

University of Nevada, Reno

The Fainting Mary: The Role of Marian Divinity in Colonial Nahuatl Drama

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the degree for Masters of the
Arts in History

By

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of Marian divinity within colonial Nahuatl drama in Mexico. The Virgin Mary is typically associated within Christianity as a staple of biblical representation and devotion. However, her representation within the colonial dramas indicates various attributes of pre-Columbian culture and religious belief.

The analysis of 6 of the 19 currently available Nahuatl theatrical plays are examined and compared to the historiography and primary sources regarding pre-Columbian culture, and religion in particular, as well as the orthodoxy and hybridity of Christianity in the New World. Historiography of colonial Mexico, Christianity, the Franciscans, and Nahuatl Theater are employed to assist in the establishment of precedential work within the ethnographical subfield of cultural studies.

The ritualization of theater strengthens the paradigm of compromised conversion in colonial Mexico and the creation of a syncretic religion, and thereby, hybrid deities. Nahuas found ways of demonstrating their traditional forms of worship by incorporating them into the practices introduced by the Franciscans. Nahuatl theater was a unique form of evangelization among the Aztecs, and its success was due to the cultural parallels in belief and ritual performance which could be translated across the cultural and linguistic barriers which stifled other efforts of proselytization. By allowing religious compromise, the lines of identity of divinity merged with the native associations. Mary began

absorbed attributes of pre-Columbian deities and her identity became a conglomeration of many aspects.

The figure of the Virgin Mary is a hybrid construct as a result of the confluence of cultures as a result of the Spanish Conquest in colonial Mexico and the subsequent evangelization efforts by Franciscans who utilized theater in order to accomplish it. Her attributes are distinctly syncretic with other feminine divinities which existed prior to the introduction of Christianity in the New World, and through her, they were reconciled with her Christian aspects, preserving a unique conceptual product within a unique vehicle of conversion: Nahuatl theater. The study proves that the Marian construct also became a legitimator of native autonomy in addition to a source of devotion.

To My Grandparents,

Parents,

and my esteemed professor Dr. Linda Curcio-Nagy:

“Ipal nonixpatlaoa: Because of him my face becomes wide.”¹

¹ Thelma D. Sullivan, trans. *A Scattering of Jades: Stories, Poems, and Prayers of the Aztecs* (University of Arizona Press, 1994), 192-193. Sahagún documents this as a compliment for parents and teachers on the commendability of upbringing and instruction.

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Chapter 1: The Confluence of Culture and Religious Concepts

*“Taeuuetl, in tipochotl motlan moceoualhuiz, moyacaluiz, in maceoalli: You are a great cypress and a ceiba; under you the people shall have cover, they shall have shade. This is said of the rulers. They are thought of as great cypress and ceibas; under them there is cover, there is shade. (This was said of the lords who protected their subjects. CGN: 354. Ed.)”*²

In July of 2007, accompanied by a Mayan guide through the Mexican national park at La Venta in Villahermosa, I first became acquainted with the ceiba tree and its sacred tradition in Mexico. Not unique to the Aztec or the Mayans, the tree seems to have a ubiquitous presence within the Central Valley. Ironically, this archaeological site houses the resting place of the infamous megalithic head carvings, captive tables, tomb housings and mosaics of the Olmec civilization, universally considered to be the “mother civilization” to all others in Mesoamerica. It was no surprise therefore to find the ceiba tree was a common metaphorical reference within the literary and cultural tradition of both civilizations. At the time, I was not aware how far ingrained it is in the folklore of the native people, even to the extent of modern-day culture. The guide pointed out the lofty tree above us and asked me if I could “see God.” Finding this question quite a bit odd, I asked what he meant. He pointed out “the crosses” that the branches made and he told me this occurred in every ceiba tree. It has therefore, according to him, and presumably others, always been considered a natural holy icon. Thinking this a quaint paradigm, I mentally filed the image and conversation away, until I read the Nahuatl quote above which was collected by Fray Bernardo de Sahagún as an Aztec proverb. The

² Thelma D. Sullivan, trans. *A Scattering of Jades: Stories, Poems, and Prayers of the Aztecs*. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 215.

guide seems to have been correct that the image and metaphor of the tree stem from antiquity; yet, the “crosses” that he spoke of seemed to be a Christian concept, one that would have been imported and superimposed onto the ideal which had already been in place. This begged the question of how far the perception of the Old and New World beliefs had become fused. My first experience with this fusion had to deal with the iconography of religious belief. Did the concept of Old World divinity and their representations ally that closely with Indo-European ones; or had the core roots, the very concept of divinity, also become altered as a result of the Mexican Conquest?

In the late sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries, Mexico was part of the Spanish Empire. The history of its pre-Colombian subjects lives in notoriety as belonging to one of the most formidable of all nations known in the Western world: the Mexicas, also known as the Aztecs, and during the post-Conquest era ethnically identified as the Nahuas. The Spanish encounter in 1519 resulted in the subsequent conquest of the native population in 1521, although intermittent pockets of resistance would recur throughout the empire’s history. The Spaniards quickly realized that the only way to completely suppress subversion and secure their grip on New Spain, as the post-Conquest Mexican empire would come to be known, was to create a deeper unity between the two populations: miscegenation of ideals to instill the bonds of empire and ensure solidarity and loyalty to the Spanish crown.

In European history, the process of mass conversion had worked well in traversing cultural boundaries in order to unify countries under the common factor of religion, regulating the common causes of politics to align with those assigned by the highest authority, that of one God, mitigated by the ordained authority of earth, the

Catholic Church, headed by the anointed pope. In the Mexica culture, the embodiment of divine qualities is believed to reside within Aztec emperors and priests. The perceived divine authority makes the emperor a “god-king” and the priests are divine conduits which the public practice of ritual helps to reinforce and provide a spiritual link with temporal order. As the Spanish sought to identify with their new subjects, they once again turned to the correlation of hegemonic practice as a means of connection. The Spanish friars engaged in their missionary efforts as a means of creating a “millennial kingdom,” a utopia that would be achieved by the unification of the Spaniards and Native Americans in Christian solidarity. The millennial kingdom was an apocalyptic belief that in exodus from the corruption of the Old World, the New World would provide a new “Chosen Race” of creoles.³ This miscegenation could only be achieved through the mutual understanding of culture and the compromise required to obtain the hybridity that was necessary for the utopia to occur, beginning with the catalytic building block of religion. In order to indoctrinate and unite under the Christian regime, the Franciscan and Dominican orders were first obligated to understand the cosmo-vision of the Mexica in order to supplant it with their own. This intricate process would come to be more of a Gordian knot than the friars had ever anticipated, and although the Spanish were successful in altering the concept of divinity, they would never suspect that they themselves might be adopting aspects of the alien paradigms they were attempting to suppress and collapse. Evidence of this cross-cultural exchange and morphology of the concept of divinity can be traced through documentation contemporary with that era, namely the religious morality plays that were written, produced, and observed as a means

³ John Leddy Phelan. *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 75.

to indoctrinate the concept of Christian divinity among the native populations. It is within these works that we can see the efforts of the natives to control and preserve semblances of their religious traditions, language, and beliefs in order to maintain their identity, meanwhile placating their conquerors and submitting to their authority by way of submitting to the ultimate Christian authority of divinity. The result is that the natives forged a new concept of divinity, one which joined the characteristics of the pagan pantheon of deities with the presumptuously “monotheistic” religious model and hagiography of Christianity, eventually leading to an evolving religion which fused the two traditions together.

Pre-Colombian Mexica Religion.

In order to understand the concept of divinity that is represented within the morality plays, the ancient traditions of the Mexica must first be examined: what exactly were their religious beliefs? The Mexica were adherents to polytheism. Their pantheon of gods reflected the life that they lived: nature, agriculture, warfare, tribute, trade and the unexplainable were all related through the conjuring ideals of supernatural beings who personified the issues and questions faced by people in everyday life. Much like other Mesoamerican peoples, the Aztecs shared a similar pantheon that revolved around the agriculture that sustained their communities. “In Aztec cosmivision there were many connecting points between the supernatural spheres and the human sphere. The most outstanding examples were mountains, considered to be the sources of life-giving waters, deities, and diseases associated with the rain, the tlalocs (rain gods), and other

supernatural powers.”⁴ The rain god Tláloc and the Feathered Serpent Quetzalcóatl are culturally ubiquitous deities that were assimilated into the pantheon of that worshipped by the Aztecs as they made their home in the Central Valley of Mexico among myriad other nations. As mentioned, Tláloc represents the rain god, the god of sustenance. He is the rain god who is ultimately responsible for the cycle of life, which was viewed by the Aztecs euphemistically as the seasons of farming and animal husbandry. Quetzalcóatl, “the plumed serpent”, a holy man, a warrior, and a founder of civilization, is a prominent Mesoamerican translation into the pantheon. He is credited with founding the “Serpent Mound,” a sacred space, a place that in effect signifies a birthplace of power. It is for this reason that the location of the temple that was built in Tenochtitlan was chosen.⁵

Tezcatlipoca, a god who is capricious and known for his trickery, is also a prominent figure in the pantheon. Known as “Lord of the Smoking Mirror,” he is often described as embodying earthly forms and therefore many rituals featuring human sacrifice were committed to honor him. Victims were given places of honor as “impersonators” of the god who were to be released from their human form. Reenactments of sacred mythological events took place as a form of tribute. “The sacrificial victim [was] a captured warrior, as in the case of the mythical sacrifice at Coatepec...we see the importance of artistic display in the music, costume, rhetoric, and poise of Tezcatlipoca. He is a living example...the divine truth on earth.”⁶ Yet the Mexica have one deity which is omnipotent and held in higher esteem than any other: Huitzilopochtli, the god of war and the sun, who often appears in the form of a hummingbird. This deity is unique to

⁴ David Carrasco. *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers*. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990), 72.

⁵ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 70.

⁶ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 90-91.

the Mexicas in that he was transported into Mesoamerica by the Aztec. He does not identify with any of the other Mesoamerican deities and was held in the highest esteem, presumably due to his bellicosity which resembled the livelihood of the Mexica, who masqueraded as mercenaries in the course of their attempts to settle within the Central Valley. Huitzilopochtli was therefore revered above all other gods because he was the patron god of the Mexica nation and he embodied the very essence of the Mexican concept of divinity as one which should be emulated and ritualized in order to secure the favor of the god on a temporal level.

As with nearly all other mythologies, the creation archetypes of mother, aggressor, and savior are present with the tradition. The creation myth of the Mexica names the “mother” goddess as Coatlicue, who gives birth just in time to Huitzilopochtli, the warrior and protector, who defeats and dismembers his siblings (primarily his sister, Coyolxauhui), spreading their limbs to create a cosmological landscape: moon, stars, and topographical features.⁷ Of course, Huitzilopochtli represents the sun, as he ensures that the earth continues every day in ritual emulation of how it was created; through sacrifice. The Coyolxauhui stone, a large monolithic carving placed at the base of the Templo Mayor, depicts the Ymir motif associated with the Mexica tradition. It is a rendering of divine dismemberment in the mythological battle of the gods and helps to corroborate the influence that divinity plays in the scope of public spectacle. Pre-Conquest encounters by the Spanish documented that the Mexica were still practicing human sacrifice on a massive scale at the time of their encounter, rumored to number up to 10,000 sacrificial victims per day. The stone was recovered by archaeologists in 1978

⁷ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 73-77.

and helps to corroborate the theory that sacrifice was being carried out according to the ritual set forth by the native concepts of divinity and the spiritual mandates required by their unique cosmovision, which included human sacrifice.⁸

The Christian Veil.

The Christianity imported into Mexico by Spanish mendicants (the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and the Augustinians) was intended to be highly orthodox Catholicism. All three religious sects subscribed to the Catholic doctrines of faith which professes to worship one true god, “God” or “Yahweh.” Yet the religion also incorporated forms of reverence to other supernatural beings such as saints, Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit. In fact, “the Holy Trinity” (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is said to be three beings and yet one at the same time, allowing for the misunderstanding, that the practices of the Catholic faith are not monotheistically exclusionary. The Catholic religion also emphasizes the battle between good and evil, each side having their own supernaturally endowed powers, a type of unequal complementarity. Of the three orders, the Franciscans ultimately persevered to employ the most successful tactics which would gain them a cultural advantage to promoting their order while gaining converts to Christianity within the Nahua community. The Franciscans quickly realized that they would need to overcome many cultural barriers, the largest of which was language. Language, as Louise Burkhart points out, was a powerful instrument in the conveyance of ideas and it is necessary to have a dialogue in order to implement conversion.⁹ Upon

⁸ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 76.

⁹ Louise M. Burkhart. *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 11.

investigating the Nahua religious culture divulged through language, they found that “the forms of personal devotion- fasting and other mortifications of the flesh, sexual abstinence, the adornment of temples and images- were consistent with Christianity.”¹⁰ Therefore, this opened up a cross-cultural examination of the values the two cultures held in religious esteem. If the rituals were at first glance similar foundational models, how different could the concept of divinity really be? The friars sought correlations between their own God and the saints and the Nahua concept of divinity, supplanting a theoretically heretical belief system.

Spectacle and Transmogrification.

The problem faced by the friars and their quest to convert the native population was how to apply their own religion by discrediting and displacing the current pagan one. They considered a dialogue to be the most effective way to convince and thoroughly permeate the divine archetypes which were contemporarily being worshipped. Since the friars did not speak the native languages, they could not properly comprehend their adversarial concepts, nor could they evoke what they considered to be the superior qualities of their own God and his supernatural conduits. Attempts were made to build a linguistic bridge, in the form of a bi-cultural school as part of a utopian experiment in the sixteenth century known as the Colegio de Santa Cruz at Tlateloco. Other schools quickly emerged in emulation of this pioneer establishment which employed the use of native instructors and scribes to bridge the cultural barrier. In the meantime and contemporaneously with those efforts, the Franciscans sought out other means of

¹⁰ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 18.

conveying their religious ideals and social mores through the medium of spectacle such as theater, song and dance. Through this medium, it was expected that even uneducated natives would be able to interpret, comprehend, identify and apply the messages, and most importantly the concept of divinity represented therein. “Theater, in the sense of a prepared dialogue spoken by a group of role-playing individuals in front of an audience, did not exist among the Nahuas before the Spanish invasion,” according to Burkhart.¹¹ However, Burkhart points out that the Franciscans could easily see what a significant role in daily life the rituals played for the natives and thus emulated their practices with the substitution of Christianity. The rituals among the Mexica were revered as a display of their history and continuous recurrence that involved them on a level of interaction. This tangibility with the divine allowed the natives to feel connected to their gods and empire by their participation. Therefore, the plays were malleable by their improvisational nature and the people could perform by participating or by simply being an audience. Their stage, the arena for the spectacles, had to reflect the awesome nature of the rituals being performed, and it had to contribute power to the meaning behind them.

David Carrasco is particularly concerned with the use of urban landscape incorporated into sacred ritual. As Carrasco points out, the use of sacred structures and urban landscape were utilized to affect community. “The human community with its various ceremonial centers was defined in terms of the landscape, the Mountain of Sustenance, which provided the resources for life.” Temples came to replicate mountains, which were sacred birthplaces inhabited by the divine. The Templo Mayor in Mexico City held two temples:

¹¹ Louise M. Burkhart. *Holy Wednesday: A Nahuatl Drama from Early Colonial Mexico*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 43.

“The south side of the pyramid represented the legendary Coatepetl, the mountain birthplace of the war god Huizilopochtli. The north side of the temple represents the Mountain of Sustenance associated with Tlaloc’s paradise, which provided the precious rains and moisture that regenerated the agricultural world of the capital. Imagine the visual power this pyramid/temple had on the populace, who saw it standing in the center of the city as a living image of these two great mythic mountains.”¹²

Spectacle, particularly theater, was acted out in order to gain the adherence of people who attended rituals. The dramas were performed in open areas, often on the platforms of old temples or community squares, actors dressed in regalia and spoke in the language, and stories were enacted in order to construct a new pattern according to the old mythic ones. “The Nahuas at the time of the Conquest had no concepts of ‘theater,’ ‘stage,’ ‘actor,’ ‘script,’ ‘audience,’ or ‘play’ as such. They did not distinguish between the dramatization of a sacred narrative and the performance of a ritual in the way that, for example, a Spaniard would distinguish an *auto* of the Last Supper from a priest’s celebration of the Mass.” For the Nahuas, when someone impersonated a being or deity, they embodied it.¹³ This opened up an entire medium of manipulation for the Franciscans, provided they could get across the language barrier. Thus it was that Nahua actors and authors would come to be the primary actors as well as the audience, and the linguistics, costumes, dance, and song would all contribute to the post-Conquest evolution of the concept of the divine.

¹² Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 72-73.

¹³ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 43-45.

Sources and Methodology.

Although it is believed that many plays were created, age, deterioration, private ownership and largely intangible documentation have contributed to many of the problems in cataloging and analyzing the remnants of the plays that are extant today. In 1996, Louise M. Burkhart published a translation of *Holy Wednesday: A Nahuatl Drama in Early Colonial Mexico*. It is a passion play in both Spanish and Nahuatl translation that is a key document in understanding the different ways religion, and the idealization of deities in particular, are understood. In 2004, Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart expanded upon the mission of religious play translation and began cataloging and translating the Nahuatl religious plays that were available within three volumes: *Volume 1: Death and Life in Colonial Nahuatl Mexico*, *Volume 2: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, and *Volume 4: Nahuatl Christianity in Performance*. A total of 19 plays are present within the volumes and the majority of them are biblical re-enactments derived directly from the Bible, including the most popular and famous, which is the passion of Christ.

For purposes of this study, it is important to evaluate what we can interpret from Nahuatl dramatic texts based upon what is already known regarding other extant documents and the historiography of Aztec culture. Authors who composed primary sources contemporary with the era included Fray Bernardo de Sahagún, Diego Durán, and Motolinía (otherwise known as Fray Toribio de Benavente). To a degree, Hernán Cortés' letters and the account of Bernal del Castillo can be useful. These authors wrote or depicted in graphic text the concepts of religious ceremony which revealed the Mexican ideals of divinity, and that of the Virgin Mary in particular. This transference of understanding was a necessary tool in the evangelization process. Yet, the works are

themselves products of bias as they are often not considered to be written directly by Nahuas, and one scholarly argument maintains that at their very best, they were simply transcriptions of Spanish perceptions. For example, Ross Hassig explains that many accounts of the New Fire ceremony are derived from the classic details put forth by Fray Bernardo de Sahagún, who never technically witnessed what he described.¹⁴

The Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, written in the mid-sixteenth century, and credited to Fray Bernardo de Sahagún of the Franciscan order, is arguably one of the strongest primary sources that scholars are able to utilize in their pursuit of a detailed ethnographic pictorial of the rituals and practices of the Mexica, particularly where it concerns religion and ritual, as well as government. The codex is broken up into 12 books which detail information gathered from oral interrogation in a collaborative effort by himself and his colleagues, many of who were native intellectuals. The books include vivid accounts of the history and beliefs of the conquered Aztecs, but also their interpretation of themselves and even the Conquest. Illustrations are often employed for supplementary detail throughout the manuscript. Owing to the possibility of subversive material being produced as a by-product of the employment of native scribes, the project encountered many setbacks, particularly from the Catholic religious institutions.¹⁵ For this reason, the text is critiqued for the bias it exhibits in the recordation, editing, and synthesizing of ethnohistory; yet, it is still one of the most accurate portrayals of pre-Colombian belief than other primary resources available.

¹⁴Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 45.

¹⁵William H. Prescott *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru*. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1922), 52-53.

In the middle and late decades of the sixteenth century, a Dominican friar Diego Durán also took it upon himself to document the philology of the Aztecs in codices. Owing to his fluency in Nahuatl, his task was one in which he could more accurately portray the history of the native people through their language, from the most subtle nuances of expression, and other details which different historians may have overlooked. The result was the production of two books: *Book of the Gods and the Rites and the Ancient Calendar* and *The History of the Indies of New Spain*.

The Codex Mendoza is a codex compiled under the first viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza. It gives a socio-economic view of the culture of the Mexica prior to Conquest and details the tribute system which the Spanish studied in order to assess their new assets.¹⁶ One of the most important items contained within the codex is the frontispiece which depicts the social, economic, and religious values of the Aztec all within one image.

Fray Toribio de Benavente, also known as Motolinía, was a Franciscan friar who championed missionary cause post-Conquest. Motolinía composed a history of the natives based upon his interactions with them, naturally with a Eurocentric overtone and bias. Benavente documented his conversion efforts, while combating the abusive viceregal practices such as the *encomienda* and *corregimiento*. Benavente sought to convert based upon the top-down European model in which a mass conversion would be accomplished via the chieftains' primary conversion which would spread to their adherents. For this reason, Benavente's *History of the Indians of New Spain* was seen as

¹⁶ Linda A. Curcio-Nagy. "Notes from History 639b: History of the Aztecs", 7. These are notes taken by me from a seminar given in 2007 by Professor Curcio-Nagy.

oppressive, and was especially berated by his contemporary brethren, such as Bernardo de Sahagún.¹⁷

The documents such as the *Five Letters* of Hernán Cortés and *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, illustrate the Conquest history from the Spanish perspective. While these are oftentimes poor primary sources for the interpretation of the true Aztec culture, they do give insight to the Spanish perception. It is therefore a valuable tool when attempting to synthesize the Spanish bias away from what may have been the true history and culture documented within other texts. In addition to these primary sources, *The Holy Bible* will be utilized to provide the basis for the presumably Christian concept of divinity and, to a degree, ritual.

These primary sources will assist in the analysis of Nahuatl theater as tools for decoding the true religious conceptions of the divine, with focus upon the divinity of the Virgin Mary that can be extracted from what we know about the performances, and the documents themselves. They will provide insight into the behavioral paradigms between the cultures, and will also show the overlapping of ascribed characteristics and values. With these tools, the study will seek to differentiate between cultures, but will also serve to examine the metamorphosis of the concept of divinity depending on the theatrical factors of production, performance and perception. The methodology in order to accomplish this is very straightforward. The first step will be to read through all of the available theatrical works. The second step is to note anomalies and characterizations within the text as any differentiation in the comparison of the Nahuatl versus the Spanish translations. The third step is to draw correlations between the anomalies and their

¹⁷ Charles Gibson. *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 100-101.

meanings, as well as to document the way the divinity is not only being represented within the plays but to decipher the message that is being given and received by the audience, which may not always be the same thing. The last step is to offer proof that the historical evangelization of the Nahuas became a mission of religious syncretism and the abandonment of the goal to eradicate native roots in their concept of Marian divinity. The theater offered a way for the paradigmatic exchange between the two cultures to occur and served as vehicle for the transition of those paradigms to a hybrid concept of divinity which is chronicled in the aspects that can be discerned from the sources which are examined. This scholarship will offer new ethnohistorical insight into the evolution of the concept of divinity through Nahuatl religious drama which has not been previously explored.

In order to understand, interpret and hypothesize about the process and purposes of Nahuatl theater, I will be examining 6 of the 19 available works, examining the appearance of the Virgin Mary within the texts, focusing on their language and the various components that contributed to the spoken word (and unfortunately, all we have is what was written). All of the plays are religious morality plays and are based on biblical events, the passion of Jesus Christ, morality tales, or are re-enactments of alleged miracles at Guadalupe. There is also value in exploring the costumes, the rituals, the performers and their backgrounds, the audience and their backgrounds, the locations, the calendrical significance, the archaeological vestiges, as well as the political arm that was linked with the Church and its efforts at proselytization. The concept of divinity of the bi-cultural tradition has never before been directly analyzed within these religious morality plays. This study intends to focus upon the concept, its morphology and

hypothesis regarding the reasons behind it, all within the context of what impact the Nahuatl theatrical tradition and its religious and morality plays had upon that concept, and how the persistence of certain characteristics applied to an assimilating religious culture, helps define how the Nahuas saw their own world and their own traditions and values.

Historiography.

Scholars have provided a wealth of information regarding what we know of the Mexicas and their experience under the Spanish. The two most important monographical works of this region were performed by Charles Gibson in *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810*, which he published in 1964, and that of James Lockhart in 1992, entitled *The Nahuas After the Conquest : A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico*. These works set a precedent for a linear examination of the history of Mexico, and first focused upon the primary resources that could be examined in order to draw conclusions and verify historical information, at times even being able to corroborate it with archaeological evidence. These works provide a cultural, political, economic, and social background of the Mexica and establish the historical context for how the infrastructure of their systems was composed along with the evolution that followed post-Conquest efforts at hegemonic reforms. Our understanding of the Nahuas is greatly enhanced by the examination of primary sources within these historiographies and the debates that have stemmed from this research.

In *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, Louise M. Burkhart expands upon Lockhart's summation, but ultimately persists in her belief that the Nahuas maintained a degree of agency within the production of their works and their belief and preservation of their own conception of deities. Burkhart concurs with James Lockhart that the friars made their religion more appealing to the Indians in order to gain their conversion, ultimately sacrificing many of the uncompromising precedents they had set for themselves.¹⁸

Other contributors to the ethnohistory of colonial Mexico include Serge Gruzinski's *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Modern World, 16th-18th Centuries*, Ross Hassig's *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* and *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica*, David Carrasco's *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* and *Religions of Mesoamerica*, Susan Kellogg's *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700*, and Stephanie Wood's *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico*. Throughout their works, they examine the history of the Aztecs through manuscripts, archaeology, culture, landscapes, linguistics and oral tradition. Stephanie Wood's *Transcending Conquest* follows in the footsteps of Lockhart and Burkhart by examining Nahua subversion in a post-Conquest setting. Serge Gruzinski's *The Conquest of Mexico*, Ross Hassig's *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* and *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica*, and Susan Kellogg's *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700* all examine the effect that society had on the interaction of imperial components (i.e. warfare, religion, politics, economics, judicial

¹⁸ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 16.

and social organization). Together, these authors encompass many subjects that lay the historical framework for examination of narrower detail, such as the role of Nahuatl theater in the transformation of the Mexican nation based upon the shift in the conceptual ideals.

Pre-Columbian religion is examined by many authors as a tangential aside to the tendencies of a religious military state, but a few authors have made a point of building their ethnohistory around the religious paradigms which were arguably the driving factor behind all Aztec political and economic foundations. Ross Hassig's *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* and *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica*, David Carrasco's *Religions of Mesoamerica* and *City of Sacrifice*, Enrique Florescano's *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*, Elizabeth Hill Boone's *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*, Jill McKeever-Furst's *The Natural History of the Soul in Ancient Mexico*, Robert Haskett's *Visions of Paradise: Primordial Titles and Mesoamerican History* and Miguel Leon-Portilla's *The Aztec Image of Self and Society* all document the intricacies of religion and its relationship with a society built entirely on the fundamental practices of martial law and imperial ambition. Elizabeth Hill Boone's *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* documents the vestigial pictographs that could be used as primary sources and what their value was to scholarship, even as their validity and authenticity is questioned, in addition to disputes regarding interpretation. Ross Hassig concerns himself with the effect of time and calendrical cycles in concordance with government and religious events in *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico*. In *City of Sacrifice*, David Carrasco hones in on the role that cultural landscape

plays in the development of society, pre-Colombian and colonial. Carrasco marks how the cultural landscape modified the perception of the divine and lent greater influence to its disbursement within the Aztec empire. A great point of Carrasco's is how the ritual landscape and belief in the Aztec religion inspires and generates feelings which compel citizens to comply, and tributaries to pay homage. In Enrique Florescano's *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*, he focuses on how myth, memory and time allow influence the social behavior and dictate expectations on behalf of the citizens and create an image of identity within the Mexica nation, which is discussed in Robert Haskett's *Visions of Paradise: Primordial Titles and Mesoamerican History* and Miguel Leon-Portilla's *The Aztec Image of Self and Society*. Jill McKeever-Furst's *The Natural History of the Soul in Ancient Mexico* discusses the soul and its role in the concept of afterlife, divinity and mortality and what those beliefs translate to when combined with a state where citizens believe the divinity is alive within them and power is to be provided in order to maintain a community stasis. It is necessary to gain an understanding of the concept of divinity and how it translated to action within the Aztec belief system in order to understand how that concept changed over time. John Leddy Phelan's *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* as well as Georges Baudot's *Utopia and History in Mexico: The First Chroniclers of Mexican Civilization* will be used for a more concentrated focus on the Franciscan side of the story. It may be deduced, that the adoption of Christianity in the form of religious plays is the ultimate example of how pervasive indigenous concepts of their own pantheon persisted, sometimes under the guise of the Christian veil of compliance. Therefore, when we are examining the ethnohistory of the Mexica through text, we are looking at an

acculturation brought about by the diversity of Mesoamerican conceptions of the divine and in the integration, rejection and imposition of European political and religious agendas.

In order to establish the definitive elements which may be extracted from the theatrical works, it is first necessary to draw upon other scholarship which has already provided a catalyst for research. To begin with, the work of Fernando Horcasitas is generally accepted as the landmark production which provided a springboard for all other research into theatrical spectacle and the multi-component assets it drew attention to in the scope of evangelization. Although other scholars were involved with the translation and commentary upon the plays prior to his involvement, Horcasitas' work is considered to be more "comprehensive" in which he investigated everything from how the plays were conceived, produced and distributed to its chronology and translation. He is also credited with moving past the expectations of mere linguistics, and delving into the properties of costume, scenery, music and the acting and directing.¹⁹ Viviana Díaz Balsera follows up on the examination of what the plays could offer by analyzing, dissecting and drawing conclusions from Nahuatl theater. Diaz Balsera identifies the qualities of divine conception within the development of the character of the God Tláloc in her article "A Judeo-Christian Tláloc or a Nahua Yahweh?: Domination, Hybridity and Continuity in the Nahua Evangelization Theater." She directly analyzes one of the plays, "The Sacrifice of Isaac" in which, despite their proclivity for human sacrifice, the Nahuas could identify with the intended demands of the god Yahweh.

¹⁹ Miguel Leon Portilla. "Foreword: Fernando Horcasitas (1924-1980) and Nahuatl Theater." *Nahuatl Theater Volume 1: Death and Life in Colonial Nahua Mexico*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), xiv-xvi.

Díaz-Balseira builds upon a precedent set by Louise M. Burkhart in her book *Holy Wednesday: A Nahuatl Drama from Early Colonial Mexico*. In *Holy Wednesday*, Burkhart establishes that there was no question that the evangelization process had been implemented in the form of dramatic spectacle within the theater in order to gain converts and that the products were manipulated in every step of production. She draws attention to differences in the actions, appearance, diction, tone, and sounds and interaction of the actors. She also draws contrasts between the characters within the plays up to the significance of certain events, such as the Virgin Mary fainting, and the omission of details within one translation or the other.

Burkhart's project within *Holy Wednesday* became an impetus for other colleagues to collaborate on the further translation of other Nahuatl plays. Barry D. Sell became her primary collaborator for the four-volume *Nahuatl Theater* series, which offered translations on plays depicting biblical scenes, concepts of life and death, miracles such as the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and some entertaining morality plays. Viviana Díaz-Balseira, Miguel Leon-Portilla, and Stafford Poole were a few of the contributors to the series, often writing forewords and explaining their analysis of the texts and the indigenous people they were meant to evangelize. These collections of plays and accompanying scholarship provide the foundation for this comprehensive study which will determine how the ethnic relations of acculturation are implicated within the text, surmounted by the proselytization via theatrical medium as evidenced through the changing concepts of divinity depending upon the afore-mentioned factors, as well as the texts themselves.

Contribution by Comparison.

In the following chapters, the performance, purpose and product of Nahuatl drama will be examined. Chapter 2 will focus on the production and enactment of the works. It will synthesize the final product into categories of who the writers, actors, audience, and sponsors were, what they performing and what they were intended to perform, when and where the spectacles took place and the significance of the use of sacred space and time, how the plays were performed (costumes, language, music, dance, ritual, and specific actions by the characters), and finally, why they were performed and why they were allowed to develop in complementary didactic manner. The presumed answer of why they were performed is Christian evangelization of native populations. However, the plays had many by-products that will be examined in order to determine whether or not that original intention was effective.

Chapter 3 will compare the changes and exchanges of the two cultures over the time span of Nahua performance, and the evolution of the concept of Marian divinity. This will be accomplished through the analysis of six of the Nahuatl plays which provide specific highlights of the Virgin Mary. They are entitled: “Holy Wednesday”, “How to Live on Earth”, “Dialogue on the Apparition of the Virgin Saint Mary of Guadalupe”, “The Wonder of Mexico”, “The San Simón Tlatlahquitepec Passion Play”, “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play”. By analyzing these plays, I will compare the changes and exchanges of the two cultures over the time span of Nahua performance and the evolution of the concept of divinity as it concerns the Virgin Mary. The pagan pantheon of the Mexica will be further examined, as well as the Christian hierarchy of supernatural beings that can be found within the Holy Bible and the hagiography of the Catholic

tradition. By summarizing and examining these roots, we can detail the characteristic, similarities, polar opposites and the characters as they became known in the dual theatrical tradition between translations. We will see whether certain attributes were applied and what the purpose of Mary and interacting characters' individual developments meant not only to the populations perceiving them, but those who were performing them. Via examining these aspects, we can begin to deduce how far the native tradition of impersonation and embodiment was taken and whether a certain amount of native traditional reclamation occurred. We will also examine the roles in which Mary can be distinctly correlated to archetypal identities.

Chapter 4, the conclusion, will focus upon the details of acceptance and subversion that can be extracted from the theatrical works, and how the Virgin Mary was a role which clearly illustrates the extent to which religious assimilation occurred. As previously discussed, the methods of the Spanish evangelization were often-times a practice of exclusivity despite moments of reciprocation when it did not provoke political condemnation. This chapter will also examine the possibility of a cross-cultural exchange, the possibility of a religion that grew out of a fusing of the two traditions and their concepts of divinity. The conclusion to this study will also attempt to answer the following questions of whether the objectives of evangelization were achieved, what were the by-products or unexpected tangential results that arose, how representative are the sources that were examined in order to determine the hypothesis of the divine conceptual evolution, and most essentially it will answer if the concept of Marian divinity of the Nahuas altered by the performance of Spanish-Nahuatl theater and how. My intention is to prove that the Spanish friars' evangelization efforts through Nahuatl

theater resulted in the hybridity of religion. A unique, syncretic Mexican religion emerged, with the façade of Christianity intact, but with the characteristics of venerable deities and ritual being expressed within the distinct native concepts of divinity. The Spaniards ultimately understood that a degree of orthodoxy would be bypassed in order to gain the conversion, and therefore, the process by which the concept of Marian divinity evolved came about by Nahua as well as Spanish influence.

Chapter 2: The Production of Nahuatl Theater

“In tlaulli, in ocotol, in machiotl, in octacatl, in coyaoca tezcatl: mixpanicmana: I set before you a light, a torch, an example, a measuring rod, a great mirror.”²⁰

For anyone who has ever attended a modern-day church service, the experience of a sermon is most often interpreted as an inspirational, motivational lecture on how to live a life in line with that which has been dictated by divinity. The traditions of modern-day churches are derived from ritual which has been ingrained for centuries, and arguably, millennia. However, ritual is transformed- manipulated- for various purposes in order to achieve a desired outcome. In order to do this, various aspects of performance are employed, such as that of specific language- not just dialect, but also diction and syntax; costumes, which can be representative not only of a person’s station or authority, but also the personification of the divinity they are trying to portray; music and dance, which appeal to almost every culture as a communion with the divine and a way of expression; ritual, which ranges from the most deep-rooted traditions, to the mutation of those traditions in order to appease the divine; and finally action, which greatly affects the malleability of ritual as it encompasses circumstances of interference by political, social and other religious entities, particularly in the cases of cultural transference.

With understanding the fluid nature of ritual, comes the understanding that the monitoring of its constant transitioning is particularly difficult when faced with hegemonic elements such as the conquest, domination, and attempts to suppress pre-

²⁰ Sullivan, *A Scattering of Jades*, 209.

existing cultural institutions, which was also responsible for defining a collective history. Models of religious properties have been examined by many historians, sociologists and anthropologists alike. Victor Turner is one of the most prominent of these scholars to tackle the issue of ritual and community. Turner explains that the individual and community are socially processual states of religious experience and participation. He refers to this state of being, as “liminal entities” which are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”²¹ Therefore, the recognition of the supreme religious authority by that of social and legal ones and legal hierarchy, such as that of the *tlatoani*, is an anciently ingrained manifestation of the structure of religious belief and enactment. Liminality, essentially a phase of transition, is one which requires the convergence of efforts by multiple entities. Turner bases his theory off Arnold van Gennep’s *rites de passage* which states that:

ritual is “marked by three phases: separation, margin, (or *limen*, signifying “threshold” in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both. During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous, he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.”²²

²¹ Victor Turner. “Liminality and Communitas.” *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. (2nd edition). Edited by Michael Lambek. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), 327.

²² Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” 327.

While this explanation of religious structure may seem lengthy and perplexing, it clearly identifies the three stages to which the religion itself transitions via the participation of its adherents. As it applies to Mexican religion, the first stage is the identification by the Spanish of a pre-existing structure of polytheism practiced by the Mexica who then could find parallels within their own religion in order to establish a relation with the natives. As previously mentioned, the Aztec model of religion is presided over by god-kings and administered by priests of the official imperial religion who hold significant social positions within the culture. As it applies to the European religion, particularly the Franciscan order, their model is also presided over by a similar paternal patronage (the Pope), and the social hierarchy which encompasses heads-of-state, and was administered by clerics (primarily the Franciscans). Therefore, at the time of Conquest, a Phase One was already in place. At the convergence of culture, post-Conquest, Phase Two began to manifest. Mexica religion entered a stage of liminality, neither belonging entirely to the old ways (their ancestral heritage) nor committing to the new traditions (the Catholicism introduced by the Franciscans). Therefore, in order to examine the process of liminality, essentially a movement of cultural, religious, and social transition, it is necessary to understand the reciprocal impact that the two cultures inevitably had upon each other. More specifically, while examining the remnants of performance, Nahuatl theater was a bicultural production in an attempt to achieve Phase Three: aggregation.

The concept of liminality exists not only at the level of “communitas” as Turner identified, but on an individual level as relatable to the experience of ritual via participation in it. The liminality of religious ritual as it pertains to the individual is one

of transition and static status. The individual participates because it is a socially ingrained practice, and also because their participation helps to form a link in the chain of collective action required for successful ceremonial enactment. The individual invokes the celestial purpose of ritual and understands the ceremony based upon their individual perception through communal experience. The tangibility of cosmological reenactment allows them to experience liminal significance within the events being performed. They learn that the life cycle follows a pattern, the requirements to fulfill a cycle, and the results of that fulfillment. Although they may not be able to witness the spectacle in its entirety, their cosmovision is formed and affected by the events that take place within the ritual and their role within it. Therefore, the audience of Aztec spectacle was active in carrying it out, in order to generate the communal success of the process. Turner explains that,

“for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. The passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness. In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another are mutually indispensable.”²³

This reaffirms the religious, political and social stratifications within the Nahua culture while defining the relativity that exists between them and the static nature of identity which is acquired during sacred ritual. The individual’s ritual experience helps to dictate the acceptance and compliance of societal demands, the significance of every

²³ Turner, “Liminality and *Communitas*,” 328.

station of life and its contribution to the cosmological cycle based upon the mythical model.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the methods by which a new ritual was created in the Nahua world: the ritual of theater. While the concept of didactic theater existed in medieval and Renaissance Europe, it had never been a part of the Aztec culture prior to European contact. The Aztecs however did enact rituals in which sacred events were recreated by deity impersonators. This ritual in itself was seen as giving power to events, and the people who observed them had divine power ascribed to them according to their roles. Parallels can be drawn to the European tradition of theater and it would prove an ideal method utilized as teaching device.

The mendicant friars met with limited success in their attempts at early conversion. They had pursued a blanket attempt at converting the natives based upon the cultural and religious parallels. Mass conversion is typically directed at the higher echelons of social stratigraphy, an attempt at top-down religious saturation. However, this often ostracized the common citizen and a new and more inclusive avenue of contact would be needed in order to create the idyllic millenarian civilization. The initial attempts to sermonize and distribute pamphlets were not as successful among the average citizens who were not literate. Theatricality can open a dialogue that traverses the limitations imposed by social and religious elitism. The priests had started with the social elite, such as native nobility and high priests in order to transfer their influence to the cause of Christianity. While it is confirmed that baptisms and converts are present, the sincerity of conversion was highly suspect. The earliest known census from

Cuernavaca from circa 1535 to 1540 shows that a large amount of the population remained unbaptized and that there were cases of heretical behavior by some neophytes who still practiced ritualistic paganism and in some cases, polygamy, despite having been baptized.²⁴ The largest problem was the difference in language. By setting out to learn the language, the Franciscans began to grasp that words had a deep-rooted meaning to the people when they were associated with religion. Words carried great power and the ability to convey meaning to the people. The mission had a greater chance of success when the language was adopted and manipulated by the Franciscans. Yet fluid translation would evade most of the Franciscans for decades, and would take intellectuals like Sahagún a lifetime to master. Nonetheless, the Franciscans continued their attempts at conversion and exploited theater as a unique vehicle to transport and distribute their beliefs. As for the language barrier, over a period of time, the Spaniards were able to hybridize the spoken Nahuatl to include “loans”. By 1550, this practice of adopting Spanish “loan nouns” was seen as acceptable among the Nahuas, indicating that the post-Conquest community was already in the stages of hybridity. James Lockhart breaks down the chrysalis of the orthography within three stages:

“Stage I, from the arrival of the Spaniards in 1519 to a time that can be set at between 1540 and 1550, was characterized by virtually no change in Nahuatl. Stage 2, extending from then until close to the mid-seventeenth century, saw massive borrowing of Spanish nouns, but the language remained little altered in other respects. Stage 3, with some advance signs coming earlier in the seventeenth century, stretches from about 1640-50 until today, wherever Nahuatl is spoken, and involves a deeper and broader Spanish influence betraying wide-spread bilingualism.”²⁵

²⁴ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest : A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 205.

²⁵ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 261.

The language was a challenge to overcome, but with the miscegenation of the population, the language itself became hybridized as foreign concepts became incorporated into the everyday culture of the Nahuas, not just those belonging to the elite class.

By utilizing Nahuatl Theater to disseminate their faith, the Franciscans accomplished a direct line of contact with an audience that could receive the message via a format to which they were accustomed: that of theatricality, complete with deity impersonation, song and dance. There are historical indications that the reception by the Nahuas was highly pervasive. One of these indicators is that through the chronology of religious transformation, the Nahuas shifted to writing down the plays in order “to preserve and perform them, whereas songs virtually ceased to be transcribed” and the plays retained pre-Columbian elements. Although the songs were still performed, their composition was less true to the original forms.²⁶ James Lockhart asserts that theater was a subversive method by the Nahuas to maintain the semblance of their pantheon and rituals without effectively challenging the conqueror’s God. Lockhart echoes Charles Gibson when he points out that the Spanish were aware of the continuance of pagan practice and belief, and furthermore, they allowed it, more for political purposes, which would appear to have been given priority over maintaining a concept of Christian orthodoxy. In fact, pockets of indigenous resistance to conversion are notable with the historical record. Lockhart believes that this is due to religion often being so closely tied to politics. Conversely, the importation of Christian religion became an important tool for political struggle among indigenous rulers who retained some aspect of power within

²⁶ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 408.

the new empire.²⁷ Essentially, power is performed on various levels within any culture. Nahuatl Theater became just another instrument in the struggle for colonial identity and religious faith.

The Method.

Proponents and Sponsors.

When the Franciscans sought to form a collective community based upon Christianity, they set out with a millenarian purpose. This movement was based upon the belief that corruption in the Old World had limited its religious legitimacy. The millenarians believe that the future will come from the West, in an apocalyptic manifestation that was imminent. The natives encountered will face conversion, submit, miscegenation will occur and the population will become a pure model for the rest of the world to follow.²⁸ The Franciscans believed that the natives were essential in bringing about the second coming of Christ and the key to achieving the fulfillment of promises of the Apocalypse. The native way of life was endearing to the cause as they were non-materialistic (owning little or nothing of value), were bound to the land by their very lifestyle and owing to their innocence and freedom from European contamination, were essentially pure, although misguided, children of Adam.²⁹ The Nahuas essentially were a tabula rasa for the reform and rebirth of fundamental Christianity in the New World as

²⁷ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 204-205.

²⁸ Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, 75.

²⁹ Baudot, Georges. *Utopia and History in Mexico: The First Chronicles of Mexican Civilization, 1520-1569*. (Niwot, Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1995), 84-85.

the Franciscans envisioned. The millenarian movement had an important impact on the evangelization process because it opened up avenues of cross-cultural understanding and development: it led to the creation of schools such as the Colegio in Tlatelolco, the creation of *cofradías* (brotherhoods) and gubernatorial and other civil offices, and the maintenance of a social structure of the *atlepetl* as well as other pre-Columbian cultural practices without openly subversive confrontation.³⁰ The theatricality of the Mexican belief system had been in practice for centuries prior to European contact. “Costumed individuals impersonated deities and interacted with priests according to standardized scenarios. Many if not all of these rituals were linked to sacred narratives referring to the mythological deeds of the deities and to the local ethnic group’s own history, constructed according to mythic patterns.”³¹ When the natives observed the theatricality of these rituals, they were observing, creating and recreating their own cosmology. Their cosmovision was influenced by the deeds that took place and were presided over by the priests and patriarchs of their *atlepetls*. Ross Hassig notes that religious beliefs help to structure political actions among the Aztecs and that the political proponents within Aztec society would often manipulate the calendar and its religious system to suit their own purposes. “Linking the past and present is important on a conceptual level, but the past is gone and temporal placement of bygone events can be – and often is – layered for political, religious, and social purposes....”³² This meant that a precedent for religious conquest had already been set among the Aztecs and proved to the Franciscans that not only would relating to the natives and manipulating their cosmovision gain religious

³⁰ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 218-227.

³¹ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 43.

³² Hassig, *Time, History and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico*, 83.

converts, it would assist in the creation of an imperial identity. This likewise would have reinforced the millenarian aspiration of creating a utopia based upon the purity of Christian practice among native nations.

At first, the Franciscans' aim was to create an understanding of European language and culture by imparting a European education. In turn, they expected to receive help in learning aspects and language of the Nahua culture. An anticipated by-product of this mission was to endear themselves and their civilization onto the native sons, whose loyalty would veer away from the traditional ones of their ancestry, and would become not only accepting, but welcoming of the conquistador hegemony. The newer generation was a *tabula rasa* and would be more receptive than the resistance which might be encountered by the war-torn memories and resentment of their familial counterparts.³³ The larger goal of the Franciscans at the Tlatelolco School was to gain the conversion and loyalty of the next generation of Nahua leaders in order to pacify and unify the colony whose previous generation remained fractured by the Conquest.³⁴ It is ironic that the Franciscan efforts helped to preserve the culture that they were ultimately attempting to suppress. As Lockhart confirmed, many of the altruistic properties of the movements were thrown out from the very beginning, as the Spaniards showed tolerance for the practice of syncretic religion.³⁵ While the friars' initial intentions were to create a utopia of the natives of flawless orthodoxy, they eventually abandoned many aspects of their mission due to the increasing pressure of their own clergymen, the Spanish colonists, the Spanish gubernatorial influence, and the rejection of ideals and limited

³³ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 55.

³⁴ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 55.

³⁵ Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," 336.

reception by the Nahuas.³⁶ In cases where the friars did encounter what they considered to be worthy subjects, they were met with fierce opposition from other ecclesiastical and political entities from encouraging or promoting natives to positions of relevance, fearing it would legitimize them and possibly incite a rebellion against governing authorities, both temporal and ethereal. Therefore, while religious homogeneity was still a goal for the Franciscans, the legal authority of the Spanish Empire prohibited the advancement of social equality and sustained an imperial model of hierarchy.

While the millenarian cause was never entirely abandoned, it met with waning success. The idea that the native population was a tabula rasa just waiting to be written on became a fiction. The Franciscans quickly understood that despite the ravaging of temples and iconoclasm, the Mexica had a firm religious belief system that would not be supplanted easily. Franciscans searched for a way to reach out to their native audience and captivate their attention in order to convert them, yet they needed a way to understand the indigenous beliefs in order to battle them for supremacy in the New World. Only then would the natives achieve an “epiphany” and the millenarian kingdom could still be realized. Upon observing native ritual which was still being practiced post-Conquest, the Franciscans noticed the reverence with which the ceremonies were enacted. They also noticed that the communities were completely involved and that the spiritual experience posited that the deity impersonators were actually gods walking among the mortals. The Franciscans understood that performance was power to the Nahuas. They needed more than proselytization; the Nahuas needed to be *involved* in their religion. Theater provided the entertainment aspect while encouraging interaction.

³⁶ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 63.

The portrayal of divinity on stage was ethereal power in a temporal realm; divinity was visceral, audible and tangible. By looking to their own culture, the Franciscans found a relatable method of instruction: the *autosacramentales*.³⁷ The Franciscans obviously felt that drama was an effective evangelization and didactic tool. One of the playwrights, Pedro Calderón de la Barca defined the *autos* as “sermons in verse”.³⁸ This meant that the playwrights were consciously proselytizing via a method that would allow them to interact on a colloquial level.

In the early sixteenth century, after the declaration of heretical ideas by scholars such as Martin Luther, the Spanish searched for a way to involve the sacraments in popular entertainment. The plays would appeal to a greater number of people who could not understand the sacraments in their liturgical form but could understand the vernacular performance of its messages. The *autosacramental* is a play that was performed on the important religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter, and that embraced the holy sacraments and represented them. “Typically, it is highly allegorical, with dramatis personae representing all sorts of abstract concepts from the Eucharist itself to Time, Virtue, the World, Penitence, and so forth. Its message is moralistic and dogmatic, urging reverence toward the sacrament and moral reform.”³⁹ The earliest known Eucharistic play is believed to date back to 1520 or 1521.⁴⁰ The popularity and success among the common people of Spain would not have gone unnoticed by the Franciscans.

³⁷ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 20-22.

³⁸ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 20.

³⁹ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 19.

⁴⁰ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 19-20.

Spain had battled its own bicultural war with the Moors for the domination of the European peninsula. The Reconquista would still have been fresh in the minds of the Franciscans. They required means to translate the success of cultural, and in particular religious, subjugation that could be paralleled to the New World empire. The Spanish needed a way to maintain control of New Spain, in order to ensure that their policies permeated the populace and transversed all cultural barriers and the native diversity of the foreign landscape. Charles Gibson notes that gubernatorial documents from the sixteenth century cite the need for festivals in order to bring the native people together, in order to appeal to their communal traditions. “If rulers failed to provide fiestas, their people ‘neither hold them in esteem nor obey them.’”⁴¹ The result was an increasing emphasis on government and Church-sponsored spectacle.

“Clifford Geertz has pointed out that every political authority requires its own ‘cultural frame’ from which to define itself and claim its legitimacy, and festivals became just that for the ruling elite in Mexico City. They utilized festivals to reassert periodically and bolster symbolically the values of the socioeconomic hierarchy that maintained their privileged position.”⁴²

Nobility: Educated and Corruptible.

The nobility were an important part of the development of Nahuatl theater. Owing to their elite status, they were typically the intellectuals, the governors, and socially stratified at the top of the *atlepetl*. Yet, their intentions were suspect to the friars and to their own people who weren’t sure to which social system they still belonged post-

⁴¹ Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*, 187.

⁴² Curcio-Nagy, -Nagy, Linda A. *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity*. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 3.

Conquest: the religious-based imperialism or the newly politicized Hispanization. This uncertainty on both sides of the fence can be pinpointed throughout the dramatic texts.

In the passion plays, Judas considered the personal benefits of allying himself with the priests, who were probably an interpretation of the old *tlatoani*: “if I betray him to the high priests, they’ll give me many favors, they’ll pay me.”⁴³ Many of the Mexica elite still maintained wealth and influence under the Spanish colonial government and some still patronized gods of their old pantheon, as they were not required to submit to Christianity, although it was in their best interests politically. Nobility could denote more than just elitist and intellectual echelons, the honorific term of “nobleman” or “noblewoman” began to be applied to those who had been enlightened by the teachings of Christ and began to live by his example. This can be seen through the example of Mary of Magdalene, who upon first meeting Jesus, was harshly judged and scolded by him. Once she repented and became a disciple, he addresses her as “noblewoman.”⁴⁴ The crux of the issue here is that Christianity did not guarantee social status and since the social nobility were often the intellectuals, they were responsible for assisting in the production and performance of these Nahuatl plays on various levels. Therefore, the critiques upon the old nobility and high priests as corruptible were most likely instigated by Christian proponents.

James Lockhart points out that the Church officials came to rely heavily on the indigenous officials, especially for fiscal matters that were controlled by the Church, of

⁴³ “The San Simón Tlatlahuquitepec Passion Play.” *Nahuatl Theater Volume 4: Nahua Christianity in Performance*. (eds. Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart). (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 139.

⁴⁴ “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play.” *Nahuatl Theater Volume 4: Nahua Christianity in Performance* (eds. Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart). (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 169.

which the payment for production of spectacle was obviously a part.⁴⁵ This meant that not only were there political, economic and religious factions, but a third party interest in the form of the native nobility. All three factions would contribute to the construction of a religious framework, appealing to a higher authority than the temporal one which could so easily be overturned in the face of war and alliance. Performance equaled power, and spectacle was simply a demonstration and reiteration of that power. So when the elite operated under the machination of performance, the impersonation of a deity reinforced not only their ideology, but their position within the community as well. Therefore, theater acted as more than a tool of evangelization; it was a tool to maintain the stasis of a conquered population by qualifying their paradigms through performance.

James Lockhart discusses how theater emerged from 1530s onward with the dual purpose of converting religiously as well as inciting homogeneity for an imperial purpose. What the proponents could not imagine was the level of involvement the indigenous people would take in their endeavor to preserve their culture as well as to conform to the new normalcy that was being sought by the Franciscans and the imperialists.

“One strong indication of a Nahua role is the naturalization of the material; the characters, as we will see, take on Nahua ranks and operate within the context of Nahua social and conversational conventions. Nevertheless, it remains at least conceivable that an astute and knowledgeable friar would have made such adaptations deliberately, the better to reach his audience. A less ambiguous trace of indigenous writers can be found in numerous nonstandard spelling so Spanish loans corresponding to the usual Nahua substitutions and hypercorrections....A third indication of some Nahua autonomy in the production of the final

⁴⁵ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 212.

versions is the existence of occasional doctrinal irregularities in the plays, things friars surely would not have tolerated had they been fully aware of them.”⁴⁶

The idea of power of performance never escaped Nahuas, as they continued to subvert authority as well as preserve traditional remnants in the only way they openly could, through literature. As Louise Burkhart points out, this was a way in which Christianity compromised and was incorporated, despite the friars’ efforts to maintain their uncompromising precedents.⁴⁷ It may be deduced, that the adoption of Christianity in the form of these plays is the ultimate example of how pervasive and permanent syncretic religion came to be in the development of the Spanish empire in the West. This obviously proved frustrating to certain ecclesiasts, such as Bishop Vasco De Quiroga, who strove to combat the problem by touching upon “primitive” elements of ideology and appealing to an ethical background that he was sure all humans shared, regardless of their simplicity.⁴⁸ This idea was integral to the utopian establishment which the Franciscans were attempting and was likely the reason that the syncretic practice of religion was allowed to continue in practice. Since “idolatry and superstition persisted” and the clergy were forced to a degree of acceptance at the inevitably that certain indigenous religious traditions would persist, especially in more remote areas.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 401-402.

⁴⁷ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 16.

⁴⁸ Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*, 100-101.

⁴⁹ Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*, 100-101.

Production.

There seems to be a perpetual debate regarding who is responsible for writing the plays and histories, who was involved on every level of production (patronage and performance), and who the audience was. Spaniards, criollos and mestizos were involved in writing; for the most part native nobility or Spanish clergy were responsible for patronage and performance (given their level of education); and the audience was the mass community of Nahuas. However, in the advent of cross-cultural exchange of religious syncretism, the audience eventually encompassed all citizens in New Spain, as the Spanish came to accept the new form of religion.

In order to extract these answers, historians look to the historical record, or what is left of it.

“Aztec histories were not comprehensive, but primarily chronicled political events, with supernatural occurrences being notable primarily by their absence. Although no examples survive, various groups apparently maintained their own historical accounts that reflected what was significant to them, but not necessarily to the rest of society...Historical codices in the Aztec world were strictly political annals, and their compilers were clearly in the service of the king” and did not usually reflect upon life outside of politics or matters of the imperial monarchy.⁵⁰

Bernardino de Sahagún is usually credited with writing the historical codices, since his manuscripts are some of the few, and certainly the best, codices that are still extant. The most famous of these chronicles is the compendium commonly known as *The Florentine Codex*. Started in the 1540s and completed by the late 1570s, the

⁵⁰ Hassig, *Time, History and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico*, 111.

collection consists of 12 books (*The Gods; The Ceremonies; The Origin of the Gods; The Soothsayers; The Omens; Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy; The Sun, Moon and Stars and the Binding of the Years; Kings and Lords; The Merchants; The People; Earthly Things; and The Conquest*) which are different aspects of the ethnography of the Nahuas. It was originally written in Nahuatl and not translated into Spanish until sometime later.⁵¹

Sahagún's compilation is widely considered to be the most accurate depiction of the culture of pre-Columbian Aztecs despite that the work presents a problem with historical license. Sahagún was a member of the clergy and admittedly had his own biases against the very culture he was chronicling.

“Alfredo Lopez Austin, who investigated Sahagún's method of gathering information in each of the twelve books of the *Florentine Codex*, calls Book 7 a ‘personal failure’ by the Franciscan priest. Sahagún's preface to this book is full of his own biases and prejudices against native cosmology, intelligence, and language. He calls them ‘vulgar’ in their thinking, language, style, and intelligence without realizing that he missed a crucial opportunity to gain access to their Cosmo vision.”⁵²

Sahagún, for all his efforts, is also credited with founding the scribe school at Tlatelolco, which housed native neophytes who could traverse both cultures in order to gain insight into both religions and document them firsthand, although Sahagún is also credited for the majority of that work. This presents the problem of syncretism being introduced before the production of the manuscripts; it was possibly introduced at the very inception of chronicling in order to appease the Church, who funded the Franciscan order, while maintaining some semblance of the past indigenous culture. Although this was a desired church policy, actual practice was much different. Antonio Valeriano, a protégé of

⁵¹ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 6.

⁵² David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999. 94.

Sahagún's, was eventually promoted to the rank of governor in Tenochtitlan in 1568. A native, and not of noble birth, he was previously a scribe under Sahagún, documenting the histories of his people and offering translations and interpretation.⁵³ It is proposed by some scholars that Valeriano was the actual author of many of Sahagún's documents, and that he, or his son (of the same name) may also be the author of the religious morality play *Holy Wednesday*.

Writers, Compilers and Contributors.

One of the most controversial aspects of the plays is authorship. Traditionally, this credit has been ascribed to great compilers such as Bernardino de Sahagún. However, the examination of historical records and the manuscripts themselves have led Louise Burkhart to believe that plays were not only compiled, but also written by various Nahuatl scholars. Burkhart yearns to dispel the myth that at best, Nahuatl scholars were merely translators, scribes and compilers. She asserts that they were very active in the writing of the plays, preserving much of their traditional heritage within the text that was identified with Christian overtones. This subversive activity is arguably subjective depending on which play, which authors, and in which era the plays were produced. Burkhart focuses on one play in particular: *Holy Wednesday*. This play is believed to be the oldest surviving manuscript and first Passion play performed in New Spain. She notes that whoever wrote it would have been a prolific Nahuatl speaker, whose fluency would have been complicated by the fact that the encounter with the Nahuatl had not even

⁵³ Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*, 169-170.

spanned three decades at the time of this play's production. She notes that in 1570, Gerónimo de Mendieta compiled a list of 148 priests who were actively working to evangelize the colony through various mediums, and all but 38 could understand Nahuatl fluently, largely due to the efforts produced by the Colegio in Tlatelolco. At the time of *Holy Wednesday*'s production, only a few friars were active from that list: Bernardino de Sahagún, Pedro Oroz, Juan Bautista, Francisco de Gamboa and Juan de Torquemada.⁵⁴ However, Burkhart does not believe that the play was produced by any of them, given the historical evidence of the manuscript and the unrecognizable penmanship associated with any of those friars, and the most likely author was Valeriano.⁵⁵

Valeriano, like many other Nahuas (primarily of affluent families), was given a European education at the Colegio in Tlatelolco whose mission was self-serving but would eventually become reciprocal. An unexpected result was met by the Franciscans founders of the Colegio: "Struck by the skill exhibited by many of the boys in the mastery of Latin grammar and other facets of European education, the Franciscans sought to provide the brightest of the boys with a secondary education. They would thus be better equipped to serve as administrators in the colonial government."⁵⁶ Despite the utopian idealism expounded by the millenarian Franciscans, the enactment of the ideals would be met with apprehension and for a time, the activity of any Nahuas having political authority or holding any civil office would be forbidden. It was only at a time when they saw their cause floundering, that they considered enlisting the help of Nahuas in the evangelization of their native brethren, not only as scribes and translators, but as

⁵⁴ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 50.

⁵⁵ Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*, 169-170.

⁵⁶ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 57.

deputies for the tasks in the form of thespians. Ironically, Valeriano, a man heavily involved in the didactic purpose of the Nahuatl theater, would become the first native to hold gubernatorial office, as previously mentioned. His involvement in the manuscript production of the Nahuas gives strong evidence as to the potential of his eventual political influence as well. It is apparent that governmental and ecclesiastical patrons were involved in the regulation and sponsorship of theatrical functions performed within the jurisdiction of the new empire as an effort of evangelization.

In regards to the Guadalupan plays, authorship is very speculative. One of the plays known as the *Coloquio* has no known author. The play is dated widely from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries with no certainty. Stafford Poole hypothesizes that “the quality of the Nahuatl opens up the possibility that the author was a Spaniard with an uncertain grasp of Nahuatl. Or he could have been a native speaker who spoke poorly and had an even worse copyist. It is also quite possible that the scenes involving the physician were taken directly from Spanish originals.”⁵⁷ A very likely scenario is that by this time, the Colegios that had been established to educate and produce chroniclers of the Nahuatl tradition had declined and the major Nahua intellectuals such as Valeriano had already passed away, taking their expertise and linguistic prowess with them.

Audience and Aspect.

The general Mexica population was the targeted audience for proselytization.

Therefore, it was necessary to appeal to their understanding of ritual and translate it to the

⁵⁷ Stafford Poole. “Introduction: The Virgin of Guadalupe in Two Nahuatl Dramas.” *Nahuatl Theater Volume 2: Our Lady of Guadalupe*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 16.

Christianity, with an end result being the incorporation of this mission into the festival days proscribed by the Church. “Plays were performed in the Nahuatl language, by Nahua actors, and for a principally Nahua audience. The subject matter was exclusively religious, usually biblical or hagiographic and bearing more resemblance to the earlier Spanish *autos* than to Golden Age *comedias* and *autos sacramentales*.”⁵⁸ The Mexica based their calendar on a traditional tribute system which coincided with festivals and religious events in Pre-Columbian times. The Spanish eradicated the traditional calendar and imposed their own. The reasons for this were manifold. Primarily, the Spanish were accustomed to their Eurocentric traditions (of which the calendar was certainly one). However, the political implication of replacing the Mexica calendar cannot be ignored. By eradicating the historically practiced timelines, the pagan rituals were offset, and it made practicing them difficult. The Spanish friars also assumed the responsibilities of the rituals which would be attributed to or transplanted into their own calendar, thereby excluding the Pre-Columbian holy men, and diminishing their authority with the native population and strengthening that of the conquerors.⁵⁹

Within the next few decades, miscegenation occurred in the midst of demographic disasters, native uprisings, and the importation of African slaves. The diversity in a developing caste system further objectified the need to have a “model” of production exhibited for cultural and social, as well as religious and political situations. There were many other aspects that the audience could identify with. The performances would eventually come to be known as “*neixcuitilli* ‘*something that sets an example.*’”

⁵⁸ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 42.

⁵⁹ Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico*, 140-141.

Devotion and morality could be implied within the play and lay the groundwork for conversion. As a result, many people came to participate in festivals, bringing offerings, paying penance, engaging in singing and dancing activities, and actively impersonating revered historical or divine figures in order to embody the ceremony to which they identified.⁶⁰

Performers and Bi-cultural Liaisons.

All performers within the Nahuatl religious theater performances were male. Although woman did participate as actors in the profane theater, the Franciscans saw the exclusionary gender roles within the religious theater as a point of moral fortitude in keeping with the reputation they intended to exude and to prevent any question of hypocrisy in the event that there was a conflict between genders.⁶¹ This practice was a Franciscan construct and not indicative of Spanish theatrical practice. The decision on behalf of the friars comes as no surprise as their Eurocentric archetypes of complementarity were transferred to the New World. The medieval European concept of women dictated that they were inferior to men. The archetypes of the evil and temptation that comes from their abandonment of restriction, such as Eve in the garden of Eden, was one which would persist, the qualities being ascribed to the female gender and in most cases, the Spanish would give less reverence to the image and qualities of divine female entities (such as that of the Virgin Mary), while the Nahua religious base held a spectrum of complementarity between male and female deities. While the female image and

⁶⁰ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 46.

⁶¹ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 42.

mission would come to be revered and later, worshipped arguably more than the male deities (referring here to the Virgin of Guadalupe), the written Nahuatl accounts of performance indicate that she still embodied pre-Columbian characteristics which will be examined later on.

Since the noble Nahua males receiving an education at the Colegios were literate and were still held in esteem in a society whose social values of the old *calpulli* system had not yet been entirely usurped, their prestige was enlisted in the performance and production of plays. “The new plays were based on sacred narratives; the new written scripts imitated *huehuehtlahtolli* style...”⁶² The elite Nahuas boasted mastery over this particular way of speaking. When they performed, their mode of delivery could range in diverse art forms of linguistic expression:

“Some were prayers (*tetlatlauhtiliztli* ‘asking someone for something’) addressed to divinities; others were advice and admonitions (*tenonotzaliztli* ‘advising someone’) addressed to children or other family members, vassals or other persons. These sometimes took to the form of a dialogue with the person of junior rank briefly responding to the words of his or her superior. Skilled orators employed a special genre of speaking style, which they called *huehuehtlahtolli* ‘old speech’ or ‘words of the elders.’ The elite claimed particular mastery of this prestigious verbal art formality.”⁶³

They spoke with the “words of elders” because of the social hierarchy they represented, despite the probability that they were, in many cases, younger than the audiences to which they played. While they may have embraced new Christian traditions, it did not

⁶² Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 45.

⁶³ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 44.

mean that they devalued their own. Evidence to corroborate their loyalty exists in many of the writings they are believed to have created or assisted in the compilation.

What the Franciscans could not imagine was the level of involvement the indigenous people would take in their endeavor to preserve their culture as well as to conform to the new standards that were being sought by the Franciscans and the imperialists.

“One strong indication of a Nahua role is the naturalization of the material; the characters, as we will see, take on Nahua ranks and operate within the context of Nahua social and conversational conventions. Nevertheless, it remains at least conceivable that an astute and knowledgeable friar would have made such adaptations deliberately, the better to reach his audience. A less ambiguous trace of indigenous writers can be found in numerous nonstandard [spellings and] Spanish loans corresponding to the usual Nahua substitutions and hypercorrections....A third indication of some Nahua autonomy in the production of the final versions is the existence of occasional doctrinal irregularities in the plays, [anomalies] friars surely would not have tolerated had they been fully aware of them.”⁶⁴

The idea of power of performance never escaped Nahuas, as they continued to subvert authority as well as preserve traditional remnants in the only way they openly could, through literature.

Costumes.

⁶⁴ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 401-402.

Essential to the production performance was the personification of deities. It was necessary to dress the part in emulation of something that was recognizable to the audience. Since the plays were being performed by Nahuas, it stands to reason that their traditional garb did not alter much, even with the advent of Christian influence. In fact, this identification marker was one more tool that could be employed in order to gather the attention and reverence of the audience, and the actors themselves. “Catholicism’s emphasis on images permitted an easy transition, since native deities revealed themselves in manifold and concrete forms...ritual impersonators would put on a sacred being’s identity by dressing in its attributes.”⁶⁵ The actor became known as an *ixiptla* “delegate” or “representative” of the deity as well as being the temporal manifestation of the divine.⁶⁶ In effect, the person was recognized as an individual but also as a deity, holding a complementary purpose in the ceremony and yet performing an intimate communion with the god.⁶⁷ The actors performed in a mythical pattern that was standardized by the history or biblical accounts.

The best known accounts of how pre-Columbian peoples dressed can be garnered from codices such as *The Florentine Codex* and *The Codex Mendoza*. “Most Aztec apparel was draped, worn just as it came from the loom, knotted over the shoulders as a cloak, tied about the waist as a hip-cloth, or wrapped around the body as a loincloth or skirt....There is only a single example of a closed-sewn garment, the *quechquemitl*....[The *quechquemitl* and *xicolli*] were worn solely as special-purpose clothing. The restriction of the two costumes to ceremonial-ritual contexts implies that

⁶⁵ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 20.

⁶⁶ Poole, “Introduction: The Virgin of Guadalupe in Two Nahuatl Dramas,” 4.

⁶⁷ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 44.

they carried specific historical and religious significance.”⁶⁸ In everyday life, garments were simplistic owing to the militaristic culture. Elaborate weaving was indicative in social status (such as nobility or priesthood) and among deity impersonators, certain patterns conveyed identification of characteristics or powers held by that enactor.⁶⁹ In the colonial period, the performers of Nahuatl theater continued to embrace their costume heritage since it could identify the similarities between the old and new pantheons of deities. This meant that the performer of Mary’s character might actually be utilizing the same costumes that were used in pre-Columbian deity impersonation rituals.

Spectacle Time and Space.

The first known play to be performed in the New World is believed to have taken place in 1531 or 1533 and was a reenactment of Christ’s actions on Judgment Day. Nahua chroniclers made note of the spectacle and their impressions of it as theatrical productions within the European context were unknown to them prior to European contact.⁷⁰ The difference and employment of theatrical stage and devices allowed a comparable medium, but the concept of theater still differed from the traditional *ixiptla* that was known to the Nahuas. Owing to the calendrical shift in the adoption of the Christian calendar, ritual and ceremonies were now dictated by the religious liturgical calendar of the Christian Church. The eradication of a tribute system, around which, as Ross Hassig pointed out, ceremonies and communal events were normally celebrated in

⁶⁸ Patricia Anawalt, *Indian Clothing Before Cortes*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 58.

⁶⁹ Anawalt, *Indian Clothing Before Cortes*, 58.

⁷⁰ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 42-43.

conjunction, the Christians adopted the same system on their own time cycle. Theatrical performances became a post-service pastime for “Church festivals or Sunday services....”⁷¹ While the Holy sacramental mass could prove formidable and confusing, the activities surrounding the theatrical performance were engaging and related to the Nahua constructs of worship. As of 1537, a papal bull mandated the observance of at least 12 religious festivals per annum.”⁷² Production and performance of the plays persisted as a valuable institutional practice into the mid-eighteenth century.

The concept of sacred landscape was one that was embraced by the Franciscans when they decided on a venue for performance. This was mainly for two reasons: the natives could not persist in performing their pagan rituals in their traditional locations (meaning the temples, pyramids, and *zocálos*) if they were otherwise occupied, and the adoption of these spaces and incorporation into the Christian ceremony gave some legitimacy to the religion they were attempting to proselytize. Pre-Columbian ritual cited the Templo Mayor as the *axis mundi*. “A people’s vision of place reflects their strategies, mechanisms, and performances for integrating their potent symbols with their social organization and historical developments, their theology, ontology, and social ambitions.”⁷³ Therefore, the place where the plays took place needed to have a central position in the cosmovision of the natives, it needed to *be* a place of power. The position of the cathedrals and churches on top of ancient religious ruins absorbed the prestige simply by their position within the cultural landscape. It was within or near these venues that the theater stages would be erected.

⁷¹ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 42

⁷² Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 81.

⁷³ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 66.

While many of these public spectacles took place in Christian edifices, the Franciscans often utilized public squares and the temples of the Nahuas, even constructing platforms at times to serve as a stage for public observance.⁷⁴ Burkhart is careful to point out that owing to the grandiose size of the spectacles, many of the rituals were “obscured from public view.”⁷⁵ Whether or not the audience could witness the events, their presence was in itself a fulfillment of ancient ritual which dictated their gathering in order to conform to the demands of a community that ritualized not only religion, but also tribute and “the shifting political geography of empire.”⁷⁶

Music and Dance.

Music was a tool which mimicked the fluidity of religion and the change that fate brought into the lives of a culture. Robert Stevenson explains that the musical traditions of the Aztecs were an amalgamation of the cultures they encountered, and in most cases, conquered. As the conquered tribes are enveloped by the empire, the desired aspects of their musical tradition are acquired and transplanted into the Aztec tradition.⁷⁷

Stevenson asserts that instruments that were being utilized at the time of European contact were woodwinds, conch shells, drums, or rattles. Essentially, no stringed instruments existed prior to European contact. Woodwinds are prominent within the Nahuatl plays and usually signify the entrance or departure of an ethereal entity, demi-

⁷⁴ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 42.

⁷⁵ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 44.

⁷⁶ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 67.

⁷⁷ Robert Murrell Stevenson. *Music in Aztec and Inca Territory*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968),19.

god or prior to a significant event. Burkhart explains that instruments called *chirimías*, Moorish reeds resembling modern oboes, were also employed frequently in place or accompanying the other woodwind instruments as well as a type of horn called a *vacas*.

Burkhart explains that allowing the Indians to sing and dance for God and the saints in the tradition of their old gods was permitted by the Church and was generally seen as a breakthrough in gaining neophytes to their religion as it made the Catholics more accessible and palatable to native reception.⁷⁸ “Hymns were often sung during or after a performance and dances and processions were among the festival day’s other activities.”⁷⁹ These hymns are known as antiphons and usually involve a Latin prayer regarding the Eucharist within the plays, as will be addressed in later analysis. Since song and dance were incorporated into the pre-Columbian ritual of the Aztec, this open prayer also appealed to their understanding of divine reverence.

The Set Stage.

Nahuatl dramatic production was an elaborate process that required a confluence of effort between the Spanish and indigenous culture. The historical and religious records are documented within manuscripts in the linguistic tradition of the natives. The native role in preparation and conservation of the documentation is indicative of their ability to influence the theatrical production which also required their assistance and assembly. The stage is set for conversion: as writers, the Nahuas embrace their linguistic

⁷⁸ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 20-22.

⁷⁹ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 45.

tradition in order to create a relatable identity with the Christian parables that they portray. As performers, the Nahuas are able to utilize their social and religious authority embodied within their stage personification to influence the audience and retain the pre-Columbian tradition of cultural order that is tied to ritual. As the audience, the Nahuas are allowed to participate and indulge their ritual heritage by utilizing elements of ritual (such as song, dance and prayer form) within the performance. In the next chapter, we will discover how the biblical representations of divinity were assimilated and adapted to the Nahuatl stage.

Chapter 3: Deconstructing the Virgin Mary

“You who are the supreme noblewoman, you who are my precious mother, you who are the daughter of the one who lives forever, God the father, May you know that today, oh my precious mother, you who are a very humble one, it is now the hour, it is now the moment, it is now that the time has arrived for the people to be rescued.”⁸⁰

The Virgin Mary is a biblical character whose static identity has been defined, modified, expanded or depressed according to her relation to the populations worshipping her, and the cultures and timeframes by which she has been embraced. It is clear that for over two thousand years, Mary is still one of the most revered biblical characters of all time; but who is the real Mary? Demi-goddess, mother, saint, apparition, intercessor, pedagogical model, harbinger, compassionate healer, sentient being? These are all possibilities, and they are all forms of her identity depending upon the context in which she appears.

In the case of Nahuatl Theater, Mary was a forceful, even if often understated, character within the plays. She was an integral part of the transition toward Christianity for the native populations. She had a corollary identity to the old pantheon and she had new qualities ascribed to her which were intended to create an enlightened reception by the natives. In all ways, she was Mother of Jesus, often described as Mother of God, and all-encompassing as Mother of Us All. Clearly, her matriarchal value was a powerful tool in the revelations of the colonial millenarian movement, which sought to forge a bond with their native “brethren.” In order to understand how extensive this bond is, one must only look to the Mother of All to understand the hybridity of the new empire in

⁸⁰ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 111.

action. Within the microcosm of Nahuatl Theater, Mary took on many roles, indicating her absorption of qualities of Pre-Columbian deities and their characteristics, essentially becoming a hybrid production for the benefit and from the theatricality of performance as a ritual. Mary's unique ubiquity within the Nahuatl religious dramas as a role model, teacher, and powerful being capable of acting in a divine capacity were all crucial characteristics to the way in which she was understood by the natives and how they projected qualities onto those bases of divinity. Yet, how far removed from the original orthodox concept were they? The key to understanding just how hybrid of a figure the Virgin Mary was within the Nahuatl theater and likewise in the colonial New World, is to investigate the biblical accounts of her character and compare them with the figure represented within the Nahua performances, as much as can be gleaned from the extant texts.

The Christian Mary

Background.

The Virgin Mary is universally accepted within Christianity as the mother of Jesus, the son of God, or Yahweh. Her role within the New Testament indicates that owing to her actions and suffering, she received or would receive rewards from God. This opens up the door to other possibilities, the like of which could be associated with the sainthood she would later acquire, as well as becoming a figurehead in a demi-goddess-like capacity, as much as a self-proclaimed monotheistic religion will officially admit.

In order to understand the various capacities of Mary, we must first understand that Christianity itself is a collective religion branching off of ancient oriental religions, mainly what we have come to understand as Judaism. As a branch of the Abrahamic religion, Christianity asserts its legitimacy via the lineage of Abraham, as do the Hebrews. Hebrews and Christians both recognize the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) as the founding principle of their faiths. The New Testament and reverence for Jesus as more than a prophet (as the only son of God) is one of the many causes of differentiation between the two religions. Yet within both of these ancient religions, there are still elements of complementarity: the co-existence of light and dark, good and evil, God and Satan, heaven and hell, and even the complementarity of gender. This particular form of complementarity is an unequal complementarity, with more power being given to light, good, God, heaven, and masculinity. Yet, the complementarity does exist, and the complementarity of this unequal complementarity is something that will be repeatedly revisited in the evaluation of the metamorphosis of Mary.

Sacred Vessel.

Mary was first introduced in the New Testament: Book of Matthew as a young daughter of the descendants of Abraham and David who became impregnated by divine action. Arranged to be married, her husband-to-be, Joseph, was uncertain of what his moral duty was. “Behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is

conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.”⁸¹ As a result of this, her integrity as a pure woman was maintained, thereby removing any question of immorality to her prospective husband and, ideally, any social stigma, though that was unlikely. According to Marina Warner, the Immaculate Conception was a source of contention for Catholic ascetics who saw her virginity as a laudable state but struggled with the implication of taint that went along with birth. They overcame this by reasoning that she was the only creature who was honored by remaining free from sin, whereas Adam and Eve were engaged in sinful activity in addition to the vice of sexuality which was required to procreate. As a human, this made Mary an exceptional human and impeccably unique, and the birth of her son transferred a demi-goddess like status to her.⁸² Mary is hereby given the honor of becoming a sacred vessel of divinity. She gave birth to the only son of God, and his presence on earth was in the capacity of a demi-god. Her role as the sacred vessel brings up a curious religious anomaly regarding procreation. In order to bring Jesus into the world, she needed to give birth to him. Yet in the Old Testament Book of Genesis, God created man and woman in His own image and gave them dominion over the earth.⁸³ Clearly, God had already demonstrated His ability to create human life without the need, or potentially the omission of mention, of a female consort. Since Jesus would be a direct descendant of the Lord, he would acquire demi-god status, and his mother would

⁸¹Matthew 1:20-21 in *The Holy Bible* (King James Version). (Cobb, California: First Glance Books, 1998), 274. Please note that the Holy Bible version being utilized for the purposes of this study is the King James version. Owing to the fact that no translated versions of the Bible were available prior to the Protestant Reformation and all church services were performed in Latin. Since Protestantism was virtually contemporary with the colonization of New Spain, this vernacular version is deemed an acceptable source comparable to the material which likely would have been imparted to the Nahuas in their own language interspersed with Latin and Spanish.

⁸²Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. (New York, NY: Knopf, 1976), 236.

⁸³Genesis 1:27-28 in *The Holy Bible*, 8.

naturally be unique among women, giving her likewise a similar status. By becoming her consort, her husband offered protection in the temporal realm, and gained the favor of the Lord in the ethereal realm. The passage acknowledges prior to his birth, Jesus will die in order to save the sinners of the world. Even within the womb, the holiness of Jesus was felt, and the reverence for Mary was expressed in her dialogue with Elisabeth: “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb... behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.”⁸⁴ As the mother of the savior, it is easy to understand why Mary was given the title of Mother to a myriad of biblical characters and was even referenced as the mother of all. As her son emphasized fraternity within his teachings later on, this link is firmly established within her role as the sacred vessel. Mary is also typically depicted in iconography within the role of a fertility goddess, often portrayed as a medieval grain goddess, holding a pomegranate or even a pinecone.⁸⁵ These images are derived from pagan remnants of belief that associate the feminine side of Marian culture with the earth and the fertility that her femininity represents. As a sacred vessel, her fertility translated to many genres affected by that imagery. One of the most interesting associations of the Virgin’s imagery is of her treading on a serpent, which has typically been associated with lascivious carnality and wickedness, though it once represented knowledge. “A pivotal contradiction...exists at the centre of the figure of the...Virgin....she is at the very moment of her most complete triumph over carnality, a goddess of vegetable and animal and human fertility.”⁸⁶ Although her status may appear to be downplayed, the recognition of her divinity, and also the discrepancy of

⁸⁴ Luke 1:42 in *The Holy Bible*, 300.

⁸⁵ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 276.

⁸⁶ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 269.

gender, alluded to the underlying complementarity with which she was seen even among Christians.

Harbinger of Sacrifice.

Much like Abraham in the Old Testament, Mary was forewarned that she must sacrifice her only son. His anticipated death should have come as no surprise. The Gospel of Luke recounts the conception of Jesus and his birth, and once again proclaims the prophecy of Jesus' purpose which can only be achieved through his self-sacrifice, which is inevitably the auto-sacrifice of the Virgin Mary: "And Simeon blessed them and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed)."⁸⁷ This reference to the complementarity and divine connection with which Mary had with her son also translates to the transience of her mortality and spirituality once that prophecy has been fulfilled.

The Mother of Sorrow.

The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all proclaim that the death of Jesus had been foretold. They also say that Mary was cognizant of the eventuality. Yet, her sorrow is something which is depicted in the devotions and iconographies of Christianity. She is often portrayed as being involved in the Passion of the Christ, yet John's reference

⁸⁷ Luke 2:34-35 in *The Holy Bible*, 302.

to her during the procession indicates that she may not have completely observed the spectacle:

“Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his home.”⁸⁸

It makes no mention of the reason, but judging from the prognostication of Simeon as previously mentioned, the grief may have manifested as the allegorical sword through her soul. The passage also reaffirms the fraternal affinity which Jesus established with his disciples. As his own mother, she was mother to all of his brethren and despite the sorrow which would come from his demise, Mary might rejoice that she had many children who might live for the sacrifice of the one she must lose.

While Mary is iconically depicted as a weeping woman, it might possibly be mistaken for the role played by Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene kept vigil over the sepulcher in which Jesus was laid to rest after the crucifixion. It was she that first discovered the missing body, which would later be revealed to have been resurrected. “But Mary stood without at the sepulcher weeping....”⁸⁹ It is possible that the Virgin Mary has often been confused with the mourning companion of Jesus, Mary Magdalene. Although the Virgin Mary’s sorrow is considerably great as it was alluded to by Simon, mention of her displays of emotion is virtually omitted.

⁸⁸ John 19:25-27 in *The Holy Bible*, 324.

⁸⁹ John 20:11 in *The Holy Bible*, 324.

Mercy and Charity.

The Virgin Mary for centuries has indubitably been cast as a role model who good Christian women emulate in order to walk the path of righteousness. Mary maintained her chastity until marriage, Mary followed the commandments of the Lord (even when they put her in dangerous quandaries), and Mary attended Jesus with his disciples even after his death.⁹⁰ However, the qualities of mercy and charity are not as blatantly displayed throughout the biblical texts. So how did Mary become the embodiment of these actions?

While Mary's involvement after her son's death indicates that her faith was not swayed by his sacrifice (and thereby her own), neither does it emphasize her involvement nor specific actions taken by her. The characteristic of mercy may possibly be owing to the idea, that as first among women, Mary gave the greatest sacrifice imaginable for a woman: her child. In this way, her sorrow would be inconsolable. Yet her divinity (her favor with God and all that could imply) remained intact. Therefore, with this divine link, Mary could empathize with her fellow women and children (as all peoples of the earth now were considered). In order to obtain mercy from God, Mary might have seemed like a more tangible and approachable figure, particularly for women, but in general as well. Given her compassion to the human plight and being herself human, she might feel more inclined to intercede on their behalf when it came to asking favors from God. This intercession naturally is peripheral to the concept of charity, with which the Virgin is also associated. To live one's life in a holy way, one must emulate the Virgin.

⁹⁰ This makes reference to the Book of Acts of the Apostles 1:14, which acknowledges the attendance of Mary in the upper room in Jerusalem, participating in "prayer and supplication." (Book of Acts of the Apostles: 1:14 in *The Holy Bible*, 326).

The Virgin sacrificed what she loved most for the benefit of a world community. In order to follow in the Virgin's footsteps of sacrifice, people must also act in a similar manner; albeit, the sacrifice of the Virgin would never, and can never, be recreated. The concept of charity is nevertheless one which has been integral to the Christian outreach efforts and *communitas*, and it may be supposed, is at least partially owing to the actions of the Virgin Mary, which were also encouraged within the parables of Christ. "The consequence of her exemption from original sin was a completely unblemished life. The Virgin Mary was therefore the most perfect created being after Jesus Christ."⁹¹ This entitled her to the honor of living a life worthy of emulation to her other female counterparts. This concept of purity associated with the Virgin also gave her the quality of generosity on behalf of her other children of the earth. The most significant element of her charity is her role as intercessor. Warner explains that theologically the Virgin acted through her son, even after his death. Yet in practice, that necessity is forgotten as she acted in the capacity of a "sorceress with dominion over angels and devils alike".⁹² Her role as a human with divine qualities has been recycled instead to become a divinity with human qualities. Any reference to her death simply states that she is "translated to heaven," indicating that her death was simply a passing similar to that of Jesus and other biblical figures whose holiness is unsurpassed.⁹³

The Nahua Mary

⁹¹ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 237.

⁹² Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 323.

⁹³ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 84.

The Nahua Mary embodied many of the characteristics of the Christian Mary, and for all intents and purposes, was the same divine being. Yet, there are many differences, including subtle tributes to the deities of the old Mexica pantheon, as well as blatant homage that respect and legitimize the old native concepts of the divine. The challenges in deciphering the roots of Marian divinity in Nahuatl Theater are that the role was sometimes limited, but the clues that are preserved within the works can be called representative of the Nahua cosmo-vision as they were contemporary with the transitional conversion process.

Portrayal in Plays.

Mary's appearance within the plays was almost exclusively reserved for Passion plays. The performance within epiphany and morality plays was more distinct and rare. However, a unique sub-culture hijacked the Nahuatl Theater in the advent of Marian worship and created another category: Guadalupan plays. These plays focus upon the apparition of the Virgin Mary and the establishment and legitimacy of native Christianity in the New World. Of the 19 works that are currently available, we will only be examining 6 which draw from each of the categories just highlighted: "Holy Wednesday" (a Passion Play), "How to Live on Earth" (a morality play), "Dialogue on the Apparition of the Virgin Saint Mary of Guadalupe" (a Guadalupan play), "The Wonder of Mexico" (a Guadalupan play), "The San Simón Tlatlahquitepec Passion Play" (a Passion play), and "The Tepaltzingo Passion Play" (another Passion play). Each of these plays will allow us to garner unique information about how the Virgin was generally viewed, how she was portrayed differently depending upon circumstance, and how the concept of her

own divinity was transformative within the ritualization of religious spectacle. The plays will be dissected according to Mary's role and themes surrounding her.

As with the Christian Mary, the concept of Mary as "mother" was the most pervasive and cross-culturally relatable component of feminine divinity. In the pre-Columbian tradition,

"there was an ensemble of mother goddesses, and some were thought of as earth-mother figures that represented the abundant powers of the earth, women, and fertility. These were the deities of earth, water, the moon, drunkenness, sex, the birth of life, fertilization, illness, and healing of cold diseases. The underlying concept was of the Mother who could provide comfort or harm, love or terror, and life or death."⁹⁴

The Aztec goddesses possessed a complementarity of their own, but were powerful in their own right. As goddesses of the earth and fertility, they commanded a serious amount of respect within a population that survived upon two principles: warfare and agriculture. It was therefore necessary for the women to adopt and possess qualities appealing to both aspects of civilization; the female deities needed to be capable of bellicosity and generosity, destruction and creation.

The Christian Mary's story resonates with the Nahuas on more than one level, beginning with her role as a sacred vessel and the Immaculate Conception. A *teocuicatl* (divine song) was recorded shortly after the Conquest entitled "The Song of Huitzilopochtli." The contents of this song detail the creation myth and cosmological battles of the Aztec pantheon. Coatlicue, the Mother Goddess, became impregnated with Huitzilopochtli (the Aztec god of war and the sun) by a

"small ball of 'fine feathers' that fell from above....the divine semen [descended] from the sky in the form of white feathers, replicating what López Austin calls the 'process of the descent of divine semen into the earthly sphere to create new beings.' It is significant that the meeting point of heaven, in the form of the fine feathers, and the earth, in the form

⁹⁴ David Carrasco and Scott Sessions. *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 52-53.

of the Mother Goddess, is the hill Coatepec. The joining of sky and earth symbols in this simple way represents a *hieros gamos*, a sacred union of the above and the below in order to produce a deity.”⁹⁵

This creation story parallels the conception of Jesus. For one, Coatlicue was an earthly entity, albeit divine. Her consort was more ethereal and intangible. Yet He required the utilization of earthly life in order to create; He required the involvement of the earthly realm and manipulation of it to set the cosmology in motion. The son that they produced would become a savior and Lord over the Aztec empire, and his sacrifices would ensure the continuance of life via ritual. Coyolxauhui, the Aztec goddess of the moon, felt that she and her divine brethren who were 400 hundred strong, had been dishonored and she called them to arms in order to destroy the pregnant mother goddess. At the moment of attack, Huitzilopochtli was born and promptly utilized a magical serpent to kill and dismember Coyolxauhui and her body was rolled down the hill. In emulation of the creation story, the Aztecs constructed the Templo Mayor in their capital city of Tenochtitlan (present day Mexico City). The Templo Mayor housed two shrines, one to Huitzilopochtli and one to Tlaloc, with a staircase which contained the effigy of serpents, and the Coyolxauhui stone (depicting the cosmological dismemberment) at the base of the stairs, where the bodies of sacrificial victims also fell during ritual reenactments. Eventually, Huitzilopochtli obliterated nearly all other deities, demanding their sacrifice in excess.⁹⁶

Carrasco and Sessions propose that other feminine deities may have characteristics that were collectively ascribed to the Virgin Mary post-Conquest, such as Tonantzin (“Our Venerable Mother” who was the predecessor to the Virgin of

⁹⁵ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 59-60.

⁹⁶ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 60-62.

Guadalupe), Xochiquetzal (“Precious Flowery Feather”, goddess of romance, love, sexual desire, flowers, feasting and pleasure), Tlazolteotl (goddess of filth and sexual sin) and Mayahuel (“Circle of Arms”, goddess of drinking).⁹⁷ Nearly all of the goddesses were associated with fertility of civilization or agriculture, giving strength to the idea that the woman as a sacred vessel, and her offspring as the “fruit of her womb” is an allegorical archetype which was already in place prior to European, and therefore Christian, contact. These roots would help to provide an impetus for the millenarian and legitimacy movements that emerged after the events that occurred at Guadalupe.

Childbirth, was seen as a great honor within Aztec society. Ideally, women were responsible for procreation and men were glorified by warfare. The process of childbirth was a battle that was waged with victory in a healthy delivery, or glory in death of the battle. If the woman died in childbirth, she would be given the same privileged afterlife as a male warrior who died in combat. This gave the feminine deities fearsome as well as gentle characteristics and is considered to be part of their complementary nature.⁹⁸ The role of the sacred vessel would therefore afford the Virgin Mary the reverence on par with that of the supreme war god, Huitzilopochtli, if not more.

The Complementarity of Divine Gender.

Complementarity within the Christian and pre-Columbian religions was yet another archetypical parallel. David Carrasco and Scott Sessions confirm that complementarity was typical of the Aztec pantheon, and the feminine and masculine

⁹⁷ Carrasco and Sessions, 53.

⁹⁸ Timothy J. Knab, ed. *A Scattering of Jades: Stories, Poems, and Prayers of the Aztecs*. (Tucson, AZ: Arizona University Press, 1994), 43-44.

manifestations were also interchangeable.⁹⁹ This can lead to some ambiguity concerning the different pre-Colombian deities whose characteristics were transplanted into the collective notions of the Christian pantheon, which included not only God but the saints as well.

Yahweh, the Hebrew and Christian God, is often associated with Tlaloc. His supremacy is equitable to the power of the Christian creator, and his association with Tlalocan, the only paradise available in the afterlife, deepens the hypothesis that Tlaloc may have been perceived as the Nahua Yahweh. Viviana Díaz Balsera wrote an article examining the hybrid concept of Yahweh within one of the Nahuatl theatrical plays, “The Sacrifice of Isaac.” She explains that the idea of a Supreme being whose divinity had been prevalent in all of Mesoamerica, was easily projected onto the concept of the Christian God, and that this can be traced through the ideological anomalies which abound throughout the text. She explains that:

“Tlaloc had been one of the most important and revered deities in Mexico. He was the ancient Mesoamerican god of rain and fertility, whose precious life-giving powers were conjured in seven of the eighteen calendrical feasts.... In order to procure the timely release of rain that would nourish the fields, producing food crops for the people, very small children were sacrificed at the beginning of the dry season or during the *Altacahualo* (“ceasing of water”) month of every year. These little children died as *ixiptla* or deity impersonators of the Tlatoque (Broda, quoted in Román Berrelleza 1987, 138), dwarfish helpers of Tlaloc who dwelled on the mountain-tops...[serving] as tender ”corn” (Read 1998, 176-78) for the rain gods...[who were then] enabled to bring down their water upon their fields.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Carrasco and Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Viviana Díaz Balsera. “A Judeo-Christian Tlaloc or a Nahuatl Yahweh? Domination, Hybridity and Continuity in the Nahua Evangelization Theater.” *Colonial Latin America Review*. (Vol. 10, No. 12, 2001), 221.

The Tlatoque may possibly have been represented by the Nahuas within the roles of angels and saints, as they were semi-divine and were servants to the Supreme Lord. However, David Carrasco explores the writings within *The Florentine Codex* which describes four festivals pertaining to the sacrifice of women. The women are sacrificed for agrarian purposes, but surprisingly, to predominately female goddesses associated with agriculture. “Women were the supreme givers; they gave words, seeds, virginity, hearts, and skin in order to regenerate plants and stimulate males to war.”¹⁰¹ The women were referred to as “corn” because of the imagery of the life-cycle of seeds, planting, growth, and sowing. The heart was seen as the proverbial seed which must be extracted in order to feed the goddess and her minions.¹⁰² Within *The Florentine Codex*, Bernardino de Sahagún described the deity impersonator of Xilonen (a maize goddess) as wearing a costume with colors, feathers, flowers and powerful objects that “come out of the earth” in order to represent fertility.¹⁰³ Likewise, an image with the *Codex Barbiconus* illustrates an Aztec priest acting within the capacity of an *ixiptla* in the costume of Chicomecoatl-Tlazoteotl (a maize goddess). The priest, who would have been male, would not have been incongruent owing to his gender, as the complementarity of the divine was a well-established Mesoamerican precedent. He is dressed in a skirt, a shroud and an elaborate headdress and is fitted with two sets of arms: ones that are masculine and hanging lifeless upon the skirt, and the others are smaller, more feminine and are holding stalks of corn. The costume colors are very agriculturally related: green

¹⁰¹ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 195. It should be noted, that these descriptions are taken from Book Two of *The Florentine Codex*, a primary source written by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in describing ritual performance within an Aztec ethnographical context, supposedly untainted by Christian interaction.

¹⁰² Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 199.

¹⁰³ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 17.

(like plants), brown (like the earth), blue (like the water), and yellow (like the sun and maize).¹⁰⁴ The characteristics of the deity impersonators, along with the archaeology conducted at the Templo Mayor, which revealed that two temples were placed side-by-side, demonstrate the complementarity of divinity. This brings up the question of supremacy among the deities. Carrasco feels that Tlaloc's presence was an obvious absorption of Mesoamerican deities into the Aztec pantheon, legitimizing their role within the Valley where they were the last to settle. Carrasco explains that other scholars such as Matos Moctezuma believe that the two temples are indicative of a "clear superstructural image of an economy based on agriculture and on tribute obtained by military conquests of other societies." However, a third group embraces the possibility that the region's long understanding of complementarity is to credit for the dual temples' existence based upon oppositions and complements.¹⁰⁵ In light of the third possibility, another hypothesis which might be offered is the complementarity of Tlaloc as an ambiguous gender. Upon conversion, this concept would allow for the Nahuas to embrace Christianity by applying their longstanding ideological paradigms, and possibly even correlate Tlaloc to the Virgin Mary, alongside Jesus who might have been represented by Huitzilopochtli.¹⁰⁶

Huitzilopochtli, aside from his bellicose nature, embodied many of the characteristics of Jesus, and was therefore understood by the Nahuas. He was the son of

¹⁰⁴ Anawalt, *Indian Clothing Before Cortes*, 111.

¹⁰⁵ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 71-72.

¹⁰⁶ In the prologue of the play "How to Live On Earth." *Nahuatl Theater Volume 1: Death and Life in Colonial Nahua Mexico*. (eds. Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart). (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 213: Mary is acknowledged: "Here she scatters [commandments] as if they were precious jades, jewels, gold and silver, their pendants shimmering greatly like precious water about to drip." (p. 213). The diction and sentence structure definitely indicate a possible correlation to those associated with Tlaloc.

some Supreme Being and Mother of the Earth, born of Immaculate Conception, and he challenged and defeated other supernatural entities and cleansed the sins of the population through ritual sacrifice. He was the patron god of the Aztecs, and therefore, transmutable to the role of the patron god of the natives. Another god which may have contributed to the identity of a Nahua Jesus is Tezcatlipoca, the god of the Smoking Mirror. He is often associated with mischief and shamanism (which can include transformation and omnipresence). The festival of Toxcatl which is dedicated to him, ends in his auto-sacrifice, which is recreated by *ixiptla*, demonstrates the way in which one who lives a certain way (read: a lavish lifestyle), must die humiliated, perfectly and be put on display. Sahagún wrote that during the festival it is said: “No one on earth went exhausting happiness, riches, and wealth.”¹⁰⁷ This might have been a pedagogical lesson to the community to live in moderation and to check the hubris of those who sought divinity in human form. This would have appealed to those who were affected by the parables of Jesus. Quetzalcoatl (“the Plumed Serpent”) another god credited with co-creating the world, seems to also have an older presence within the Mesoamerican pantheon (dating back to the Toltec civilization) and to have been adopted into that of the Aztec. A cosmology of the creation exists, wherein a “crocodilian” goddess called Tlaltecuhltli resided in water and the two sky gods, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca dismembered her and distributed or aligned her body parts to create the earth in its cosmological landscape.¹⁰⁸ This archetypal device is often referred to as the Ymir motif (the dismemberment and distribution of divine/semi-divine beings to create the world). This meant that the gods, are themselves interchangeable, or may have even been

¹⁰⁷ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 137.

¹⁰⁸ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 72.

acknowledged within a dual context. This complementarity might have appealed to the identity markers of Yahweh, Jesus or a combination of the two. Based upon the paucity of Yahweh within the Nahuatl dramas, it is possible that Jesus and God were seen as interchangeable deities.

The earth and mother goddess Coatlicue was an excellent archetype who translated into the Virgin Mary. Her daughter Coyolxauqhui represented the complementarity of the feminine divine. Her sacrifice so that the earth might continue could possibly be seen as the “sword through the soul” of Mary, thus initiating the complementarity between herself and her brother; between the Virgin Mary and Jesus. One aspect of the cosmological landscape provides an important clue to the Aztec cosmovision: the placement of the Coyolxauqhui stone at the bottom of the temple. When archaeologist uncovered the stone at the Templo Mayor in 1978 and noted the detail of the spatial analysis as compared to cosmological ritual, it painted a portrait of the way in which the deities themselves may have been perceived.¹⁰⁹ Since the masculine deity (Huitzilopochtli) resided at the top of the mythical mountain of Coatepec, his realm of existence essentially represented the cosmological heavens. Coyolxauqhui’s stone was placed at the bottom of the temple, represented the earth. The relativity of the cultural landscape made Coyolxauqhui, the feminine divine, more accessible, more tangible. Communion with Huitzilopochtli, which in most cases was human sacrifice, required ascension into the divine realm. Coyolxauqhui would also have more in common with the people performing the ritual, who in some cases, were food for the gods. Having become a part of the ritual herself, the goddess may have been

¹⁰⁹ Carrasco and Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 13.

more accessible to the common participants, since priests and sacrificial victims were usually the only ones who could ascend the holy mountain. Mary is described as “queenly advocate”, “the pure one,” and “God’s beloved mother” within many of the texts. Within the Tepaltzingo Passion Play, Jesus is referred to as “child of the maiden”, reminding the audience of Mary’s role as a sacred vessel, and her link and authority in relation to the divinity to which emerged from her womb.¹¹⁰

Sacrifice: “We are ALL FRUITS of the earth...We eat of the earth then the earth eats us.”¹¹¹

The idea of sacrifice can ideologically take many forms: it can be produced in the form of penance, prayer, dedication, offerings, and fasting, but the most notorious forms are those of self-flagellation (auto-sacrifice) and human sacrifice (the ritual killing of those dedicated to the deity for whom the act is being performed) which can, and often did, include ritual cannibalism. “In the sixteenth century human sacrifice was used both as a pretext for wars on native peoples, accompanied by merciless exploitations of these supposedly barbarous Indians, and as demonstrating the natives’ deep, though misguided, capacity for religious devotion that would make them potentially faithful Christians.”¹¹² David Carrasco reaffirms the prevalence of the integral practices of human sacrifice, but does not believe it was misguided; rather, he notes that it was an important social

¹¹⁰ “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play,” 173.

¹¹¹ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 169-170. Carrasco notes that this quote is from Timothy J. Knab’s modern ethnography.

¹¹² Knab, *A Scattering of Jades*, 41.

integration of religious, social and imperial ideologies- essentially power in performance reinforcing the authority and cultural stratification within Aztec daily life.¹¹³

Auto-sacrifice, or to “pay in blood,” is the act of blood-letting through some form of self-mutilation. This usually affected the extremities of the body such as the tongue, ears and penis and could be performed with any implements that could let blood. The use of maguey spines and obsidian blades were particularly popular methods by which to conduct the act. In so doing, the penitent might appease or win the favor or aid of a supernatural being to whom the blood, the cosmological life-force, was dedicated.¹¹⁴

Auto-sacrifice appears to have been willingly given by the participant.

Death sacrifice could pertain to either animals or humans.

“The major ritual participants were called *in ixiptla in teteo* (deity impersonators, or individuals or objects, whose essence had been cosmologically transformed into gods)...The most common sacrifice was the decapitation of animals such as quail, but the most dramatic and valued sacrifices were the human sacrifices of captured warriors, women, children, and slaves. These victims were ritually bathed, carefully costumed, taught to dance special dances, and either fattened or slimmed down during the preparation period. They were also elaborately dressed to impersonate specific deities to whom they were sacrificed. The different primary sources reveal a wide range of sacrificial techniques, including decapitation, shooting with darts or arrows, drowning, burning, hurling from heights, strangulation, entombment and starvation, and gladiatorial combat.”¹¹⁵

Many times, the sacrificial victims were captives of warring nations, kidnapped victims, or those who were born under certain circumstances (such as a certain date or

¹¹³ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 3.

¹¹⁴ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 185.

¹¹⁵ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 83.

having certain phenotypic traits favored for sacrifice.¹¹⁶ The ritual killings took place in order to balance the cosmos and restore or maintain the order of the universe by reenacting the cosmological events. Therefore, the blood was the salvation of the community performing it. Cannibalism after the sacrifice was also rooted in the ancient Mesoamerican myth of the earth goddess whose flayed body became the earth needing to be “irrigated” in order for “fruits of the earth” to grow of which humans could partake.¹¹⁷ Humans therefore, were in effect emulating the divine by consuming the fruits of the earth. Since humans were also considered to be a fruit of the earth, and the deity impersonators were for all purposes the temporal manifestations of the divine, eating their flesh after the sacrifice was fulfilling the ritual and they were ingesting and embracing the divinity within themselves.

The Christians who observed the rites were appalled by the level of violence and the acts of cannibalism which seemed harshly primitive. Bernal Díaz del Castillo catalogued such a ritual in 1519 at the Templo Mayor in honor of “Huichilobos” (mispronounced, but meaning Huitzilopochtli) where victims were sacrificed, and their flesh was flayed, eaten and masqueraded as costumes.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Christian friars who would eventually attempt to convert the Nahuas understood sacrifice within Christianity, albeit rarely at the expense of human life. Christians engaged in acts of self-flagellation as an act of piety.¹¹⁹ Also, the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, the symbolic eating of the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus (substituted with bread and

¹¹⁶ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 81-87. Note: a genetic marker for sacrifice would be two cowlicks in the hair of a child that would be sacrifice to Tlaloc (p. 87).

¹¹⁷ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 174.

¹¹⁸ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 49-51.

¹¹⁹ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 18.

wine) was a similar form of cannibalistic ingestion of the divine and the ritual itself is a cosmological recreation of the Last Supper. Therefore, Christianity had more in common with the native religion in principle than was originally thought.

As it pertains to Nahuatl theater, the concept of sacrifice is one which is integral to the portrayal of Marian divinity. Mary's role was expressed most frequently within the act of sacrifice in the passion plays. Another Nahuatl play, "The Sacrifice of Isaac" which was analyzed by Viviana Díaz Balsera recounted the dramatization of the biblical story upon which Abraham was called to sacrifice his son to Isaac because God asked him. Despite his sorrow, he agrees to do so, and at the last minute *dues ex machine* is introduced, sparing the life of Isaac and showing the magnanimous nature and compassion of the Christian God. Díaz Balsera remarks that this would have been paradoxical to the Nahua audience who would not understand the release of the sacrificial offering that was meant to sustain the deity.¹²⁰ Díaz Balsera also notes that this is portrayal of God was meant to deter the belief that the Christian Lord required blood or human sacrifice except when He expressly commanded it, and even then, He did not require it and could show mercy.¹²¹ However, this discrepancy could have appeared arbitrary to the Nahua audience who perceived a difference between the foreign deity and their own gods. According to Díaz Balsera, the "alterity and strangeness" of the new deity allowed for this anomaly and in the minds of the Nahuas, might have been perceived as not having an appetite for humans, but needing to be placated in a different manner.¹²²

¹²⁰ Díaz-Balsera, "A Judeo-Christian Tlaloc or a Nahua Yahweh?", 219.

¹²¹ Díaz-Balsera, "A Judeo-Christian Tlaloc or a Nahua Yahweh ?", 219.

¹²² Díaz-Balsera, "A Judeo-Christian Tlaloc or a Nahua Yahweh ?", 222.

Of the three Passion plays that are being analyzed, all of them document the persecution and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In Louise Burkhart's translation of the Passion play, *Holy Wednesday*, she presents both the Spanish and Nahuatl versions translated into English. The Spanish version is entitled "Beacon of Our Salvation" while the name "Holy Wednesday" is reserved for the Nahuatl text. The most obvious difference in the two versions is the complementarity of Mary and Christ. The play is a dialogue between Mary and Christ. Mary did not want Christ to sacrifice himself and presented her plight almost as if she would die when Jesus did. Jesus was dedicated to sacrificing himself because his death is redemption for Adam and Eve's sins. The Nahuatl version explains more of a biblical background than does the Spanish version, probably written on the assumption that most people understanding Spanish were more effectively Hispanized. Also, letters were sent to the Virgin Mary to intercede on behalf of those souls trapped in Limbo. They are not sent to God or to Jesus. This may have been due to the connection of the Virgin with the mother goddess characteristics. In the Spanish version of the letters, the Nahuatl versions are "entreating". The Spanish version exemplified the fortitude of the faithful who expect salvation because it is foretold. The Nahuatl version begged for mercy as if it was in jeopardy, for themselves and their ancestors. The Nahuatl version also acknowledged those in Limbo as "imprisoned" as "our fathers who first came to live on earth." To the Nahuas, sacrifice was necessary to rescue those in purgatory whereas the Spanish saw it as a necessity to rescue future people.¹²³ The Spanish version continued to be more formal and the Nahuatl version continued to exemplify the pathos of Mary's plight to save her son. At their parting, the Spanish

¹²³ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 153.

version harshly depicts Mary being told not to throw herself in Christ's arms; in the Nahua version, Christ implored Magdalene to hold his mother so she "will not fall." The Spanish version ended before the Nahuatl version which incorporates some aspects of Nahuatl speech and tradition into the play, including Mary's farewell to her "quetzal plume" and Christ's blessings of Mary's body parts, concluding with an embrace at the end.¹²⁴ Mary's sacrifice was not only the sorrow she must endure -which according to the biblical reference would kill part of her own soul; her sacrifice was a human sacrifice as she willingly had to allow her child, born of her blood, spill his own, thereby cosmologically connecting her to the ritual of renewal.

The reference to Mary's falling, or fainting, was only present within the Nahuatl version. Burkhart strives to explain this anomaly. Burkhart notes that indigenous women carried their children strapped to their backs, not in their arms, as Mary has been depicted, which would have been more "strenuous." Mary details the burden of her journey, claiming that she could have fallen and dropped Jesus as she carried him in that manner, resulting in the detriment to his soul (*tonalli*) which could have derailed his mission as the savior of mankind. This hearkens back to native superstition, such as the tale of Quetzalcoatl falling and damaging the "precious bones he had stolen with which he would create humanity (Bierhorst 1992: 145-46; Garibay 1979: 106)....Moreover, stumbling and falling were used in Nahuatl rhetoric as metaphors for moral deviance (Burkhart 1989: 61-62, 65)."¹²⁵ Mary's human sacrifice took the form of her son, Jesus. Her auto-sacrifice was enacted through the mutual suffering from the crucifixion (the

¹²⁴ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 109-163.

¹²⁵ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 189-190. The issue of moral deviance revealed through "falling" is exemplified by the actions of Mary Magdalene in the "Tepaltzingo Passion Play" (p. 165).

sword through her soul), her sorrow, and the burdens that she underwent in protecting Jesus from harm so that he might fulfill the prophecy; ultimately, wrestling with her mortal self to let go of human emotion and see the necessity in the deed which elevated her to a goddess-like status within the Nahuatl texts. Yet Mary's dialogue with her son pleading with him to reconsider his obligation was consistent throughout the passion plays, and she repeatedly drew attention to the fact that she had already paid the debt of blood in many ways.

The San Simón Tlatlahquitepec Passion Play is only extant in minute parts. The play is incomplete, owing to missing and torn pages. Certain passages are illegible. For the main part the play discusses the Last Supper, arrest, trial and beginnings of the persecution of Jesus. Jesus told his disciples to prepare a feast, explained to them that he will be betrayed by one of them and arrested and killed, and that one of them (Peter) will deny him three times. Judas Iscariot is portrayed as a manipulative and greedy disciple who sells Jesus to the high priest for 30 pieces of silver (which could also be gold according to the Nahuatl version). He later regretted his decision and as other disciples were questioned, Peter did indeed deny knowing Jesus, and Mary appeared with Magdalene and Martha to witness the arrest. Mary's brief appearance within a trinity is a common reference to the significance of that number, and possibly is a reference to the collective aspects of the Nahua pantheon embodied into a Christian context. Jesus was brought to trial before Pontius Pilate and Herod. Pilate did not condone his execution, but did order his castigation in order to satisfy the people with his blood and to set an example to the people regarding uprisings. The text ended with the whipping of Jesus and the crowning of thorns at which point, the remnants of the document are lost. The

translating authors do make mention that this Passion Play likely ended similarly to the final scenes of the Tepaltzingo play.¹²⁶

This passion play contains many pre-Columbian elements. In the very opening dialogue of Samuel, he stated that if they tried to seize Jesus during a festival, they would be killed.¹²⁷ This conformed to the idea that sacred ritual should be respected, even if it is not one's own; otherwise, the consequences could be catastrophic. This may have been a subtle subversive warning to the friars that conversion should not be forced, and that the old ways must be respected. Another possible missionary reference is spoken by Christ who declared: "Remember that first they scorned me and hated me, and I am your teacher. Pain and affliction must befall you as well...your weeping and your sadness will never come to an end."¹²⁸ This also created a link between the Christian and Nahua paradigms of auto-sacrifice which is held in the terms "pain and affliction." Nahuatl diction such as "atlepetl" (community), "precious", "scatter", and "deity" are ubiquitous throughout the text. Jesus was labeled "trouble-maker" and "trickster" by the judges and the centurion.¹²⁹ Since Tezcatlipoca was known as the trickster god, the Lord of the Smoking Mirror, and has been associated with the Nahua concept of Jesus, this is a confirmation of his identity. Yet, within this context, the Spanish influence may be that the sinners were confusing and misrepresenting Jesus with a pagan god, and their deliberate denial of his divinity and teachings was a clear justification for his crucifixion. The representation of Mary within the text was presented within a trinity: the arrival of Mary, Martha and Magdalene. In a dialogue between Mary (who was given the honorific

¹²⁶ "The San Simón Tlatlahuquitepec Passion Play," 127.

¹²⁷ "The San Simón Tlatlahuquitepec Passion Play," 127.

¹²⁸ "The San Simón Tlatlahuquitepec Passion Play," 137.

¹²⁹ "The San Simón Tlatlahuquitepec Passion Play," 149.

of Saint Mary, and elevating her to a semi-divine status) and Saint John, Mary was told of her son's demise. Through her sorrow, she deferred to the "will of [her] deity" and was called "beloved mother" by both John and Martha, reinforcing the concept of Mary as the mother to all humans.¹³⁰

The Tepaltzingo Passion Play is very similar to the other two passion plays. It consists of dialogue between Jesus, his mother and disciples. In this version, the Virgin seemed less subdued and more humanistic in her grieving as she beseeched Jesus not to fulfill the destiny of the holy prognostication. In Holy Wednesday, he was a "dutiful and obedient son" but in this place, he had control and dictated the scene. More in line with morals of friars who said that Christ had free will as opposed to committing an act only because of his father and ancient prophecy.¹³¹ Jesus reprimanded Mary, and reminded her of his duty to obey his father, who is the Supreme God. He told her "for as long as you live here on earth you are to always give torment to your earthly body."¹³² This corresponds to both the Christian and Nahua practices of flagellation and auto-sacrifice. Mary tried to reason with Jesus, and acknowledged that she had already committed sacrifice by allowing his auto-sacrifices in the form of circumcision, fasting, and the rejection of his proselytization. She believed that the blood given should already be enough sacrifice for the sinners.¹³³ Christ also reminded his mother of the prognostication by Saint Simeon: "It also says in the holy words that I am to die now....Saint Simeon, he told you of your suffering, that your face, your heart would

¹³⁰ "The San Simón Tlatlahuquitepec Passion Play," 153.

¹³¹ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 90.

¹³² "The Tepaltzingo Passion Play," 169.

¹³³ "The Tepaltzingo Passion Play," 177.

suffer great pain.”¹³⁴ This bond between Jesus and Mary suggests that they were still seen within the concepts of complementarity: opposing and yet connected. Later in the text, Jesus asked Mary’s permission to go to Jerusalem and fulfill his destiny, despite earlier claiming his father’s supremacy.¹³⁵ Although Mary eventually deferred to the masculine deity’s decree, the shift in paradigm requiring her permission indicates that she may have held more influence than God within the Nahua perception.

Mother of Mercy: Advocate and Consolation.

The Marian association with mercy may actually have been mistaken as a prayer to the feminine divine. As previously mentioned, the role of the Mother Goddess was one which could protect or destroy. In the Nahuatl drama, “Holy Wednesday,” there is an entire Nahuatl portion of the play where the syntax is set up in the form of a prayer, mimicking the old ways of the ritual. Mary is portrayed as a divine intercessor, one that may act on the behalf of her supplicants. The presence of this prayer within a Passion play, which is ultimately supposed to chronicle and celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus and salvation of the sinners, is dedicated to the role of Mary, reversing the scales of unequivocal complementarity that is portrayed within the Christian text and the Holy Bible. Among the letters for divine intercession, a disparity can be clearly seen between the two translations, and an even greater correlation can be drawn when compared to a pre-Columbian prayer to Tlaloc. The Spanish version of Moses’ letter reads more within a poetic, rhythmic manner:

¹³⁴ “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play,” 179. Later in the text, Magdalene tells Christ that his mother is dying (p. 179). This may be a deconstruction of the demi-goddess; the mortal part of Mary dies, but the semi-divine perseveres as she is later referred to within the play as Saint Mary.

¹³⁵ “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play,” 183.

“Take these three coral beads/ as you gift. / They are three mortal nails,/ with which he will be nailed/ on Calvary for my wrongs./ You well know, Virgin entire,/ that God came here out of love/ and to grab the flag,/ which Lucifer took/ in a wily manner./ To you, Lady, we ask, make an end to our pains,/ so that in Limbo where we are/ “Lift up your heads, O ye gates!”/ we may hear the voice of God. / The end.”¹³⁶

The Nahuatl version of the same letter is much longer. The syntax displayed demonstrates a more elaborate prose, indicative and most likely derived from the linguistic tradition of the Nahuas:

“Oh noblewoman and sovereign,/ here is that with which I greet you,/ three metal thorns,/ with which your precious child’s hands and feet will be shot with metal arrows,/ there on Mount Calvary,/ because of my wretched misdeeds,/ with which I offended God./ And well do you know,/ you noblewoman,/ that your precious child heartily desired so for it to be:/ that he would rescue people,/ that he would destroy the deceptions of the demon, Lucifer,/ with which he mocked the people on the earth./ And this:/ oh noblewoman,/ all the way from here I beseech you,/ may your heart concede/ that our torment may finish, may come to its end,/ here in Limbo./ And may you send him,/ may your precious child go,/ so that he will die!/ For that is when he will come to Limbo./ Then we will hear him, he will say,/ “Lift up your heads, O ye gates!”/ Then it will abate, the way we suffer fatigue./ That is all with which I console you./ I, Moses./ May you exert all your effort,/ may you be strong in your painful sadness,/ oh, mother of God!”¹³⁷

The emulation of Nahuatl traditional prose cannot be overlooked. In a prayer entitled “O, Tlaloc!” the Aztec implore the supreme god to restore the rain to them, as without it, they are living in a pre-Columbian conception of Limbo as well:

“O Lord, Our Lord, O Provider, O Lord of Verdure/ Lord of Tlalocan, Lord of the Sweet-Scented Marigold, Lord of Copal!/ The gods, Our Lords, the Providers/ the Lords of Rubber, the Lords of the Sweet-Scented Marigold, the Lords of Copal,/ have sealed themselves in a coffer, they have locked themselves in a box./ They have hidden the jade and turquoise and precious jewels of life,/ they have carried off their sister, Chicomecoatl, the fruits of the earth, and the Crimson Goddess, the chile./.../Everyone knows anguish and affliction,/ everyone is gazing upon torment;/ no one has been overlooked./.../Oh, the sustenance of life are no more, they have vanished;/ the gods, the providers, have carried

¹³⁶ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 144.

¹³⁷ Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday*, 145, 147.

them off,/ they have hidden them away in Tlalocan;/ they have sealed in a coffer, they have locked in a box,/ their verdure and freshness-.../all that grows and puts forth,/all that bears and yields,/all that sprouts and bursts into bloom/ all vegetation that issues from you/and is your flesh, your generation and renewal./.../May it be your will, O, Our Lord, may you grant that the gods, the Providers,/.../that they see their tasks on earth./may you succor, may you aid, Tlaltecutli, Lord of the Earth,/ who feeds and nourishes man!/And may you comfort the anguished fruits of the earth....”¹³⁸

There are many differences within the three examples for divine intercession. The Spanish model is formal, simplistic, and almost unapologetic for Mary’s sorrow. It also references God as the organizer of events, and it is He that will save them with His voice if Mary will lend her assistance. The Nahuatl version of the play is very personalized, very entreating, and cognizant of the fact that it is through sacrifice that their salvation resides. The Nahuatl version also uses recurring accolades, such as “noblewoman and sovereign,” and words that indicate resonate the diction of the Aztec prayer such as “precious.” Finally, the Aztec prayer to Tlaloc is one of similar desperation. A drought or pestilence would be equivocal to the forsaken status one would acquire in the Christian concept of Limbo that was imparted to the natives. The prayer exhibits the suffering within the dialogue, acknowledges the supremacy of Tlaloc over other gods, and the “fruits of the earth” which are not only the plants, but also the people. Tlaloc is not only the rain god, he is also has dominion over the earth, which is often associated with feminine divinity. In this context, the prayer for divine intercession is curiously similar to that made to Mary within “Holy Wednesday.”

In the Tepaltzingo Passion Play, the concept of Limbo is explained in more detail than “Holy Wednesday.” Jesus explained that all of their ancestors are in purgatory

¹³⁸ Sullivan, *A Scattering of Jades*, 152-157.

owing to original sin and the projection of that punishment onto their progeny. “Adam [and Eve] stretched out their arms to the fruit tree as they sinned. Thus they betrayed their children. And I must be stretched by my arms on the cross, so that I may save the children of Adam and [Eve] from the hands of the demon.”¹³⁹ During the stations of the cross, Veronica wiped the face of Jesus with her cloak and showed how his visage was copied onto it, claiming it was a miracle. It was sanctified by the kiss of Saint Mary when she is shown.¹⁴⁰ The play ends with Longinus having the epiphany that he had just sacrificed the son of God and begging forgiveness.¹⁴¹ The virtual omission of the flagellation of Jesus as well as the condemnation of the sacrifice may have been an effort by the friars to communicate a message to the Nahuas that the pagan ways were illegitimate.

Didactic Model: How to Live Piously.

“How to Live on Earth” exemplifies the “sacred way” in which people were expected to lead their lives if they wished to find redemption in purgatory. The prologue warns that people have received the word of God, have received the mercy of the Virgin, but have taken it for granted. Five people were subjected to the cosmic battle between angels and demons: Lorenzo and his newlywed wife, and three youths traveling through a forest on their way to confession. The play also briefly includes a devout woman determined to go to mass and her unruly child who abused her, and who she was forced to forsake. Lorenzo and his wife sought confession because Lorenzo felt ill. His wife

¹³⁹ “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play,” 179.

¹⁴⁰ “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play,” 237.

¹⁴¹ “The Tepaltzingo Passion Play,” 241.

followed suit after confession, as Death sentenced them both as a mercy. Demons tried to tempt them before they succumbed, but to no avail. Meanwhile, three youths were traveling through a forest on their way to confess. One was a blasphemer and declared he was afraid of nothing, that he openly abused his parents, and he did not guard himself against evil. He was left to sleep alone and the Virgin Mary allowed a demon to take him for his sins and refusal to repent. All souls in purgatory were brought before Christ for judgment, and the demons were allowed to speak on behalf of the sins committed. The youth remained condemned despite his claims that his parents never educated him in religion; the decision is reinforced by a demon's claim that Lucifer was exiled from Heaven for only sinning once, and the youth had made many mistakes. Lorenzo and his wife remained virtuous into death and so were admitted to heaven. The moral to this play is that people should raise their child in reverence for the Lord because there is no excuse for ignorance in the hour of judgment. It is so spoken by Condemned One: "You who bring up children, you who raise children, do not be idiotic, as if you were not rational. Open your ears! Listen to the sermon and the exemplary model. You are not going to fall into the fiery crag like I am now about to do!"¹⁴² Mary's words within the text express the frustration that may have been the result of native resistance to conversion: "With his blood, with his dye he saved the sinners. But there is no payment, no return for my beloved child's suffering and death. They pay nothing for it, they return nothing for it."¹⁴³ Mary's sorrow for the loss of her son reaches into the perplexity of blood debt and renewal. Ritual obligations are being denied to the deities, and the consequences could

¹⁴² "How to Live on Earth." *Nahuatl Theater: Volume I: Death and Life in Colonial Nahua Mexico* (eds. Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 210-241.

¹⁴³ "How to Live on Earth," 229.

be severe. In a scene that takes place at a burial, the stage directions illuminate the actions and props which were being utilized to capture the attention of the audience and to apply significance to the scene which was about to take place: “All enter. They perform the burial. The responsory is raised [in song]. When they have been buried, then wind instruments are played. Heaven opens. Wind instruments are played.”¹⁴⁴ The utilization of music sanctified the actions which were taking place, drawing attention to the presence of an ethereal entity which is about to inhabit the stage. In the scene, Mary pleaded with Christ to reach into purgatory and bring the trapped souls there into heaven, even the one who has forgotten her. Wind instruments were played again to accompany the exodus of those in purgatory.¹⁴⁵ Mary’s mercy extends beyond her sorrow, but does not reach to the condemned soul who transgressed against her son, even after an angel appeared to him. Mary’s divinity seems to overshadow that of Christ’s within the play. In the previous scene, she told Christ to release the souls in purgatory and he followed her instruction. In the final scene, after the condemned one was not forgiven by Christ, the Virgin admits those “who have loved one another well on earth” to heaven, and the command is followed by singing, highlighting the holy act.¹⁴⁶

The mendicant friars of the Catholic Church spread the faith of their religious institutions throughout New Spain. Seen as an infantile race, the missionaries believed that the natives were something akin to the lost children of Adam and Eve. They believed that the natives could not knowingly commit sin, rather that it was a learned transgression. Therefore, policymakers and clergy sought to segregate the races, thereby

¹⁴⁴ “How to Live on Earth,” 239.

¹⁴⁵ “How to Live on Earth,” 239, 241.

¹⁴⁶ “How to Live on Earth,” 241.

creating a larger cultural rift and eliminating the possibility of *communitas* which might allow the natives to become acculturated more quickly and efficiently. “Like most missionaries...Mendieta was convinced that the only way of dissociating God’s name from the Spaniards’ actions and their moral pollution was to segregate the Indians completely from the colonizers.”¹⁴⁷ Obviously, with colonialism came issues of miscegenation and the boundaries set forth by government and church would quickly become skewed. Seeing the apparent need to educate the neophyte population of natives, this policy became secondary in efforts of conversion and total conquest.

Once the missionaries familiarized themselves with the linguistic machinations associated with the religious practices of the Nahuas, they discovered many anomalies that would lead to opportunities for clearing up ambiguities, but would also complicate the understanding of the complex pantheon of deities employed by the Catholics.

“The apparent absence of a term for ‘god’ in Nahuatl led Jesuit José de Acosta to conclude in *Historia natural y moral de las indias* (1590) that the Indians hardly understood anything about the Supreme Divinity, ‘for they don’t even know how to name him except by means of the Spanish term (*vocablo*).’....They knew of the word *teotl*, a Nahuatl term referring to a multiplicity of manifestations- images, ritual objects, and deity impersonators- which the Spaniards found difficult to apply to their own deity.”¹⁴⁸

Of course, as the missionaries became closer to their subjects and discovered how heavily involved ritual was in manifesting the perceived vision of truth, they turned to mimicry in order to successfully replace the old divinities, with new concepts. One of the first, and most malleable, was of course the sacred Virgin Mary.

¹⁴⁷ Javier Villa-Flores. *Dangerous Speech: A Social History of Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico*. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 32.

¹⁴⁸ Villa-Flores, *Dangerous Speech*, 33-34.

Legitimater of Native Autonomy: Millenarian Justification Comes Full-Circle.

Certain indications are given that the Guadalupan plays were performed during Lent. The first Guadalupan play, "Dialogue on the Apparition of the Virgin Saint Mary of Guadalupe," acknowledges that some Nahuas were still practicing their ancient religion. In the play, Mary appeared to Juan Diego, a man who had committed to celibacy with his wife in imitation of the pure life that Mary led. She told him that he must tell the bishop to build a temple for her on the hill of Tepeyac, so that people may come to know her, an effort to supersede the residual aspects of the native religious traditions. Juan visited the bishop who dismissed his report as a native fantasy manifesting the dreams that the Indians have a habit of equating to reality. Juan Diego returned to Mary and tells what has transpired, also asking to be replaced with a man of higher status so that that the tale might be more credible to the ecclesiastical palette. She refused and told him to return to the Bishop the next day. He did so, and the bishop interrogated him regarding his lifestyle and the appearance of the Virgin. He told Juan Diego that he must have a sign. Juan Diego returned home to find his uncle Juan Bernardino had succumbed to illness. The family called in a fraudulent physician who treated the uncle and told the family to get a priest just in case he turned for the worse. Juan Diego was elected, but decided to take another road to avoid disappointing the Virgin Mary. Mary encountered him anyway and had him pick flowers which do not normally grow in the region and which would have been out of season in any case. He puts them in his mantle and presents them to the bishop as a sign. The flowers appeared as painted finery to all others who try to pick them up. The bishop accepted this as a

sign, and Juan Diego returned home to find his uncle had been cured by Mary. The physician wouldn't believe it was anything other than his medicine, and so the sick were brought before him as a test. He sent one away, refusing to treat him because he "met with a powerful wind" while trying to conjure hail. Even the evil doctor apparently had his scruples. The people conspired to trick the doctor by faking illnesses and the scene ends with them beating the physician with bull bladders.¹⁴⁹

This play exhibits a multitude of pre-Columbian qualities. The structure of the prose itself is reminiscent of prayers to Tlaloc, the words "precious" and "jade" are once again repeatedly used, parallels between monikers associated with Tezcatlipoca are allied with that of God, and the content of hybridity is much more prevalent than the previous Guadalupan drama, although it maintains the same storyline. Chastity continued to be exalted and the expression of a need for conversion is blatant. However, a dialogue between two pages reveals that some authors were deliberately salvaging remnants of past religions under the guise of Christian works. "This good fable / Means that a great many people / Do not understand; / If some document / Falls into their hands, they see only / Its beauty; but interiorly, / They are not wise, They pass it by without thinking."¹⁵⁰ This hint is by no means subtle enough for the average person not to realize that this play is a very bold example of that such practice. The play ends with a more pious and less comical act than the previous one, with the Virgin Mary speaking about the need for her

¹⁴⁹ "Dialogue on the Apparition of the Virgin Saint Mary of Guadalupe." *Nahuatl Theater Volume 2: Our Lady of Guadalupe*. (eds. Barry D. Sell, Louise M. Burkhart, and Stafford Poole). (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 54-105.

¹⁵⁰ "The Wonder of Mexico." *Nahuatl Theater Volume 2: Our Lady of Guadalupe*. (eds. Barry D. Sell, Louise M. Burkhart, and Stafford Poole). (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 145.

temple to be built.¹⁵¹ This play appears to be more rooted in Nahua conventions than the previous Guadalupan play.

The Miracle of Guadalupe.

A challenge to the European hubris of foreign subjugation would be presented in the form of an Indian neophyte named Juan Diego in 1531, exactly 10 years after the Spanish Conquest. The timing, place, and manifestation were crucial indicators of manipulation in order to subvert the unwelcome colonial authority of the Spanish.

Stafford Poole, an authority on the development of Guadalupan culture, explains that the account that seems to have gained the most credulity among scholars for its authenticity is one which was written by Luis Laso de La Vega, who was himself a creole priest and vicar of the Guadalupan chapel.¹⁵² His account wasn't written until 1649, suggesting that either the story was a fabrication, at least in part, which manipulated the date, characters and events of the story. At the very least, it had become a folk tale spread through oral tradition and documented over a 100 years after the reported occurrence, leaving no surviving witnesses or disputers alive to confirm or deny the details of the story. This would allow for embellishment, omissions or all-together untruthful accounts regarding the apparition of the Virgin. For this reason, it is necessary to understand that while the account itself is based upon events which may have deeper roots in oral tradition, and arguably as much authenticity of those recorded by Nahua clerks creating The Florentine Codex, it is also a hybrid product, of a hybrid culture, and almost certainly has some revisionist license embedded within the documentation.

¹⁵¹ "The Wonder of Mexico", 106-185.

¹⁵² Poole, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in Two Nahuatl Dramas," 5.

The account, or legend, of the apparition of the Virgin to Juan Diego states that he was a pious and humble native who made a pilgrimage to the hill at Tepeyac, which had previously been known for its devotion and as a pilgrimage destination for the goddess Tonantzin. He was attracted to the sound of music being emitted by birds, which was followed by a woman's voice which led him to the hill. The Virgin Mary then appeared to him, and told him that she desired a chapel to be built on the spot so that she might be seen and known by her people, that she might hear their pleas and act upon them. In order to accomplish this he must go to fray Juan de Zumárraga, the bishop of Mexico. Met with a certain amount of incredulity and disdain, Juan Diego failed and returned to consult the Virgin. Explaining his lack of presence among the esteemed clergy and himself as meek for the task, the Virgin offers the explanation that she didn't want prestigious ambassadors "who would have more credibility. She, however, wanted her message delivered by a poor and humble person". This display of confidence by the Virgin in a menial personality in the cultural strata of post-Conquest Mexico is an evident message of favoritism of the natives and can best be equated to the aphorism of the meek who shall inherit the earth. It grounded the natives with a legitimacy bestowed by a divine personage (a deity in their own eyes) and it also gave power to the Catholic proponents of millenarianism who believed that the future of Christianity and the hope for a utopian society existed within the innocent hearts of a New World civilization who only needed the epiphany. The account continues as the Virgin manifests some rare and incongruous species of flowers and the healing of Juan Diego's sick uncle as proof of the Juan Diego's validity and his mission. Seeing these other miracles, the bishop relents and

the chapel is built to honor the Virgin.¹⁵³ By some coincidence, the chapel is erected on top of the old site dedicated to the pre-Columbian deity Tonantzin. This was apparently noted by several of the Spanish friars, including Bernardino de Sahagún who wrote this confirmation fifty years after the Conquest:

Now that the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been built there, they call her Tonantzin too...The term refers...to that ancient Tonantzin and this state of affairs should be remedied, because the proper name of the Mother of God is not Tonantzin, but Dios and Nantzin. It seems to be a satanic device to mask idolatry...and they come from far away to visit that Tonantzin, as much as before; a devotion which is also suspect because there are many churches of Our Lady everywhere and they do not go to them; and they come from faraway lands to this Tonantzin as of old.¹⁵⁴

Sahagún's reaction may indicate a certain amount of anathema to cult worship of the feminine divine, however, the devotion dedicated to Guadalupe was one which originated in Extremadura, Spain and was also transplanted into the Nahua belief system and may have contributed to the development of deity worship revering Mary in particular. According to Stafford Poole, not all Franciscans were vocal regarding their disdain for what they conceived as heresy. Poole claims that silence within the Franciscan accounts were indicative of the hostility with which the shrine was viewed. The writings, such as those of Motolinía who was saving the account of his attendance to dying native youths claiming to have seen the apparition, were not published or accounted for very publicly, most likely in an act to prevent further ignition of native devotion to a sacrilegious

¹⁵³ Poole, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in Two Nahuatl Dramas," 5-7.

¹⁵⁴ Eric R. Wolf. "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol." *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. (ed. Michael Lambek. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), 162.

shrine.¹⁵⁵ Yet other conflicting accounts exist, such as that of Bernal Díaz del Castillo who writes that miracles are associated with the site, but are not necessarily associated with the Virgin, or her apparition. Poole recognizes that the place is associated with the Virgin despite the ambiguity of details and cross-dating of accounts.¹⁵⁶ While documents reference the events within the year 1531, Poole notes that there is no record of the chapel on the site until at least 1555 and that the story did not appear in print until 1648 by Miguel Sánchez and six months later by Laso de la Vega in the *Nican mopohua*.¹⁵⁷ There could be several reasons for this discrepancy in dating. The most obvious being that the events were strategic in their development within the development of the post-Conquest history in order to claim native legitimacy within a Spanish government. Another could be that the accounts were suppressed in an effort to combat heresy; an even more likely scenario is that the natives lacked the linguistic and literary skills to transfer the story to a permanent medium. In any case, the devotion became popular even among residential Europeans within New Spain, though there seems to be no clear reason for it.¹⁵⁸ This could be a possible manifestation of cross-cultural exchange, a “double-mistaken identity” of religion within the developing hybrid culture that was growing within colonial Mexico.

The Guadalupan plays are rife with political innuendo and blatant proclamations of native autonomy. The appearance of Mary in the New World legitimized and gave the

¹⁵⁵ Stafford Poole. *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797*. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 39-40.

¹⁵⁶ Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 65.

¹⁵⁷ Stafford Poole, “Some Observations on Mission Methods and Native Reactions in Sixteenth-Century New Spain.” *The Americas*. (Vol. 50, No. 3, Jan. 1994: 337-349), 346.

¹⁵⁸ Poole, “Some Observations on Mission Methods and Native Reactions in Sixteenth-Century New Spain,” 346.

Nahuas leverage in proclaiming their own religious rights as Christians, despite the fact that the events were a hybrid construction, and this can be seen throughout the plays. The Virgin Mary clearly possessed many attributes which are depicted within the dramatic representations of her, which vary and correlate throughout the plays. The concept of Marian divinity among the Nahuas was fluid, metamorphic and at times whimsical. The power of that concept demonstrates more than just conversion, it highlights the religious syncretism and hybridity of that divinity.

Chapter 4: The Transformation of the Divine

“My will is going to be carried out, as it is essential for my beloved child’s vassals that I build my house here, so that they may go about crying out to me and obtaining my help.”¹⁵⁹

The deification of the Virgin Mary signified more than just a mutated conversion to Christianity; it is one which established the legitimacy of the Native American autonomy that existed prior to European contact and which underwent an entire political and cultural conquest based upon the Eurocentric precepts sanctioned by divine and temporal authorities: the Catholic Church and the Spanish monarchy respectively. The Virgin Mary became a hybrid construct of the Nahua religion which still existed syncretically and harboring the subversion of a conquered people who would never be completely assimilated.

Didactic Complementarity.

By examining the Nahuatl plays and these various aspects of them, we are able to determine that the vision of the sacred through native eyes and native culture differed greatly from the meaning that was derived by its implementers, the Franciscans. Christian productions were transformed into performances which were *not* a direct translation as the Franciscans had originally sought to implement. The plays became a hybrid invention by the Nahua intellectuals in which elements of the pre-Colombian faith

¹⁵⁹ “Dialogue on the Apparition of the Virgin Saint Mary of Guadalupe,” 73.

could survive. The Nahuas were instrumental in the product of Nahuatl theater at every level. The Franciscan colegios allowed them a voice in documenting the hallmarks of their religious beliefs and pre-Columbian history. The scribes who were involved in translating the plays into Nahuatl were responsible for the stylized way in which it was presented. The appeal to this was that it could retain the structure of the Aztec religion with at times, only minor substitutions. This resulted in gaining the attention and transition to Christianity of the Nahua audience. The performers who maintained their role in ritual as deity impersonators, also helped to indoctrinate traditions such as prose, dance and music into the hybrid religious practice that was a compromise created by the confluence of Franciscan and Mexican traditions. The audience, for its own purposes, was also performing, as they interacted with the plays, not just observing them. Spectacle allowed them to associated and transfer their deity worship into the forms introduced by the Franciscan priests. Eventually, the Virgin Mary would come to hold value in many ancient capacities. In newer ones, she also dominated as the virtuous and native-loving proponent of millenarianism. Her identity had become transformed by the bi-cultural interaction of the natives and the Spanish. Eventually, this hybrid identity would come to be accepted as orthodoxy even by the Spaniards, when she was clearly a hybrid divinity conceived by the clashing cultures.

Double-mistaken identity is a concept that was defined by the scholar James Lockhart who explained that the convergence of culture resulted in absorption of cultural elements based upon their familiarity.¹⁶⁰ In fact, Lockhart credits the success with which

¹⁶⁰ James Lockhart. *Of Things of the Indies: Essays Old and New in Early Latin American History*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 99.

Spanish religion took hold in the New World to the Nahua belief systems that were already in place: “for the people of preconquest Mesoamerica, victory was prima facie evidence of the strength of the victor’s god. One expected a conqueror to impose his god in some fashion, without fully displacing one’s own; the new god in any case always proved to be an agglomeration of attributes familiar from the local pantheon and hence easy to assimilate.”¹⁶¹ It is therefore an easy matter to see how Europeans and Nahuas connected on a religious cultural level and the emergence of the devotion to the Virgin was transmutable from Spain to the pre-existing Nahua devotion to Tonantzin. Lockhart examines data regarding the occurrence of miracles and notes that Marian devotion was more prevalent in “Hispanized areas” and that of 14 miracles, half affect Spaniards, and the rest affect indigenous or neutral individuals”.¹⁶² Hence, the account of Tepeyac is itself a hybrid product with an ambiguous religious deity whose divinity was relatable to both cultures despite whatever language or name by which she was invoked.

The Hybrid Mary.

Stafford Poole claims that the apparitions at Tepeyac are more recent than historical documentation has previously claimed. He believes that no apparitions were associated with the site until after 1648 and the publication of Miguel Sánchez’s book, that it was purely a local ritualistic pilgrimage site.¹⁶³ The purpose of Mary is manipulated within the text to highlight the native role in the progress of Christianity within the New World. “Guadalupe was heaven’s way of showing the humanity of the

¹⁶¹ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 203.

¹⁶² Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 249.

¹⁶³ Poole, “Some Observations on Mission Methods and Native Reactions in Sixteenth-Century New Spain,” 345-346.

Indians, their place in the devotion was secondary and somewhat grudgingly admitted.”¹⁶⁴ Mary provides the natives a role within the expansion, with an identity within the Spanish empire. The sermons which catered to this paradigm may be responsible for the legend’s growing popularity at the time. The “divine favoritism” can be seen very clearly in the Guadalupan dramas which were contemporarily developed in order to increase native devotion. Poole notes that “deliberate evangelization” does appear to be the ultimate goal in the Guadalupan dramas which seeks to “impart...devotion to the Virgin, who has a special love for the Indians, and living a good Christian life” though they differ from the criollo sermons in their claims of “special election”.¹⁶⁵

The final religious product and orthodoxy are two concepts which have been juxtaposed since the inception of religious conversion within the New World. They are often seen as opposite ends of a spectrum when defining the authenticity of Christianity, yet the fault lies in the definition of orthodoxy. The fact is that nearly all cultures have assimilated to one culture or another, simply by coming into contact, conquest, or subversion. In many cases, the assimilation has not been one of complete whitewash, but rather one of specialized integration, known as syncretism. Religious syncretism is one of the most common forms of hybrid culture and the convergence of ideals forges a new identity, but that does not mean the method itself is new. Stafford Poole analyzes the tool of theater within the process of Nahua evangelization. One of his two main observations is that the religious syncretism involving Christianity is as old as the religion; that

¹⁶⁴ Poole, “Some Observations on Mission Methods and Native Reactions in Sixteenth-Century New Spain,” 346.

¹⁶⁵ Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 190-191.

Christianity is in fact a product of hybridity. Not only are many of the legends borrowed from Judaism and certain pagan religions, but words, philosophy, liturgical calendars, and certain rituals can be traced past the indoctrination of Christianity and found in other (and usually older) religions. His second observation is that these changes to the Christian religious culture occurred in spite of the Church's constant disapproval and institutional principals.¹⁶⁶ This ground-giving by the Church demonstrates an eventual level of acceptance and assimilation that varied depending upon the influence that was being pressured at the time of instigation. Since the extant plays depicting Marian divinity within Colonial Mexico are seen through the eyes of Nahuas, preserved in their language, and harboring elements of their pre-Columbian roots, it is necessary to consider that the concept of Marian divinity in Colonial Mexico was not the "orthodox" one presented by the Spaniards, but an amalgamation of many attributes associated with the feminine concept of divinity embraced by the pre-Columbian population.

Indigenous Identity and Agency.

Exploring the likelihood that the Virgin Mary of colonial Mexico was a hybrid product of religious syncretism, we must evaluate what identity the natives saw in their valuation of her purpose. As Poole noted previously, the deity had a special love for natives. She also had a proclivity to appear within mysterious circumstances, such as in dreams. As dreams were sacred to the Nahuas as a means of connecting to the sacred on an alternate plane, the method of her apparitions would have gained legitimacy in relating

¹⁶⁶ Poole, "Some Observations on Mission Methods and Native Reactions in Sixteenth-Century New Spain," 346-347.

her to ancient Mexican deities.¹⁶⁷ Conversely, the Virgin Mary also gave legitimacy to the natives and their devotions which maintained rituals that were similar- if not the same- as pre-Conquest enactments. Therefore, the question remains to be explored on how much influence the Spanish, the Nahuas and the creoles had in creating the concept of Marian divinity. Poole explains that the plays existed prior to the explosion of the devotion dedicated to her in the New World:

“It was only with Hidalgo’s revolution of 1810, when he adopted Guadalupe as the symbol of Mexican nationalism and identity, that it became a fixed part of indigenous religious devotion. Since that time Guadalupe has become a foremost example of the fusion of national identity and religious devotion.”¹⁶⁸

This brings up a larger issue of how prevalent the pilgrimage to Tepeyac was and how prolific the legend of Marian divinity was conceived by everyday Nahuas who visualized her based upon the portrayal of the Nahuatl edifying plays.

Agency, Worship and Subversion.

“Guadalupe has been adapted to the needs of contemporary agendas. In a very real sense the Virgin of Tepeyac is reinvented by successive generations to meet the demands of a new orthodoxy.”¹⁶⁹ This precedent was adopted by the Mexica even before the Conquest, and according to Lockhart, is a secret to the success of ideological modes that thrived in the New World.¹⁷⁰ Clearly, as authors, actors and audience, the Nahuas had influence in the presentation of the Marian deity within theatrical production. As the

¹⁶⁷ Poole, “Introduction: The Virgin of Guadalupe in Two Nahuatl Dramas,” 21.

¹⁶⁸ Poole, “Introduction: The Virgin of Guadalupe in Two Nahuatl Dramas.” 9.

¹⁶⁹ Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 13.

¹⁷⁰ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After Conquest*, 203.

founders of schools and patrons of the elite who catalogued the details of pre-Columbian culture, the Franciscans were responsible for the didactic material substance of the plays.

Stephanie Wood explains that the Nahuatl writings are key to discovering the true agency and depth of subversion within colonial culture as the writing is one of the few resources left to historians in order to interpret the true historical religious precepts held by native populations before and after their partial assimilation and eventual hybridity.¹⁷¹ Wood specifically believes that any documents which were produced by a native hand away from the oppressive influence of the clergy and which was kept in a relatively secular location for safe-keeping are the best specimens that scholars can hope to find, although they are rare. Part of the reason they are so rare is owing to the Christian effort to destroy all things pagan that they could encounter. Codices and other native texts, usually in the form of textiles, were destroyed or spirited away by private collectors; and although some have been retrieved, many are lost to the archaeological and historical record forever. The reason the clergy were so eager to exterminate any Pre-Colombian evidence was obviously to replace it with the alternative of Christianity, but also because of a constant threat to the very institution they were offering to instill.

It appears based upon scholarly research and the development of the deity, that the Nahuas had the most agency in preserving their pre-Columbian identity within the facets of Nahuatl drama. Theater was enveloped into their spectrum as a way of coping with Conquest and the domination of deities usurping the traditional ones. Theater replaced pagan ritual, yet embodied its fundamental elements. “The sacred, then, has two

¹⁷¹ Wood, Stephanie. *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 14-15.

components: *it is what overflows human understanding and explanation, and what exceeds the possibility of changing it.*¹⁷² Therefore, the Marian deification within colonial Nahuatl drama is a creation of hybridity. It maintains a definition and identification of the supernatural and it superimposes a new identity onto it due to the convergence of culture via conquest. Néstor García Canclini notes that ritual is a cultural institution that is symbolic of social inequality, to paraphrase Durkheim.¹⁷³ As every Latin American scholar has reaffirmed, the institution of Mexica religion was tied to the socioeconomics and politics inextricably. They each affected another aspect of the cultural composition of the Nahua.

The syncretic Mary, who encompasses the pre-Columbian and Christian concepts of the feminine divine, has many purposes, many authors, and many devotees. Her identity, like Turner's definition of ritual, is liminal and fluid. Balsera-Díaz discusses how the God presented in another Nahuatl play "The Sacrifice of Isaac" demonstrates the static incongruencies of a developing ideological character: "And though foreign deity's inexplicable behavior was not unlike the arbitrary Tezcatlipoca, it did alter the regularity of the established practices that nourished the cosmic feeding continuum."¹⁷⁴ The paradigms of the Franciscans did influence the religious cosmo-vision, though it could not replace it or be conquered by it. The result was a hybrid product, a cross-cultural understanding. The same can be said of the concept of Marian divinity. The Franciscans began a project of native evangelization, seeking to create a utopian civilization that

¹⁷² Nestor Garcia Canclini. *Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995), 134.

¹⁷³ García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity*, 134-135.

¹⁷⁴ Balsera-Díaz, "A Judeo-Christian Tlaloc or a Nahua Yahweh? Domination, Hybridity and Continuity in the Nahua Evangelization Theater," 223.

would invoke the biblical apocalypse and renew the true Christianity which had become so contaminated in Europe. The Franciscan friars attempted to teach the natives to emulate the role models of Christ and Mary, who they identified in the roles of Adam and Eve, although breaking from the parable's pattern of disobedience in original sin and providing an explanation of mortality, heaven and hell to the natives.¹⁷⁵ The natives were encouraged to embrace the new religion, which had admittedly already been altered by those seeking orthodoxy. Marian divinity was altered to appeal to the complementarity of the native concept of divinity, but also to appease the European archetype which had already created a corollary syncretism. Mary's tangible and motherly qualities naturally appealed on many levels to the devotion which became the legacy of her introduction. The Franciscans had attempted to protect the purity of their concepts when translating their texts into Nahuatl, opting to keep Spanish terms while compromising in converting Christian dogma into the vernacular in order to become more appealing to the Nahuas.¹⁷⁶ By altering their own mission, the Franciscans were creating a hybrid religion whether they intended to or not.

Mary was seen by Nahuas as the dominant figure in the complementary relationship of the religious figures within Christianity. She occupied the roles of sacred vessel, intercessor, mother of mercy, authority of native religion and autonomy and most importantly, she was further hybridized and embodied many of the characteristics of the pre-Columbian deities. She gained a devotional following owing to her pagan ties and Christian empathies. She defined herself as savior not only of the world, but of the Native Americans, who had been oppressed by the European conquest of their lands, and

¹⁷⁵ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 77.

¹⁷⁶ Baudot, *Utopia and History in Mexico*, 99.

she therefore became a political figurehead as well. Her mission was encouraged by millenarians who saw the natives as an innocent and uncorrupt population that could bring about the apocalypse and establish a new, orthodox Christian utopia that would become a model to the rest of the world. Marian divinity within the plays was altered as needed to establish, comfort and create a tangible link to the world of the sacred. The concept of her divinity is hybrid and always has been. The more her deity comes into contact with different cultures, the more assimilation will occur. The Franciscan project of evangelization and the native efforts of conservation evoked through their agency within translational and performance capacities resulted in a new unique hybrid Christianity: Nahua Christianity, with a Nahua Mary, and later a devotion resulting from the following which resulted from this cultural convergence. The question remains whether the results were consciously produced, and there is a great deal of evidence to corroborate an affirmation of that theory. Burkhart concludes that this hybrid religious product is a “Christian surface with a Nahua structure.”¹⁷⁷ This undoubtedly translates to the religious figure of Mary as well. This religion would then become accepted by a progressively homogeneous population under the concept of double-mistaken identity.

Going back to my memory of the Mayan guide in La Venta who told me that you can see the crosses in the great ceiba trees, and the question he provoked in me: did the concept of divinity change and become accepted as authentically Christian although it might actually be religiously syncretic? The trees were present in the Central Valley before Christians came, but was divinity embodied in that symbol and the myths surrounding it? I would argue that the trees have always been there and the crosses have

¹⁷⁷ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 188.

always been visible, but it was a foreign paradigm which superimposed itself onto the ancient beliefs that have become associated with it. The old religion persists in elements of the hybrid religion and masquerades behind the face of Christianity, yet its attributes are undeniable. Marian divinity in Nahuatl drama is the same; it is the ceiba tree which bears a cross, a uniquely hybrid concept of her divinity.

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