

Letras Hispanas

Volume 14

TITLE: Chivalric Chronicles, Battles, and Alternative Heroic Models in Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*

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ABSTRACT: Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* is often linked to fabulous books of chivalry as a source of narrative inspiration. Yet, books of chivalry generally present unrealistic examples of battle that did not reflect the true experience of the conquistadors in Mexico. For that reason, as this essay argues, Bernal Díaz del Castillo follows a (lesser-known) model of heroism present in fifteenth and early sixteenth century chivalric chronicles to compile the battle scenes of the *Historia verdadera*. I focus on two characteristics that manifest an alternative understanding of heroism in battle: courageous leadership and the ability to endure wounds. This divergent heroic model forms a part of Bernal's strategy to persuade his readers to acknowledge the value of his contribution to the conquest of Mexico.

KEYWORDS: Hero, Chronicles, Leadership, Wounds, Warfare, Chivalry

RESUMEN: *La Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* de Bernal Díaz del Castillo se relaciona con frecuencia con los libros de caballería como fuente de inspiración narrativa. No obstante, los libros de caballería en general presentan ejemplos poco realistas de las batallas que no logran reflejar las realidades de los conquistadores en México. Por ese motivo, como explica este ensayo, Bernal Díaz del Castillo sigue un modelo de heroísmo no tan conocido pero presente en las crónicas caballerescas de los siglos XV y XVI para poder construir las escenas de batallas de la *Historia verdadera*. Me centro en dos características que manifiestan una perspectiva alternativa del heroísmo en tales batallas: el liderazgo valiente y la habilidad para soportar las heridas. Este modelo diferente de heroísmo forma parte de la estrategia bernaldina en cuanto a su deseo de persuadir a sus lectores para que reconozcan el valor de sus hazañas durante la conquista de México.

PALABRAS CLAVE: héroe, crónicas, liderazgo, heridas, guerra, caballería

DATE RECEIVED: 12/28/2016

DATE PUBLISHED: 3/8/2018

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Chivalric Chronicles, Battles, and Alternative Heroic Models in Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*

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“Como he dicho que me hallé en más batallas que Julio César, otra vez lo torno a afirmar, las cuales verán y hallarán los curiosos lectores en esta mi relación...”

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera* (chapter CCXII)

“Chivalric fiction just praised the wrong heroes at the expense of the true ones.”

Miguel Martínez, *Front Lines* (81)

Defining heroism—or actions deemed heroic—ranks among one of the most challenging tasks in literary studies.¹ Literary representations of exemplary heroes seem to begin in Homeric times, but as John Keegan claims, the desire for heroes is

almost as old as man himself, and reaches into the most sacred places of the human heart, places where self dissolves rational purpose, where pride reigns, where emotion is paramount, where instinct is king. (3)

Societies throughout history have invariably been concerned with the support and training of warriors as defenders and/or conquerors, and heroic models transmitted through literature provided examples for these men to emulate. According to Hugo Bauzá, “todas las sociedades—cultas e incultas—han dado muestras de necesitar heroes...”; and that “los heroes se comportan como la imagen de lo que cada uno de los hombres hubiera querido ser” (123). Medieval writers, too, modeled

their heroes in line with standards of expected behavior meant to benefit society.

During the Middle Ages, knights were considered to be the epitome of military virtue, and different literary genres from the epic to the chivalric romance recount their deeds; and each genre, as it were, imprints certain values on the next generation that feeds on its material. In Castilian literature, these examples abound in the epic, the *romancero*, and the *libros de caballería*. Late-fifteenth century wars in North Africa established an *esprit de corps* amongst the Castilian military nobility that would go on to permeate books of chivalry from Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo's *Amadís de Gaula* (1508) and the *Sergas de Esplandián* (1510) to Fernando Bernal's *Floriseo* (1516) and Feliciano de Silva's *Florisel de Niquea* (1551) (Alvar 13). The chivalric ideal, as Carlos Alvar and José Manuel Lucía Megías explain,

pasa por la defensa de la fe frente a las aventuras mundanas, amorosas; en donde los grandes imperios, como

Bretaña o Gaula, son amenazados por los ‘soldanes’ africanos: la victoria final en los libros de caballería—apoyados por la divinidad—debería ser el deseo ideal del desenlace de las batallas reales de la época. (13)

In sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain, much of the literary production revolved around popular chivalric romances replete with exciting scenes of individual glory on the battlefield.² These entrenched the heroic model to be someone pairing the finest martial skills with impeccable moral character. A knight like Amadís de Gaula is good because he meets the criteria of a hero fighting monsters and dishonorable knights as part of the “búsqueda de la aventura” (Viña Liste 52-53).

Despite chivalric literature’s presentation of orderly battles with clear winners (heroes) and losers (villains), real warfare evolved and fighting mechanisms changed, leaving a gap between the true experiences of the men fighting actual battles and their literary models who, by and large, fall short of reflecting an authentic marshal experience. This trend becomes more pronounced during Spain’s imperial expansion, where warfare ceased to be an aristocratic endeavor and became an undertaking of the bourgeoisie and lower classes; Mexico, for example, was conquered by a “fleet of poor men” (Martínez 12). How, then, does one convert a “fleet of poor men” into legitimate heroes given the prevailing literary models of the time? This essay argues that Bernal Díaz del Castillo follows a (lesser-known) model of heroism present in fifteenth and early sixteenth-century chivalric biographical chronicles to compile the battle scenes of the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1568; originally published 1632). Precisely, I focus on two characteristics that reflect an alternative understanding of heroism in battle: courageous leadership and the ability to endure wounds. This divergent heroic model forms a part of Bernal’s strategy to persuade his readers to acknowledge the value of his

contribution to the conquest of Mexico, “para que digan en los tiempos venideros: esto hizo Bernal Díaz del Castillo, para que sus hijos y descendientes gocen las loas de sus heroicos hechos” (qtd. in Sáenz de Santa María 95-97).

Scholars have for a long time argued convincingly that romances of chivalry such as *Amadís de Gaula* influenced Bernal’s narrative, mostly serving as a prism through which the conquistador-chronicler—by his own admission a mediocre writer—could transmit his incredible new surroundings and undertakings (Serés 1205). Luis Weckmann, for example, asserts that “el conquistador español llevó consigo [las virtudes caballerescas], más o menos incólumes, al otro lado del atlántico” because

el sentido de honor, inseparablemente acompañado de la sed de grandeza, constituyó unos de los resortes principales de la acción emprendida por los españoles en defensa de su fe y en nombre de su rey. (175)

And although critics have explored the connection between the romances of chivalry and the military experience of the ‘conquistadors,’³ we lack a deeper explanation on how other types of texts such as chivalric chronicles might have impacted later narratives intending to relate a more authentic soldierly experience; also, and as a result, how these sources influenced the definition of the hero.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo pertains to a warrior culture steeped in violence at a time when renaissance ideas began to crystalize and medieval forms of thinking receded. As Oswaldo Estrada states, “Pese a su detallismo medieval, el soldado cronista camina con paso marcial hacia la mentalidad renacentista” (28-29). From a literary position, Bernal is caught somewhere between the traditions of fantastical tales and historical texts claiming to tell the truth; in both cases, cultural schemas bare down on narrative practices. The need to distinguish fact from fiction consumed authors’ attention at the close of

the Middle Ages, as Rodríguez de Montalvo makes clear in his “Prólogo” to *Amadís de Gaula* (Estrada 30):

Considerando los sabios antiguos que los grandes hechos de las armas en scripto dexaron cuán breve fue aquello que en efecto de verdad en ellas passó, assí como las batallas de nuestro tiempo que [por] nos fueron vistas nos dieron clara esperiença y noticia, quisieron sobre algún cimiento de verdad componer tales y tan estrañas hazañas [...]. Otros uvo de más baixa suerte que escrivieron, que no solamente edificaron sus obras sobre algún cimiento de verdad, mas ni sobre el rastro della. Estos son los que compusieron las historias fengidas en que se hallan las cosas admirables fuera de la orden de natura, que más por nombre de patrañas que de crónicas con mucha razón deven ser tenidas y llamadas. (219-23)

Renaissance historiography, as Estrada explains, “es un reportaje verídico de aquello que ha ocurrido en el pasado, sin ningún adorno ni distorsión [...] [que] excluye la libertad clásica de inventar discursos y descripciones de batalla” (31). Chronicles, aiming to portray events as they happened, approach the limits of fiction and history as part of the “desire to grasp the unknown by means of the known” (Todorov 128). And at the same time, even exotic tales needed to incorporate details true to the human experience in order to resonate with readers (Nelson 38).

Bernal, as a common infantry soldier, artfully navigates these opposing poles by borrowing certain attributes celebrated in earlier chivalric chronicles to write battle scenes. In doing so, he proclaims a unique standard of heroic behavior geared towards celebrating the efforts and accomplishments

of the collective military enterprise rather than elevating the solitary knight as the champion of the battlefield. Guillermo Serés analyzes Bernal’s chronicle as a reflection of the fifteenth-century’s influence through the concept of the “crónica de hechos particulares,” which departs from Alfonso X’s earlier “crónica general” model (1156). Texts that he terms “biografías novelescas” reflect this new style and include examples such as Gutierre Díaz de Games’s *El Victorial* (1448) or the anonymous *Historia de los hechos del Marqués de Cádiz* (1492).⁴ These texts, while not as widely read as *libros de caballería*, nevertheless reflect an alternative heroic ethos present in the minds of real men who fought real battles.

These heroic ideals, born out of an era of tremendous change in warfare that altered the role of the warrior, extend beyond the fifteenth and into the sixteenth century.⁵ At this time, two ideas of the heroic knight competed against each other in literature: the ideal knight-errant appearing in chivalric romances such as *Amadís de Gaula*, and the type of knight presented to us through chronicles like *El Victorial*. Since both types of narrative attempt to extoll the highest heroic virtues—excellent martial capabilities—certain parallels exist; yet, these narratives simultaneously diverge in their descriptions of battle scenes, with the fanciful *libros de caballería* ceasing to reflect actual warfare. Knights, no longer the centerpiece of the battlefield, adapted their roles in order to continue reflecting the martial standards by which their predecessors exemplified “nobility.” Although Bernal would have been familiar with stories of these mounted soldiers who exude heroism individually and often in isolation against a single opponent, this type of fighting could not have been further from his own experience fighting the Aztecs in Mexico. As Martínez explains,

The aristocratic rules of individual fighting, the prominence of the horse in knightly culture,

the honor codes that had been outmoded by the new culture of warfare, the fantastic fictionality of imagined wars as opposed to those the soldiers experienced distinctly—none of these aspects could provide an undisputed model for the literary culture and social practice of the soldierly mass. (65-66)

According to Bernal, he and his men face a constant onslaught of Aztec platoons swarming their positions day and night, firing rocks and arrows from all angles as the Spaniards edge closer towards Tenochtitlan. Theirs is an experience unlike anything written in the romances of chivalry.

Amidst this hostility with the Aztecs, Bernal aims to assert his and his men's valor in the Mexican conquest: "he traído aquí a la memoria para que se vean nuestros muchos y buenos y notables servicios que hicimos al rey nuestro señor y a toda la Cristianidad" (1043). He knows, too, that he is competing for recognition against an entrenched military hierarchy in which

ensalzados y puestos en grande estado muchos caballeros, así en España como en otras partes, sirviendo como en aquella sazón sirvieron en las guerras e por otros servicios que eran aceptos a los reyes que en aquella sazón reinaban [...] caballeros que entonces subieron a tener títulos de estados y de illustres no iban a las tales guerras ni entraban en las batallas sin que primero les pagasen sueldos y salarios. (*Historia verdadera* 1042)

This quote exemplifies what Martínez terms the "probanzas de mérito"—"the complaints of other veteran conquistadores such as Bernal Díaz's regarding the crown's abandonment of its soldiers and conquerors" (127).

For this reason, Bernal, a soldier on the ground, incorporates himself and his men into detailed battle descriptions instead of exclusively focusing on the cavalry, the traditionally heroic military class in Spain:

con heroicos hechos e grandes hazañas que en las guerras hicimos, peleando de día y de noche, sirviendo a nuestro rey e señor, descubriendo estas tierras y hasta ganar esta Nueva España e gran cibdad de México y otras muchas provincias a nuestra costa, estando tan apartada de Castilla, ni tener otro socorro ninguno, salvo el de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo, que es el socorro y ayuda verdadera, nos ilustramos mucho más que antes. (*Historia verdadera* 1042)

Bernal delineates his and his men's magnitude as part of the conquest for reasons of self-preservation. "As a conquistador," explains Rolena Adorno, "Bernal Díaz belonged to a generation of men whose claims to royal reward and influence in local colonial affairs depended on testimony and credentials pertaining to major episodes in the history of New Spain" ("Discursive Encounter" 219). Bernal lacks the authority enjoyed by someone such as his captain Hernán Cortés or other educated historians (Adorno, "Discursive Encounter" 218), a position which complicates how he must transplant certain courageous values traditionally ascribed to the military nobility onto lower-ranking soldiers. As a result, Bernal relies on his first-hand experiences in Mexico to reframe the heroic model to fit his needs. In order to highlight his and his fellow soldiers' efforts during the conquest of Mexico, he draws on examples of leadership and the ability to endure wounds, features that elevate himself and his men by way of their actions to the level of heroism prescribed by earlier chivalric chronicles.

Leadership

Fifteenth century chronicles frequently praise excellent leadership as heroic. Usually the skills needed to be a leader stem from an elite education, which Bernal Díaz, as a common soldier, most likely lacked.⁶ Leadership, though, depends on more than what can be learned from books and tutors; possessing common sense, too, strengthens one's ability to be a leader. The late thirteenth-early fourteenth-century philosopher Ramón Llull recognizes this in his *Libro de la orden de caballería* (1281), explaining that a knight must have good sense ("cordura") if he is to be successful:

así conviene que la orden de caballería te haga amar la sabiduría y cordura con que puedas honrar la orden de caballería contra el desorden y la decadencia que hay en aquellos que piensan cumplir con el honor de la caballería por la locura y la mengua de entendimiento. (36)

Llull lists "sabiduría" and "cordura" separately, meaning they are not the same thing and that a knight needs both. While Bernal's station may have prevented him from formally achieving the first, "cordura" can certainly be learned by anyone with enough battlefield experience.

One of the best examples of a practical projection of Llull's concept of "cordura" hails from *El Victorial* in the form of a didactic tale woven into the larger narrative. The author Díaz de Games applies an example of an English knight in command of a platoon of soldiers who demonstrates "cordura" by remaining calm after a low-ranking enemy soldier attacks and wounds him:

[el caballero] puso la mano sobre la ferida, que la non viese ninguno, e dixo a todos que estuviesen quedos [...] e puso su baçinete, e tornó a la batalla, hordenando

e refiriendo todos aquellos [...] diziéndoles que todos se fuesen cada uno a su lugar [...] mas que mirasen los henemigos que tenían ante los ojos, e pensase cada uno de fazer su devdo. (370)

In order to win the battle, the knight and his men must maintain their formation while keeping their anger over the unjust assault in check. He implores them to focus on the enemy and on executing their task rather than trivial affronts to honor.

As a testament to the unnamed knight's self-control and leadership, a panel of judges observing the battle select him for a gold chaplet—a prize for the best knight—precisely for putting the interests of the collective ahead of his own individual honor. When the judges explain their reasoning, they reveal that an important shift is taking place in knightly thinking:

Nosotros vimos la grand ofensa que a aquel cavaleiro fue fecha en su persona, seyendo de tan grand estado. E vimos cómo la nuestra hueste se deshordenava por le vengar; la qual vengaçã fue en su mano de la tomar luego si él quisiera. E sabemos, otrosí, que el otro caballero de grand valía, e muchos de los que heran en la hueste avían de fazer algo por él, e fuera en tal manera que la nuestra hueste oviera discordia e mal; la qual discordia bien la conosçieran nuestros henemigos, ca son muy guerreros e hombres entendidos de batalla. Vinieran sobre nós, e muy de refez nos destruyeran todos, e nos vençieran e mataran. (371)

For a real battle, order and organization are paramount; the knight must not place anything—including his individual honor—above achieving victory. As the judges state, a seasoned

enemy will exploit an army's poor organization, and it is up to the leader to ensure his men will not break rank even at the expense of personal honor. By commemorating the knight with the highest reward from the battle, the judges mark his deeds as heroic, even though these actions may not agree with other meritorious prescriptions seen in more fanciful chivalric romances. The knight's heroism, therefore, is tied somewhat to his abilities as an exceptional fighter but more so to how he exercises sound judgment and leadership on behalf of the collective fighting force.

Another example of heroic battlefield leadership appears in the anonymous *Historia de los hechos del Marqués de Cádiz*. This chronicle discusses the deeds of Ponce de León, the Marquis of Cádiz, who serves as a high-ranking captain in Fernando and Isabel's forces during their mission to subdue Granada. In one battle, Ponce de León attacks the Moorish village Alhama by surprise only to be caught in a counterattack by the Moors, who squeeze him and his men into narrow streets and alleys, impeding their ability to fight: "Y como [el Marqués] entró con toda su gente, los moros desmayaron e se retruxeron por algunas calles más estrechas, donde mejor se podían defender" (201). The author describes how the intensity of this battle compels even some of the most qualified captains to suggest aborting the mission:

E los capitanes que yuan con el marqués, caualleros muy principales, como esto viesan, paresçioles ser cosa muy graue e ynposible de se tomar aquella çibdad; e dixeron al marqués que les pareçia, segund los moros se defendian, que se deuían boluer para sus casas y no dar lugar que más gente allí pereçiese. (201)

In an effort to appear prudent, the leading knights hesitate to fight and begin exploring options for retreat. This failure of courage on their part creates a leadership vacuum that

Ponce de León fills by using a three-step approach to rally the men. First, Ponce de León harangues his peers, of which the text provides a brief description:

A los quales el marqués respondió que se marauilla mucho dellos, segund quien eran, tomar tan mal consejo, donde tan grand mengua e injuria podían resçibir; y pues que allí estauan con tanta y tan nnoble gente, que cada vno deuía esforçar los suyos e trabajar por tomar aquella çibdad, como esperaua en Dios que la tomarian; e que quando la fortuna les fuse tan contraria que oviesen ally de morir, muy más honrrada les sería la muerte que la vida con desnuesto entre los otros caualleros. E como los caualleros oyeron al marqués tan graçiosas y esforçadas razones, respondieron que, pues a él aquello le pareçia, que todos querían seguir su mandado e morir debaxo de su vanderá juntamente con él. (202)

Ponce de León tells the men he's surprised by their initial faintheartedness, and that they are noblemen and should advance and take the city. His words change the course of the battle by inspiring them to continue fighting because, although they might die, they would die together with great honor.

Second, he further motivates the men by promising them any spoils they claim: "que cada vno ouiese para sí lo que pudiese tomar" (202). Finally, he galvanizes the desired fighting spirit from the troops by circulating through their ranks: "y el marqués, andando por todas las estanças esforçandolos mucho, que los christianos cobraron tan grand coraçon y apretaron tanto en el conbate, que retraxeron a los moros" (202). Together, this approach to leading the men under his command—especially when he moves amongst them—departs from the image of the

individual mounted warrior defeating gangs of opponents single-handedly. Ponce de León's chronicle reflects excellent soldiering within the context of real warfare and thus marks a shift in heroic behavior towards a model rooted in using leadership to achieve cohesiveness as the key to victory.

In his *Historia Verdadera*, during the Battle of the Grijalva river (chapters 31-35),⁷ Bernal speaks first about Hernán Cortés's leadership. Estrada affirms that

Hernán Cortés es el héroe, el protagonista principal de la *Historia verdadera*, aquél que enfrenta una serie de obstáculos y lucha contra fuerzas antagónicas para cumplir su propósito: conquistar todo un imperio. (97)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Bernal illustrates his notion of excellent leadership by noting Hernán Cortés's poise as a captain as a point of comparison. At the Grijalva river, Cortés realizes that the natives will not respond to his calls for peaceful interaction ("Y mientras más lo decía Aguilar, más bravos se mostraban, y decían que nos matarían a todos si entrábamos en su pueblo), and he quickly acts to prepare his men for battle: "Y desde que aquello vio Cortés, mandó aperecibir los bateles y navíos menores, y mandó poner en cada batel tres tiros, y repartió en ellos los ballesteros y escopeteros y soldados" (113). Cortés organizes his fighters into defensive positions, calculating precisely how he wants each boat prepared to fire on the Aztecs.

In a similar light, Bernal paints himself as an astute military thinker and brave fighter against the backdrop of the ferocious Aztec warriors that "como esforzados se vienen todos contra nosotros" (115) and that "cargan sobre nosotros tantos indios, que con las lanzas a manteniendo, y otros a flecharnos, hacían que no tomásemos tierra tan presto como quisiéramos" (114-15). Despite mounting a strong offensive themselves, the Spaniards cannot push the Aztecs back: "Y con todos los males e heridas que les hacíamos,

no los podimos apartar" (121). The Aztecs assault with ceaseless hit-and-run attacks, forcing the Spaniards to proceed with full arms in hand:

Desde que Cortés supo que muy ciertamente nos venían a dar guerra, mandó que con brevedad sacasen todos los caballos de los navíos a tierra, e que escopeteros y ballesteros y todos los soldados estuviésemos muy a punto con nuestras armas, y aunque estuviésemos heridos. (119)

The Spaniards remain gridlocked, taking huge volleys of enemy fire and incurring injuries:

se vienen como rabiosos y nos cercan por todas partes, y tiran tanta de flecha y vara y piedra, que de la primera arremetida hirieron más de setenta de los nuestros, y con lanzas, pie con pie, nos hacían mucho daño. (121)

At this point, Bernal recognizes the Aztec's weakness and proposes a strategy meant to disrupt their offensive:

parecíame que podemos aperechugar con ellos, porque verdaderamente sienten bien el cortar de las espadas y estocadas, y por eso se desvían algo de nosotros, por temor dellas, y por mejor tirarnos sus flechas y varas tostadas y tantas piedras como granizo. (121)

Bernal and his men's attitude contrast with those of his commanding officer, whose response to the proposed assault falls somewhere between overly cautious to somewhat cowardly: "Y respondió que no era buen acuerdo, porque había para cada uno de nosotros treientos indios, y que no podríamos sostener con tanta multitud" (121). This contrast highlights Bernal and his soldiers' valor as they push the Aztecs back by forcing them to fight at close range.

Bernal's strategic case, which reflects keen battlefield leadership, rests on two principles: first, by "apechugar," Bernal means to get himself and his men as close to the Aztecs as possible in order to take advantage of their armor and metal swords and lances, which were much stronger than the Aztec obsidian striking weapons.⁸ The Spanish weapons easily penetrated the lightweight Aztec "armor" consisting of thick cotton padding (Pérez Mallaina 69), and Bernal notes that these indigenous warriors flee once confronted with such weapons: "desque conosçieron las estocadas, se apartaban de nosotros" (121).⁹ Second, by closing the distance the Aztec missiles would no longer be as effective, thereby forcing these indigenous warriors to scatter in order to regain the proper firing distances.

Advocating and organizing this attack, Bernal underscores his leadership potential, understanding of warfare, and courage in battle—three fundamental characteristics of the emerging military hero. As Martínez explains, "The individual effort of the chivalric ethos had been replaced by the soldier's obedience and professionalism, together with the technical knowledge and strategic skill of meritorious officers" (65). Additionally, suggesting the full-frontal assault is an apt strategy given the likelihood that the Spaniards were not especially well trained in group tactics and potentially lacked, at this moment, the military cohesion that goes with having lived, trained, and fought side-by-side for a long time (Harari 37). Under such circumstances, this type of direct assault works well as it does not require complicated formations or special skills with weapons (Hanson 31). It did, though, require tremendous courage. The tactic recalls the famed Greek phalanx, where soldiers marched forward arm-in-arm and fought for one another not only to survive, but also to leave a lasting impression of prowess in the eyes of their comrades.¹⁰

The mission of the foot soldier was very different from that of the captain, so Bernal's self-fashioning becomes essential to alerting others that he fulfills a role beyond his rank.

Eloy Bullón y Fernández affirms that "la misión del mando es otra muy distinta y muy superior ciertamente a la que sólo consiste en exponerse a las balas" (307). The fifteenth century scholar Palacios Rubios discusses the merits of leadership in his *Tratado del esfuerzo bélico heroyco* (1524):

E quanto a esto gran diferencia se debe hacer del capitán de la gente a los caballeros, que van con el. Que ansi como son dos ordenes de los que pelean; unos son los caudillos o rectores; otros los que van so su bandera, ansi son dos maneras de esfuerzo o fortaleza. Una por respecto del fin, porque pelean, al qual se refiere toda la batalla. Esta es la verdadera fortaleza, que se hace por auctoridad y consejo. Esta principalmente pertenece a los caudillos o capitanes, en los quales no se debe mirar, si pelean o no; con tanto, que sean esforzados y estremos en auctoridad y consejo, y sepan mandar. (126)

Readers of the time familiar with the heroic motifs illustrated by Palacios Rubios would have recognized the value of good leadership. Therefore, by including the Grijalva scene near the beginning of his narrative, Bernal demonstrates his ability to lead and elevates his image to be amongst Spain's best and bravest conquistadors.

Wounds

Classical scholars have observed that the non-fatal war wound is a crucial component of the characterization of the hero in texts such as the *Iliad*.¹¹ Being wounded demonstrates bravery by emphasizing the hero's courage; additionally, injuries shine a light on the hero's mortality, exposing his frailties as well as his moral fortitude (Neal 1, 14). Kenneth Hodges states that

injuries sustained give weight and worth to the abstract issues being fought about: they visually announce that the issue was so important that it deserved this much suffering, memorializing the conflict in the lasting scars they leave behind. Injury is thus essential to create meaning out of conflict. If there is no injury, then the fight does not matter: neither side is forced to remember the conflict and neither side gives up anything for asserting its beliefs (16).

Fifteenth-century chronicles make the case that military heroism is about more than just defeating an enemy in pitched battle; it is also about enduring all the trials that surround fighting. In war, soldiers suffer from a myriad of circumstances: heat and cold; hunger and dehydration; wounds, both physical and psychological. This universal truth, present throughout the history of warfare, is often absent in chivalric tales of heroic knights defeating monsters or other opponents in combat.

In Feliciano de Silva's *Florisel de Niquea*, for example, the knight Arquileo easily defeats the giant Bravasón in single combat. Bravasón, "el más bravo y esquivo jayán que en todas las Islas Orientales se halla" (qtd in Alvar 205), defeats four sagittarii monsters who protect the castle of Arquisidea, the woman with whom Bravasón seeks marriage. This sets up his fight with Arquileo, who wishes to protect Arquisidea. Bravasón, described as entering the field "con armas tan fuertes, cuales las pedía su grandeza, subió en un caballo tan poderoso con una lanza muy gruesa de grande y limio hierro" (qtd. in Alvar 206), proves no match for the more agile and experienced Arquileo:

Mas Arquileo, como no era nuevo en aquel menester, y en la ligereza no tuviese par, salta al través como una onza, hurtándole el golpe que fue soterrado. Y como

él vio jayán detenerse un poco por lo sacar, soltó el escudo, que en la siniestra tenía, y con ambas manos le hirió con el cuchillo en el muslo con tanta fuerza, que con el peso de el cuchillo no prestó armadura que tuviese para que toda la pierna por cima la rodilla no fuese cortada, cayendo el jayán, que pareció una torre dando un doloroso bramido, quedando el cuchillo metido por tierra. (qtd. in Alvar 208).

Arquileo proceeds to decapitate Bravasón, and escapes the battle without a scratch—even though his adversary is enormous, skilled, and heavily armed.

In many books of chivalry, the mark of the hero often lies in his invincibility. In *Amadís de Gaula*, for instance, the protagonist fights constantly but is rarely wounded. The exception is when he fights the Endriago monster, an imaginative mythological creature whose power reaches far beyond the capabilities of normal human beings. With its sharp claws, the Endriago squeezes Amadís and tears through his armor, cutting deeply into his torso: "abraçose con [Amadís], y con las sus muy fuertes y agudas uñas rompióle todas las armas de las spaldas, y la carne y los huesos hasta las entrañas" (1144). At first glance, these wounds would appear to be fatal, but Amadís is no ordinary knight; he is, as Michael Harney explains, a superhero "possessed of preternatural courage, stamina, resistance to pain, and fighting skills" (292). The scene recalls the fanciful and idealistic images typical in *Amadís* and other romances of chivalry in which the hero is always in danger but never really so because he is a gifted individual who, by faith, will survive.

For real soldiers, being wounded in battle was a common occurrence, but for authors composing realistic war narratives, writing the wounding scene is paramount for celebrating their protagonists' heroic stature. For this reason, fifteenth-century chronicles portray

wounding scenes quite differently than their fanciful counterparts. In real pitched battles or even skirmishes men risked being injured or killed from blows or objects coming from near or far. These battles were often against archers, crossbowmen, and later on musketeers, who rained down volleys of arrows and bullets. Such a variety of weapons created a chaotic and stressful atmosphere where death may arrive unexpectedly from any angle. That said, no amount of training can fully prepare the soldier for what he will face, and he must instead rely on instinct and fortitude to weather the fighting.

In *El Victorial*, Pero Niño suffers multiple wounds in different battles. Fighting in Pontevedra in northern Spain, he is struck in the neck by an arrow, and the resulting wound—non-fatal due to his armor—hinders his dexterity by making it painful to move his head: “le estorbava mucho al bolver del pescueço” (253). Overcoming this wound, though, is an opportunity for Pero Niño to demonstrate his mettle (Gearhart 17). The author continues “e tanta hera la su voluntad en dar fin a lo que avia comenzado, que poco o nada sintía la ferida” (253). In spite of his injury, his mental fortitude remains intact, and he is able to continue fighting with greater tenacity: “E de allí comenzó su pelea más rezio que de ante” (253). As the battle continues, Pero Niño receives another wound from a crossbow bolt, this one striking him in the face and piercing his nose: “[Recibió] un fuerte viratón por medio del rostro, que él tenía descubierto, que le apuntó çerca de la otra parte, por las narizes, de que él se sintió mucho, tanto que le atordeçió” (253).

The message here is that real knights, despite fanciful heroic paradigms that might suggest otherwise, are subject to being wounded in battle; and, since these men represent the epitome of military excellence, their example is to be recognized, applauded, and followed. Pero Niño is an exemplar because of his extreme fortitude (Gearhart 20). He never stops fighting until the goal is achieved: “E quando Pero Niño salió de la

pelea, la su buena adarga toda hera ya cortada e fecha pieças, e la espiga del espada torçida, a ora de quebrar e descabeçar, e toda mellada, fecha sierra, tinta en sangre” (253). The images provided by the author portray a knight hanging on by a thread—his shield is shredded into pieces, his sword is minced and covered in blood. He would have us believe that battle is not a neat, clean affair; and, despite the fanciful courtly literature supporting warfare as a leisurely aristocratic undertaking akin to the pageants of knights fighting in solitary combat, real battle is messy, bloody, and usually deadly. At the very least, as the example of Pero Niño demonstrates, one does not likely escape without being wounded.

Comparable to Díaz de Games, Bernal carefully weaves cases of soldiers being wounded into his narrative, showing how they bear the pains of battle. While fighting in Tenochtitlan leading up to and during the infamous “noche triste,” the Aztec fighters overwhelm and inflict substantial damage against Bernal and his companions. He comments on the size of the force that attacks one platoon lead by Diego de Ordás:

le salen tantos escuadrones mexicanos de guerra y otros muchos que estaban en las azoteas, y le dieron tan grandes combates, que le mataron a las primeras arremetidas diez y ocho soldados. (465)

Next, he compares that attack to the one he faces:

si muchos escuadrones salieron al Diego de Ordás, muchos más vinieron a nuestros aposentos, y tiran tanta vara y piedras con ondas y flecha, que nos hirieron de aquella vez sobre cuarenta y seis de los nuestros, y doce murieron de las heridas. (465)

Bernal here celebrates he and his men’s ability to hold the line despite being injured and facing overwhelming numbers of elite Az-

tec fighters, who battle like Homer's Hector and the medieval French hero Roland: "peleábamos muy bien [...] aunque estuviéramos allí diez mil Éctores troyanos y otros tantos Roldanes, no les pudieran entrar" (466).¹²

Bernal's recognition of their physical sacrifice on behalf of the Spanish crown extolls the notion that the wounded body is synonymous with heroism. As Martínez explains,

The exposure of the injured body, whether in writing or in flesh and bones, is a privileged mode of relation between the veteran and his society or the state: bodily deprivation, disease, wounds, and hunger contributed to legitimize the voice of the returning and petitioning veteran (178).

According to Bernal, "Era cosa de notar vernos a todos corriendo sangre y llenos de heridas, y otros muertos" (470). The battle's intensity is such that Bernal admits he is unequipped to accurately compose it:

Digo que no lo sé escribir, porque ni ballestas ni apachugar con ellos, ni matalles treinta ni cuarenta de cada vez que arremetíamos, que tan enteros y con más vigor peleaban que al principio. (466-67)

Therefore, although he describes overcoming an enemy who seems to never lose courage or numerical advantage, he simultaneously highlights the physical costs incurred by the soldiers.

Soldiers relied on their wounds as verifiable markers of their time in combat (Martínez 167), but wounds do not necessarily translate into victories. In order to defeat the enemy, soldiers—wounded or not—must continue to battle. During the siege of Tenochtitlan, Bernal again describes being overwhelmed by Aztec fighters and receiving

many more wounds, but he and his men do not stop fighting:

Y heridos y entrapajados habíamos de pelear desde la mañana hasta la noche, que si los heridos se quedaran en el real sin salir a los combates, no hubiera de cada capitania veinte hombres sanos para salir. (621)

Bernal affirms that most of the soldiers are injured and, should they succumb to those injuries, there would be no one left to fight. Instead, the wounded tolerate their pain and display their mettle by facing down an unrestrained adversary.

By repeatedly describing how he and his men labor while injured, Bernal cements their valor. He later narrates how they launch a boat off the shallow shore in order to escape the swarming Aztecs, and what happens with Sandoval, one of the commanders:

Y como Sandoval nos vio a mí y a otros diez soldados en el agua metidos a más de de la cinta ayudando al bergantín a echalle en lo hondo, y estaban sobre nosotros muchos indios con espadas de las nuestras que tomaron en el desbarate de Cortés y otros con montantes de navajas dándonos cuchilladas, y a mí me dieron un flechazo e una cuchillada en la pierna... (646)

It is vital, exclaims Sandoval, that the Spaniards hold off the Aztecs and launch the boat into the water: "¡Oh, hermanos, poné fuerzas en que no lleven el bergantín" (646). This plea reflects the situation's urgency, but also panic on the part of the officer-in-command Sandoval.

As a result, within Bernal's narrative Sandoval cedes the role of hero historically assigned to his rank to Bernal and the other soldiers, who take action immediately: "Y tomamos tanto esfuerzo, que luego le sacamos

en salvo, puesto que, como he dicho, todos los marineros salieron heridos y dos soldados muertos" (646). The key point Bernal makes is that they complete the mission and save the boat. However, the scene simultaneously contrasts the action-taking foot soldiers with a rather impotent officer behaving cowardly. As Bernal and his men continue to fight, Sandoval, in a somewhat desperate tone (as Bernal writes it), urges them to retreat: "Queréis que por amor de vosotros me maten a mí y a todos estos caballeros? ¡Por amor de mí, hermano Bernal Díaz, que os retrayáis!" (647). By fighting while wounded, though, Bernal emphasizes both the courage and the corporeal sacrifices necessary to achieve victory. These sacrifices, he argues throughout, legitimize their military duties in Mexico alongside the more-often praised officers.

Bernal, having constructed this heroic context for the actions of the common soldiers, reinforces the significance of fighting despite being wounded by recounting his own personal experience:

Digo que fue maravilla cómo no nos mataron a todos en ellos. De mí digo que ya me habían echado mano muchos indios, y tuve manera para desembarazar el brazo, y Nuestro Señor jesucristo que me dio esfuerzo para que a buenas estocadas que les di me salvé, y bien herido en un brazo. Y desde que me vi fuera de aquella agua en parte seguro, me quedé sin sentido, sin me poder sostener en mis pies e sin huelgo ninguno, y esto causó la gran fuerza que puse para me descabullir de aquella genticilla e de la mucha sangre que me salió. (628)

He describes his own injuries and praises God for helping him survive the battle. This calculated self-insertion into the text adds another level of subjectivity to the narrative

and thereby helps the reader associate more closely with his predicament as a foot soldier. Along with his companions, Bernal risks death, evident by the life-giving blood that runs out of his body. In the end, he shares the bond of wounds with real soldiers from the past, and praises his and the other rank-and-file soldiers' efforts to overcome pain and suffering on the battlefield.

Battle scenes, therefore, are key elements of Bernal's narrative because they transmit a particular set of heroic ideals that correspond to early renaissance warfare and its departure from a reliance on the solitary knight celebrated in chivalric fiction. Collectively, these scenes lack the traditional individual martial prowess observable in chivalric romances because those fanciful examples, while remaining a popular escapist genre, do not exclusively define the military hero. Warfare had changed to the point that foot soldiers slogging through the mud, holding a defensive position, and fighting on despite receiving terrible wounds could, in the hands of a skilled writer, appear heroic. Likewise, texts began celebrating men who display excellent leadership since it was crucial for professional armies to be well commanded. These conditions remain largely absent from books of chivalry, which celebrate individual values such as the knight's prowess in single combat or his dashing appearance while draped in heraldic armor. Perhaps Miguel de Cervantes best addresses this phenomenon with his masterpiece *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, whose protagonist famously over-consumes tales of knight-errantry to the point he is moved to transform himself into a pseudo-knight and proceed forth into a world no longer in need of this antiquated, individual heroism. Earlier literary examples like Bernal's *Historia verdadera* addressed the need to reformat certain ideals of the individual hero, and then transfer those adaptations to a collective body of fighters in order to reflect a truer experience of battle and garner the praise as heroes they deserved.

Notes

¹ Many studies related to the figure of the hero and heroic deeds exist. To list a few key examples: C.M. Bowra's *Heroic Poetry* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* are two seminal works; also, Hugo Francisco Bauzá's *El mito del héroe*. For recent studies related to Western medieval and early modern literature, see Molly Robinson Kelly's *The Hero's Place* and Stephen Rupp's *Heroic Forms*.

² All classes enjoyed reading these stories, but especially the lower classes (Eisenberg 90). Multiple studies have examined the explosion of chivalric literature during the onset of the sixteenth century, reaching its peak between 1508 and 1556 before slowing down through the second half of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth (Alvar 17-27). Between 1501 and 1550 upwards of 150 editions of books of chivalry appeared in print, including at least eighteen versions of *Amadís*. See Maxime Chevalier, Anastacio Rojo Vega, and Fermín Reyes Gómez.

³ Irving Leonard's seminal work *The Books of the Brave* marks the foundation of these studies. See also Rolena Adorno's *The Polemics of Possession*, A.J. Cascardi, Mónica Domínguez Torres, Oswaldo Estrada, Carlos Fuentes, Stephen Gilman, Jennifer Goodman, and Ida Rodríguez Prampolini.

⁴ *El Victorial* chronicles the life of don Pero Niño, a soldier and nobleman who lived and was active militarily during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Considered by Rafael Beltrán Llavador to be the first example of a biography in Castilian, the text, written by his page Gutierre Díaz de Games, is divided into three parts that collectively describe the particular life-stages of Pero Niño: boyhood, early knighthood, marriage, service, and death. Although the biography follows a prescribed outline that includes his lineage, his upbringing, his innate talents (revealed by prophecies that tie him to his future glory), and his entrance into knighthood, it is his first and last battles which receive particular attention and let us see the manner in which this portrayal of a knight diverges from the standards of the chivalric romances. The *Hechos del Marqués de Cádiz* deals with the life of Rodrigo Ponce de León during the latter part of the fifteenth century. There are many works that refer to Ponce de León's actions and achievements, yet this is the only text that deals exclusively with him. *Hechos del Marqués de Cádiz* is similar to *El*

Victorial in that both focus on the military life of a particular real knight. It is different, however, because it has a panegyric quality that aims to praise an important nobleman involved in the campaign against Granada and references a number of skills that do not characterize the chivalric hero.

⁵ As the fifteenth century progressed, the nobility's role in war changed as they were no longer the essential, "front and center" soldiers that dominated battles. As a result, their martial activities gravitated to spectator sports like jousting so that they could maintain their positions in society as elite figures with champion horses and ornate armor. Also important to note is that war was different in the 'New' world: "Both sixteenth-century observers and today's scholars seem to agree that the men, the material culture, and the practices of warfare were substantially different in the new and the Old worlds" (Martínez 130). Martínez explains that "The truth about war was that the new military technologies and tactics had forever altered the social logics of warfare and of its representation" (56) and "the representational traditions of romance fiction in prose and verse clearly privileged the image of the 'medieval centaur,' the relevance of an aristocratic corps of heavy cavalry whose role on the battlefields of Europe was decreasing at the same rate that the output figures of *Orlandos* and *Amadis* printed in Venice or Seville swelled" (65).

⁶ Despite this lack of formal education, Bernal's talent as a writer is widely recognized. Serés comments on Bernal's style, stating "Opta por una especie de estilo 'medio,' pero no el convencional y sistematizado en las poéticas de su tiempo, sino uno ajustado a lo que él llama el 'común hablar' de los soldados" (1202). Oswaldo Estrada, too, has commented on Bernal as a writer, stating "aunque la *Historia verdadera* conserva el tono épico de las novelas de caballería, como el *Amadís de Gaula*, Bernal se aleja de tal género: no escribe sobre un mundo cerrado, absoluto y completo, sino sobre uno en proceso de construcción y evolución" (25).

⁷ This is sometimes referenced as the Battle of Tabasco.

⁸ According to Bernal's text, the Spaniards are consistently wounded by onslaughts of arrows and rocks, but not terribly affected by the Aztec "macana," a long wooden sword with sharp fragments of obsidian around the edge. As Pérez Mallaina explains, "por mucho que la obsidiana, el llamado 'acero americano,' presentase grandes ventajas, como la sencillez de su tratamiento para pasar

de un trozo informe de vidrio a unaafiladísima cuchilla, su fragilidad la hacía saltar en mil pedazos ante el choque con una espada toledana” (68). In fact, many Spaniards adopted the Aztec lightweight armor designed for their types of weapons since it protected well enough against enemy arrows and was much more comfortable.

⁹ The Aztecs were not accustomed to the weapons and style of face-to-face combat used by the Spaniards. The Aztecs did not, for example, necessarily try to kill their enemies in pitched battle, for they were worth much more as live prisoners later to be used in sacrificial rituals. See studies by Zhi-van Alach, Ross Hassig, and John Keegan (pages 110-11).

¹⁰ See Victor Hanson for a comprehensive study of the Greek phalanx.

¹¹ See, for example, Tamara Neal and Christine F. Salazar.

¹² Bernal relies on a realistic description of battle to persuade us that the common soldiers' actions deserve recognition, and he verifies this by telling us about the Aztec art recounting the battle: “Muchas veces he visto pintada entre los mexicanos y tascaltecas esta batalla e subida que hicimos en este gran cu. Y tiénelo por cosa muy heroica, que aunque nos pintan a todos nosotros muy heridos, corriendo sangre e muchos muertos...” (471). Serés signals that here Bernal is likely referring to the Códice Ramírez (also known as the Tlaxcala), an Aztec artistic rendering of the Battle of Tenochtitlan (471, fn. 23).

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