maintain his loyalty to the king and to Spain, it seems that the creation of the "cult of Cortés" concerned a state that

[130] Pieper, "News from the New World," p. 507.
[131] Restall, *Seven Myths,* pp. 12, 164n39.
[132] Restall, *Seven Myths,* pp. 12, 15.

still remembered the revolt of Castile in 1520 and 1521.[133] Once again, despite his profession of loyalty to the crown, Spain was not willing to let his power go unchecked, whether it was popular, political, or military power. Yet, people in Europe still remembered his deeds and continued to revere the legend of Cortés's Mexican conquest. Therefore, Cortés's use of Reconquista rhetoric to portray himself as the hero of Mexican conquest and the use of print to describe his escapades to a larger audience cannot be labelled anything but effective in creating a long-lasting legacy.

Cortés's letters were more than just a simple narrative about the conquest of a single region. They were a legal basis, and a religious justification for insubordination to a superior. Cortés used them to argue his loyalty to the king, his rightful status as a Spanish hero of conquest, and for his legacy in the minds of the people of Spain and Europe. Cortés shaped his narrative with the personal touch intrinsic to letter writing, without which his justifications and bases would not have been as effective. Whether or not thoughtful readers agree or disagree with his status as a "hero" has been and will continue to be up to the individual, yet what was undeniable was that Cortés was effective in accomplishing his goals, and the role his letters played in that success must not be overlooked.

[133] Elliott, "Cortés Velazquez and Charles V," p. xxvi.

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