Coronado and Aesop Fable and Violence on the Sixteenth-Century Plains

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In the spring of 1540, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado led an entrada from present-day Mexico into the region we call New Mexico, where the expedition spent a violent winter among pueblo peoples. The following year, after a long march across the Great Plains, Coronado led an elite group of his men north into present-day Kansas where, among other activities, they strangled their principal Indian guide, a man they called El Turco. In the pages that follow, I focus on the events leading up to and including the execution of this Indian guide. Although Coronado, his chroniclers, and modern historians have tended to take the killing of this guide for granted, the violence was far from straightforward. Indeed, the expeditionaries' actions were embedded in sixteenth-century Spanish culture, a milieu that can still reward study by historians of the Great Plains. Working within this context, I explore the ways in which Aesop, the classical master of the fable, may have informed the Spaniards' actions on the Kansas plains.

CONQUISTADORS AND STORYTELLERS

The notion that fierce conquistadors could have any interest in fables of foxes and tortoises will strike many people as improbable. With good reason, David Lavender explains that “Los conquistadores were tough, disciplined, and as ruthless as circumstances required.” To be sure, they were violent men in search of great wealth, but simple portraits do not capture their complexity. Simon A. Barton offers more detail:

Most were young single men aged between 14 and 30; a quarter were of hidalgo stock, many of them impoverished segundones, or younger sons, who were denied any prospect of an inheritance at home by the system of...
entail; the rest were mostly labourers, artisans, traders and soldiers of limited means. Imbued with the militant Catholicism of the Reconquest and inspired by the tales of chivalry then much in vogue, what all these determined and supremely self-confident men had in common was a burning sense of loyalty, to Crown and Church, and an unquenchable thirst to acquire wealth, status and power.2

This description supplements Lavender's summary by recognizing a range of conquistadorial inspirations and motives. Alluding to "the tales of chivalry," Barton acknowledges that a surprising number of the conquistadors were literate and, to a certain extent, aware of the literary culture around them.3 After describing this connection in detail, Irving Leonard offers an even more surprising portrait of the conquistador: "His emotional responses to stimuli of every sort were quick and warm, moving him to heroic action and intense enthusiasm."4 In ways too numerous to mention here, the conquistador was a complex product of his age. As J. H. Elliott once pointed out, in a discussion of Cortés, the conquistador embodied the "ideals and aspirations of his society."5 If this more complex invader turns out to be guilty of atrocities, perhaps we should look to the European culture that produced him. Leonard puts the matter bluntly: "The study of contemporary Europe reveals plainly the universal pattern of cruelty, intolerance, and inhumanity."6 Although this sort of acknowledgment can never excuse the conquistadors' violence, it does help us approach the personnel of the Coronado expedition with greater precision.

We know, for instance, that Coronado led about four hundred Europeans and thirteen hundred Indian allies.7 G. Douglas Inglis has pointed out that "[o]nly 28.9% of the men of Cíbola had participated in a previous conquest. Even the Captain General was a novice conquistador having served only in pacificaciones of areas already conquered."8 Instead of shining armor, many of the Europeans wore pieces of Indian armor they called armas de la tierra.9 A number of Europeans brought along their wives and children. African slaves marched with the party. Wagons filled with supplies and armaments rattled along. Sheep, goats, and dogs made their own slow way at the back of the caravan.

Like many before them, Coronado and his European comrades had been inspired by a mix of legend, literature, and rumor. Myths of El Dorado, the seven Portuguese bishops, Antillia, the Hesperides, and Solomon's mines merged with rumors of Indian kingdoms to the north and the stories of Cabeza de Vaca.10 Tales of chivalry such as Amadís de Gaula mingled with this discourse of speculation. Whether such stories really motivated any Europeans to risk life and limb is open to debate, but such fictions inflected their aspirations and their perceptions.11 For instance, as Richard Flint explains,

Spaniards came to the Western Hemisphere already primed with popular stories of treacherous guides, often Turks, so they anticipated and might have projected that possibility onto American natives. The deceptive guide was a staple of the wildly popular chivalric romances of the day in Spain. Many expeditionaries were preconditioned to expect attempts at deception.12 Expecting deceit, Coronado and company tried to take charge of their fortunes by turning "authorial."13 It is possible to study this scripting in first-hand accounts of the expedition by Coronado, Pedro Castañeda de Nájera, Juan de Jaramillo, and the anonymous author of Relación del Suceso.14 Arranged side by side, these relaciones clearly agree on many aspects of the expedition. In unison, they point to landmarks and rehearse turning points. Nevertheless, personal and professional biases emerge as the writers attempt to explain New World experiences through Old World frames of reference. Where the anonymous author emphasizes measurements, Jaramillo concentrates on bison and pasture. In the longest account of the expedi-
tion, Castañeda likes to explore the literary possibilities of the material. He sets scenes and pauses to rehearse little inset stories, like the one about

a young man-at-arms called Trujillo [who] pretended to have had a prophetic vision while bathing in the river and defecating. With his appearance altered, he was brought before the general, at which point he explained that the devil had told him that he [Trujillo] would kill the general and marry his wife, doña Beatriz, and that she would give him great treasures. (392)

Readers of Renaissance literature will recognize the spirit of Boccaccio, Lazarillo, and La Celestina in this tale as the writer explains how a frightened Coronado sent Trujillo home—which is what the man craved all along. In keeping with the satiric spirit of the aforementioned works, Castañeda mocks the captain-general. Elsewhere in the narrative, he heightens this mood as he tells how Coronado was knocked to the ground during the attack on Cibola and how an expeditionary raped a woman at one of the pueblos in New Mexico while her husband unwittingly held the attacker’s horse.

I suggest that Castañeda’s investment in storytelling says as much about his comrades as it does about him, and this hunger for narrative is acutely apparent at the end of that first long and bloody summer in 1540. The expeditionaries felt like failures. With no gold to show for their actions, they paid close attention to the first storyteller who spoke to their desires. He was probably “a member of a proto-Pawnee people.”15 He may have been an itinerant merchant.16 We really have no way of knowing for sure, but what we do know is that when he began to tell his story of a distant land called Quivira—a place of abundant water and gold—the Spaniards listened. Not surprisingly, Castañeda reports the Indian’s story of

a river in a plain which was two leagues wide. There were fish as large as horses there. And [there were] a great many exceedingly large canoes with more than twenty rowers on each side, which also carried sails. The lords traveled on the poop, seated [54r] beneath awnings. On the prow [there was] a large eagle of gold. He said further that the lord of that land slept during siesta under a great tree on which a great number of golden bells hung. In the breeze they gave him pleasure. Further, he said that generally everyone’s serving dishes were worked silver. And the pitchers, plates, and small bowls were [made] of gold. (400)

Castañeda and his fellow chroniclers devote a great deal of speculation to this story because, needless to say, the tale of Quivira did not seem to match their experience of Quivira. Following these chroniclers, many modern historians have dubbed El Turco a prevaricator, but other interpretations are possible.17 Although Europeans in the New World liked to assume that they could communicate clearly with native peoples, the reality was always more fraught. With this in mind, one archeologist has suggested that the Indian was really describing Mississippian tribes and their watery worlds.18 Perhaps Coronado and his captains simply misunderstood an honest report. It is also possible that, minus a few garbled details, the description accurately depicts the abundance of Quiviran life along the Arkansas River.19

What we know for sure is that the expeditionaries responded to the tale with violence and invention. When the other Indian guides denied the story, the Europeans tortured them for it, as though violence could in some way supplement, even perfect, the anecdote. More strikingly, either during the expedition or afterwards, Coronado and company named the storyteller El Turco, turning him into a character, a figure from the Old World that echoed familiar tales of the Reconquista. If the act of naming was retrospective, as Jane MacLaren Walsh and the Flints quite reasonably suggest, then it represents a remarkable example of sixteenth-century rationalization. The expedition’s failure made perfect sense. Coronado
and his captains had simply been playing their part in an ancient (and even eternal) battle between good and evil. On the other hand, if the expeditionaries named the storyteller before setting out for the plains, the act may suggest the Europeans' awareness of their own desperation. It may suggest a kind of fatalism that seems irrational to us but quite reasonable to sixteenth-century minds. Pushed to the brink of collapse, these gold-hungry Europeans may have gone out of their way to fictionalize their final venture and foreshadow its collapse.

AESOP AND THE EXPEDITION

Not content with El Turco, the Spaniards turned to Aesop. In the spring, as the expedition prepared to set out, the captains laid their hands on Quivirans who could counsel them with their detailed knowledge of the kingdom. The captains called one Xabe and turned away when the native told them El Turco was lying (Castañeda 408). Xabe's compatriot said the same thing and the captains dubbed him "Ysopete," or Aesop in English, as the Flints point out in their definitive edition of the expedition documents. Historians have tended to pass over this action in silence, even though it raises a number of remarkable questions. What did sixteenth-century Spaniards know of Aesop? How did they value him? How might knowledge of the fable-maker and his fables have mattered to Coronado's company as it set out for Quivira?

Answering the first question is simple enough. Coronado and his compatriots would have been quite familiar with the creator of fables. For much of the fifteenth century, a few well-educated Spaniards read a Latin version of the stories translated by Lorenzo Valla. Then, as Spurgeon W. Baldwin Jr. explains, “The first collection of fables to appear in Spain [in Spanish], made up primarily but not exclusively of fables attributed to Aesop, was printed in Zaragoza in 1489, and was given the title La Vida del Ysopet con sus fabulas historiadas.” Baldwin goes on to describe the significance of the edition for Spanish culture:

[F]irst, it was probably one of the most widely read books of the time, judging from the large number of editions; second, it is the first known Spanish version of these fables, and served as a model for a series of collections of Aesopic fables, having popularity in Spain lasting almost down to the present time.

Sixteenth-century Spanish schoolchildren read the book as a language primer, and the fables took on a life of their own. Over time, these secular tales assumed the moral aura of Christian texts; and sometime after the Coronado expedition, Spanish humanists began to translate their Aesop into Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. In the imperial mindset of the sixteenth-century Spaniard, Aesop occupied a central place.

The fascination, as it turns out, was multifaceted. People of lower social classes appreciated the fables because they saw their own lives and predicaments reflected in the stories of lowly mice and vulnerable lambs. People of all ranks appreciated the fables because they found compelling stories of difficult and dangerous predicaments. Just as the poor in spirit might turn to the Beatitudes for comfort, people could invoke and rehearse Aesopian tales and find company for their misery. It should be no surprise, then, that a group of frustrated Spaniards might see their situation mirrored in Aesopic storytelling.

Nor is it surprising that the expeditionaries would want to write their own fables. La Vida del Ysopet encouraged them to do so. Stretching to 163 fables, the collection includes many stories penned by later fabulists, who happily wrote themselves into the Aesopian tradition. The quality of their contributions seems not to have mattered. Many of the later entries are bad imitations. A number of the dimmest entries seem completely out of touch with the genre. Yet everyone, it seems, was welcome at the Aesopian table. By naming their guide Aesop, Coronado and company seem to have embraced this model.

Needless to say, their action offered a number of strategic advantages. If the expeditionaries
took to calling their honest Indian guide Aesop after the fact, they could claim an aura of prescience. Thoughtful readers might deduce that the captains had anticipated deception but had pressed on in the face of disaster. In such a scenario, the leaders seem less like dupes and more like dutiful officers following every possible lead, regardless of the risk. At the same time, by aligning their search for golden cities with the Aesopian tradition, the authors of the *relaciones* could imply that their stories should be understood in the tradition of the *fabula historia*. In this context, the failure to find gold seems less important than the adventure itself.

If the captains named the Indian Aesop before setting out for Quivira, they may have been seeking a kind of hermeneutical reorientation. Perhaps Aesopian bearings could be applied to their unprecedented position in the heart of *Tierra Nueva*. In this context, the expeditionaries were—like the cats, raptors, mice, and lambs of so many fables—poised before life and death decisions with inevitable finales. The tack made sense. As Baldwin explains, fables' morals “are without exception concerned with practical advice for getting along in life, often with overtones of stoicism highly appropriate and useful to those of low degree.”

Reading Aesop was like studying a manual for how to anticipate and manage failure.

One thing seems certain. Regardless of when the captains named their Indian guide Aesop, the nomination helped them naturalize the violence that occurred on the Kansas plains. This effect, as it turns out, is rooted in the title of the 1498 collection: *La Vida del Ysopet*. Before offering any fables, the volume rehearses the familiar narrative of Aesop the gadfly who travels the world, challenging communities' assumptions about themselves. Put more bluntly, the volume introduces the storyteller as being famous for telling people what they did not wish to know. In keeping with Herodotean version, the Delphians execute Aesop for being so irascible. Coronado and company must have been acquainted with this violent ending. Indeed, they may have said, “This is what happens to Aesop.” Perhaps they found a certain consolation in such thoughts. If they were intent on believing El Turco, then calling his chief critic Aesop turned that criticism into a familiar joke. Aesop could deny the possibility of finding gold, but the Spaniards would have the last laugh at the Indian’s execution. The violence would be communal, emphatic, and inevitable.

Of course the fables reinforce this kind of rationalization at every turn. In story after story, violence is inevitable, pragmatic, retributive, and utterly gratifying. Consider, for instance, the fable of the wolf and the lamb that appears near the beginning of the Spanish collection (Fig. 1). This well-known story offered a paradigm for the Spaniards’ position on the way to Quivira. In the fable, the two animals meet at a stream, and the wolf puzzles over his desire to eat the innocent lamb. Hopeful readers might begin to suspect that the wolf will change his mind, but he does not. The moral explains:

> Esta fabula significa q[ue] cerca los malos y falsos no ha lugar de razón ni vale otra cosa contra ellos salvo la fuerza sola. Eseme[n]jates lobos se fallan en cada lugar. Los quales por tirania buscando ocasiones beuen la sangre y afan delos innocentes y pobres.

This fable signifies that in proximity to bad and false people there is no place for reason or anything else save force alone. And these wolves are everywhere, searching out by means of tyranny occasions to drink the blood and take away the will of the innocents and the poor.

As they set out across a forbidding landscape for Quivira, Coronado and his comrades saw the trail ahead in precisely these terms. They would have to traverse an arid landscape where even the smallest stream would mark a turning point, a moment of decision. They already believed that their guides could not be trusted. Preaching a kind of lupine paranoia, the Spanish version of Aesop reminded them that “wolves” are every-
where. But any thoughtful expeditionary must have wondered whether, in this story, he and his comrades were the wolves or the lambs. As wolves, they could take heart from the fact that force would see them through. As lambs, they had to feel doomed. Whether wolves or lambs, the end was the same: violence.

The fable of “The Mouse, the Frog, and the Hawk” is even more relevant. Like the expeditionaries, the mouse in this fable wants help with his journey. Against all the laws of nature, he approaches the frog and asks for help crossing the river. They agree on the preposterous plan of tying the mouse’s leg to the frog’s leg. The venture goes smoothly only until the frog hits the water and the mouse sinks. As the frog struggles to save himself, the hawk swoops down and snatches the two creatures. The woodcut from the Spanish collection depicts this pathetic end (Fig. 2). Here we find yet another tale of failure and violence, but this one adds an important codicil to the familiar formula: in a harsh world, alliances only make more victims. The application to expeditionary experience seems obvious. Like the mouse, Coronado and company crossed streams and rivers with varying degrees of confidence. Like the mouse, they were now defying common sense by tying themselves to guides who were radically other. Somewhere on the plains ahead, they would sink like mice in water. In retrospect, the moral is particularly ominous:

Significa esta fabula q[ue] los q[ue] piensan mal y dämpnyo a otros y lo se ponen por obra, a las vezes se destruyen assi mesmos por fazer mal a otros, y assi perescen los q[ue] so especie de beien fazer mal.

This fable means that those who wish ill and injury to others and try to do it, sometimes destroy themselves in trying to hurt others, and thus die those who, under the guise of good, do harm.33
Fig. 2. La Vida del Ysopet con sus fabulas historiadas (Zaragoza, 1489). The figure depicts the fable of “The Mouse, the Frog, and the Hawk.”

According to the Spanish text of Aesop, alliances demand rigorous analysis by all those involved because improbable plans usually mask malicious motives. Destruction is inevitable.

Quite in keeping with this conclusion, Coronado and the other writers who chronicle the expedition describe their alliances with Aesopian wariness. In his letter to the emperor, written soon after his return from Quivira, Coronado provides the most compelling example. Faced with the task of reporting failure, Coronado explains that

some native Indians from other provincias beyond these gave me a report that in their land were much grander towns and buildings, better than those of the natives of this land. [They reported] that there were lords who ruled them, that they ate out of golden dishes, and other things of great magnificence. (319)

Any educated Spaniard reading this letter would expect Coronado to have shown a certain amount of skepticism at this juncture. The leader does not disappoint:

[S]ince it was a report from Indians and mostly by signs, I did not give them credence until I could see it with my own eyes (their report seeming very exaggerated to me). Because it seemed important to Your Majesty’s service that it be examined, I decided to go with the company I have here to see [it]. (319)

The writer takes care to highlight his reasoning. The shifts of thought are evident, here as well as in the Spanish original. Coronado had good reason to doubt the report. Consequently, he set out with a clear standard for belief: his own eyes. Unconcerned with wealth, he went forward out of duty or “service.” He was, at the outset, neither frog nor mouse.
As they traveled across the Plains, the expedition encountered the Querechos and the Teyas. They marveled at the herds of bison and the grasslands that seemed to erase their passage. Pummeled by hail, confounded by the open spaces, the Spaniards grew more and more frustrated. A crisis was inevitable. Coronado reports the turning point as occurring during a conversation with the Teyas who made me [understand that] in [the land I was going to] the houses [were made] of thatch and hides and not of stone nor [were they] multistoried, as the guides I was taking had made me imagine them. And in them [there was] little corn for eating. With this news I received the utmost pain, seeing myself in those tiresome, endless plains, where I had extreme need of water. I drank [water] so bad it contained more mud than water. (320)

The account reads like a fable's peripeteia, that moment when an animal looks about over a stream and suddenly realizes that he has been dangerously misled. Like one of these duped animals, Coronado confesses that he was bamboozled. His confession made, the leader begins to complain and goes on whining about conditions on the final leg of the journey to Quivira.

MURDER IN QUIVIRA

What Coronado and his elite group of expeditionaries found along the great bend of the Arkansas River was an abundant civilization of Caddoan people, ancestors of the Wichita, who lived in thatched lodges, cultivating lush gardens in the summer, hunting buffalo in the winter. A wealth of streams and springs surrounding the river nurtured their way of life. Ysopete and Xabe seem to have negotiated the arrival, for the Quivirans welcomed the invaders peacefully enough, offering them hospitality and access to their villages.

To say the least, the conquistadors were conflicted. On the one hand, there were no stone mansions encrusted with jewels. Castañeda puts it succinctly: “Neither gold nor silver was seen among those people, nor [was there] news of it” (411). On the other hand, Coronado reported to the emperor: “The soil itself is the most suited for growing all the [crops] of Spain that has been seen. [This is] because in addition to its being deep and black and having very excellent water from streams, springs, and rivers, I found plums like those in Spain, walnuts, excellent sweet grapes, and mulberries” (321). Jaramillo echoes this appraisal: “This land has a very beautiful appearance, such that I have not seen better in the entirety of Spain, nor in Italy or part of France, nor even in other lands where I have traveled in His Majesty’s service” (517).

These accounts seem to suggest that the conquistadors were well contented with their labors, but such an assumption overlooks the Europeans’ mood. Coronado describes the sticking point:

Thus the report [the guides] gave me was false. [And] because it might have induced me to go there with the whole company, I believe (because the route passed through so many empty and unsettled areas and [because of] the absence of water sources) that [the guides] may have directed us to a place where our horses and ourselves might die of hunger. The guides confessed to just this and that they did it by the advice and order of the natives of these provincias [Tiguex, Cicuque, and perhaps others]. (321)

Coronado and his men, though they had suspected the situation from the outset, were furious that the Indians had lied to them. It would be a mistake to pass over this testimony lightly. According to the invaders, the pivotal issue was that they had been duped. A glance back at Aesop tells us more. Compounding this frustration was a certain Aesopian awareness that they, like the frog in the fable, had embraced a bad alliance. They should have known better. It would, I think, be difficult to overestimate the resulting fury that, in fabular
terms, was already sufficient justification for violence. Coronado does not mention the execution of El Turco in this letter. We must turn to the expedition’s chroniclers for an account of this event. Castañeda takes pains to rehearse the important “confession” of the guide:

He replied that his land was toward that area and besides, the [people] of Cicuyc had begged him to get the [Spaniards] lost on the plains. [That was] so that, lacking food supplies, the horses would die. And [the people of Cicuyc] could kill [the Spaniards] without difficulty when they returned, [because they would be] weak. And [they would be able] to avenge what [the Spaniards] had done. Because of this he had led the [Spaniards] off course, thinking that they would not know how to hunt or how to sustain themselves without corn. Regarding what [he had said previously] about gold, he [now] said that he did not know where there was any. He said this now as [one who was] hopeless. He was ashamed that [the Spaniards] had believed Ysopete and that [Ysopete] had guided them better than he had. (411)

I quote the passage at length because of its historical importance. Here is a “transcript” of the first crudely improvised tribunal of European “officials” condemning a Native American to death in the Great Plains. It begins with the victim whose true name has been erased. After torture, this man “confesses” his desire for home and a plot to undo the European forces that mean to claim his land. After torture, he denies his previous account of Quivira. He announces his hopelessness and his shame. Even the casual historian of the American West knows that this pattern stands as a prototype for the centuries of violence that followed.

Undigested in this account is the Spanish chronicler’s emphasis on the rivalry between the lying guide and Aesop. Jaramillo sets up this narrative by describing the events surrounding Coronado’s epiphany on the plains: “Here the Indian Ysopete, whom we were call-

ing a companion of the aforesaid Turco, was asked whether he would tell us the truth and lead us to the land we were going in search of. [{} He said yes, he would do that, and that it was not as El Turco had told us” (515). At Coronado’s moment of truth, Aesop stepped in to supplant the lying guide. In a manner of speaking, the father of fables took center stage in order to explain that he had been right from the beginning. Unlike his namesake, the Indian was set free and remained with his people. In the midst of so much failure, it must have been a psychologically satisfying turn of events.

On the matter of El Turco’s execution, the chroniclers are matter of fact. Castañeda emphasizes expediency, the idea that the Spaniards acted in order to prevent collusion between El Turco and the Quivirans. He concludes, “[T]hey garroted him” (411). Then he adds a touch of Aesopian spirit by reporting that “Ysopete was pleased about that” (411). Here is the old fabular pleasure in victory, comeuppance, hierarchy restored, vindication—and deftly executed violence. In this spirit, Jaramillo tells his version with the kind of sardonic tone that would eventually figure in tales of the Wild West: “That night he [El Turco] was put to the garrote, so that he did not wake the next day” (516). Both writers emphasize a kind of poetic justice, the inevitable ending in a clear-cut moral that makes violence so satisfying and so inevitable.

When the expedition eventually returned to Mexico City in 1542, the Spanish government initiated an official inquiry into the expedition’s many acts of violence. At the center of this hearing was the question of El Turco’s murder. Richard Flint, who has translated and edited the hearing’s documents, observes that the Coronado expedition has a reputation for gentleness, but the editor declares: “Nothing could be farther from the truth.” As one participant after another testified, the conquistadors had carried out many acts of violence, including the brutal murder of El Turco. Having established this fact, the presiding officials exonerated Coronado for having done his best in a difficult situation.
... When modern historians discuss the murder of El Turco, they effectively underwrite the chroniclers’ perspective. For instance, in the most famous account of the expedition, Herbert Bolton becomes positively Aesopian when he calls the victim that “rascal.”36 He describes the garroting in detail, speculating that “[p]erhaps the honors were divided.”37 Bolton writes of this execution with the kind of high spirits we tend to reserve for comedy or sport. Paul Horgan, by contrast, conjures up a legalistic sort of justice: “The Turk was dead, by order of the General, for he had proved to be a lying traitor who had even schemed to betray the army to enemy Indians.”38 Of course, this sense of legality has its roots in the kind of justice dispensed by crafty felines and raptors in the pages of Aesop. It has far less to do with jurisprudence than it does with human psychology. Lavender offers a similar treatment: “He had lied about it because the people of Cicuye had promised him rich rewards for luring the Spaniards onto the Llano, where, it was hoped, they would perish. Bleakly, Coronado had the prevaricator strangled.”39 Lavender embeds the idea of cause and effect in this passage but encourages our sympathy for the despairing leader. Picking up a bit of Castañeda’s tone, William Brandon equivocates but arrives at the same verdict: “Whether or not El Turco was truly the first villain of record of the Quivira Trail, he was certainly the first victim; and, of course, maybe he was both. He was killed at night in one of the Christian tents—secretly, to keep from upsetting the Quivirans.”40 More recently, John L. Kessell has told the most succinct version of the familiar equation. He notes the Indian’s confession and concludes “[t]hat revelation cost El Turco his life.”41 For Horgan, Lavender, Brandon, and Kessell, El Turco’s end is pure cause and effect, right and wrong, utterly logical and reasonable. Among the many historians who have discussed the expedition over the last hundred years, Wes Jackson is unique in his dissenting opinion: “Thus young noblemen from some of Europe’s finest families were responsible for the first murder of an Indian by whites in Kansas.”42

“Myths,” James Hillman writes, “are the norms of the unreasonable.”43 When Coronado and his company found themselves struggling to salvage an expensive expedition founded on unreasonable expectations, they invoked the figure of Aesop. With his life and his fables, this canonical figure of the Old World offered these frustrated conquistadors a way to manage failure and normalize violence in the heart of an abundant and peaceful civilization.

NOTES

10. Hartmann and Flint, “Before the Coronado Expedition,” 38; Diana de Armas Wilson, “Cervantes


14. George Parker Winship discovered Castañeda’s narrative in the nineteenth century and published it in 1896 as The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542, part of the Fourteenth Annual Report of the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, 1892-93, part 1. Born c. 1515, Castañeda left behind the most comprehensive account of the expedition, although he did not witness certain key events, including the execution of El Turco. Jaramillo came from Villanueva de Barcarrota in Extremadura, having invested over 3,000 pesos in the expedition. The author of the Relación seems to have been a captain with significant knowledge of the expedition’s decision-making process. Further quotations from these documents are cited parenthetically in the text and come from Documents of the Coronado Expedition, 1539-1542, trans. and annotated by Richard Flint and Shirley Cushing Flint (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2005).

15. Documents of the Coronado Expedition, 596.


17. For a succinct summary of such verdicts, see Smith, The Wichita Indians: Traders of Texas and the Southern Plains, 39.


20. Walsh, in “Myth and Imagination in the American Story: The Coronado Expedition,” 207-8, has suggested that the name was given to the Indian after the expedition. There seems to be no way of proving this notion. I remain skeptical of the theory for several reasons. First, if Coronado and company waited until after the expedition to name the guides, what did they call them during the expedition? Although written at different times in different places, none of the extant accounts ever hints at other names. Second, the expeditionaries everywhere demonstrate their love of naming. They name one Indian for his facial hair—Bigotes. They name every river and every significant canyon. They even call attention to their love of naming. In his chronicle, Juan Jaramillo reports: “Here the Indian Ysopete, whom we were calling a companion of the aforesaid Turco . . . ” (Documents of the Coronado Expedition, 515). Finally, we should not underestimate the capacity of sixteenth-century people to anticipate and even embrace their own misfortune. On this phenomenon, see Lacey Baldwin Smith, Treason in Tudor England: Politics and Paranoia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 1-35.


22. Emilio Cotarelo Mori, “Prologo,” in Fábulas de Esopo (Madrid: Real Academia, 1929), x.

status of this volume is complex. For more on the transmission of the fables into Spanish, see Gustav G. Laubscher, "Notes on the Spanish Ysopo of 1496," *MLN* 24, no. 3 (1909): 70-71.


28. Ibid., 762.

29. Ibid., 764.

30. *Fábulas de Esopo*, 25r.


33. Ibid., 27r, translation mine.

34. The Relación del Suceso echoes this view, noting that the expedition gave little "credence" to El Turco (*Documents of the Coronado Expedition*, 501).


37. Ibid., 303.


