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## **The Translation of Aesop's Fables in Early Colonial Mexico**

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### **Resumen en inglés**

This article contributes to an already limited analysis of the translation into Nahuatl of some of Aesop's fables. Informed by former studies, it elaborates on the possibility that the translation reflects the influence of an educational environment like that of the sixteenth-century Mexican Imperial College of Tlatelolco. Here, Nahua students might have learnt Latin grammar and rhetoric by following the exercises suggested by the classical author Marcus Fabius Quintilian, which included textual analysis, literal translation, and a more free translation or paraphrase of Aesop's fables. The article also tries to explore the hybrid nature of the Nahuatl version; it continues to acknowledge the influence of the Nahua rhetorical style and, in addition, highlights the translator(s)' Christian interpretation of the Aesopic tradition. In this sense, an analysis of the fables attempts to show that they were possibly translated in order to be drawn on as stories or exempla for conversion purposes.

### **Resumen en español**

La intención de este artículo es contribuir al ya de por sí limitado análisis de la traducción al náhuatl de algunas fábulas de Esopo. Siguiendo la línea de otros estudios anteriores, contempla la posibilidad de que la traducción refleje la influencia de un contexto educacional como el del Colegio Imperial de Tlatelolco (fundado en México en el siglo XVI), donde los estudiantes nahuas habrían aprendido latín y retórica de acuerdo con los ejercicios que el autor clásico Marcus Fabius Quintiliano sugería: análisis textual, traducción literal y traducción libre o paráfrasis de las fábulas de Esopo. El artículo también examina la naturaleza híbrida de la versión nahuatl; sigue reconociendo la influencia del estilo retórico náhuatl pero, además, hace hincapié en la interpretación cristiana que el traductor o los traductores hicieron. En este sentido, se intenta demostrar que las fábulas se tradujeron posiblemente para utilizarse como historias o exempla con fines evangélicos.

**Palabras-clave:** Aesop (Esopo), Quintilian (Quintiliano), Nahua translators (traductores nahuas), College of Tlatelolco (Colegio de Tlatelolco), evangelization (evangelización)

## 1. Introduction

Two manuscripts of forty-seven fables of the Aesopic tradition have come down to us translated into Nahuatl, the language of the Nahuas, who were subdued to Spanish rule after Cortés's conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1521. One of these manuscripts is catalogued in the Biblioteca Nacional of México. A 1800s copy of it by the Mexican priest and scholar José Antonio Pichardo, who probably attached a Latin version to the first thirty-three fables in order to present the translation in a parallel-text format, is also held in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. The second manuscript, with very slight deviations in comparison with that of the Biblioteca Nacional, belongs to the Bancroft library of Berkeley and was edited in 1987 by the Spanish American scholars Gordon Brotherston and Günter Vollmer. They included an early 1960s translation into German by the anthropologist Gerdt Kutscher and their parallel translation into English (Vollmer 1987: 217, 231).

After the Mexican scholar Angel María Garibay Kintana denied the interest of the Nahuatl fables in his seminal *Historia de la literatura náhuatl* (1953-1954), these have received scant attention, with Brotherston and Vollmer's edition containing the only two studies available to experts in colonial America and curious readers.<sup>1</sup> Their hypothesis and conclusions remain as follows. The fables were likely aimed at a wide audience and the two manuscripts must be surviving ones of many other hand-written copies. Undated and anonymous, Mexican scholars like Garibay Kintana suggested the second half of the sixteenth century as their date of composition and, possibly because of the other religious texts accompanying the manuscripts, the Franciscan missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagún as the translator (Vollmer 1987: 222-223).<sup>2</sup> Having arrived in colonial Mexico in 1529, Sahagún spent most of his life dedicated to the schooling of the sons of the Nahua elite and to the composition of proselytizing works in Nahuatl. Although unable to prove it, Kutscher similarly believed that the Nahuatl fables imbibed from Sahagún's environment. They were, as Vollmer quotes "proof of an occidental intelligence, with which the great Sahagún paid his thanks to the Indians for sharing so much of their culture with him" (Vollmer 1987: 235). It is, nevertheless, the "Indians" to whom Kutscher alludes that have been proposed by Brotherston as the translator(s) of the fables and copyists of the manuscripts. According to him, only native speakers were able to abide by the Nahuatl syntax and rhetoric in such a refine and fluent manner. What is more, the fables show that the translator(s) found inspiration in their cultural heritage and, in this respect, Brotherston states (1987: 27) that their *tonalamatl*, a divinatory calendar composed of animal signs, "formed a precise antecedent for Aesop's Mexican translators." Departing from any connection with Sahagún's religious context, he later continues to defend the unique indigenous nature of the fables, arguing (Brotherston 1992: 316) that they do not bear much "resemblance to the Nahuatl catechisms and Bible stories produced by the friars and their local helpers."

Reinforcing Brotherston's claim of the indigenous rhetorical style of the fables, the intention of this study, nonetheless, is to offer an additional understanding to the Nahuatl translation and demonstrate their likewise strong Christian skew. The Nahuatl fables are contextualized within a religious setting in which some of the Nahuas who had been educated in a Christian institution aided the friars in the composition of doctrinal works and other auxiliary texts for conversion. The latter comprised indigenous speeches, conundrums, and stories or exempla, all of which were intended to be deployed in religious communications with the Nahua neophytes. The article is thus divided into three main sections. The first discusses the European projection of Aesop's fables as an educational and liturgical source in the New World and, particularly, in colonial Mexico. The second explores the connection between the Nahuatl fables and the Franciscan Imperial College of Santa Cruz of Tlatelolco, where Sahagún taught, and considers the possibility that the Nahua translator(s) belonged to this institution, as more recently suggested by Silvermoon (2007: 39). This section briefly examines the translator(s)' educational context by looking at

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<sup>1</sup> Brotherston reiterated the contents of his study in 1992: 315-319.

<sup>2</sup> The Biblioteca Nacional manuscript contains, amongst others, two works attributed to Sahagún—the *Kalendario* and the *Arte adivinatoria*. The Bancroft library one also comprises a *Santoral*; a calendar of saint's days, and a collection of Nahua sayings and metaphors (Vollmer 1987: 209, 211).

the manner in which they learnt Latin thanks to the paraphrase exercises recommended by classical authors like Marcus Fabius Quintilian, and tries to explain some examples of domestication found in the Nahuatl fables. Elaborating on the influence exerted by both their Christian environment and their rhetorical and cultural pre-Hispanic knowledge, the third section of the article continues to delve into the translator(s)' Christian interpretation of the fables and takes into account the doctrinal purposes for having them translated in the first place.

## 2. Aesop's fables for educational and liturgical purposes

*Institutio oratoria* (The education of the orator; ca. A.D. 95) by Quintilian (ca. A.D. 35-98) is a twelve-book classical treatise that, concerned with the formation of a citizen-orator, blends a teaching guide on education and a manual of rhetoric with a reading list of best authors and a reflection on moral duties (Murphy 1987: xvii-xix). In Book I Quintilian urges teachers to initiate students into certain "rudiments of oratory" and good morals by performing speaking, reading, and writing activities. In chapter IX, he suggests (1922: 157) in particular that "[t]heir pupils should learn to paraphrase Aesop's fables." Quintilian bases his choice on their "simplicity of style," if one is to compare them, for example, with the more complex verses of Virgil's *Aeneid*, although their enjoyable and instructional content must not be discarded. With respect to the exercises that this paraphrasing or rewriting of the original entails, he spells them out as part of three consecutive tasks. The pupils, he explains (1922: 158-159),

should begin by analysing each verse, then give its meaning in different language, and finally proceed to a freer paraphrase in which they will be permitted now to abridge and now to embellish the original, so far as this may be done without losing the poet's meaning.

As observed in this passage, Quintilian's exercises do not differ from those of present-day teaching scenarios. Firstly, Quintilian puts forwards the reading comprehension of a given fable, which requires an analysis of its grammar and vocabulary; secondly, a literal translation into a "different language," in his own time mostly likely from Greek into Latin; and finally, a "freer paraphrase" or appropriation of the text by indulging into a free translation that allows the student to shorten or extend the original as long as Aesop's interpretation of the fable is kept.

In the middle Ages students were introduced to Latin through Aesop's fables and Quintilian became a pedagogical *auctoritas*. His teaching methods and the subject matters that were involved continued to work well for the acquisition of oratory skills; the teaching of Latin and its grammar, and what we term today as lexicography, history, and cultural studies. Two textbooks that observed Quintilian's selection of texts, and which students began to read after having achieved a satisfactory mastery of Latin grammar, were the *Six auctores* (Six authors), widely-circulated up to the thirteenth century, and its sequel, the *Auctores octo morales* (Eight moral authors), which remained strong well into the Renaissance. The first compiled Christian and classical stories by six minor authors, whereas the second, placing even major emphasis upon the teaching of Christian moral values, consisted of prescriptions of schoolboy's manners, reflections on virtues, sins, and the sacraments, and parables and retellings of biblical stories (Ciccolella 2008: 68; Orme 2006: 100-101). Interestingly, both compilations included Aesop's fables on human and animal subjects, in *Six auctores* as written by Avianus (fifth century A. D.), and in *Auctores octo* by Walter the Englishman (ca. 1200) (Orme 2006: 99-100; Taylor 2004: 90).

Avianus and Walter's collections are only two of the many versions of the Aesopic literary tradition, so-called due to the centuries-long complex process of different authors' appropriations and rewritings in which the fables were fraught. The stories attributed to Aesop, a historical figure of the island of Samos who is thought to have lived around 2,800-2,600 years ago, originally constituted a Greek body of adult popular knowledge that was told in private conversations and public scenarios like assemblies and dinner parties (Gibbs 2008: xi). The Greek poet Hesiod authored the first written testimony in the eighth century B. C., and the first extant collection of fables, this time in Latin verse, was composed by Phaedrus in the first century A. D. To this compilation followed many others, such as the third-century anonymous

*Collectio Augustana* in Greek verse; the fourth-century one by Aphoninus's in Greek prose; and Avianus's in Latin verse. From the tenth-century onwards, the Aesopic medieval tradition favoured another collection known under the name of "Romulus," which contained Phaedrus's fables, but this time in Latin prose, and additional fables as outsourced from other medieval authors, who retold familiar ones and more stories circulating amongst the population. "Romulus" co-existed with classical, medieval, and, later on, Renaissance authors' allusions to the Aesopic tradition, as found in Horace's poems, Alciato's *Emblems*, and Erasmus's *Adages*, as well as with further editions of the fables, like those of the eleventh-century French monk Ademar of Chabannes and the late fifteenth-century Bonus Accursius; the Greek *Collectio Accursiana* (Gibbs 2008: i-xii; xx-xxix, xl-xli).

While some collections of fables, including Avianus and Walter's, were drawn on by tutors as a minor reading for pedagogical purposes, there existed another sort of rewriting that inserted the Aesopic tradition within an evangelical and liturgical oral context. Together with legends, contemporary events, and descriptions of animals as found in bestiaries, the fables became a useful type of exemplum in popular preaching; a short story that helped in the transmission of oral and folkloric memories and bridged the intellectual gap between churchmen and commoners. Told as exempla, Aesop's stories were used by preachers in order to retain or regain their audience's interest as well as to facilitate the understanding of a difficult moral or theological exposition (Taylor 1992: 68, Barry 2004: 83). The thirteenth-century scholar and cleric Odo of Cheriton illustrates strongly the manner in which medieval churchmen situated Aesop's fables in a Christian context. Cheriton seems to have been the first collector to organize the fables in thematic groups, beginning, for instance, with those revolving around the process of choosing a ruler or a king. This arrangement perhaps responded to an intent on his part to supply an easy identification of a relevant fable that, conveying a specific topic or message, was suitable for a churchman's sermon (Gibbs, 2008, pp. xxviii-xxix). A typical example of Cheriton's rewriting of the fables as exempla stands as follows. For the fable of "The Crow, the Eagle and the Feathers," on the crow's vanity and ungratefulness towards other birds that had given their feathers to him in order to make him beautiful, Cheriton begins the fable with this promythium or interpretation of its meaning prior to the text itself: "A fable against people who boast that they have something they do not" (Gibbs 2008: xxviii). Likewise, immediately after the body of the text, Cheriton adds his own epimythium or final moral of the story: "This fable can also be used against wealthy men who boast of the extent of their riches: The Lord will take everything in time and thus the rich are humiliated" (ibidem). A preacher in search of an exemplum to be introduced in a sermon attacking vanity and ingratitude would have found that this fable was very appropriate. During the delivery of his speech to a large congregation, he could have even brought the exemplum to conclusion by reiterating Cheriton's promythium and epimythium, which addressed the bulk of the population as well as the wealthy, respectively.

### **3. Aesop's fables in the Imperial College of Santa Cruz of Tlatelolco**

Given the twofold deployment of the Aesopic tradition in Europe—for the teaching and learning of Latin, rhetoric, and moral values, and for an easier exposition of the Christian doctrine—, it is not surprising that Aesop's fables made their way to the libraries of New World friaries and schools. In colonial Mexico, in particular, the fables have been found in the sixteenth and seventeenth-century catalogues of the friary of Toluca and the College of Tlatelolco (Mathes 1982: 62; Gómez Canedo 1981-1982: 69). Their presence in this college can be explained because of its focus on the learning of Latin and because of the linguistic expertise that was expected of its students in order to support the friars' evangelization of the Nahuas. The College of Tlatelolco squared in some extent with a European friary, functioning at the same time as a centre of study for its Franciscans and as a secondary grammar school for the male Nahua elite. The schoolboys and teenagers, who started aged ten to twelve, were instructed for three years in the subjects of the *Trivium* and the *Quadrivium*, together with moral and natural philosophy, and Christian doctrine (Steck 1944: 25, Kobayashi 1974: 277). Some of the tutors of the college, aside from performing their teaching and pastoral duties, were active in a number of proselytizing endeavours; not only in the continuation of their religious studies, but also in the administering of the sacraments and the production of auxiliary works

for conversion in the Nahuatl language. Thus, Fray Arnaldo de Bassacio, the first to teach Latin, composed sermons and brief doctrinal treatises; Fray Juan Focher, who imparted rhetoric, logic, and natural and moral philosophy, composed a Nahuatl grammar, and Sahagún, who taught Latin, and moral and natural philosophy, directed the creation of *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*, and sermons and psalms like those of the *Sermonario de todos los sanctos* and the *Psalmodia christiana* (Mendieta 1973, II: 280, 195).<sup>3</sup> Although attributed to the friars, the production of these texts relied heavily on those pupils who had proven to be the most advanced. Sahagún (1988, II: 635) reports on their linguistic expertise and the activities in which they were involved in the following manner:

[N]os dan a entender las propiedades de los vocablos y las propiedades de su manera de hablar, [examinan y corrigen] las incongruidades que hablamos en los sermones o escribimos en las doctrinas [...] [.] [C]ualquiera cosa que se ha de convertir en su lengua, si no va con ellos examinada, no puede ir sin defecto, escribir congruamente en la lengua latina ni en romance ni en su lengua.

As observed in this passage, the students and later assistants of the college engaged in linguistic comprehension and correction of texts, writing, translation, and interpreting. Sahagún also stresses their high skill in the performance of these duties, asserting that they had been trained to become trilingual “gramaticos” and “trilingues”—by which he probably means that they were native speakers of Nahuatl with an excellence command of Latin and Spanish (Sahagún 1950-1982: 53-55). A glance at the catalogue of the college unveils the texts thanks to which they attained their linguistic mastery. For the study of Latin grammar and rhetoric, the Nahua assistants would have attended classes in which tutors availed themselves of Nebrija’s *Introductiones latinae* and of a copious list of collections and works by classical authors such as Cicero, Virgil, Pliny, Seneca, Sallust, Juvenal, Livy, Aesop, Cato, Caesar, and Plutarch (Mathes 1982: 32-33, 47-77, 93-96). Many of these were suggested readings by Quintilian, whose textbook was also present in the library. In fact, the imitation and paraphrase of some of these texts would have been part of the curriculum, and in this respect Sahagún commends the ability of his students when claiming that they became quickly adept at the writing of “versus heruicus;” the English iambic pentameter that is found in another work recommended by Quintilian; Virgil’s *The Aeneid* (Sahagún 1988, II: 634).

With no extant heroic verses as conducive evidence to shed light upon the manner in which Sahagún’s Nahua students were trained to master Latin, the surviving translation of Aesop’s fables can be fit for purpose. If one is to imagine how the students went about to do the exercises suggested by Quintilian for the paraphrase of Aesop, the first stage to be considered is the recreation of their linguistic and cultural analysis of the text prior to the paraphrase. To begin with, the students would have done a close reading of the assigned fable in Latin, probably from the bilingual edition of the compilation by Accursius, *Aesop fabulae graece et latine* (1479), or from the similar *Aesopi phrygis fabulae graece et latine*, a 1544 copy of which was available in the Tlatelolco library (Brotherston 1987: 13).<sup>4</sup> During the textual examination the students would have discussed with their tutor vocabulary, grammatical topics such as unusual verb forms or subjunctive versus indicative, and stylistic matters. This analysis by students who belonged to a different cultural and geographical space, and who were native speakers of an agglutinative language like Nahuatl, must have emerged as more complicated and time-consuming than the analysis carried out by a native speaker of a Latinate language like Spanish. A glance at the opening fable of the two extant Nahuatl manuscripts, “Quaquauhtentzone yuan coyotl” (the goat and the coyote)—identified by editors Brotherston and Vollmer as “Vulpes et hircus” (the fox and the goat),—serves as a starting point showcasing this. With pupils who were consolidating the fundamentals of Latin, the tutor might have started by working with them sentence by sentence. When discussing the meaning of the first one, “vulpes et hircus sitientes in puteum descenderunt” (the fox and the goat were thirsty and went down into a well) (Aesop 1616: 138), they would have spoken about the two animals featuring in the fable. As customary, they must have

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of these texts, see Bustamante García 1989, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Aesopi phrygis fabulae graece et latine*, cited hereafter as *Aesopi phrygis fabulae* saw many reprints for centuries. This article quotes one from Basilea, 1616.

acknowledged the gender, number, declension, and case of *vulpes* and *hircus*, and then they would have tried to fathom out their equivalents in Nahuatl. In matching both animals with autochthonous species they might have agreed that the goat was similar to their *quaquauhtentzone*, and that the fox was to be equated with a coyote. Whereas the identification of the former rests on the physical similarities, that of the latter has more to do with the symbolic or cultural perceptions of the two animals in the European and the Nahua cultures. In the same manner as the “cunning fox” stands for craftiness and deception, for the Nahuas it is the coyote that represents astuteness. In this respect, the first chapter of Book XI of *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España* depicts the coyote as “muy sagaz” and “diabólico,” in the sense that it is vindictive; “si alguno le quita la caça [...], procura de vengarse de él, matándole sus gallinas o otros animales de su casa” (Sahagún 1988, II: 682).

In their linguistic analysis of the fable the Nahuas would likewise have continued to notice the differences and similarities between the Latin grammar and that of their native tongue, which they had been taught by taking Latin as the basis for comparison and understanding.<sup>5</sup> For instance, they would have identified the word *sitientes*, a present participle literally translated as “thirsting,” and keeping it as a verbal form perhaps translated it as “amique” or “amiqui” (Kutscher et al. 1987: 58), which is the third person plural preterit of *atniqui*, deriving from *atl* (water) and *miqui* (to die) (Ruth and Cortés 1968: 116). As for the rest of the sentence, “in puteum descenderunt,” the students would have noted that it consisted of a preposition followed by accusative. In Nahuatl they knew that this preposition, rather than standing on its own, could be attached to the location to which it refers. Thus, they could have interpreted “in puteum” as “atlacomolco,” comprising the equivalent for *puteus* (well) as *atlacomolli* and the preposition “co,” which observing the Nahuatl grammar rules is postponed and changes the root of the noun. Finally, they would have recognized “descenderunt” as a verb because of its third person plural preterite form “-erunt.” Working out the meaning of the verb would have proven more difficult to a Nahua student than to a Spaniard, who would have thought of the Spanish cognate “descender” (to go down). The preposition “in” and the word “puteus” told them that the verb implied some sort of movement towards the well, which a Nahuatl-speaking tutor could then have confirmed as *nontemo*, and translated as *onontemoque* (they descended).<sup>6</sup>

Having completed this linguistic analysis and word-for-word translation, as suggested by Quintilian, the students would have come up with a more fluent translation that still abided by the main ideas of the original. This case is illustrated in the rendering of the fox’s plan. The Latin version of *Aesopi phrygis fabulae* reads:

Confide, utile quid in utriusque etiam salute excogitavi: si enim rectus steteris, anteriores pedes parieti applicueris, & cornua partier in anteriorem partem inclinaveris, cum percurrerim ipsa per tuos humeros & cornua, & extra puteum illinc exiluerim, & te postea extraham. (Aesop 1616: 139)  
Trust me, I have devised something useful and safe for both, you should stand and put your forefeet to the wall, and incline likewise your horns forward. I will then run over through your shoulders and horns and hence leap out of the well. Afterwards I will draw you out. (Hamilton 1828: 4)<sup>7</sup>

The Nahuatl version maintains the same steps of the plan as follows:

macamo ximotequipacho: ca oniquittac yn tleyn ticchihuaz[que] ynic vel tiquiçaz[que]. Ca yntla timotlame lauhcaquetzaz. yuan ym moma caltech ticmamanaz. yuan yn motzontecon ticacouiz. ynic vel micampa veuetztoz moquaquauh. yn neuatl niman mocuitlapan nontlecoz ynic vel nonquiçaz atlacomolco. Auh yniquac oniquiz niman nimitzualanaz.

<sup>5</sup> The first extant grammar of the Nahuatl language, the *Arte de la lengua mexicana* (1547) by the also tutor of Latin at Tlatelolco Fray Andrés de Olmos, proves that Nahuatl was conceived according to Latin grammatical paradigms. For further reference, see Olmos 2002.

<sup>6</sup> In the Nahuatl and Spanish dictionary composed by the bilingual Franciscan and tutor at Tlatelolco, Fray Alonso de Molina, the entry reads: “nontemo. (pret. onontemoc.) abaxar o descendir” (1571: f. 73v)

<sup>7</sup> This and subsequent quotes from Latin into English of *Aesopi phrygis fabulae* are a more reader-friendly version of those by Hamilton 1828.

Don't worry, for I can see what we should do to get out [...]. If you'll stretch yourself straight up [...] and lift your head forward so that your horns reach well up, I shall then climb up on your back so that I can get out of the well. And once I'm out I shall help you out! (Kutscher et al. 1987: 58-59)<sup>8</sup>

A similar case occurs at the end of the Latin and Nahuatl fables, containing this epimythium or final moral. The Latin version of *Aesopi phrygis fabulae* finishes with: “Fabula significant, Sic prudentem virum oportere prius fines altius considerare rerum, deinde sic ipsas aggredi” (the fable means that the prudent man must consider things more highly before they end, and afterwards thus to attempt them) (Aesop 1616: 140, Hamilton 1828: 5). The Nahuatl version, maintaining the gist of the source text, reads:

ynyn çaçanillatolli yc timachtilo yn quenin achto monequi ticnemilizque yn tleyn ticchiuaznequi. ynic amo çatepan ipan tiuetziz[que] yn anezcaliliztli, y xolopiyotl.  
By this fable we are taught how necessary it is above all to think about what we intend to do, so that we do not later become careless and stupid. (Kutscher et al., 1987, pp. 60-61)

Leaving aside a hypothetical scenario in which Nahua students translated Aesop's fables and concentrating instead on the above text as the extant excerpt of the translation, it is important to note the wording used in order to introduce the moral of the fable, that “ynyn çaçanillatolli yc timachtilo” (by this fable we are taught). This phrase and others with slight variation, such as “yni çaçanilli techmachtia” (this conundrum teaches us), appear in every epimythium of the forty-seven fables rendered into Nahuatl. Although the phrases might have been a translation of the beginning of the epimythium in the original source—“fabula significat” (the fables means)—, the title that the whole Nahuatl version bears seems to indicate otherwise. Aesop's fables in Nahuatl open with a title that operates at the same time as a definition of their nature: “Nican vmpeua y çaçanillatolli yn quitlali ce tlamatini ytoça Esopo. yc techmachtia yn nematcanemiliztli” (Here begin the fables, set down by a sage called Aesop to teach us a wise life) (Kutscher et al. 1987: 57-58). The fables are not mere stories but *çaçanillatolli*, literally a mixture of a discourse or *tlahtolli* and *çaçanilli*; translated by Molina as “consejuelas para hazer reyr” (pieces of advice to make laugh) (1571: f. 13v). A *çaçanilli* “teaches us” something, warning us of the consequences of our own wrong behaviour and that of others. Interestingly, there exists another collection of *çaçanilli*. Book VI of *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*; the *Libro de la Rethorica y philosophia moral y theologia de la gente Mexicana*, translated into Spanish by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in 1577, contains forty-six *çaçanilli*, understood by Sahagún as “enigmas” or conundrums. Sahagún and a group of Nahua assistants whom he had taught Latin at Tlatelolco had compiled them in the 1540s together with Nahua speeches, metaphors, and sayings (Sahagún 1950-1982, I: 55. Sahagún sought the codification of a body of texts that, reflecting Nahua rhetoric, could be emulated for the dissemination of the Christian message.

As regards the identity of the translator(s) of the fables, the thorough consistency in the decisions taken when domesticating and foreignizing the source text reveals them as learned Nahuas, likely graduates or tutors at one of those colleges in which a copy of Aesop is present. The social and cultural status that its Nahua tutors and those educated in the institution occupied in the sixteenth-colonial milieu points once again at Tlatelolco.<sup>9</sup> What is more, the two worlds in which they moved—some of their pre-Hispanic cultural traditions and the Spanish Christian environment surrounding them—transpire in some of the translation decisions of the Nahuatl fables. To begin with, when translating animals, the translator(s)' knowledge of European fauna thanks to the study of natural philosophy through texts like Pliny's *Historia naturalis* ensured the comparison of species in the Old and the New worlds. In doing so, the translator(s) are thoroughly consistent. When the distinctive similarity of physical traits leaves no room for confusion the association of animals is based on direct identification, as in the case of the dog, translated in fables

<sup>8</sup> For a more literal translation into Spanish, see Ruth y Cortés 1968: 101.

<sup>9</sup> For a list of Nahua authors and assistants educated in Tlatelolco as well as some of the works that have been attributed to them, see Burkhart's introduction, “Nahua scholars,” in 1996: 65-73, and Silvermoon 2007: 145-239.



fourteen, sixteen, twenty-two, twenty-three, and twenty-four as the Nahuatl *chichi*; the frog, in fables ten, twenty-five, and thirty-five, as the *cuiatl*; and the deer, in fables twenty-four and twenty-five, as the *maçatl*. A matching belief applied to an animal in both cultures leads likewise to the association of species, as in the case of the fox, perceived as the cunning coyote in fables one, two, three, four, six, twenty-six, and forty-six; and that of the lion, as the fierce “tequani miztli,” literally a dangerous or man-eating wild animal, as in fables two, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, forty-four, and forty-six.<sup>10</sup>

This domestication strategy contrasts with the somewhat foreignizing effect experienced in those fables in which the translator(s) decide to maintain the original animal in the Aesopic tradition, that is, an animal that did not exist in the New World prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. Illustrative of this is the presence of the “cocodrillo” (crocodile) in fable four; the “perdiz” (partridge) in five; the “atun” (tuna) in nine; “the cauuallo” (horse) in fable thirty-five; and the “asno” (donkey) in fables twenty-six, thirty-two, thirty-eight, and forty-four. That the translator(s) of Aesop’s fables were cognizant of the unfamiliarity of their audience with some of these animals, like the tuna and the crocodile, rests on the fact that they resorted to explanatory translations. In the fable of the “Tlatlamaque” (fishermen), from the Latin “Piscatores,” a big tuna flies directly into their boat when, tired of catching nothing, they are returning home. The tuna is defined in the Nahuatl fable as “ce uey michi ytoca atun” (a big fish called Tuna) (Kutscher et al. 1987: 80-81). Similarly, in the “Acuetzpali yuan coyotl” (the crocodile and the coyote), from the Latin “Crocodylus et vulpes,” the crocodile is portrayed as follows:

Centlamantli acuetzpalli muchiuā yn vmpa Egipto atlan nemi cenca temamauhti, yn itlachieliz vel yuhquin tzitzimitl itoca cocodrillo yuhquin cuetzpali yc mamaye, auh cenca vey temamauhti yn ixincayo.

Over there in Egypt there is a kind of water-lizard that lives in the water. It is quite terrifying: its appearance is that of frightful monster. Its name is crocodile. Its feet are like those of a lizard. And it is big, frightening is its bark-like skin. (Kutscher et al. 1987: 68-69)

The translator includes a geographical reference to locate the crocodile—in Egypt—which alerts us about his background; very likely a student of Pliny’s *Historia naturalis*, if not of another source influenced by him, who depicts the reptile in these terms: “The Nilus is inhabited by the crocodile, an ill-disposed creature, four-footed, as dangerous upon land as is upon water (Pliny I: 1847-1848: 46). Bearing in mind the initial sentences of Pliny’s portrait, the translator of the fable generalizes its habitat; Egypt instead of the river in it, and concentrates on its frightening appearance. Later on in the text, he establishes a link with an autochthonous reptile; a water-lizard or alligator named *acuetzpalli*.

As for the reference, without clarification, to other animals like the horse and the donkey, unknown to the Nahuas in pre-Hispanic times, one cannot completely speak of a foreignizing effect but rather of an intent to reflect a new reality; the fact that these fables attest to the changing world of the Nahuas, who were widely exposed to the mount of the conquistadors and to pack animals from the early colonial period. In this sense, Brotherston (1987: 17, 21) also indicates that the fables allude to the new economic system brought along by the Spaniards in the form of new types of pastoralism and agriculture. To serve as an example, the fables “Millahcatl yuan ypilhuan” (the farmer and his sons), from the Latin “Agricola et filii ipsius,” and “Quauhtla çihuamaçatl ihuā xocomecatl” (the hind and the vine), from the Latin “Cerva et vitis,” are set in a vineyard, a novel kind of cultivation imported by the Spaniards, and which is termed as *xocomecamilli*, consisting of *xocomecatl*, a native type of grape vine and *milli* or cultivated land (Molina 1571: f. 52r, f. 56v). In the fable of the hind and the vine, it is the moral of this fable that contains, nevertheless, the most revealing example of the Old World brought along by the Spaniards. The story tells of a deer that, having hidden behind a vine in order to escape from some hunters, begins to eat the fresh green of the vine, the rustling of which made them return and kill it. As the deer is dying, the translator makes the deer repent and say: “Oquito huel notlatlacol in ie tzaqua iehica ca amo onicmahuiztili in notepixcauh xocomecatl çan ixco icpa oninen” (I’m suffering entirely because of my own mistake, because

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<sup>10</sup> Molina (1571: f. 57v) translates miztli as “leon” (lion) and in their edition Brotherston and Vollmer opt for the fearsome jaguar.

I have not honoured my protector the vine! To him I have shown no respect!) (Kutscher et al. 1987: 186-187). In the same religious vein, the moral of the fable that appears immediately afterwards reads: “yni çaçanilli techmachtia ca in aquique tlahuelilocaioatl ic quicuepcaiotia teicneliliztli in inpan chihualo hamo huel ixpanpa ehuzque in itelatzacuilitiz dios” (This fable teaches us: those who give harm in exchange for kindness which they have received, may not escape the punishment of God) (Kutscher et al. 1987: 186-187). The Christian moral, speaking of God’s merciless intervention when someone behaves in an ungrateful and sinful way, speaks not only of the translator’s mindset but also of the manner in which he transforms the fable into a two-layered adaptation. The classical Aesopic fable is rendered into the Nahuatl language for its native speakers, but at the same time it turns into a religious text, translated by someone fully evangelized in order to pass on the Christian message to other Nahuatl-speakers. Another likely possibility is that the source text deployed by the translator had already been “Christianized.” Thus, the version of the *Aesopi phrygis fabulae* reads: “Fabula significat, qui injuria benefactores afficiunt, a Deo puniri” (this fable means that those who wrongly blaspheme the benefactors, will be punished by God) (1616: 226).

#### 4. The Christian bias in the paraphrase of Aesop's fables

In the hands of linguistic experts, either graduates or tutors of a Franciscan college like Tlatelolco, with ample experience in translation, paraphrase of source texts, and creation of works for the spread of Christian values and comportment, it comes as no surprise that Aesop’s fables adopt a religious slant. Their Christian purpose is highlighted in the Bancroft library manuscript, which accompanies the title of the translation with the Christogram IHS, an insignia standing for the first three letters of the Greek spelling of the name Jesus Christ. The open allusion to “Dios” (God) is likewise present in fables eight, seventeen, thirty-two, and thirty-eight. In the eighth fable “Nehtolli yn amo vel moneltilia” (the not properly kept promise) an infirm begs God to cure him, making a promise he knows he will not be able to maintain. Whereas in the Latin version of the *Aesopi phrygis fabulae*, “Impossibilia promittens,” the story relates how a sick man commends himself to the classical pantheon of gods—“deos rogabat” (he begged the gods) (1616: 153)—, in the Nahuatl text these divinities turn into the Christian God with whom the sick man pledges: “diose. yniquac oniyol, onipatic ca mixpantzinco niqummanaz macuiltecantli quaquaque” (oh our God, as soon as I feel better again and I am well, I shall offer before your face as a sacrifice five times twenty oxen!) (Kutscher et al. 1987: 78-79).<sup>11</sup> The seventeenth fable, “Telpopochtontin ihuā molchichihuahqui” (the young boys and the cook), transforms the Latin version “Adolescentes et coquus” (the teenagers and the cook) into an example of the third commandment “do not take the Lord’s name in vain.” The title is once again introduced with the initials “Ihs,” which could be a signal by the translator or the scribe of the easy adaptation of this fable for evangelizing purposes. In other words, a preacher in search of an exemplum that would remind his auditors of what might have been a common misuse of the name of God, could have drawn on the contents of this fable by repeating either the whole fable or some relevant quotes. A reading of the Nahuatl text demonstrates that, when rendering the original source, the translator not only bore in mind his Christian bias but also that he might have put into practice two exercises that Quintilian (1922: 158-159) proposes for the paraphrase of Aesop: the delineation of characters (*ethologiae*) and the writing of maxims and of “moral essays” (*chriae*). Regarding the former, the translator came up with this dialogue between the cook and the youngsters, which does not appear in the Latin version of *Aesopi phrygis fabulae*, and converts the thief and the cook into Christian figures, knowledgeable of the third commandment:

auh in iicniuh· i huel iehuatl· oquichtecnacatl· quto· nelli nictene hua in itocatzin in dios hamo tle  
 nicpia nacatl auh in molchichihuahqui in oquicac ynteca necayahualiz· quimilhui maço  
 xinechiztlacahuican i nehuatl auh in tt<sup>o</sup>. Dios in anquitlapictenehua itocatzin cuix no huel  
 anquitzlacatizque

<sup>11</sup> Gibbs’s English translation, based on the story passed down by other editors of the fables like Émile Chambry (1925-1927) and Ben Perry (1952, 1965), also refers to “gods,” and the moral does not include the Christian god either; see Gibbs: 2008, 249.

And his friend, the one who had stolen the meat, said to him: “by God’s holy name, I have no meat whatsoever!” When the cook had listened to their cheek, he said to them: “You may deceive me, but in vain do you use as witness the great name of our God! Do you think you can deceive him as well? (Kutscher et al. 1987: 102-105)

As for the paraphrase of the original by inserting a maxim, in this case by reinterpreting the moral, this is visible in the Christian bias of the epimythium:

Yni çaçanillatolli techtlacahualtia ittechpa iztlacatlitolli in teca necaiahualiztlatolli ihuan in itlapicteñehualoca itocaztin tt<sup>o</sup> iehica ca in iuhqui i muchi quimotztilitica in dios macihui inn aço talticpac tlaca amo quitetzacuilitia

This fable prevents us from deceptive talk, from the deception of others through false words and from using falsely the great name of our God, for it is a fact that God sees everything, even if punishment does not reach man on earth. (Kutscher et al. 1987: 104-105)

This time the moral in Nahuatl and in the Latin version of *Aesopi phrygis fabulae* acknowledge the power of the Christian God, which in the latter appears printed in capital letters as “DEUM” (Aesop 1616: 169). Yet, in the Latin version the gist of the story lies on the fact that one might succeed in deceiving others but not God, whereas in the Nahuatl translation a special emphasis is placed on committing a sin against the third commandment and the punishment that a merciless god will inflict, either on earth or, implicitly, after death.<sup>12</sup>

Fable thirty-eight “Asno ihuan cauallo” (the ass and the horse), from “Asinus et equus,” constitutes another example of how a fable ended up adapted to warn against sins. The story tells of an ass that had grown jealous of a horse because he was greatly honoured and given much fodder. However, the minute the ass sees how the horse is badly injured in a battle, he pities him. Once again eyeing the possibility of using this fable for doctrinal ends, the translator comes up with this Christian moral:

Yni çaçanilli techmachtia ca i macehualti hamo monequi· intech· moxicozque in tlahtoque ihuan im motlacamati· çan munequi ic toiollo pachihuiz in tlein ceceiaca oquimomaquili totecui Dios iehica. ca in tlatoque ihuan motlamati· oc çenca miecpa· ohuutiliztli quinamiqui

This fable teaches us: it is not right for subjects to envy their masters and the rich. On the contrary our heart should be contents with what our God shares out to each one of us, for the rulers and the rich often have to confront danger. (Kutscher et al. 1987: 174-175)

In the Latin version of *Aesopi phrygis fabulae*, the moral recommends that the commoners should neither emulate nor envy the rulers and the rich but instead “invidia et periculo in illos consideratis, paupertatem amare” (having considered the envy and the danger [to which they are exposed], to love poverty) (1616: 218). The Nahuatl text, however, deepens into other doctrinal aspects. The belief in predestination—for the case, of peoples’ status in life being willed by God—is coupled with a warning against one of the Seven Deadly Sins, that of envy. If pronounced from the pulpit, a priest could serve himself of this fable as an exemplum to convey the idea of social distinction as a divine prerogative, which, rather than favouring the rulers and the rich, justifies their position in that at times it burdens them with dangerous responsibility.

Whether the Nahuatl fables include the name of God or not, the truth is that most of them could have lent themselves as exempla carrying a Christian message for a Nahua congregation. In this respect, several fables appear to admonish against the Seven Deadly Sins, amongst others, fable eighteen “Mococoliani” (the enemies) from “Inimici,” which serves to advise against wrath; fable thirty-nine “Tlahtlametl” (the miser), from “Avarus,” against avarice; fable thirty-two “Asno ihu[an] quilchihuhqui” (the ass and the gardener) from “Asinus et hortulanus” against sloth; fable forty-four “Asno ih[uan] leon tequani” (the ass and the lion) from “Asinus et leo” against pride; fable forty-one “Aiutl ihuan quahutli”

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<sup>12</sup> For Gibb’s translation of a Latin version, also found in Chambry and Perry, see 2008: 248-249.

(the turtle and the eagle) from “Testudo et aquila against lust or desire for something that God has not provided for us; and fable fifteen “Ycnociuatl yuan yciuatotl,” “the widow and her hen,” from “Mulier et gallina,” against gluttony. There are also fables that could have been reproduced in order to warn against sins against other commandments, such as fable thirty-four “Piltontli ihuan in[an]” (the lad and his mother), from “Puer et mater,” against theft, and fables that would have reminded a Nahua audience of liars, deceitful people, and false appearances, like fable forty-two “Quauhtla maçtl” (the stag), from “Cerva,” and nineteen “Mizton ihu[an] quiquimichtin” (The cat and the mice), from “Felis et mures.” Finally, there are also fables that would have encouraged hope and faith in times of duress, such as fable thirty-seven “Cicihti ihuan cuicuia” (the hares and the frogs), from “Lepores et ranae.”

Given that the translator(s) of the fables had a powerful and widely pervasive grind to axe as the evangelization of the Nahuas was in colonial Mexico, the audience of the fables would not have been restricted to the didactical purposes and adoption of Christian values of the College of Tlatelolco. In fact, the fables so far mentioned seem to be addressed to three types of Nahuatl-speaking audiences. There is the reader, who would reflect on the edifying words of the moral; the user, who read it while selecting the story that best accorded to the message he wanted to put through to an actual audience; and this audience, who needed the moral in order to decode the meaning of the story and to understand how to apply it to their lives. To be noted is that it is precisely this oral performance for a wide number of auditors that stands out in some of the Nahuatl fables. Restoring the Aesopic tradition back to its origins, and in an attempt to meet the education and entertaining goals of the fables, the translator(s) reconcile the classical studies that they had learnt with the Nahua oral tradition in which they were still immersed. For example, as previously observed, the translator(s) resort to the paraphrase of the fables by delineating the characters, one of the exercises suggested by Quintilian, and in doing so they emulate their traditional Nahua rhetorical style, as reflected for instance in the *huehuetlahtolli*. Literally meaning “ancient words,” the *huehuetlahtolli* that were codified by friars like Sahagún in Book VI of *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España* were speeches, prayers, and salutations mostly delivered by priests, aristocrats, merchants, and midwives, who conveyed their religious, moral, and social concepts in a beautiful and persuasive style.<sup>13</sup> It is relevant to remember that Sahagún compiled them for proselytizing purposes. Setting an example, he and his assistants copied many of the rhetorical elements that characterize the *huehuetlahtolli*, such as vocatives, reverential forms, questions, explanatory comments, repetitions, and fixed phrases, in doctrinal works like *Adiciones, apéndice a la postilla y ejercicio cotidiano* (Sahagún 1988, I: 370; 1993: 105, Bustamante García 1989: 704-707).<sup>14</sup> As noted by Brotherston (1987: 31, 1992: 315), the presence of the Nahua eloquence is remarkable throughout the Nahuatl version, which, distancing from the laconic reported speech of the Latin text found in the Accursius’s collection and *Aesopi phrygis fabulae*, indulges in Nahuatl direct speech brimming with the rhetorical elements found in the *huehuetlahtolli*. In general terms, the direct speech of the fables is found in dialogues and in discourses delivered by main characters. The translator(s) knew that these would attract the attention of Nahua auditors, accustomed to hearing something alike in public events and private rituals, such as in prayers to gods, admonitions given by parents to their youngsters, and ceremonial conversations between midwives and the family of a newborn.

Amongst others, fable forty-six “Leon tequani ihuan cuitlachtli” (the dangerous lion and the wolf), from “Leo et lupus,” offers prime examples of the traditional Nahua style of these dialogues and discourses. The Latin story tells of a lion king who, having grown old and sick, receives the visit of all his animal subjects but for the fox. The wolf seizes the opportunity to denounce the fox’s disrespect towards the lion, who eventually demands an explanation from her. Having heard how the wolf had tried to put her at loggerheads with their master, the fox justifies her absence by stating that she had been travelling all around the world in order to find a remedy for his illness. This happens to be the skin of a living wolf wrapped around his body, which the lion decides to obtain by killing the same wolf who had defamed the fox. In the Latin version of *Aesopi phrygis fabulae* the dialogues held by the wolf, the lion, and the fox are reported in

<sup>13</sup> For further reference, see Sullivan 1974, pp. 99-108 and Ruiz Bañuls 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Burkhart examines the friars’ ability to borrow the Nahua rhetorical style in order to apply it to Christian ends in her 1989 study.

indirect speech and limited to a couple of sentences. For example, the wolf is said to complain to the lion in this manner: “Lupus [...] accusabat apud Leonem Vulpem, quasi nihili facientem suum omnium dominum, & propterea neq, ad visitationem prosectam” (the wolf accused the fox to the lion of doing nothing for his master and therefore of not having come for a visit) (Aesop 1616: 236, Hamilton 1828: 68-69). In the Nahuatl text, however, the translator reproduces the accusation levelled by the wolf against the fox, represented by the coyote: “tlatohuanie tla ic xicmotili in inepohualiz coiotl in hamo tehua ohualla in mitzmotlapalhuiz ca nelli amo tleipan mitzmotilia” (oh, lord! Take note of the haughtiness of the coyote! He did not come with the others in order to greet you! Truly, he does not value you much! (Kustcher et al. 1987: 196-197). In the same manner as in a *huehuetlahtolli*, the translator inserts the vocative *tlatohuanie* (oh, lord), and two parallel sentences transmitting the same idea, that the coyote is not willing to pay her respects. Likewise, the Nahuatl version transforms the reported narrative of the dialogue between the angry lion and the fox into a lively exchange of words between the *leon tecuani* or *miztli tequani* and the coyote: “can oticatca nocne cuix amo titlachia in nican omoçenquixtique noteicahuan manenemi nechtlapaloco auh çan tiio in amo nimitzita” (Where have you been miserable one? Did you not notice that all together my younger brothers, the four-footed creatures, have appeared here to greet me? But I did not see you amongst them!) (Kustcher et al. 1987: 196-197). Once again, the translator resorts to the Nahua rhetorical style by inserting the vocative *nocne* (miserable one), two consecutive questions, and the rephrase of *noteicahuan* (my younger brothers) with the epithet *manenemi* (four-footed creatures). The coyote’s reply continues to resemble the Nahua tradition by starting with a deferential exclamation: “tla oc ihuian xinechmocaquiti totecuioc” (have the goodness to listen to me without anger, oh our master!) (Kustcher et al. 1987: 198-199).

As for the paraphrase of the Latin text by adding a discourse that, echoing the Nahuas’ rhetorical style, proposes some moral values or pieces of advice, there exist several fables in which a leading animal gathers his companions to warn or teach them a lesson. A salient example is fable thirty-six “Quetzaltototl ihuan tozne” (the Quetzal-Bird and the Parrot), from “Pavo et monedula” (the peacock and the jackdaw). A group of different birds hold council in order to choose a leader and the peacock, notably turned into the also beautifully-feathered Quetzal, demands the position on the grounds of his majestic display of colours. The jackdaw, represented in the Nahuatl version as an eloquent parrot, intervenes to make them reflect on their decision. In the Latin version, one of the shortest fables of the whole collection of *Aesop phrygis fabulae*, the jackdaw brings the fable to an end with this question: “Sed si, te regnante, Aquila nos persequi agressa fuerit, quomodo nobis opem feres?” (but if once you are our king, the eagle were to attack us, how will you bring assistance to us?) (Aesop 1616: 211, Hamilton 1828: 52). In the Nahuatl fable the translator clearly expands the parrot’s speech, writing:

ie quinnonotza quimilhui tla xicmocaquitan: totecuiohuane in amiquecholhuā ipalnemoani intla iehuatl anquimotenehuilia totlatocauh iez i nican icac quetzaltototl auh intla quenami techiaochihuaz quauhtli quexquich in itlapalihui oncatqui cuix huel quinamiquiz auh iehica i nehuatl iuh niquita iehuatl technequi tiquixquetzazque in totlatocauh iez quauhtli.

He warned them, he spoke to them: “Be so kind as to listen, oh our lordships, [you are the] Quecholli [flamingos] of ‘the one through whom we live’. If this is the one whom you nominate to become our head, he who stands here, the Quetzal, what shall be his strength to us if the eagle makes war on us one day? Would he be able to stand up against him? For this reason I for my person am of the opinion: he, the eagle, is the one we are in need of, him we should appoint as our leader, our leader must be the eagle! (Kustcher et al. 1987: 166-167)

As aforementioned, the passage contains vocatives like *totecuiohuane* (our lordships), and several sentences that demand the hearers’ attention, once again in the form of an imperative and questions. The passage is likewise rich in the expression of Nahua cultural knowledge. First, the epithet “amiquecholhuā ipalnemoani” (flamingos of the one through whom we live or Live Giver) is a fixed phrase that echoes the pre-Hispanic belief in the flamingo as a messenger of the divinities, as found in pre-Hispanic Nahuatl songs like those collected in the anonymous *Cantares mexicanos* (1985: 186-187). Second, the end of the

paragraph makes the interesting claim that it is the powerful *cuauhtli* (eagle) that should be named as lord of the birds. Whereas in the Latin text no leader to fight the eagle is appointed, and the moral recommends choosing one because of his bravery and prudence rather than because of his physical appearance, in the Nahuatl version the translator “elects” the eagle. His choice is not arbitrary, for the Nahuas this bird of prey stood for fearlessness in battle and constituted a strong symbol of identity. According to one of their origin myths, the capital of their empire, Tenochtitlan, was founded at the place where a priest had seen an eagle perched on a nopal cactus holding a rattlesnake.

## Conclusion

The last fable, bearing a strong Nahua influence, points at a native speaker who was versed in his cultural myths and rhetorical style. Other fables cited in this article likewise show that the translator(s) intended to write a Christian biased translation. Thus, he or they lived in-between two worlds, a symbiosis that is personified by the Nahua graduates and tutors of a college like Tlatelolco. It is still impossible to fully claim that they authored the translation of Aesop’s fables and yet, Sahagún’s assistants and former students seem to fit the bill. They stood out for their linguistic mastery in the writing and translation of texts. What is more, at a time during which their ancestors’ pre-Hispanic cultural conceptions were being obliterated, their involvement in the composition of texts like *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*, roughly speaking an encyclopaedia on the world of the Nahuas that comprised many of their pre-Hispanic ritual practices and beliefs as well as the codification of Nahua rhetoric, offered them an unrivalled setting in which to learn about their disappearing culture and to study and internalize the main elements that characterized their ancient rhetoric. With the answer to the authorship of the fables partially unsolved, this article has nevertheless opened the debate about the origin of the translation techniques and the possible purpose of the translation. Even if the translator(s) used a Christianized source like that of Odo of Cheriton’s instead of the suggested *Aesopi phrygis fabulae*, which similarly contains a Christian bias, the fact that he or they decided to maintain, and perhaps, expand the religious interpretations of the original can only tell us that the fables were rendered for doctrinal purposes. In other words, a translator who had solely wished to translate the fables for a Nahua audience in order to entertain them would have seen no point in including Christian references. Contrarily, a translator who had been commissioned to transform the fables into entertaining and proselytizing *çaçanilli* knew how to negotiate meanings; how to make the fables sound as religious texts with a moral to learn and at the same time capture the attention of a Nahua audience.

Certain questions remain as regards the use and audience of the two surviving manuscripts before they ended up in the Biblioteca Nacional and the Bancroft library. Clearly, both descend from a Christian environment. The one in the Bancroft library, with the IHS in its title, was likely intended for an evangelizing context. Whether or not the fables were used as exempla in sermons or not needs to be proven by analysing surviving sermons by, for instance, Sahagún and his assistants. The manuscript of the Biblioteca Nacional, with the religious comments but no IHS in its title, might have been used in a wider context. This differentiation does not exclude the possibility that the two manuscripts, together with other copies, circulated as communications amid learned Nahuas, who would have told them in private meetings and public gatherings. The existence of other Nahua animal fables, some of which were collected by the Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanovas in *Cuentos indígenas* (1946) might reveal an association with the Aesopic tradition and perhaps the popular adaptation that, with the passing of the centuries, the Nahuas in general made of it.

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