

LATIN LETTERS AND AN AMERINDIAN VERNACULAR:



The creation of Nahuatl literature in early colonial Mexico

By Andrew Laird*

Literature in Nahuatl was engendered by the interaction between Latin and Nahuatl after the Spanish incursion into Mexico. Missionaries initially viewed Amerindian tongues as vernaculars – from which Latin, constituted from written letters, was categorically distinct. But the dominant directionality of translation from Latin to Nahuatl characterised the practical relation between the two languages, and an illustrative review of specific texts shows that Nahuatl literature, conveyed by the Roman alphabet, was generated from a culture of translation. Although that literature has many distinctive features, its emergence in the 1500s followed the template of the earlier rise of vernacular writing in Europe.

Only a few months after the Aztecs had been finally defeated by Hernán Cortés in August of 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V sent the first three Franciscan missionaries to Mexico, all of whom were from Flanders. One of them, a lay brother named Pieter de Muer, better known as Pedro de Gante or Peter of Ghent, wrote a letter reporting on his experiences to his Flemish *confrères* which begins as follows:

Dilectissimi patres fratres et sorores, multa ad vos scribere cuperem de hac regione in qua nunc viuimus, sed tempus et memoria mihi deficiunt. Plurimum etiam me impedit, quod linguam meam vernaculam jam penitus sum oblitus, ut in ea vobis pro desyderio meo sufficienter scribere non valeam. Et si scripsero lingua Indica, vos me non intelletis. Hispanicae tamen linguae parum noui, in qua vobis, prout potero, pauca significabo.¹

*This essay is dedicated to Marianne Pade, in admiration of her scholarship and in gratitude for her generosity as an editor, teacher and friend.

¹ Gante 1529 [1534, 124r].

Dearest Fathers, Brothers and Sisters, I wanted to write many things to you about this country in which we are now living; but I am short of time and memory. A very great hindrance is that I have now utterly forgotten all of my native tongue; so that I do not have sufficient ability to write to you in it in accord with my wishes – and if I wrote in the Indian language, you would not understand me. I have got to know a little Spanish, though, in which, as far as I am able, I will convey a few things to you.²

A preoccupation with language is exhibited again in the closing part of the letter, which may well contain the first ever sentence in Nahuatl to have been read in Europe:

Optarem autem vehementer, vt aliquis ex vobis amore Dei suscipere vellet laborem vertendi hanc epistolam in linguam Flandricam siue Teutonicam, eamque ad meos parentes destinaret, vt saltem aliquid de me certi et boni audirent, me videlicet adhoc viuere et recte valere. Vnde Deo sit laus & gloria. Non est aliud quod pro hoc tempore ultra velim scribere: tametsi permulta de his regionibus facile enarrare possem nisi linguam meam vernaculam prorsus neglexissem... *Ca yeix quichi mamotu neoa ytote oh ytotia tucauh y Iesu Christo*, Quod sic interpretatur: non est praeterea quod dicam, laudetur Deus noster et benedictus Filius ejus Iesus Christus. Scriptae sunt hae literae anno Domini 1529. Mensis Iunii die vicesima septima. Ex Messico, in coenobio sancti Francisci.³

So I am keenly hoping that one of you, for the love of God, will not mind taking on the job of translating this letter into Flemish or German and sending it to my parents, so that they might hear some definite good news about me, that I am plainly still alive and faring well – for which praise and glory be to God. There is not anything else I would like to write for the time being, for all that I could easily recount a great deal about these regions, if I had not completely neglected my native language... *Ca yeix quichi mamotu neoa ytote oh ytotia tucauh y Iesu Christo*, which translates like this: I have nothing to say other than may our God and his blessed Son Jesus Christ be praised. These words were written in the year of the Lord 1529, on 27th June. From Mexico City, in the Convent of Saint Francis.

Fray Pedro de Gante did indeed write the letter in Spanish, as he states, but the fact that the text survives only in a Latin translation, made by another Franciscan, Amandus Zierixenses, is revealing. Zierixenses' *Chronica compendiosissima* (1534), a collection of testimonies from various parts of

² Transcriptions and translations are my own.

³ Gante 1529 [1534, 127r].

the world to convey a particular historical eschatology, naturally relied on Latin as a medium for communication across geographical and regional boundaries.

Humanist theory and practice bearing on the relation of Latin to vernacular languages shaped much of the cultural history of early modern Europe. Fray Pedro de Gante's letter, however, invites reflection on how ideas of that relation were received and transformed, in the wake of imperial expansion, in regions like the Americas where non-European languages were and are widely spoken. That will be the frame for the present account of literature in Nahuatl: its emergence in sixteenth-century Mexico can be productively compared to the rise of European vernacular literatures – and it will also be shown that many of the first works to be composed in the Mexican language have a historical relation to Latin. A similar case might possibly be made for literatures which developed later in the 1500s in one or two other Amerindian languages, such as Quechua in the Andes, or Purépecha in the southwestern Mexican region of Michoacán.⁴

The opening part of this discussion will review another text by a Franciscan missionary in New Spain which offers a helpful illustration of the way in which an educated Spaniard conceived the difference between Latin and vernacular in the Americas (1). Specific aspects of the relation between Latin and Nahuatl in post-conquest Mexico will then be considered (2), before some examples of Nahuatl texts will be used to give an idea of how a written vernacular literature in the Mexican language was generated and took shape (3). A short conclusion will identify parallels between that Nahuatl corpus and European Latin and vernacular literature (4).

1. Latin and vernacular in a new world

Cristóbal Cabrera, who joined the Franciscan order after his arrival in Mexico in the early 1530s, translated maxims from Latin and Greek patristic authors into Spanish for a volume later published as *Flores de consolacion* (1549). The collection had originally been made for the Marquesa Juana de Zúñiga, wife of the conquistador Hernán Cortés.⁵ An excerpt from Cabrera's dedicatory letter to the Marquesa is worth revisiting because it shows how humanist presuppositions about Latin and vernacular had a bearing on indigenous languages:⁶

⁴ Cf. Itier 1995; Durston 2007; Universidad Michoacana 1982; Monzón 1997; Monzón 2012, 113–114 lists the few extant sixteenth-century Purépecha texts, which were all by missionaries.

⁵ Andrés Iñigo Silva has located Cabrera 1549, long thought lost, in the library of the Complutense University of Madrid.

⁶ Cf. Laird 2019a, 118–122.

De buena gana hize lo que pude en la traducion deste libro por servir a v[uest]ra señoria, sino va mi romance tan polido como lo hilan algunos retóricos castellanos, no es de maravillar porque al cabo de tanto tiempo como ha que peregrino por estas tierras y naciones barbaras, donde se tracta mas la lengua de los indios que la Española, y donde se tiene por barbaro el que no es barbaro entre los barbaros, no es mucho que este olvidado de la elegancia de la lengua castellana. Quanto mas que no soy muy curioso del romance; veolo poco, tratolo poco, se bien que no lo se bien. Tomemos el tronco, que es la doctrina. Dexemos las ramas que son las palabras, las cuales al fin no pueden ser mas que palabras.⁷

With the best will I did what I could in the translation of this book out of service to your ladyship, but if my vernacular is not as polished as that which some Castilian rhetoricians spin, it is no wonder, because after so much time as a wanderer in these lands and among these barbarous peoples, where the language of the Indians is used more than Spanish, and where one who is not a barbarian is regarded as a barbarian among the barbarians, it is of little account that I am forgetful of the elegance of the Castilian tongue. What is more, I am not very curious about the vernacular: I rarely see it, I rarely use it, I know well that I do not know it well. Let us keep the trunk of our education; let us leave the branches which are the spoken words, which in the end cannot be more than spoken words.

It was common enough for Renaissance scholars to affect disregard for their native tongue, and Cabrera himself authored far more work in Latin than in Spanish.⁸ His claim that that he made little use of the vernacular has all the more credibility, because as he remarks, Spanish was spoken less than native languages in the places he had been posted.

Yet while this writer's experience of being a "barbarian among barbarians" recalls the predicament of the exiled Ovid in a general way, the situation leads him only to be forgetful of Spanish, not of Latin.⁹ Latin was seen as being of a different order from everyday spoken languages and Cabrera's image of a tree with its branches was a visualisation of this: the trunk of *doctrina* corresponds to the acquired *langue* of Latin, the incarnation of grammar itself, while the branches of "palabras" or *parole* correspond to all the varieties of everyday speech (presumably 'barbarian' or indigenous American tongues as well as European ones), which are interchangeable and less important. That interchangeability between vernaculars is nicely demonstrated at the end of the dedication:

⁷ Cabrera 1549, fol. vii r–v.

⁸ Ruiz 1977.

⁹ Ovid, *Tristia* 5.7.55–56, 5.10.37; cf. Saint Jerome, *Epistulae* 7.2; *Commentarii in epistulam Pauli apostoli ad Galatas* 3, "Praefatio".

En Cuernauaca, o como los Indios dizen, Cohaunauac, el mas fresco y apazible pueblo dela nueva España. xxv. de Mayo.¹⁰

In Cuernavaca, or, as the Indians say, “Quauhnhuac”, the most refreshing and peaceful town in New Spain, 25th of May.

Cuernavaca and its Indian name are set in equivalence. *Cuauhnhuac* (as the name is now written) means ‘place beside the trees’: this could be another allusion to the conventional image of language as a tree, with Latin as the trunk.¹¹ The potential implication that Amerindian languages could be viewed, like Spanish and Italian, as offshoots from the trunk of Latin may not have seemed too far-fetched in the 1500s when Latin was still generally regarded, not as the source of the ‘natural’ and corruptible Romance languages, but as an artificial medium of *grammatica*, which had been refined from them.¹²

There is an important further point: the idea of writing and literacy was always fundamental to the conception of grammar: its derivation from the Greek γράμματα, letters, was well known owing to the wide dissemination of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* in the Hispanic world.¹³ This was connected with the four parts of grammar, derived from Priscian, which Nebrija, Perotti and other grammarians of Latin (including Fray Maturino Gilberti in Mexico) took as their point of departure.¹⁴ The first and most fundamental part was the letter, *littera*; followed by the syllable, then the word or *dictio*, and finally *oratio*, full blown discourse or speech. This schema was pervasive, but the missionaries did recognise there was an indigenous writing system in Mexico which included both logograms (to represent words) and syllabograms, but Roman alphabetic writing rapidly became dominant, although colonial codices were often hybrid in nature.¹⁵

2. Latin and Nahuatl

While missionary linguists may have sought to accommodate Amerindian tongues into their linguistic scheme by viewing them as vernaculars, their *artes* or manuals of Nahuatl show they soon realised that Latin could not serve as a universal system of explanation for every language. In the opening

¹⁰ Cabrera 1549, viii v.

¹¹ Lockhart 2001, 23.

¹² Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.9 is the *locus classicus* for this view; cf. Eco 1995: 34–39; Gravelle 1988; Mazzocco 1993.

¹³ Isidore, *Etymologies* 1.5.1.

¹⁴ Priscian, *Institutiones grammaticae* 2.14 [Keil 1855 ii, 53], Perotti 1473, 1r. [2010, 21]; Nebrija 1495, book 3 (unpaginated); Nebrija 1492, Book 1, cap. 1; Gilberti 1559, 5r [2003 i, 88].

¹⁵ Boone 2011; Whittaker 2021.

chapter of his foundational *Arte de la lengua mexicana* (1547), Fray Andrés de Olmos acknowledged that the Mexican language lacked many categories that were conspicuous in Latin: “declinations, supines, and the types of words to denote the diversity of them... accents and other subjects do not bear on this tongue”.¹⁶ Olmos made clear that the very way he organised his exposition of Nahuatl had been determined by its distinctive nature:

Primeramente se porna la conjugacion, no como en la gramatica, pero sino como la lengua lo pide y demanda, porque algunas maneras de dezir que nosotros tenemos en nuestra lengua, o en latina, esta no las tiene. Y pareceme que sera confusion, por no salir de la conjugacion del latin, poner algunos romances en tiempos que no les pueden cuadrar, como parecera en la conjugacion de los verbos, por tanto a ninguno le parezca nouedad sin prouecho, pues se dara en la formacion la causa dello.¹⁷

First, the conjugation is set out not as it is in [Latin] grammar, but in the way the language requires and demands, because it does not have some manners of expression which we have in our own language or in Latin. In my view keeping to Latin conjugation and putting some vernaculars in tenses that they do not fit would be confusing, as would be apparent in the conjugation of verbs, so this new system should seem advantageous to everyone since the basis of it will be clear when it is set out.

Latin did not serve Olmos as a benchmark against which phenomena of the object language could be measured. Instead he invoked Latin and Castilian in order to highlight what was *different* about Nahuatl, which in the end had to be explained in terms of its own linguistic behaviour.

Fray Alonso de Molina was just as aware of the pitfalls of using Latin grammar as a template for ordering Nahuatl in his own *Arte de la lengua mexicana y castellana* (1571), although he followed the general scheme of Nebrija’s *Introducciones latinae*.¹⁸ In his *Arte mexicana* (1595), the Jesuit Antonio del Rincón used Latin terms as points of reference far more frequently than Olmos or Molina because he assumed his readers were familiar with them: “In whatever way it is possible to make use of Latin grammar I will always be hugging it close.”¹⁹ “But”, he continued, “in the

¹⁶ Olmos 1547, 23r [2003, 15].

¹⁷ Olmos, 1547, 44r [2003, 59].

¹⁸ Molina 1571; Nebrija 1495.

¹⁹ Rincón 1595 [1885, 11–12] “Prólogo al lector”. Rincón’s style thus could be macaronic e.g. [1885, 12]: “En lugar de *hic, haec, hoc* usan, *inin*, v.g. *inincalli, haec domus*; en lugar de *iste*, usan *inon* v.g. *inoncalli ista domus. ille, illa, illud*, no le tienen propriamente. Usan de circumloqucion, diziendo *in nechcaca*, lo que esta alli. En lugar de *qui, quae, quod*, usan de este relativo, *in*, indeclinable, v.g. *intlaqua, qui comedit*.”

other respects in which the present language differentiates itself from Latin, because they involve new things, it has been necessary to reduce those to new rules, with the new style that is required.” Rincón was also alert to the profound differences between the different autochthonous tongues of Mexico and he opposed the application of one standardised approach to teaching them:

No es posible guardarse en todo un mismo methodo y arte, en enseñar todas las lenguas, siendo ellas (como lo son) tan distantes y diferentes entresi, antes la vniformidad en esto seria gran disformidad, y por consiguiente confusion y estoruo para quien les desprendiesse.

It is not possible to keep wholly to the same method and technique in teaching all the languages, being as they are so distant and different from each other. Uniformity in this would be a great deformity which would consequently lead to confusion and trouble for whoever might learn them.²⁰

That is in accord with the precept of Juan Luis Vives that “no language is so copious and varied that it can respond throughout to the figures and conformations of another, even a very inarticulate one” (“nulla est enim adeo copiosa lingua et varia, quae possit per omnia respondere figuris et conformationibus etiam infantissimae”).²¹ None of the first missionary linguists in New Spain seemed to believe that all languages shared a common underlying system or *ratio* – although the speculative theories associated with the medieval ‘modist’ grammarians were being revived in the 1500s by Julius Caesar Scaliger and Franciscus Sanctius.²²

It remains to consider the perspective Nahuatl-speaking converts might have had of Latin. The few who received an advanced education soon discerned that literacy and literature – both *litterae sacrae* and *litterae humaniores* – were inextricably bound up with Latin because the fundamental atomic unit of grammar was the letter, *littera*. This is indicated in an excerpt from a 1561 petition by the indigenous governors of Azcapotzalco to Philip II which was actually written in Latin:

praedecessores suae tempore gentilitatis fuere admodum rustici, abiecti, nudi et corporis et animae dotibus, inter quas primas habent virtutes ac litterae, quas profecto ne per somnium quidem novere.²³

²⁰ Rincón 1595 [1885, 11].

²¹ Vives 1533, 3.57 [2017, 408].

²² Scaliger 1540; Sanctius 1587. This universalising tendency culminated in the “Port-Royal Grammar” of Arnauld & Lancelot 1660.

²³ Molina, Hernández & Zacharias 1561, 1r.

Our ancestors, in the time they were pagan, were very simple, lowly and bare of endowments for body and soul, among which the foremost are virtues and letters, which our ancestors did not come to know even in their dreams.

Less can be ascertained about what the symbolic value may have been attached to Latin by the larger indigenous population in early colonial Mexico. Numerous sources call attention to the fact that Latin prayers and formulae were incomprehensible to the majority of natives, just as they were to the masses in Europe. In his Christian doctrine in the Mexican language, which was written for wide circulation Fray Pedro de Gante quoted the *Ave Maria* in Latin and adds this remark:

Jnin latin tlatolli camo ticcaqui. ma tiquitocan totlatolpan.²⁴

These Latin words you do not understand. Let us say it in our language.

A translation of the *Ave Maria* is then given in Nahuatl. Later on in the same text the *Salve Regina* is also quoted in the original Latin before being translated, again prompting a similar comment:

Jnic huel ticcaquizue to tlatolpan monequi tiquitozque.²⁵

So that we can understand it [the *Salve Regina*], it is necessary that we say it in our words.

Speakers at the Council of Trent had already been happy to affirm that the Latin rite induced a sense of reverence in those who had little or no comprehension of the language.²⁶ In the light of that sentiment it is interesting to note that the first printed dictionary from Spanish into Nahuatl published in Mexico in 1555 by Fray Alonso de Molina took the trouble to include Nahuatl equivalents not only for ‘Latin’, but also for ‘Latinity’:²⁷

Spanish:	Nahuatl:
<i>Latin, lengua latina</i>	→ <i>latin tlatolli</i> [Latin word/speech, Latin language]
<i>Latinidad desta lengua</i>	→ <i>latin tlatollotl</i> [Latin wordness, essence of Latin] <i>latin tlatoliztli</i> [the speaking of Latin, Latin eloquence].

²⁴ Gante, 1553, 79v.

²⁵ Gante 1553, 81r.

²⁶ Coletti 1987, 27, 220–222; Waquet 2001, 41–50.

²⁷ Molina 1555, 152v.

Molina's dictionary was expressly compiled for those preaching to natives, as was a prior anonymous manuscript vocabulary of Latin, Spanish and Nahuatl which also supplied terms for Latin and Latinity.²⁸ By thus making Indians aware of Latin and conveying a sense of its importance, missionaries were in effect affirming a social division based on knowledge of the language. Such forms of exclusion also operated in Europe: as Françoise Waquet has noted there were "relations of authority, inevitably asymmetric, that used to exist between those who knew Latin and those who did not".²⁹

Sixteenth-century dictionaries of Nahuatl were active, making clear that the practical relation between Latin and the Mexican language, initiated by the missionaries and sustained by their indigenous students, was based on a directionality from Latin to Nahuatl (or from Spanish, through Latin, to Nahuatl). The Franciscans arrived in Mexico in the 1520s – the aforementioned trilingual vocabulary is likely to date from the 1540s.³⁰ A Nahuatl to Spanish lexicon only appeared 1571 in a revised bidirectional version of Fray Alonso de Molina's original 1555 *Vocabulario*.³¹ The preoccupation with translating *into* the Mexican language rather than translating back into Latin or Spanish was driven by the need to transmit the Christian message to a large native population.

The first alphabetic texts in the Mexican language were accurate translations from Latin of liturgy, Gospel and Epistles for lectionaries, excerpts from the Old Testament books, doctrines, catechisms and sermons.³² To produce all this material the friars obviously depended on the work of their indigenous students. As those students had been sequestered from their families as young children and immersed in Latin, the knowledge they had of their mother tongue would not have been as systematic. This was one reason why the conventions of Latin provided the matrix for their compositions in the Mexican language.

3. Nahuatl literature

The Council of Trent may have been responsible for generating all kinds of unexpected texts in Nahuatl. Restrictions on the dissemination of scripture in vernacular languages and biblical commentary are what probably inclined Franciscan scholars and their indigenous collaborators in Mexico to turn to

²⁸ *Dictionarium* c.1545.

²⁹ Waquet 2001, 230–231; cf. Bourdieu 1977; 1991, 37–104.

³⁰ Physical characteristics of the manuscript and the lack of the Spanish loan words in the Nahuatl vocabulary points to a date prior to Molina 1555.

³¹ Molina 1571b.

³² Laird 2019b, 2–13.

other kinds of writing.³³ Catalogues of extant colonial manuscripts and printed books compiled in recent years show how much writing in Nahuatl survives from the 1500s.³⁴ This material comprises all kinds of Christian didactic writing – some translated from Latin, some original – including dramas, saints’ lives and spiritual manuals; petitions, official records and legal documents; and also native codices and annals.

Popular accounts of Nahuatl literature, however, have often focused on a more limited group of texts which are thought to be rooted in pre-Hispanic ‘Aztec’ traditions or even to *be* pre-Hispanic, despite the fact that they contain conspicuous Christian elements.³⁵ The best known examples include: two manuscript collections of poems or songs, the *Cantares mexicanos*, “Songs in the Mexican Language” (transcribed in the 1580s) and the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España* (1582); ritual and admonitory discourses generally labelled “*huehuetlatolli*”, “talks of the elders”; and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (c. 1580), often known as the *Florentine Codex*, an encyclopaedic survey of pre-contact Mexican society and belief, drawn from indigenous oral testimonies.³⁶ The emphasis on items like these has created the image of a canon which is misleading. The constituents of that putative canon have been all too often considered in isolation from their context of production, from the manuscripts in which they have been transmitted, and even from the works of which they form a part.

The four texts surveyed below, two translations and two original works, can hardly be any more representative of such a large corpus, but these examples have been selected in order to give an impression of the development and increasing autonomy of Nahuatl vernacular literature. The translations are discussed at greater length as they show various ways in which Latin could offer not only a source but also a model for Nahuatl expression.

(a) *Colloquios y Doctrina Christiana* (1564)

The *Colloquios y Doctrina Christiana* is an account of the exchanges between the Aztec high priests and the twelve Franciscan missionaries who arrived in Mexico in 1524. The account was authored in Spanish by Fray Bernardino de

³³ Laird 2019b, 13–21.

³⁴ Hernández de León-Portilla 1988; Sandoval Aguilar & Rojas Rabiela 1991; Schwaller 2001.

³⁵ Cf. e.g. León-Portilla 1956, regularly reprinted; Brotherston 1993. Garibay 1953–1954 is still the most comprehensive survey of literature in Nahuatl. An exemplary list of studies taking account of Christian Nahuatl literature is given in n. 64 below.

³⁶ Cf. *Cantares mexicanos* 1580s, *Romances* 1582; Sahagún c. 1580; Bautista Viseo 1601.

Sahagún forty years after the event and translated into Nahuatl. The Nahuatl version has received a great deal of critical attention, and there is seldom any acknowledgement that it is a translation, even though the Spanish text on which it was based is presented alongside it in the original manuscript.³⁷ Sahagún describes how the text and its translation were prepared:

La obra... a estado en papeles y memorias hasta este año de mil quinientos y sesenta y quatro, porque antes no uvo oportunidad de ponerse en orden ni convertirse en lengua mexicana bien congrua y limada; la qual se bolvio y limó en este Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatilulco este sobredicho año con los colegiales mas habiles y entendidos en lengua mexicana y en la lengua latina que hasta ora se an en el dicho colegio criado.³⁸

The work... was in papers and records until the present year of 1564 because before there had been no opportunity to put it in order, or into a Mexican language that was adequately congruous and polished; it was translated and polished in the College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco in the aforementioned year with the collegians with the best proficiency and understanding of the Mexican language and of the Latin language who have up to now been educated in the said college.

The College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, where indigenous students were trained in Latin, was also where most Nahuatl literature was produced in the 1500s.³⁹ Sahagún names the collegians who assisted him with the *Colloquios y Doctrina christiana* as Antonio Valeriano, Alonso Vegarano, Martín Jacobita and Andrés Leonardo.

An exemplary excerpt shows why these Nahuatl-speaking collegians who assisted with the project needed to be Latinists. Book 1 chapter 7 consists of a moving speech in which one of the “priests of the idols” defends his beliefs to the Franciscan Twelve. Declaring that he will “offer a response, and with two or three arguments counter the [friars’] words” about the God who created them, he begins as follows:

³⁷ León-Portilla 1986, an edition of Sahagún 1564 which translates the text back into Spanish; Klor de Alva 1980 is an English translation of the Nahuatl; Mignolo 1995, 97 refers to “the original in Nahuatl”. Zimmerman 2012, 90 takes more account of Sahagún’s testimony quoted here, but still postulates a Nahuatl source text without consideration of the translators’ use of Latin.

³⁸ Sahagún 1564, 27v. (“Al prudente lector”).

³⁹ The college was founded in the district of Tlatelolco, an Indian enclave to the north of Mexico City to train an indigenous governing class drawn from the Indian nobility. Cf. n. 51 below.

Spanish:

Aueis nos dicho que no conocemos a aquel por quien tenemos ser y vida y que es señor del cielo y dela tierra: ansi mismo dezis que los que adoramos no son dioses: esta manera de hablar haze se nos muy nueua y es nos muy escandalosa, espantamonos de tal dezir como este: porque los padres y ante pasados que nos engendraron y regieron, no nos dixeron tal cosa.⁴⁰

You have told us that we do not know the one through whom we have existence and life, and who is lord of heaven and earth: accordingly you say that those we worship are not gods. This way of talking is very new and scandalous to us: we are shocked at speech like this, because the forefathers and precursors who engendered and ruled us did not tell us such things.

Nahuatl:

Anquimitalhuia ca amo tiximachilia in tloque nauaque in ilhuicaua in tlaticpaque. Anquimitalhuia ca amo nelli teteu in toteuuan. Ca yancuic tlatolli in anquimitalhuia, auh ic titlotlapolotia, ic titotezauia. Ca in totechiuhcaua yn oioco, yn onemico tlatlicpac, amo iuh quitoiui.⁴¹

You have told us that we do not know, [our Lord] of near and far of heaven and earth. You have told us that our gods are not true. For it is a new speech you have told us we are shocked at, we are horrified at. Because our progenitors, who were, who lived on the earth, did not speak thus.

Rather, the speaker says, the gods furnish all the forms of sustenance necessary to human life, and they dwell amidst flowers and greenery in Tlalocan, a realm unknown to mortals. The Aztec priest's refutation then consists of three admonitions: it would be unwise to change laws of ancient standing; the gods might be provoked and the people rise up; it is advisable to proceed slowly and calmly. These appeals correspond to the *topoi* of *utile*, *tutum*, and *prudens* in classical oratory and the structure of the entire speech, conforms to traditional *dispositio* – with an *exordium*, *partitio*, *narratio*, *confirmatio* or proof, *refutatio* of the opposing argument and a conclusion. Its content is a point-by-point retort to the friars' preceding arguments in Book 1, chapters 1–5, following the convention of a dialectical disputation.

Yet this oration continues to be regarded as an authentic expression of Aztec belief, despite all the indications to the contrary – including Sahagún's own testimony (already quoted) that the work of which it formed a part was based on material in Spanish. Even in Nahuatl the speech displays evidence

⁴⁰ Sahagún 1564, 36r (Book 1, chapter 7).

⁴¹ Sahagún 1564, 35v. (Book 1, chapter 7).

of artifice which is markedly European. The Mexican translators were applying their knowledge of Latin rhetoric directly to the Nahuatl version, and in doing so, were creating something strikingly new. Many Nahuatl works involved this process, akin to what the missionaries called *reducción*.

(b) The translation of Aesop (undated)

The manuscripts transmitting some fables of Aesop in Nahuatl do not yield any information about why or when they were composed, or by whom, but it is likely that they were also prepared in the College of Santa Cruz. The Nahuatl translations are based on Joachim Camerarius' *Fabellae aesopicae plures quadringentis* (1538) and they are strikingly faithful to their Latin source.⁴² The selection of 47 fables from several hundred in Camerarius' volume nonetheless gives the Nahuatl collection a particular character, enhanced by the last two fables it contains which will be reviewed here. Both of them show some small but significant deviations from their models.

Leon tequani yhuan cuitlachtli, "Fierce Lion and Wolf", (46) renders the substance of Camerarius' *Leo et lupus* in which the Lion, who has fallen ill, is visited by all animals in his kingdom except the Fox. The Wolf seeks to take advantage of this to turn the Lion against the Fox, but the Fox finds a way to reverse the situation:

Hac occasione capta, lupus uulpem grauissime accusare, quæ tam superbe despiceret regem suum, neque ad illum ægrotantem uiseret. Haec illo declamitante aduenit uulpes, et de clausula orationis, quam uehementer accusata esset, intelligens, & cernens leonem fremere ira, consilium coepit callidum & sui defendendi, & ulciscendi inimici, ac dicendi copia impetrata: Quænam igitur de cunctis animantibus inquit, tantam curam gerit salutis Regie, aut de tua uita ita, leo, sollicita est, ut ego? Que omnia loca peragro, ueftigans medicinam qua sanari posse uidearis...⁴³

Taking up the case, the Wolf made a very serious charge against the Fox for haughtily disrespecting her king and not coming to see him. But the Fox arrived when the Wolf was declaiming like this, and as she understood from the conclusion to his oration how forcefully she had been accused, and as she saw that the lion was seething with rage, she initiated a crafty plan both to defend herself and to avenge her enemy, making use of an abundance of expression: "But who out of all the

⁴² Laird 2017 conclusively identifies Camerarius' amplified versions of Aldus Manutius' fables as the Latin source text. That dispels the supposition (common to Kutscher, Brotherston & Vollmer 1987 and all other studies of the Nahuatl fables) that elaborations or departures from Aldus' or Accursius' editions were the work of the Mexican translator(s).

⁴³ Camerarius 1538, 59r.

animals”, she said “shows as much anxiety for your Royal health, or is so concerned about your life, Lion, as I am? I am the one who trailed through every place, tracking down a medicine with which you can clearly be cured...”

Camerarius’ narrative thus added a mock grandeur to the debate in front of the Lion by employing rhetorical technical terms to characterise both the speech made by the Wolf (*occasione captata*, “taking up the case”; *declamitante*, “declaiming”; *clausula orationis*, “the conclusion to the oration”) and the Fox’s defence which relied on *copia dicendi*, “abundance of expression”. There are no equivalents to these terms in Nahuatl and it is no surprise that the Ciceronian *clausula* (*posse videaris*) in the Fox’s speech cannot be captured either.

To achieve a comparable dramatic effect, the translation – in which *coyotl*, “coyote”, serves for *vulpes* – has to use quite different techniques:

Auh in cuitlachtli yniquac ayac quitta coyotl yn oncan tetlahpaloloyan, (ca cenca mococoliaya) opeuh ye quiyollococoltia miztli; quilhui: “Tlahtohuanie, tla ye *xicmotili* yn inepohualiz coyotl, yn ahmo tehuan ohualla yn *mitzmotlapalhuiz*: ca nelli hamotle ipan *mitzmotilia*.” Auh in coyotl quin tepan ohuacico, ça achi in quicac yn ixqui teixpanhuiaya cuitlachtli. Auh in miztli yn iquac oquittac coyotl, cenca otlancuitzo, quilhui: “Can oticatca, nocne. Cuix amo titlachia y nican omocenquixtique noteycahuan manehnemi nechtlapaloco. Auh ça tio yn ahmo nimitzitta.” Auh in coyotl oquinanquili yn miztli, quilhui: “Tla oc yhuian *xinechmocaquiti*, totecuiyoe. Cuix *timomatzinohua* haca yuhqui tequipachohua yn mococolitzin, yn iuh nehuatl nechtequipachohua. Ca oc nohuian oninemia yn nictemohua yn tlein yc pahtiz monacayotzin...”⁴⁴

When the Wolf noticed that the Coyote was not among the visitors (as they greatly hated each other), he began to upset the lion by saying: “O king! *Be so kind as to look at* the arrogance of the Coyote: because he has not come with the others *to greet you*, because *he does not value you* at all”. At that point the Coyote arrived in time to hear the Wolf’s accusations. The Lion, upon discovering the Coyote, bared his teeth and asked him: “Where were you, scoundrel? Can’t you see that my younger animal brothers, are gathered here to greet me? You were the only one I had not seen here.” The Coyote replied to him: “*Be so kind as to listen to me calmly*, my lord. *Do you know* of someone who cares about your

⁴⁴ *Nican ompehua* 1500s, 191r–v: speech marks and the italics indicating reverential forms are my own additions. Quotations of the Nahuatl fables are from the text of Biblioteca Nacional de México ms. 1628 bis with one exception (n. 47 below).

illness as much as I do? For that reason I was looking everywhere for a remedy to cure you...”

Here the Wolf’s motivation is externalised, as the propositions of his *oratio obliqua* are put into direct discourse; and a spoken reproach from the Lion is also inserted to convey the gravity of the accusation against the Coyote. In addition the reverential forms of address in Nahuatl (indicated above in italics) used by both the Wolf and the Coyote seem to offer an equivalent to the attribution of oratorical proficiency to the animals in the Latin narrative.

The very last fable of the collection *Ce cahcatzactli*, “Black man”, is a version of *Aethiops*, “African”, the story about a man who buys an African slave and tries to wash his natural colour away. The first of two significant changes to the original text is a modification to the final sentence of the story, which Camerarius gave as follows:

Verum mutare illum colorem non valuit, aethiops autem afflictus cura, in morbum incidit.⁴⁵

In fact he had no success in changing his colour, but the African was harmed by these efforts and fell ill.

The Nahuatl translation makes a small addition:

Auh in cahcatzactli ayc huel oquicauh yn icatzahuaca yn ipochehuaca, ça ye ilhuice yc peuh ye mococohua, [o]mic.⁴⁶

But the black man never lost his blackness, his smokiness. He became more ill through this treatment, he died.

Through the insertion of one word, *omic*, “he died”, at the very last word of the sentence, the end of this final fable is endowed with far more gravity: the master who abused his bought man now becomes responsible for his death.

A second alteration is an adjustment to the Latin moral, which Camerarius had amplified with a maxim from Aristophanes:

Significat fabula nullo pacto mutari ingenia & naturas, sed retinere insitas semper proprietates, & quasi personas sibi.

Recte igitur dicitur & hoc apud Aristophanem: Non poteris rectum cancris inducere gressum, Ne leves horrentis echini reddere sentes.

The fable means that characters and natures can by no means be changed, but always keep their ingrained properties, just as people keep their attributes.

⁴⁵ Camerarius 1538, 60r.

⁴⁶ *Nican ompehua* undated, 191v: has “mic” for *omic*.

So in Aristophanes [*Peace* 1083, 1088] it is correctly said “You will not be able to get crabs to walk in a straight line or to make smooth the spines of the spiky urchin.”

There is a close rendering of the actual moral:

Yni çaçanilli techmachtia, ca yn quenami ceceyaca yyeliz in o ipan tlatcat ayac huel occentlamantli ypan quicuepiliz.

This fable teaches us that in whatever way a person is born is his nature, nobody can change it into another.

In one of the two principal manuscripts of the Nahuatl translation a second moral follows, which endows the story with political significance:

Yni çaçanilli techmachtia ca niman ahmo huel oncan nemoa in altepetl itic in cani tepachoa çan no yehuanti teca moçaihua tetlacuicuilia ihuan tetolinia.⁴⁷

The fable teaches us that one cannot live well in a state where those who govern people are the ones who deceive them, steal from them and harm them.

In fact a high number of the fables in the Nahuatl collection are concerned with the social order and with the art of government, and this preoccupation is implicit in the full title of the collection: *Nican ompehua y çaçanillatolli yn quitlali ce tlamatini ytoca Esopo, ye techmachtia yn nehmatcanemiliztli* (Here begin the fables set down by the sage called Aesop to teach us thereby to live an orderly life).⁴⁸ Several manuscript works in Nahuatl from the sixteenth century thus reflected the current interest in princely education: they include a translation of Denis the Carthusian’s *De regimine politiae*, entitled *Izcatqui yn innemiliz yn tepachoa* (c. 1559), “Here is the Manner of Living of the Governors,” and an anonymous undated treatise *Izcatqui ynin tezca amauh, in tlahtoque*, “Here is a mirror-book for princes.”⁴⁹

(c) *Colloquios de la Paz, y tranquilidad christiana* (1540s)

The theme of good government pervaded other texts, including what may well be the first original literary work in Nahuatl. It was written in the 1540s by

⁴⁷ *Nican vmpeua* undated (Bancroft), 426.

⁴⁸ *Nican ompehua* undated, 179r.

⁴⁹ Molina, Ribas *et al.* c. 1559, is examined in Tavárez 2020; Berenice Alcántara Rojas and Mario Sánchez Aguilera are working on *Izcatqui ynin tezca amauh, in tlahtoque*. Erasmus’ *Institutio principis christiani* (1516) and Francesco Patrizi’s *De regno et regis institutione* (1519) circulated in New Spain. Indigenous students in Mexico were taught Latin with the expectation that they would serve the colonial administration as leaders or judges in their own communities: Laird 2017, 149–155.

Fray Juan de Gaona with the assistance of the native scholar Hernando de Ribas, and later revised for publication in 1582 as *Colloquios de la paz, y tranquilidad christiana* by Fray Miguel de Zárate.⁵⁰ The text, which consists of twenty instructive conversations between a friar and an Indian student, has never yet been translated into English or Spanish.

Despite the lack of any apparent European model or source, several classical personages are named, both in the manuscript and in the later embellished printed version.⁵¹ For instance, Chapter 5 “on the varied forms of knowledge in the soul... and the desirability of knowledge,” invokes a series of ancient thinkers:

Macamo nimitzteneutli icenca vei tlamatini Platon, amono nimitzteneuiliznequi in Pythagoras, noyehuatl in Architas, noyehuatl Apolonio.

Let me not refrain from praising then the great sage Plato, nor should I omit to mention Pythagoras, nor another, Archytas, nor another, Apollonius.⁵²

The printed text also elaborated on Hannibal and Alexander as cautionary *exempla* – Alexander for the impetuous killing of his friend Clytus, in chapter 13 “on the definition of patience.” Diogenes the Cynic, Zeno and Socrates and Stilpo are recalled in chapter 17 “on the loss of temporal things,” including Stilpo’s remark conveying that he relied on eloquence and wisdom rather than material possessions:

Omnia mea bona, mecum porto. quitoznequi. Inixquich naxca, çan nitic in nicpie.⁵³

Omnia mea bona, mecum porto, which means “All that is mine, is alone what I have and hold.”

The frequent classical references in this guide to Christian moral conduct and spiritual discipline suggest that it had a further symbolic function – to show off the aesthetic quality and versatility of the Mexican language to those who would appreciate the allusions. The published edition of the *Colloquios de la paz* printed marginal notes in Latin which called the reader’s attention to *exempla, comparationes* or *figurae* in the text.⁵⁴ Similar notes are to be found in editions of other works in Nahuatl prepared at Tlatelolco such as Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Psalmodia christiana* (1583), Fray Juan Bautista

⁵⁰ Gaona c. 1540; Gaona 1582.

⁵¹ On the problem of Gaona’s sources cf. Garibay 1954 ii, 191; Laird 2019b, 16–17 proposes Guibert de Tournai, *Tractatus de pace* written in the 1200s as a possible model.

⁵² Gaona 1582, 23.

⁵³ Gaona 1582, 106.

⁵⁴ Commendatory Latin elegiacs, sapphic stanzas and hexameters prefaced Gaona 1582.

Viseo, *Huehuetlahtolli* (c. 1601) and Fray Juan de Mijangos, *El espejo divino* (1607).

(d) Chimalpahin, *Relaciones* (c. 1630)

It is likely that all the Nahuatl texts reviewed or mentioned above originated at the Imperial College of Santa Cruz. The indigenous collegians were never given primary credit for their work – if they were named at all. Domingo Chimalpahin, however, who worked in the early 1600s, was a very different figure. He wrote in Nahuatl on his own initiative, not at the behest of a religious order or a college. His *Relaciones* and other annalistic histories, drawn for a range of native sources, offer a great deal of information about events in the pre-Hispanic times as well as the early colonial period.

While the use of Greco-Roman *exempla* came to be an occasional feature of Nahuatl literary discourse in the wake of Fray Juan de Gaona's *Colloquios de la paz*, the invocation of classical authorities is more typical of writing in disciplines, such as philosophy, theology, history and science. Chapter 1 of Chimalpahin's first *Relación* opens with quotations (in Nahuatl) from Plato's *Timaeus* and *Letters*.⁵⁵ References then follow to opening formulae from works by Diogenes Laertius, Lactantius, Eusebius and Augustine; from the Renaissance encyclopedists Caelius Rhodiginus, Battista Egnazio and Antonius Sabellicus; and from the Book of Genesis. It is alleged that the authors of all those texts invoke God's authority before embarking upon their work.

The importance of God as the creator is thus affirmed in the first chapter of the first *Relación* to establish a metaphysical and theological grounding for Chimalpahin's historical enterprise. There is also a maxim from Sophocles:

yn mitohua motenehua ypa yn i*Sentencias* in iyamauh yn itoca
Sophocles poeta tragico quitohuaya: “Ca ça niman amo tle oncatqui
qualli yectli ytzonquizca y nepeuhcayotl”.⁵⁶

It is stated that in the text of the *Sentencias* one named Sophocles the tragic poet said: “In short, there is nothing that may be deemed good and fortunate until its end is underway.”

⁵⁵ Chimalpahin 1630, 1v [1998, 31–33]. A forthcoming study by Carlos Diego Arenas Pacheco will identify the texts through which the classical and humanist titles specified here in the *Relaciones* were transmitted to Chimalpahin.

⁵⁶ Chimalpahin, *Relación* (c. 1630) 1.1, fol. 6r [1998 i, 32]. Marlianus 1545 fol. CIII recto, translates Sophocles, *Trachiniae* verses 1–3 into Latin: “Est vetus verbum apud homines vulgatum: / mortalium neminem, priusquam moriatur, / percipere posse felix ne sit, an infelix” (“There is an old saying put forth among men that no mortal can tell before he dies whether he is fortunate or unfortunate.”). Chimalpahin echoes the title of Marlianus' anthology: *Sophoclis tragici poetae vita*.

That quotation is an appropriate comment on annalistic historiography, which by its very nature can never lay claim to closure.

Chimalpahin, who adapted the conventions of indigenous Mexican record-keeping to the model of Isidore's *Chronicon*, was not the traditionalist representative of the Indian past he is often thought to be, but an innovator. His *oeuvre* represents a new phase in the development of Nahuatl, canonising it as a vehicle for scholarship as well as a medium for literature. Chimalpahin evidently sought to elevate his own language so that it could compete with the Spanish vernacular, and it is also conceivable he was claiming for Nahuatl a status more comparable to that of Latin.

4. Conclusions

The first Franciscans to learn Nahuatl regarded it as a vernacular: Fray Andrés de Olmos, for instance, referred to indigenous languages as *romances*.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Olmos and other missionary linguists in his wake realised that the Mexican tongue resisted the taxonomies of Latin or *grammatica*, as it possessed its own “excellences and design” (*primores y buen artificio*).⁵⁸ The initial translation of liturgical texts and scripture into Nahuatl further elevated its status, an effect sustained and enhanced by the emergence of a new and original preceptive and devotional literature in the language.

A standard feature of European vernacular literatures was the accommodation of translations of Latin texts – this was especially true in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Iberia where scholars translated classical and Renaissance authors into the vernacular far more readily than Italian humanists. A second quality fundamental to the vernacular literatures which emerged in medieval Europe was their replication of genres, rhetoric, poetics from Latin literature, as well as their adoption of classical epithets, references and *exempla*.⁵⁹ Both of those characteristics had been the consequence of a gradual evolutionary process over the course of two or three centuries. But in Mexico, where there had been no alphabetically written discourse before the Spanish incursion, the same generic features defined a Nahuatl literary canon which was instituted within a couple of decades of the arrival of the Franciscan missionaries in 1523–1524. The rapid development continued in the 1600s: in using his native tongue as a medium for scholarly annalistic history, Chimalpahin made his own unilateral contribution to the *questione delle lingua* in colonial Mexico.

While the very first texts to be put into Nahuatl were for the use of missionaries, the significance of many subsequent translations made in the

⁵⁷ Cf. Olmos, 1547, 44r [2003, 59] quoted in section 2 above.

⁵⁸ Olmos 1547, 44r.

⁵⁹ Curtius 1953; Antonelli 1992.

1500s has received less consideration. Those translations served to signal the importance and authority of the language. The early modern practice of putting certain vernacular works into *Latin* – Cortés' *Cartas de relación* to Charles V for example – was actually comparable: the Latin version not only further promoted the original, but also affirmed the standing of Latin itself as a medium.⁶⁰ Today, the translation of English literature into Welsh, or of Spanish literature into Catalan, has a similar effect: readers of the translations may well be able to understand the literature in the original, but the translations in Welsh and Catalan are still perceived to be of value.

In any case it should be clear, even from this very selective survey, that Latin and Nahuatl had a sustained and intensive connection in the 1500s. Moreover, interest in the Christian elements of colonial Nahuatl writing has grown rapidly in recent years.⁶¹ Recognition of the importance of Latin letters for the development of an Amerindian vernacular now presents an opportunity for Europeanists to contribute to the interpretation of a remarkable body of literature by native Mexican authors.

⁶⁰ Burke 2007, 65 has discovered 1,140 Latin translations of works by known authors printed before 1799. between the invention of printing and the year 1799.

⁶¹ Cf. e.g. Burkhart 1989, 2001, 2011; Laird 2019b; Lara 2006; Pardo 2006; Tavárez 2011, 2020.

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