

Penelope Oseguera

Subverting Gendered Roles in *La Malinche*

Carlos Morton's *La Malinche*, a play first performed in 1995 by the Arizona Theater Company in Tucson, shows that a continuing fascination with the near-mythical woman known by the same title still exists today. The play rewrites the history of Malintzin, also known as Doña Marina, who was Hernán Cortés' Aztec slave, interpreter, mistress, and the mother of his child to whom Cortés gave his last name. In common thought, Malinche is described either as a woman who was made a fool for love and betrayed her kinsmen, or as their larger-than-life protectress, in a pattern of thought that is just as sexist because it is incapable of conceiving of Malinche as both someone with power and as a mere mortal woman.

Morton's Malinche, however, *is* a mere mortal woman, and her character works to expose and overturn both of the previously stated conceptions of the historical Malinche. Morton presents us with a character that is not innocent of helping Cortés for love, and in this way she conforms to the stereotype of woman as "adoring lover." She casts off this role, however, when it no longer serves her, becoming a formidable enemy for Cortés. She does this with the roles of "mother" and "sister" as well, roles which are thought to come "naturally" to women, alternately appropriating and shedding them depending on what suits her cause best. Morton paints his Malinche as this chameleon who can fill the various roles of lover, mother, and sister as needed to expose these roles as stereotypes for women. Further, the fact that Malinche can easily transition in and out of these stereotypes shows their very absurdity, as stereotypes by nature are not supposed to be easily escaped. At the same time, her easy transitions show Malinche for what she really is: an incredibly clever, human (with all the implications of the word) *woman* who

understands the agency that her womanhood gives her, who uses her femininity as a powerful tool in making herself heard.

The play opens with Malinche bitterly bemoaning the fact that Cortés has decided to cast her aside for a Spanish lady, Catalina, the niece of the evil Bishop Lizárraga. This strays greatly from history, as Catalina was really Cortés' wife who arrived in New Spain after him, in the summer of 1522. She died mysteriously in November of the same year, and accusations against Cortés were made, given that his union with her was not politically favorable to him and produced no children. Morton creates this different plotline to initially portray Malinche as the sad, spurned, faithful lover. He furthers this by having her scorn Cortés' offer to have her marry Jaramillo and live as a *doña* with him—an offer that she took in real life. In Morton's conception, instead, her faithfulness allows Malinche to claim, "[Cortés] spoke through my mouth like a priest who transmits the word of God" (16). She affirms the sanctity of her union to Cortés through this comparison; it is just as holy in her conception as the bishop's is with God, as she summarily tells him with satisfaction. She is in effect claiming a huge amount of power here; in legitimizing her union to Cortés, she establishes her place as *Doña Marina*, as the wife of the most prominent conquistador and as a woman of status who should be respected, simply because of her faithful love for this man. However, when he definitively tells her that he will be leaving her, Malinche is able to quickly abandon her role as his doting lover and become quite the foe. She has no problem speaking exactly her mind to him, saying, "Weakling! Coward! I made you who you are! Without me you are nothing!" (28). Here she again claims a huge amount of power, saying that she was the true person of value in their union, and that he was the one who stood to benefit the most from it. At the same time that she distances herself from her feelings for Cortés, she says, "You will never be rid of me. I will always be inside you, the only

woman who really knows you. More than your own mother!” (30). She is no longer his lover, but at the same time that she becomes his powerful enemy, she claims a hold on him because of what once was between them. Her capacity to go from loving Cortés to hating him so easily and to draw power from both feelings simultaneously is telling of her cleverness. She knows exactly how to use the stereotype of women being faithful and adoring lovers to keep a close hold on her authority over Cortés.

Further, Morton’s Malinche uses the stereotype of women as natural-born mothers to her cunning advantage. After she realizes that she will not be able to preserve her family intact using honest methods, she begins to use her role as a mother deceptively to at least secure her revenge. She is able to fool Cortés into letting her present her poisoned traditional Aztec clothing as a marriage gift to Catalina, because she convinces him that all she wants is what is best for Martín and that she believes the best way to obtain this is to secure her good favor. She uses the connection that she knows Cortés automatically *assumes* she has with her son to deceive him and murder his new bride. And when Cortés insists that Martín present Catalina with the clothing himself, thereby unknowingly putting his son’s life in danger, Malinche does nothing to intervene. She even willingly implicates her innocent seven-year-old son in the crime, preferring to see her revenge executed than calling it off for his sake. Further, the very fact that Morton’s adaptation sees Malinche willing to sacrifice her son to preserve the Aztec way—a radical departure from history as Martín lived into old age in real life—shows that she does not at all have a stereotypical relationship with her son. Although women are perceived in common thought as willing to do anything to preserve the life of their children, this is not the way of Morton’s Malinche. Her Aztec heritage is much more important to her than the life of an individual, even one to whom she gave life. She says as much in saying to Cortés, “He died

because you would not allow him to be raised a Mechica” (55). And, most strikingly of all, when she first reveals to Cortés that she has sacrificed their son, she says, “Captain...Hernán Cortés...would you like to see your son? Well here he is!” (53). Clearly, Malinche’s words here are calculated to hurt Cortés, not to show any regret or remorse at her sacrificing her son. She is able to distance herself so much from the motherhood thought to be inherent in women that she is able to use her own son’s lifeless body as a weapon against the man she now hates. And he is completely appalled by what she has done, shocked beyond action in the wake of the fact that this woman is capable of such deceit when it comes to motherhood.

One final stereotype that Morton has his conception of Malinche manipulate to her advantage is that of a sisterhood existing automatically between women. One of the most prominent examples of this is the fact that Morton rewrites Malinche’s past to suggest that it was her father who compelled her into slavery (38), when in reality this was done by her mother. This departure from history allows Morton to establish a kind of “sisterhood” between Malinche and the figure of her mother, stereotyping their relationship as one of love, in which the traditional passing down of feminine heirlooms occurs in the form of solid gold clothing and a headdress. However, in the next instant she completely devalues this tradition by poisoning the clothing and presenting it as a gift to her rival, Catalina. She does not hesitate to use what many would think of as a cherished gift from her mother, and she even destroys it in the process of exacting her revenge.

Morton also establishes a type of sisterhood between Malinche and Ciuacoatl in his play that he goes on to use in interesting ways. In Aztec mythology, Ciuacoatl was a minor fertility goddess who abandoned her son, Mixcoatl. It is said that she returns to weep at the place where she left him, but all she finds in his place is a sacrificial knife. There are clear parallels between

this myth and the story that Morton presents at the center of his plot. Further, in the play, Ciuacoatl is presented as Malinche's human friend and fellow slave and in many cases as the voice of reason, and at the beginning it is clear that they are very close. However, as the play progresses, Malinche and Ciuacoatl begin to have differences that arise from Malinche's radical commitment to her revenge. When this leads Malinche to call Ciuacoatl a traitor, Ciuacoatl answers, "I am not afraid of dying. But promise we will save Martín" (39). From this point onward, as it becomes more and more apparent that revenge and salvation cannot both be achieved, Malinche and Ciuacoatl begin to mutually drift from each other. Malinche keeps her intention to sacrifice her son secret from Ciuacoatl, while Ciuacoatl, who no longer trusts Malinche, secretly plans to run away with Martín herself. However, outwardly they continue to defend each other. Notably, when Sanchez, Cortés' officer, attempts to take Martín from Ciuacoatl, she exclaims, "Martín is not his, he's ours!" (51) and draws a dagger on him. Her defense of Malinche and her appropriation of a *share* in the role of motherhood in saying "he's ours" reestablish a sisterhood between these two women—at least superficially. In coming to Malinche's aid against the men that oppress them both, Ciuacoatl shows that she understands the power that a sisterhood can have, even if she no longer feels an affinity with the one she outwardly claims as her sister in this case. And thus she shows a cleverness to rival Malinche's in manipulating the stereotype of sisterhood.

However, in the next instant Malinche destroys any illusions of sisterhood that may have existed between her and Ciuacoatl by sacrificing her own son, showing that she is the true master of control. She allows the illusion to exist while Ciuacoatl accompanies her son to Cortés' wedding to Catalina, a situation that put Ciuacoatl's life at risk. She continues to allow the illusion to exist while Ciuacoatl again risks her life by refusing to allow Sanchez to take Martín.

However, the moment that she no longer needs Ciuacoatl's sisterhood, she casts it aside forever by doing the one thing that was unforgivable to her friend, by sacrificing her son and thus concurrently casting aside the opportunity of motherhood forever.

It goes without saying that in the moment that she sacrifices Martín, she irrevocably casts aside her role as Cortés' lover as well. Throughout the play, Malinche noncommittally uses this role as well as those of mother and sister, only to completely transcend these three roles in the end. She is a true master manipulator, and the outcome of the play in which no real resolution is reached reflects this. In an era and a society in which women did not have much say and were confined by the stereotypes made about them, Morton's Malinche is a conception of a woman who uses these stereotypes and the assumptions that people make about her because of them to gain power. In this way, her femininity gives her agency, an agency that allows her to not sit idly by and watch her son be raised as a Spaniard. Rather, she takes her life and that of her son into her own hands, a notion that is incredibly radical for a woman in Malinche's historical context. What Morton achieves through this radical rewriting is to present us with a "historical" example of a woman who claims power for herself through nothing else but her intelligence and her ability to manipulate stereotypes about women in a deeply sexist society. In short, Morton's Malinche is human and not without her faults but she is more importantly *woman*, deeply in touch with her womanhood and with the power that it bestows on her.