Doña Marina/La Malinche

A historiographical approach to the interpreter/traitor*

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This paper provides a historiographical approach to the figure of Doña Marina or La Malinche, the interpreter of Hernán Cortés during the conquest of Mexico, in order to reassess the fictionalization of the character that we often find in Translation Studies. It is argued that this discipline has used her name in an impressionistic way and, therefore, it seems necessary to complement the translation scholar's approach with that of the historian. The paper will explore the ways in which Doña Marina has been presented by translation scholars. The next section will provide the perspective of historians, focusing on three aspects relevant for Translation Studies: (1) the facts known about her origin, which explain her ability to communicate in two local languages, (2) her role as interpreter during the conquest of Mexico, (3) her alleged participation in the Cholulan massacre as an informant of Cortés. It will conclude with a discussion that aims to highlight the contrast between the use of impressionistic views of historic figures and the more balanced narratives based on factual rather than mythical elements.

Keywords: Doña Marina/La Malinche, interpreter, conquest, traitor, historiographical approach

Introduction

Although interpreters have taken part in colonial ventures, as linguistic and cultural intermediaries between the conquerors and the colonized (Roland 1999), few translators can be considered more controversial than Doña Marina/La Malinche, the interpreter that assisted Hernán Cortés during the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. She has captured the imagination of writers, historians, ordinary people and, precisely because of her role as a mediator, of translation scholars. And, as with the

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other groups mentioned, her figure has stirred much controversy. For some she exemplifies the ultimate traitor, for others she is merely a victim of her times. In all cases she was a translator, "a virtuoso of interpretation", as Rosenwald has recently put it (2008, 46). Of course, there is nothing new about this. Translation scholars merely reflect the contradictions that we encounter elsewhere, perhaps because the historic character has become a useful metaphor that can support most approaches and interpretations, however unsubstantiated or biased they may be.

This paper proposes a historiographical approach to the character of Doña Marina/La Malinche, and aims to draw a comparison between the approaches of historians and translation scholars. Historians of the conquest have been fascinated by the character since Bernal Díaz del Castillo provided information about her role in his monumental *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* whereas Hernán Cortés himself only made passing remarks to Doña Marina in his *Letters* (Cypess 1991, 26; Delisle and Woodsworth,[1] eds., 1995, 256). In the 19th century an American historian of the conquest popularized the Mesoamerican interpreter. Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico* made abundant references to the young Indian woman who would become a link between the native population and the conquistadors. The fascination with Doña Marina/La Malinche continued since then, and was revived in the years before and after 1992, as Spain started a series of commemorative events that marked the encounter (or clash) between the two cultures. In fact, numerous books and biographies came out in the last decade of the 20th century. As for the interest of translation scholars, this is often reflected in the occasional use of her name, her role as an interpreter and her relationship with Cortés. She exemplifies the ambivalent position of the translator, she has become a metaphor for the brutality of colonialism. Doña Marina/La Malinche seems to have become a problem that defies explanation. The role of interpreters, however, is far from stable, as Cronin has indicated: "The linguistic and cultural instability that results in the effectiveness of the translator as an imperial subject (informer/informant) also maximizes the potential for entropy. It is for this reason that the study of the lives of individual translators is so important" (2000, 39). And precisely because of the unpredictability of her actions as a translator, we propose an analysis that combines two elements.

This paper aims to present a historiographical approach to the person, rather than to the fictional character that has contributed to support the position of the researcher, because the "tension" between translation studies and history can be more productive than reductive (O'Sullivan 2012, 133). In order to do this, I will examine primary and secondary sources, and will compare the views, interpretations and use of her figure in translation studies and history. The first section will present the image that translation scholars have used in their works, making specific references to the contrasting views encountered in the literature. The second

section will explore the historian's approach to the character, with particular emphasis on her role as a translator embedded within the historic moment she had to live in. The authors mentioned in this section have used different approaches (historic, anthropological, etc.) to produce impressive accounts of her life, but the emphasis here will be on her role as a translator. I will concentrate on three events of particular interest to analyze her position as an intermediary between the colonizers and the colonized: (1) her origin as a member of one of the Mesoamerican tribes that populated the area conquered by Cortés, (2) her role as a mediator between Cortés and the Mesoamerican chiefs, and (3) her alleged participation in the betrayal of her people. The final section will serve as a recapitulation of the two approaches.

1. Doña Marina/La Malinche in Translation Studies

Although few facts are known about her role in the conquest of Mexico, Doña Marina/La Malinche has been stereotyped and, to some extent, stigmatized by a number of translation scholars, for whom she is a rich source of metaphors for their own political agendas. Bastin describes her as Cortés's "companion, advisor, secret agent, and the mother of his child" (2009, 487) whereas Lefevere (1995, 148), Bassnett and Trivedi (1999, 4), Arrojo (2002) and Baker (2009, xviii) have been particularly critical of her figure. Bassnett and Trivedi write:

> The figure of La Malinche, the native American woman taken as mistress of the conquistador Hernán Cortés who was also the interpreter between the Spaniards and the Aztec peoples, serves as an icon to remind us that a dominant metaphor of colonialism was that of rape, of husbanding 'virgin lands', tilling them and fertilizing them and hence 'civilizing' them. (Bassnett and Trivedi 2002, 4)

It is noticeable that she is first described as "mistress of the conquistador" and "also" as an interpreter whereas most historic accounts claim that she interpreted before she became Cortés's concubine (Ríos 2005). Arrojo repeats the same metaphor:

> One can recall, for instance, the examplary story of la Malinche, the daughter of an influential Aztec chief, whose main task as Cortés's translator was not merely to serve as his faithful envoy and concubine, but to persuade her own people not to resist the Spanish invaders. (Arrojo 2002, 142)

The emphasis is once again on the sexual nature of their relationship before mentioning her linguistic abilities, which are negatively presented as those of a traitor to her people. For this Arrojo follows Delisle and Woodworth (eds.), who

do indeed recall the black legend that surrounds Doña Marina: "According to a popular legend, her ghost walks the site of the former Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán (modern-day Mexico City), lamenting her fate, and unable to find rest in the afterlife because she betrayed her people during her life on earth"[2] (1995, 149). This allows the scholar to go even further:

> To this day, her name is a sad reminder of the Spaniards' brutal violation of the land and the women of Mexico, 'passively open' to the invader's power and cruelly abandoned to their own fate after being used and exploited. And it is to this inaugural narrative, which is also the birth scene of Mexico as a nation literally conceived in rape and violence — that Octavio Paz attributes, for instance, some of the most important traits of Mexican culture. (Arrojo 2002, 142)

For his part, Robinson, writing on postcolonial theory and translation, summarizes her position in the conquest thus:

> In 1519, the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés in Mexico relied on his native mistress and interpreter Malitzin or Malinche, called Doña Marina by the Spanish, to communicate with the Nahua whose territory he was attempting to seize. In one Nahua town, Cholulam Cortés was received with entreaties of peace, but Malintzin is said to have overheard a local woman talking of an ambush the men were planning against the tiny Spanish army of 400, and reported it to Cortés, who foiled the ambush and entrapped and slaughtered 3000 Choloteca men. (1996, 11)

Robinson's reference to Doña Marina/La Malinche is indeed remarkable. It is purported to be an account of the facts, as they are supposed to have come down to us. Although there is some indication that those events might not be absolutely certain ("is said to have"), he relies on the use of a historical past tense that projects complete verisimilitude. It is also noteworthy that Doña Marina/La Malinche is, once again, introduced first as a mistress, then as an interpreter. Robinson continues:

> This was the turning point in the Spanish conquest of Mexico; when the Nahua king Montezuma heard Cortés had uncovered and undone the plot against his troops, he became increasingly convinced that Spanish conquistador was not a man but an incarnation of the god Quetzalcoatl. (1996, 11)

The tone of objectivity in this summary places Doña Marina/La Malinche at the centre of the Spanish success in Mesoamerica, while providing the reader with no references. At least, Robinson notes that the name given to her by the Mexicans, la Chingada (or the Fucked one, a favourite metaphor with most translation scholars, as Ríos also mentions, 2005, 52) reveals as much about her role in the "middle

of power politics, a woman among men, a multilingual among monolinguals" as it does about treachery (1996, 11).

However, of all the episodes widely cited by translation scholars, the discovery of the Cholulan plot is the central piece of Doña Marina/La Malinche's "black legend". Some mention it (Roland 1999, 60–61), whereas others use the episode to present her in the negative light we have indicated. As recently as in 2009, Baker, for instance, stressed her role as a traitor to her own people, "because Malinche (Doña Marina), who interpreted for Hernán Cortés in the early sixteeth century, was heavily implicated in his colonial schemes, acting as an informant and warning him of ambushes by her people" (2009, xvi).

However, not all translation scholars have presented her in the same light (von Flotow 1998; Logie 2004; Ríos 2005; Delabastita 2009). Simon underlines that, despite the negative associations of the character, she has the "honor of being one of the few women who is remembered for her work as a cultural intermediary" (1996, 40), whereas von Flotow reminds us that after so many historic roles, "le personnage de La Malinche, interprète et femme de Cortés, est réhabilité (…) Ayant représenté la défaite coloniale et l'exploitation sexuelle, la tromperie et la liquidation de la culture du pays pendant des siècles, La Malinche est tranformée, par la critique féministe, en une femme douée et intelligente (…) une médiatrice, neutre culturellement" [La Malinche, Cortés's interpreter, has been rehabilitated (…) For many centuries she represented colonial defeat and sexual exploitation, the destruction of the culture of the country. However, she has been transformed by feminist critics into a gifted and intelligent woman, a neutral mediator between cultures] (1998, 123–124). Gentzler has noted the transformation of the character from traitor to victim in the last decades (2008, 154) whereas Alonso and Baigorri have paid more attention to the "technical component" of her activity, i. e. the difficulties posed by the translation chain in which she was involved (2004, 135). Finally, for Delabastita Doña Marina exemplifies "the problems of interlinguistic and intercultural mediation in colonial settings" (2009, 111). In his view, the fictionalization of the interpreters has created a number of competing narratives "some of which have gone on to lead a life of their own as powerful myths in the grey zone between fact and fiction" (ibid.).

2. Historians' views of Doña Marina/La Malinche

In his aptly entitled *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White reflects upon the intricacies of historiography as representation of the truth. In the West, he claims, the difficulties posed by history often derived from the fact that history is shaped against the background of literary discourse (1987, 44). Literature and history

differ in that the latter depends on facts rather than on the imagination. But historians select and arrange the material they use in certain ways (176), and, thus, they also play an interpretative role. Particularly relevant for this paper is his assertion that "the activity of interpreting becomes political when a given interpreter claims authority over rival interpreters" (225), since translation scholars, like historians, may resort to political acts of interpretation, often leaving aside any factual vestiges. Like historians, they can select and arrange their material in order to present a certain picture of a given event or, in this case, historic figure. Historians tend to rely on contemporary accounts and writings, on annals, on anthropological studies, but their narratives may be divergent. Cortés's interpreter provides a good ground to exemplify this.

Historians[3] have indeed been baffled by Doña Marina/La Malinche. Anna Lanyon, author of one of her biographies, was surprised to find how little was known about her. She believes that this should have come as no surprise since, at the time, women were filtered through the eyes of men (1999, xiii). Roland adds that "Marina's relations with Cortés are something of a mystery to historians" (1999, 60). Cortés himself, who described some of the events of the conquest in his letters, paid little attention to the interpreter. In fact, he only mentions Doña Marina/La Malinche twice. We have to bear in mind that as a woman, and an indigenous one for the matter, she was most unlikely to receive much attention in a man's writings. It would not have been very flattering for Cortés to acknowledge that he depended on her skills to overcome the difficulties of the conquest. Besides, even if, as some authors have argued, Doña Marina/La Malinche occupied a role that was more or less accepted in the metropolis, that of the permanent concubine outside marriage or "barragana" (the Spanish term used during that period, Madariaga 1941, 201–211, Barjau 2009, 210), it would have been unacceptable to acknowledge it. This is perhaps the area where the view of some translation scholars comes to meet those of some historians. Thus, the lack of relevant references to the interpreter has been used to suggest that the conquistador did not feel any affection for her, in spite of the fact that she was to become his lover and bore him a son. The most ardent defender of this view is Otilia Meza, who wrote a historical account (1985) in which the fictionalizing elements are obvious (to be commented upon below).

Conversely, Díaz del Castillo does mention her very frequently in his writings. She is often referred to as "la lengua" (the tongue) or "nuestra lengua" (our tongue), a metonymic reduction that emphasizes her value as a mediator between, at least, two cultures. In fact, Díaz del Castillo is responsible for most of the information that has circulated over the centuries. As a member of the conquering side, his account is bound to have been influenced by his origin, the close relationship he had with the protagonists and the fact that he wrote his *Historia verdadera de la*

conquista de la Nueva España some thirty years after the events took place. He devoted some pages and numerous references to Doña Marina/La Malinche, which have been repeatedly used by historians.

2.1 *Her origin*

Díaz del Castillo (1904, 103–105) is the main source to explain how Doña Marina/La Malinche would become Cortés's interpreter. He presents her as "gran señora y caçica de pueblos y vasallos" (Díaz del Castillo 1904, 103) or, in Cohen's version, "a great lady and a Cacique over towns and vassals since her childhood" (Díaz del Castillo 1963, 85), who had been given as a slave by her mother and her mother's new husband to preserve the rights of their new-born son. To support his version, Díaz del Castillo claims that he later met Doña Marina/La Malinche's mother and half-brother (Díaz del Castillo 1904, 103). The English version reads: "Thus it was that mother, son, and daughter came together, and it was easy enough to see from the strong resemblance between them that Doña Marina and the old lady were related" (1963, 86).[4] On the whole, Díaz del Castillo offers a very positive role of the interpreter (Cypess 1991, 27–28).

Historians have echoed the story that she was a slave given to Cortés (Collins 1954, 43; Figueroa 1975, 60–61; Meyer and Sherman 1979, 102; Burkholder and Lyman 2001, 43), one of the twenty girls presented by the Tabascans, who had purchased her from slavers (White 1971, 173–174), and that she was given to the Spaniards together with food, gold and cloth (Hassig 2006, 63). These accounts go back to the 19th century, when Anglophone historians relied on Díaz del Castillo to present the facts of the conquest:

> Though found in the condition of a slave, she was of high birth (…) Her father died when she was but a girl, and her mother married another cacique, a young man. They had a son born to them, and wishing to secure the heritage for him, and to despoil her, they gave her by night to some Indians of Xicalango, pretending to their own people that she had died. From these masters she passed, probably by sale, to the Tabascans, by whom, as we have seen, she was presented to Cortés. She was baptized as Marina, and afterwards served faithfully as an interpreter. Indeed, her fidelity was assured by the love which she bore to her master. (Helps 1855, 264–265)

Prescott, the first Anglophone historian to provide a full account of the conquest, also recaptures her legendary origin: "her infamous mother sold her, when a child, to some foreign traders, in order to secure her inheritance to a younger brother" (1873, 278). As expected, Spanish accounts are also based on Díaz del Castillo.

Madariaga, for instance, stresses that she was a present from the Tabascans, although of noble origin (1941, 163).

In fact, two linguistic reasons support her noble origin. On the one hand, Madariaga underlines that *Doña* was used before her Hispanized name as a sign of nobility at a time when it was not even widely used in Spain (1941, 164). In other words, the conquerors translated her name into the closest Christian equivalent and also transfered her status by giving her the closest title that could be granted to a woman. On the other hand, as Kartunnen claims, her linguistic versatility would eventually allow her to interpret between Cortés and Moctezuma, that is, she managed to understand a register of Nahuatl called "lordly speech" (Kartunnen 1997, 300–301). This was a register that no ordinary citizen would be able to comprehend: "Native intuition cannot help with this; one must be schooled in it" (301). Doña Marina/La Malinche, therefore, would be no ordinary citizen.

Others have attempted to explain why her mother would have sold her to slaverers. Collins, using a linguistic explanation once again, believes that her name, "ce malinalli" or "One Grass of Penance", had been given to her because she had been born on a date that signified "war and the overthrow of old established things" (1954, 43). She meant trouble: "From the Mexican point of view she was an unlucky person, somebody dangerous to have to do with." (ibid.). Rabasa has also mentioned the importance of the calendar in Mesoamerica since "the tonalli (forces linking the individual with the cosmos) was determined on a given day that would be beneficial to the newborn" (1993, 84). On the other hand, Collins argues that for her this was an advantage since her potentialities as an individual could be realized through her association with the enemy (1954, 43–44).

Not all writers agree with this version. León-Portilla, in his notes to the *The Broken Spears*, the indigenous account of the conquest, writes that she joined the Spaniards of "her own free will and served them faithfully as interpreter throughout the Conquest" (1962, 31). He does not provide any references for this. Barjau also casts doubts over the slavery episode because, in his view, there are no proven facts, and Díaz del Castillo was writing thirty years after the conquest (2009, 37–38). Once again he does not provide an alternative explanation substantiated by any facts or historical accounts. As Cypess pointed out (1991, 27), Díaz del Castillo remains the main source to evaluate her role in the conquest. Contemporary readers might not be able to assess which elements are factual, and which ones are invented, but we can draw some conclusions from the episodes he selected for his narrative. Thus, the narrative of history might not "dispel false beliefs about the past" (White 1987, 45), but it should be able to test imaginary conceptions of that past against the background of the more mythical representations present in literature. In this sense it can allow researchers to assess the content of the narrative itself (White 1987, 45–46). However, some of the approaches that we have

mentioned in the previous section clearly miss this point as they gear towards mythical elements. Let us now turn towards the second event by quoting a very positive presentation of her role as a linguistic and cultural intermediary.

2.2 *Interpreting between Cortés and the Mesoamerican chiefs*

> No fue solo la mujer de Hernán Cortés; fue su lengua, su consejera, y protectora, la intermediaria sagaz entre el caudillo español y los caciques indígenas, la embajadora cerca de los aztecas, la que lo salvó en Cholula (…) La conquista de México no es intelligible sin la presencia de la Malinche (…) Los resultados de esta colaboración — que bien puede llamarse así — se deben, claro está, a las cualidades intelectuales y morales de los dos protagonistas. (Pittaluga 1946, 616).
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> [She was not just Hernán Cortés's concubine; she was his tongue, his advisor and protector. She was an astute intermediary between the Spanish conqueror and the indigenous chiefs, she was the ambassador with Aztecs, she saved him in Cholula (…) The conquest of Mexico cannot be understood without Malinche (…) The outcome of this cooperation — as we can call it — is the consequence of the intellectual and moral qualities of the two protagonists]

This highly positivized view of the collaboration between the conqueror and his interpreter is not shared by other writers, but Pittalunga's words serve to highlight the significant role she played in the conquest. It is hardly plausible, though, to imagine these two characters on the same social level. In fact, other historians have chosen to ignore her completely. In a recently published history of Mexico, Russell (2010) does not bother to mention Doña Marina/La Malinche at all. His account of the encounter between the indigenous and the Spanish is a manichean reduction to the noble savage/evil conqueror dichotomy (2010, 20–25). In his version, the role of the mediator simply does not exist. The Cholula episode, which will be commented below, is summarized thus: "An informer told them that the Cholulans were preparing to attack them. Using this report as an excuse, the Spanish and the Tlaxcalans attacked the Cholulans" (2010, 20). Paradoxically, this historian, acting as a communicator and as a mediator between primary sources and his readership, chooses to eliminate how the words of the informer passed on to Hernán Cortés, or how the Spanish managed to communicate with the native peoples of Mesoamerica. Even more paradoxical is the fact that Russell, like so many historians before him, relies on Díaz del Castillo's justification for the attack, but dismisses what does not seem to fit his own narrative of the events. Russell's own text proves that historians could also engage in a dialogue with scholars from other disciplines to inform their own narrative of the events.

On the other hand, Meza (1985) also resorts to a manichean view of the conquest as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, adapted to a militant gaze where the interpreter is constantly surveyed by her captors. Unlike the negative view introduced by some translation scholars, Meza creates an imaginative narrative of the translation process carried out under the vigilant eyes of the conquerors:

> Cuando traducía al castellano lo dicho por los señores de Anáhuác, la tradución debía ser exacta, pues cerca de ella estaban presentes los conocedores del idioma o dialecto de los señores de esas tierras, por lo tanto ella no podia cambiar nada porque la denunciarían sus enemigos e irremisiblemente sería cruelmente torturada. (1985, 227)
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> [When she translated into Spanish what the lords of Anahuac had said, the translation had to be appropriate because close to her stood those who knew the language or dialect of the lords of those lands. Therefore she could not change anything because her enemies would report on her and she would be cruelly tortured.]

Meza's account does not make any sense within the context of the conquest: translators were most needed and so few were available. Her account also points to the fact that historians may resort to mythical rather than factual elements, and that the two disciplines can benefit from a closer contact with each other, as O'Sullivan has pointed out (2012). Meza's biography of Doña Marina/La Malinche, however, reflects the versatility of the character, who can be presented as the quintessential traitor by some and the ultimate victim by others.

This can be also traced in Medin's account of the relationship between her and the Spanish. He argues that only Doña Marina/La Malinche was capable of conveying accurately the threats of the conquistadors and of instilling the fear necessary to subdue the population: "y parecería que lo decisivo fue Marina (nunca sabremos cuan grande fue su papel en la conquista de México) los amenazara con las temidas represalias que tomaría contra ellos el mismo Moctezuma" [And it would seem that Marina was the decisive element (we will never know the importance of her role in the conquest) she would warn them of the terrible vengeance Moctezuma would take against them] (2009, 191). The use that this author makes of the conditional advises us to be cautious. Like everywhere else in his book, he draws a dividing line between the evil and the good, a line that discards nuances. This authors needs a myth for his own purposes and Doña Marina/La Malinche is a very convenient one.

However, these extreme views are not found in most historical accounts. Following Díaz del Castillo (1904, 104–105), whose words are rendered into English as "Doña Marina knew the language of Coatzacoalcos, which is that of Mexico, and she knew the Tabascan language also (…) Jeronimo de Aguilar spoke it also. These two understood one another well, and Aguilar translated into

Castilian for Cortes" (1963, 86–87), historians make reference to the significant role she played as an interpreter.

The 19th century American scholar William Prescott was one of them (1843, 338, 342, 352). In the three volumes he devoted to the conquest of Mexico, he paid particular attention to the interviews between Cortés and Moctezuma through Doña Marina/La Malinche (Prescott 1871, 79, 85), as other authors did after him (Ptsouras 2005, 54). Some emphasized her role as the only interpreter (Madariaga 1941, 188, 190; Meyer and Sherman 1979, 102), whereas others also mentioned Aguilar (Helps 1855, 270; León-Portilla 1962, 58, 125; Kartunnen 1997, 301; Chipman 2005, 28). In any case, the work carried out by the "tongue" or "tongues" must have been highly demanding. Kartunnen mentions a case where the translation chain became even more complex: during the encounter with the Totonac Indians, whose language neither Doña Marina/La Malinche nor Aguilar were familiar with: "The Totonacs' interpreters translated Totonac to Nahuatl for Doña Marina. She translated from Nahuatl to Maya for Aguilar, and he translated from Maya to Spanish for Cortés. And then the exchange was reversed" (1994, 7). Kartunnen marvels at the fact that "any vestige of communication survived the transmission back and forth between the four languages" (ibid.). It is an equal wonder that so much effort was being made to communicate, however negative the ultimate result might have been. Burkholder and Lyman argue that "translating in tandem with Aguilar, she provided Cortés with a tremendous political advantage over the Aztec emissaries forced to rely on the Spaniards' translators" (2001, 43). Some authors remind us that it is this that contributed to her depiction as a traitor among many Mexicans[5] (Meyer and Sherman 1979, 102).

Native accounts also granted her a prominent role during the conquest. The Florentine Codex, written by Nahuatl colleagues of Bernardino de Sahagún in the 16th century (Kartunnen 1994, 292), emphasized her role as a mediator. In fact, the code includes several illustrations of Doña Marina/La Malinche interpreting for Cortés. In Chapter 18 of Book 12, she is portrayed, together with Cortés, on the balcony of a house. She is interpreting between the Spanish conqueror and an indigenous character. She occupies a central position, Cortés standing to her left and the Indian below to her right. Although the conquest had taken place many years before, the role of the interpreter was still given full coverage in this depiction of the encounter between the two cultures.

Aztec accounts of the encounter recall how the native population was conscious of the existence of a mediator at the crossroads between them and the foreigners. As León-Portilla's presentation of the accounts of the vanquished remind us, after the first encounter with the Spanish the Aztec messengers told Moctezuma that: "The strangers are accompanied by a woman from this land, who speaks our Nahuatl tongue. She is called La Malinche, and she is from Tetipac. They found

her on the coast…" (1962, 35). At one point the account has clear negative undertones for the role of the translator: "When the Captain and La Malinche saw the gold, they grew very angry and said: Is this what you have been wasting your time on?…" (1962, 141). Whether this reaction can be interpreted as shared by both the conqueror and his interpreter or whether this can be regarded as the translator's acted interpretation of the conqueror's own reaction cannot be ascertained.

However, once again it is the linguistic element in the relationship between the conquistador, the interpreter and the other characters that contributes to shade some light. Lanyon, who has tried to see through the controversy, stresses this role and recreates the interpreting chain thus:

> From that day on, a curious chain was forged, linking Cortés to Aguilar to Malinche to Moctezuma´s emissaries (…) information was exchanged, backwards and forwards in Nahuatl, Mayan, Spanish.
> It was absurd, unwieldy, a translator's nightmare, an epistemological maze which we can only wonder at as we recall that each time Cortés said this, or Moctezuma said that, their words were conveyed through this trilingual chain of voices. (1999, 71)

Historians have questioned Doña Marina/La Malinche's rendering of the speeches of the Mesoamerican chiefs, not necessarily the faithfulness towards the original discourse but rather the tone of those addresses. Collins casts doubts over the translation of Moctezuma's speeches, as recorded by Sahagún: "Who can say how Doña Marina and Aguilar rendered intelligible this lyrical address, thrilling with hidden anguish, humble and adoring? Indeed, we cannot suppose that Cortés received more than a hint of its pathos and renunciation" (1954, 124). As for Cortés's grandiloquent speeches, as Clendinnen calls them, "we have no way of knowing how accurately his words were conveyed by Malinche to Moctezuma's emissaries" in spite of the "reassuring inverted commas" (Clendinnen 1993, 17). Even Madariaga,[6] who has been criticized for following Díaz del Castillo too closely and for providing a positivized account of the relationship Cortés/Marina, undermines the adequacy of the interpreting chain. The following quote is highly significant coming from someone who, despite not being a translator himself, was very familiar with the intricacies of working with various languages. Madariaga, who was a professor of history as well as a diplomat, wrote in Spanish, English, German and French:

> Las palabras de Cortés caían en los oídos de Aguilar; disfrazadas en el lenguaje de Tabasco, pasaban por la lengua de Aguilar a los oídos de Doña Marina; y redisfrazadas en mejicano por Doña Marina (Dios sabe cómo se figuraría ella a emperadores y cristianos), llegaban al fin a los oídos de Teuhtile, imprimiendo en su cerebro conceptos e impresiones que quizás no reconociera ni de lejos el propio Cortés que los pergeñó. (1941, 169)

> [Cortés's words would fall into Aguilar's ears; disguised in the Tabascan language, those words would go from Aguilar's tongue to Doña Marina's ears; and disguised again, this time in Mexican (only God knows how she pictured emperors and Christians), the words would reach Teuhtile's ears, representing concepts and impressions that Cortés himself might have been unable to grasp.]

The interpreting chain, however efficient, claims Madariaga, would indubitably lose the nuances of the original speeches. The rhetorical devices used by the historian remind us of the difficulties of the translation process in those circumstances: Cortés's words "fell" in Aguilar's ears, they were "disguised" in the Tabascan language through Aguilar before being "redressed" in Mexican. And, Madariaga continues, only God knows how Doña Marina could imagine what emperors and Christians were like. When Cortés's words reached their final destination, Madariaga concludes, Cortés himself might be unable to recognize the concepts he had used. The whole process reminds us of the Chinese whispers and casts serious and well-grounded epistemological doubts on the accuracy of the translation, let alone on Marina's role as an interpreter. But Madariaga's doubts concerning the efficiency of the translation chain do not end here. The encounter with the Tlaxcalans (1941, 272), which he retells quoting Díaz del Castillo, who put emphasis on the need to renounce human sacrifices, also casts doubts over Bernal's account of how Aguilar and Doña Marina had translated the explanation of Christian dogmas (Delisle and Woodsworth, eds., 1995, 256). Madariaga writes: "Aun dando de barato que Aguilar y doña Marina consiguiesen trasladar sin excesiva deformación la fe y el dogma cristianos, no solo al language, sino también al ambiente mental tlaxcateca ¿cómo era possible que aquellos indios asimilasen el dogma de la virginidad si atribuirle algún sentido inmediato y positivo como lo hacían con sus dioses?" (1941, 273). That is, even if we take for granted that the interpreters were faithful to the words of the Christian dogmas, as presented to native Mesoamericans, how could the Indians assimilate certain notions such as that of the virginity of Mary? One would add, how indeed when it is already hard to assimilate for those who have been brought up within a Christian faith?

This might be the reason why others stressed that her role was more than just a linguistic mediator. Her position would be more similar to a cultural intermediary who helped Cortés understand the intricacies of the New World (Ptsouras 2005, 45). This knowledge of the indigenous world, speculate manicheans like Medin, might have been used to present the Spaniards as gods:

> Marina, quién [sic] compenetrada con la mentalidad indígena del lugar, bien podría haber considerado que había que infundirles temor para reforzar esa posible vision mítica de los españoles como seres divinos o sobrenaturales. Pero

> volvamos de las especulaciones a los hechos, que ellos hablan por sí mismos. (Medin 2009, 177)
>
> [Marina, who was aware of the frame of mind of the natives, might have judged it appropriate to put fear in their minds in order to promote the mythical view of the Spaniards as divine or supernatural beings. But let us move away from our speculations and turn to the facts, which speak for themselves.]

But, in spite of this claim, there is no way to imagine in which direction the conversations went, no way to establish the allegiance of Doña Marina/La Malinche or of any other intermediary for that matter, as Pym has suggested (2000, 144). Equally interesting is the historian's awareness of the difference between the use of mythical elements (or speculations as he calls them) and hard facts, however difficult it may be to delve into the data available to us in order to obtain reliable information on the relationship between the mediator and the conquerors.

2.3 *The discovery of the Cholulan plot*

Of all the events in which Doña Marina/La Malinche is supposed to have played a significant role, the alleged plot and subsequent massacre of the Cholulan people lies at the base of her reputation as a traitor (Cypess 1991, 33–34). Díaz del Castillo is the initial source of the allegations (1904, 245–246). In the English translation, like in the original Spanish text, we are informed "that a certain old Indian woman, a *Cacique*'s wife who knew all about the plot and the trap that had been prepared, came secretly to Doña Marina" (1963, 196). Díaz del Castillo continues to describe Doña Marina's astuteness (1904, 246; 1963, 197) as she let the old lady believe that she would run away with the only purpose of obtaining more information: "Doña Marina asked her how they were going to kill us all, and how, when, and where the plot had been made" (1963, 197). Finally, she informed Cortés of the plot (1904, 247; 1963, 197). Another version runs that a priest told two men from Tlaxcala about the plot, who warned Marina. She, in turn, would have told Cortés. This is presented in plate 9 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, reproduced in Pagden's English version of Cortés' *Letters from Mexico* (2001, 225). However, Díaz del Castillo's version has had a more enduring power in both the popular and the historian's imagination, but how have historians used and interpreted his words?

Meyer and Sherman mention that "Doña Marina was informed by a friendly Cholulan woman of a plot" (1979, 102). Hugh Thomas, the respected Hispanist, includes Doña Marina as one of the conquistadors. He accepts the fact that she might have been sold by her mother (2000, 82) and says that "several witnesses (e.g. Rodríguez de Ocaña) agreed that it was because of Marina that 'after God' the Spaniards conquered New Spain. They said that her knowledge of the customs also

enabled Cortés to get food" (83). Thomas's version, however, does not mention the fact that many of the accounts he uses originated well after her death. For example, the historian relies on the accounts of Doña Marina/La Malinche's grandson, who "said that she was the first Indian to be baptized, that the conquest was achieved because of her, through her that Moctezuma left his idols and declared himself vassal of the king and that not only did she disclose the plot of Cholula but also that of Cuauhtémoc during the Honduras campaign" (84). But those events would have passed down to him from his elders, since it would have been impossible for him to witness them.

Figueroa reproduces Díaz del Castillo's recollections that Doña Marina/La Malinche warned Cortés of the plot in Cholula (1975, 72–74), while pointing out that the account sounds very fictionalized: whether it is "falsedad o verdad" (1975, 73) we do not know. White mentions the story of the old lady that informed the interpreter, but he also believes that Cortés must have become aware of the impending dangers in Cholula (1971, 194). Collins also relies on Díaz del Castillo, when he writes "Doña Marina, too, came forward with a story that the wife of a high officer in the Cholulan forces had secretly warned her of danger and offered her asylum" (Collins 1954, 108), but he mentions the controversy surrounding the episode:

> Historians have taken opposing views of this episode. Some have believed there really was an arrangement between Montezuma and his vassals of Cholula to exterminate the Spaniards (…) Other historians have seen insufficient evidence of a plot, and think it likely that the Tlaxcalans, who were longing to loot Cholula, deceived Cortés by feeding him with rumours through people he trusted; in fact that it was not a Cholulan but a Tlaxcalan plot. Others again think that Cortés and his men deceived themselves. Their nerves had been sorely tried. (109)

If the latter was the case, the role played by Doña Marina may have been close to non-existent. Collins states "the Spaniards grew increasingly suspicious and believed their lives were in danger" (108), which prompted quick action against the Cholulans. In other words, historians who do not find sufficient evidence to support Doña Marina/La Malinche's involvement in the plot, provide other reasons for the attack. This does not mean that they justify it in any manner. Hassig, for instance, states that "it far likelier was an unprovoked massacre carried out at the behest and with the assistance of the Tlaxcaltecs" (2006, 97), while he questions the role of the interpreter as a myth:

> Some of the Spaniards later justified the massacre by claiming that one of the Indian women accompanying them, La Malinche, learned of a Chololtec plot from a local woman and warned Cortés, who turned the tables on the Chololtecs. But La Malinche's part went virtually unreported in the earliest account, Cortés's;

> it emerged and was elaborated only decades later, most likely to justify Cortés's actions under Spanish law. And although the massacre is widely known, La Malinche's "discovery" of the plot was not. Moreover, whatever she might have learned (she spoke only Maya and Nahuatl), she could have told only to Gerónimo de Aguilar (…) At most, only La Malinche, Aguilar, and Cortés knew about the justification — or probably only Cortés, because the tale was most likely a fabrication. (Hassig 2006, 97–98)

The story of the Cholulans has been recently revived (Levy 2008, 89–90). Levy reminds us that "Cortés mentions this episode in the second letter to King Charles V, and Malinche's 'discovery' is widely and similarly reported by most of the Spanish chroniclers" (2008, 90). However, he also notes that "because the subsequent massacre is unprecedented by Cortés and might well have been unprovoked, the 'discovery' rings to the skeptical ear as a bit too convenient, like and after-the-fact justification" (ibid.). In fact, if we turn to Cortés's letter, we find a greater basis for this hypothesis. The conqueror recalls the plot although he writes that some lords from friendly Tlaxcala had come "con mucha pena los señores y me dijeron que en ninguna manera fuese, porque me tenían ordenada traición para me matar en aquella ciudad a mí y alos de mi compañía, e que para ello había enviado Muteczuma de su tierra (…) cincuenta mil hombres" (1922, 59). That is, he was warned by the local lords to stay away from Cholula because of the impending danger of an attack. Further down he mentions that his tongue had been warned of the plot as well (1922, 62). In fact, Doña Marina/La Malinche only appears towards the end of the whole episode (1922, 57–62), where Cortés goes to great lengths to describe the warnings of his Tlaxcalan allies and the signs Cortés himself saw in his dealings with the Cholulans. It seems paradoxical to dismiss Cortés's own justification of the attack and, at the same time, take his final and passing reference to the interpreter at face value. Once again, this comes to show that some historians have relied on mythical interpretations of the event rather than on witnesses' accounts, however biased they may have been. As we move down the chain, as the account of the events reaches translation scholars, the facts can be further diluted into a myth and a convenient metaphor.

For her part, Kartunnen warns us that the account provided by Díaz del Castillo should be reconsidered. After all it served the purposes of Cortés well. Kartunnen continues that, even if we accept Doña Marina/La Malinche's involvement as an informant, we should consider what her real options were. She did not have any reasons to trust the Cholulans: "She was not one of them (…) it does not appear to me that a question of ethnic loyalty can legitimately be raised here" (1997, 304). Kartunnen reminds us that "when she was given to Cortés she had no one to turn to, nowhere to flee, not one to betray. She was not Aztec, not Mayan, no "Indian"" (311). When she joined Cortés, she left behind the situation of slavery

she had to go through all her life for a new status where she would have, at least, some respect (Barjau 2009, 20–21). Barjau, a Mexican historian and anthropologist, discards the argument that she betrayed her people: "se dio a entender primero que Marina, los totonacas, tlaxclatecas, etcetera, traicionaban un país. Aunque este país no existiera. Porque en su lugar hubo reinos enemigos (…) para Marina, los totonacas y tlaxclatecas Cortés resultaba ni más ni menos que un aliado inmediato contra el opresor" (17). In other words, there was no country to betray, no ethnic group to sell. There were rival groups to fight against or to resist.

Finally, we should also mention her relationship with Cortés as a justification for the "betrayal" to her people. Although the metaphor of violation by the conqueror has been a favourite among some translation scholars, the truth is that their relationship might have been less close than assumed. In his version of Cortés's *Letters from Mexico*, Padgen writes: "it seems that far from being an obviously devoted couple some of Cortés's soldiers took Marina to be Aguilar's wife (she must certainly have spent much of her time with him)" (Cortés/Padgen 2001, 465).

3. Doña Marina/La Malinche between Historians and Translation Scholars

There is no doubt about the ambivalent role of the interpreter in modern Mexico. Calderón-Moncloa reminds us of the existence of a negative term, *malinchismo*, associated with "Latin American locals, from native, negro and/or mestizo ancestors, [who] adopt the values and play the role of the dominant side (…) and treating their native subordinates worse than the powerful foreigners and local whites do" (2007, 179). Some historic accounts might be responsible for this portrayal of the interpreter, but literature is largely responsible for the creation of a fictional Doña Marina (Barjau 2009, 230–251), which can be traced back to the popular pamphlets of the 19th century (Barjau 2009, 233–234), and which has survived in contemporary Mexico. Barjau points out that one of the few positive fictional approaches to the interpreter (at least until we reach the 20th century[7]) is the novel *Doña Marina* (1883) by Ireneo Paz, the grandfather of Octavio Paz (Barjau 2009, 239–241).

The approach to the interpreter that we can trace in the words of some translation scholars seems to have depended more on the fictional presentation of the interpreter than on the events that most reputable historians have come to accept as reliable (or unreliable). It is, in most cases, an impressionistic view that has no bearings with the specialist's close scrutiny of the sources and the historic background in which the events took place. Recent accounts of Doña Marina/La Malinche simply disagree with the view that she was a traitor. Lanyon (1999, 187–202) and Townsend (2006, 41–42), for instance, insist on the fact that, as a woman

in a man's world, first that of her tribe, then as a slave for the Tabascans, finally as Cortés's aide and lover, her options were non-existent, whereas Kartunnen claims that "this is no love story, no tale of blind ambition and racial betrayal, no morality play. It is the record of a gifted woman in impossible circumstances carving out survival one day at a time" (1997, 312). And the only means she had to survive, the only weapon, was her multilingualism. This, as Kartunnen has indicated, gives her a place in history (and also in the history of translators) in sharp contrast to other women of her period. Barjau summarizes her role as mediator in these impossible circumstances:

> A esta mujer indígena le tocó el inusual papel de la mediación. Fue una figura coyuntural por excelencia (…) Pasó de rol de la mujer indígena con reglas que la circunscribían a la agricultura y el trabajo doméstico, a ocuparse de la administración en un nuevo Estado. De la asunción de un perfil religioso fundado en el politeísmo, a otro por completo distinto, el del monoteísmo. De feligresa pasiva de los cultos indígenas, a catequizadora activa del cristianismo (…) la primera mujer mesoamericana que se condujo en dos lenguas pertenecientes a troncos lingüísticos ajenos y lo que eso implica en términos de la reconstrucción y construcción de la cultura. (Barjau 2009, 32)

That is, she was a native woman who played an outstanding role in a man's world. She was not merely in charge of the home or agricultural duties: she played a key role in the administration of a new state. She also moved towards a monotheistic religion and contributed to the spread of a new religion in the Americas. And, Barjau concludes, she was deeply involved in the construction of a new culture through her linguistic abilities. For this reason, Barjau believes that the negative connotation of the term *malinchismo* does not derive from the indigenous population, not even from those of mestizo origin: "Lo fue solamente, en los años 50 del siglo pasado, de algunos intelectuales que lograron popularizarlo a cierto nivel entre estratos de la clase media urbana y alta. Carece de universalidad (…) Estamos, pues, ante una fantasmagoría" (208). In other words, *malinchismo* as a negative term was promoted in the 1950s by the urban upper-middle classes. It is paradoxical that for Barjau the term was particularly popular precisely among those that are likely to have stronger connections with the European settlers than with the descendants of native Americans.

His words, however, provide a reason why this impressionistic view of the interpreter has prevented scholars from distinguishing between the real and the fictitious, between the character in popular culture and the historical facts as they have come down to us. Some might be unable to identify any positive elements in this linguistic and cultural encounter, however forceful it may have been. They are too eager to exemplify their own ideological stance, to make an example

of the translator. Thus, it is somehow disconcerting to read Arrojo's arguments quoting Delisle and Woodsworth (eds.) that "her name is a sad reminder of the Spaniards' brutal violation of the land and the women of Mexico, 'passively open' to the invader's power and cruelly abandoned to their own fate after being used and exploited. And it is to this inaugural narrative, which is also the birth scene of Mexico as a nation literally conceived in rape and violence" (Arrojo 2002, 142). The authors quoted *do* mention Doña Marina/Malinche's black legend, but they also point out that "her role has been seen in a new light in recent times (…), especially by feminist historians, who stress the constraints to which she was subjected as a woman and a slave, and who look upon her as a model, a symbol of fruitful cross-cultural exchange rather than betrayal" (Delisle and Woodsworth, eds., 1995, 149). Arrojo omits this part of the argument, and quotes Octavio Paz in order to further sexualize Doña Marina/La Malinche's role vis-à-vis Cortés. She omits to mention, though, that Paz, whose grandfather authored one of the few positive fictional representations of Cortés's translator, uses her as a metaphor to provide a metaphysical explanation of the soul of contemporary Mexicans only as human beings (or '*hombres*' [men] as Paz himself puts it), not as whites or Indians or mestizos: "El mexicano no quiere ser ni indio, ni español. Tampoco quiere descender de ellos. Los niega. Y no se afirma en tanto que mestizo, sino como abstracción: es un hombre" [Mexicans do not recognize themselves as Indians or Spanish. Mexicans do not accept either as their ancestors. They deny them. And they do not recognize themselves as mestizos: they view themselves as human beings] (1997, 111). Whether this is a positive depiction of the Mexican predicament is a matter open to discussion. In fact, Hernández believes that "this predominating myth about cultural origins, Paz argues, divides Mexicans and poisons their souls. Mexico's hatred of Cortés is not hatred of Spain: it is hatred of one's self. In order to move beyond this situation, Paz advocates the demythification of Cortés and his relocation to the field of history" (2006, 87). Although, as we have mentioned, the dividing line between history and fiction is often difficult to draw, especially when discussing figures such as Doña Marina/Malinche, we might argue that a certain relocation of Doña Marina/La Malinche to the field of history can certainly be beneficial. Only as we accept the historical facts about her figure, however scant and blurred these may be, will we be able to fully understand her persona within the history of translation. In the same way, only when some of the historians quoted above turn to translation studies to understand the complexity of the translational chain and all the nuances of her role as an intermediary will they be able to reposition their interpretations and discard what seems to belong to the realm of literary fictions.

Notes

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1. This book, which will be quoted several times in this article, was edited by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, but authored by a total of 45 contributors (as acknowledged on pages 289–290). For example, one the most relevant chapters for this paper was authored by nine people. To simplify references to the book, I will use Delisle and Woodsworth (eds.) throughout the paper.

2. This chapter was authored by André Lefevere in cooperation with eight others. Historians have collected ambiguous evidence in this respect, as we shall see: "Typically, the Mexican attitude to her, as to so much besides, was ambivalent. On the one hand, she was accorded quasi-divine honours as a goddess, as the grieving deity La Llorona, almost as another Mexican Blessed Virgin, interceding with the Spaniards on behalf of her own people and softening the rigours of defeat. On the other hand, she was reviled as a female Quisling, a collaborator who sold both her soul and her body to the invader and exposed the sacred soil of her country to corrupt foreign influences (…) Moctezuma and La Malinche have been elected respectively the male and female devils in the history of Mexico, though it seems a trifle hard to stigmatize her as a traitress this way. We are advised that we should not ask what our country can do for us — but what, exactly, did Mexico do for La Malinche? Her mother sold her to slavers; slavers sold her to strangers; and strangers gave her to the men who had conquered them and stolen their land" (White 1971, 174). As Van Hecke pointed out to me, the confusion between Doña Marina/La Malinche and La Llorona is quite common.

3. In this paper I will not use authors like Margo Glantz, whose work connects the character of Doña Marina/La Malinche to literary texts.

4. I have used the Mexican edition of 1904. However, quotations will be from the English edition of 1963 in order to save space. When appropriate, pages of the Spanish edition will also be provided.

5. Accusations of this kind are not unheard of in Mexico. When the academic José Castañeda denounced the long domination of the PRI of Mexican politics abroad, he was labelled "traitor" and "anti-Mexico" (Hugues 2006, 170).

6. Salvador de Madariaga was one of the founders of the College of Europe in Brugge, and an ardent defender of the concept of a united Europe.

7. Ríos (2005) mentions that in the late 20th century Chicano writers adopted Malinche/Doña Marina as her symbol. In 1980 Candelaria had already presented her as the epitome of feminist Chicana women.

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