# Confronting Stereotypes: The *Brevísima relación* as Homily, not History

*Cynthia L. Stone*

A unifying theme of Survey of Spanish American Literature 1, a third-year course for undergraduate Spanish majors, is the presentation of colonial-era chronicles not simply as historical sources but as texts structured by specific goals, which, in turn, influence the selection of particular topoi, narrative genres, and rhetorical strategies. Over the course of the semester, we cover major texts from pre-Hispanic times through the early nineteenth century, three hours of which (two seventy-five minute sessions) are dedicated to the works of Bartolomé de Las Casas.

An important goal of the course is to encourage students to critically evaluate common stereotypes about Indians and Spaniards, including the "noble savage" and the "cruel conquistador." Las Casas presents an interesting quandary from this perspective, since a pivotal metaphor from his most famous and most accessible work, the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, involves the characterization of the Amerindians as defenseless lambs at the mercy of Spanish wolves. Readers commonly react to these stereotypes by either accepting them uncritically or dismissing Las Casas's denunciations as exaggerations and slanderous inventions directly responsible for the Spanish Black Legend. Yet, for those of us who specialize in this period of immense cultural ferment whose repercussions are still evident today, neither extreme does justice to the complexity and richness of Las Casas's writings and his enduring legacy in Spanish American letters.

A solution to this quandary is to avoid treating the *Brevísima relación* in a survey format. The reasons I prefer not to exercise that option are several. First, most Holy Cross students are Catholic, and close to a third of Spanish majors are heritage speakers. Nevertheless, they, like most United States students, have internalized anti-Catholic and anti-Hispanic prejudices. Teaching the *Brevísima relación* tends to bring these unquestioned assumptions to the surface, where they can be critically evaluated. Second, the *Brevísima relación*'s combination of rhetorical strategies is amazingly effective at provoking outrage, and, to my mind, anything that stirs undergraduates from a general sense of disconnection regarding colonial-era texts is to be cherished.

Still, I postpone discussion regarding the above polemic until the end of the second class. Otherwise, the most vocal students tend to divide unreflexively into two camps—those all too ready to blame the Spaniards for the problems currently faced by the nations of Spanish America and those who feel the need to dismiss Las Casas for exaggeration and lack of historical accuracy in his denunciation of Spanish abuses.

My pedagogical strategy hinges on a comparison between excerpts from the *Historia de las Indias* and the *Brevísima relación*. We begin, accordingly, by

returning to the Renaissance definition of history that was introduced during the preceding week's discussion of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*: in the words of Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, "es la historia narración de verdades por hombre sabio, para enseñar a bien vivir" 'history is a true account by a man of wisdom with the purpose of instructing in living godfully' (24).[1] The first point is that Las Casas, as a learned man of the cloth, corresponds to the Renaissance model of the historian as philosophical moralist better than Bernal Díaz. Too, Las Casas is no less qualified than Bernal Díaz to provide eyewitness testimony, as the Dominican amply demonstrates in his writings. Relatively speaking, however, the requirement that history provide moral and religious truth gives added weight to the evidentiary truth of Las Casas's account.

The first selections from Las Casas's *Historia* are introduced through part of a chapter from José Juan Arrom's *Imaginación del Nuevo Mundo*, which presents Las Casas as "iniciador de la narrativa de protesta" in Hispanic literature ("Bartolomé de las Casas"). Several brief excerpts that Arrom reproduces and analyzes include the anecdotes of the mastiff Becerillo (*Historia* 2:389; bk. 2, ch. 55), the lies of Indians and Spaniards (3:331; bk. 3, ch. 145), and the Indian messenger (1:445 bk. 1, ch. 115). A supplementary online reading on the use of killer dogs in the wars of conquest that references Becerillo serves implicitly to call into question the charge of fabrication used against Las Casas (Grodsinsky).

The primary antithesis in the Becerillo story revolves around the personification of the dog—who is given a share in the booty equal to that of a crossbowman and addressed as "Señor perro" 'Sir Dog'—versus the dehumanization of the nameless "mujer vieja" 'old Indian woman' whom Becerillo ultimately mistakes for a wall and urinates on. The use of dramatic irony implicates us as readers in the cruel joke Becerillo's owner plays on the unsuspecting old woman. (We know that she is given a letter only to provide better sport by allowing the mastiff to chase her down before tearing her to pieces, but she thinks she is being given an important mission.) The surprising, happy ending, in which the Spaniards grant the old woman her freedom "por no ser más crueles que el perro" 'so as to not exceed the dog in cruelty' (2:389), manages to illustrate succinctly the conquistadors' loss of humanity while also foregrounding Las Casas's characteristic blending of irony and black humor. Rather than exaggeration, the predominant tone here is understatement, which is both highly effective in suggesting the matter-of-fact attitude of the seasoned torturer and also provides a good counterpoint to our later reading of excerpts from the *Brevísima relación*. The ironic definition of the experienced "cristiano" (Christian) as someone who knows how to lie convincingly and the inversion of stereotypes about the relative intelligence and prudence of the "indios" (Indians) as opposed to their supposedly more civilized masters are the highlights of the other brief selections discussed in class.

In preparation for the second day on Las Casas, students preview the story of the 1518–35 rebellion of the Taino chief Enriquillo, in what is now the Dominican Republic (for a good summary, see Wagner and Parish 74–78; an alternate

Spanish version is Losada, *Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas* 162–65), as well as a general profile of missionaries in the Spanish Indies (Rosati).[2] Depending on time constraints, the last few minutes of class are devoted to reviewing these materials.

The reading assignments for the next class session include Raquel Chang-Rodríguez and Malva Filer's selections on Enriquillo in the anthology *Voces de Hispanoamérica* (from the *Historia* 3:259–70; bk. 3, chs. 125–27), two excerpts from the *Brevísima relación* (the prologue and the chapter on the conquest of the island of Hispaniola [71–73, 80–82]), plus a reproduction of the famous 1511 Hispaniola sermon by the Dominican friar Antón de Montesinos as remembered by Las Casas (*Historia* 2:441–42; bk. 3, ch. 4).[3] I also provide an interview with Gustavo Gutiérrez on the topic of Lascasian influences on theology of liberation as optional reading (Gutiérrez, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas*).

To focus attention on the generic conventions that shape the Lascasian texts, I supply students with a list of rhetorical figures and tropes classified by Quintilian under the Greek term *enargeia* and ask them to identify corresponding passages from the *Historia* and the *Brevísima relación* with a view to comparing the uses made of them in the two works. Among the main components of *enargeia* are *descriptio* (vivid description, including ocular demonstration, invented dialogue, and personification), *accumulatio* (the piling up of words and concepts, through climax, synonymy, asyndeton, exemplum, congeries, etc.), hyperbole (a species of amplification that can either exaggerate or attenuate), irony (encompassing antiphrasis, paralipsis, *contentio*, etc.), and antonomasia (the substitution of a descriptive phrase for a proper name or of a representative individual for a class of persons).

The personal motivation informing Las Casas's most polemical writings is aptly summarized in the *Brevísima relación* as the awareness that to remain silent in the face of the atrocities the friar has witnessed is tantamount to becoming an accomplice: "deliberé, por no ser reo, callando, de las perdiciones de ánimas y cuerpos infinitas que los tales perpetraran, poner en molde algunas" 'I therefore concluded that it would constitute a criminal neglect of my duty to remain silent about the enormous loss of life as well as the infinite numbers of souls dispatched to Hell in the course of such "conquests," and so resolved to publish an account of a few such outrages' (80–82; *A Short Account* 6). Indeed, Las Casas's first draft was composed in 1542 for oral delivery to the court councils in an attempt to convince the emperor to halt the ongoing wars of conquest (*Brevísima relación* 21–22).

Las Casas's concomitant rhetorical challenge is to excite in his readers a similar sense of outrage, by bringing the subject matter so vividly before their minds' eyes that they imagine themselves to be witnesses to the events described and, as such, likewise compelled to moral action. In this sense, enargetic rhetoric is well suited to the Biblical imperative to provide visible testimony of God's presence. Here the topos of the eyewitness is more prophetically charged than in Bernal Díaz, collapsing, as Santa Arias observes, the spatiotemporal distance

between the reader and the events portrayed (*Retórica* 75–76). Las Casas's verbal pictures not only create the illusion of immediacy but also convey a deeper understanding of what is represented, the invisible significance of divinely sanctioned authenticity.

When stressing the major points of comparison between Las Casas's style of presentation in the *Historia* versus the *Brevísima relación*, note five rhetorical figures especially: antonomasia, *contentio*, irony, hyperbole, and *descriptio*.

First, the use of antonomasia: In the *Historia*, Las Casas provides proper names for historical figures, using baptismal ones for the cacique Enriquillo and his wife, Doña Lucía; surnames for the Spanish *encomendero* Valenzuela and the lieutenant governor, Pedro de Vadillo; and Taino names for those Indian rebels who reject Christianity, such as Ciguayo. In contrast, in the *Brevísima relación*, Las Casas pointedly excludes names in the chapter on Hispaniola, referring simply to "los cristianos" (the Christians) and "los indios" (the Indians). Moreover, while the *Historia* includes a brief verbal portrait of the protagonist, Enriquillo,[4] the predominant descriptive mode in the *Brevísima relación* is an intensification and accumulation of associations through the reduction of individuals to occupational titles such as "capitán" (captain) or "alguazil" (law enforcement officer) and through the use of epithets like "tiranos" (tyrants), "inhumanos" (inhumane), "extirpadores" (extirpators), and "capitales enemigos del linaje humano" (principal enemies of the human race [80–82]).

The *Brevísima relación*'s lack of individualization and in-depth characterization is one of its most problematic aspects for modern readers. My goal is to help students perceive it as a rhetorical strategy Las Casas uses in some, but by no means all, of his writings. The rationale here is to underscore that, no matter the specific circumstances, the same dynamics repeat themselves throughout the wars of conquest. In the *Brevísima relación,* Las Casas focuses on the universal dynamics of human interaction in times of war, how those who commit acts of violence (unless in self-defense) are complicit in their own dehumanization.

Although Las Casas is frequently cited as an originator of the topos of the "noble savage," this attribution is only partially accurate. In the *Historia*, for instance, it is Enriquillo (despite the childlike diminutive conferred on him by the Franciscan friars) who exemplifies the virtues of prudence, articulateness, and self-control associated with the Renaissance ideal of the fully autonomous adult male. Indeed, the exposition of the rights of the Amerindians to self government due to their exemplary political and moral development (as perfectly as Las Casas considered humanly possible without the guidance of divine grace) is more central to his writings overall than the qualities of docility, humility, obedience, and peacefulness highlighted in the *Brevísima relación*.

The second point to underscore for students is the use of *contentio* (comparison through contraries): In the *Historia*, the main contrast is between Enriquillo and Valenzuela, but there are also significant secondary distinctions made within the separate categories of Indians and Spaniards. Enriquillo, for instance, is contrasted with other Indian rebels, such as Ciguayo, who stage

unprovoked attacks on populations of Spanish civilians, while Valenzuela is contrasted with the members of the Audiencia of Santo Domingo (who give Enriquillo a favorable disposition to his legal case, albeit without the means of enforcing it), with captain Hernando de San Miguel (who negotiates a peace treaty with the cacique, though ultimately inconclusively), and with friars such as the Franciscans (who teach Enriquillo Christian doctrine and how to read and write in Castilian), as well as with Las Casas himself. These secondary contrasts are notably absent from the *Brevísima relación*, where the full force of pathos is brought to bear on the binary opposition between Indians and Christians: the Indians represented as "corderos metidos en sus apriscos" 'lambs in the fold'; the Christians, sardonically, as "feroces bestias" 'ferocious beasts' (81, 82). The generosity and humble lifestyle of the Indians, moreover, is contrasted with the covetousness, wastefulness, and ecological devastation wrought by the Spaniards: "lo que basta para tres casas de a diez personas cada una para un mes, come un cristiano y destruye en un día." 'What a European will consume in a single day normally supports three native households of ten persons each for a whole month' (80; *A Short Account* 14).

A key distinction between the literary genres of history and homily involves just such a flattening out of particulars in the interest of emphasizing universal truths. In the category of homiletics, the *Brevísima relación* corresponds to the ministerial sermon delivered to believers, as opposed to the missionary sermon addressed to nonbelievers. Along these lines, it resembles Fray Antón de Montesinos's 1511 prophetic exhortation to the Spaniards of Hispaniola to bestir themselves from the stupor into which they have fallen and recognize the mortal sin in which they are living: "yo que soy voz de Cristo en el desierto desta isla [os aviso que] todos estáis en pecado mortal y en él vivís y morís" 'I, the voice of Christ in the desert of this island, [I declare unto you that] you are all living and dying in a state of mortal sin' (*Historia* 2:441; bk. 3, ch. 4; see note 3 of this essay).

Accordingly, I draw students' attention to the division of the *Brevísima relación* into a prologue and a series of chapters set in diverse locales where the ravages of conquest are shown to repeat themselves over and over. Both the prologue (where the *thema* to be expounded on is first presented) and the final chapter on New Granada end with the word *amen*. [As André Saint-Lu suggests (Introduction 17),] the chapters are expository variations on the scriptural quotation, "Yo os envío como ovejas entre lobos" 'I send you forth as lambs among wolves' ([title to come], Luke 10.3). The underlying theological proposition implies a world radically divided between the forces of good and of evil, in which God and Satan vie for the souls of unrepentant sinners (for more on this oppositional rhetoric, see Avalle-Arce). In other words, the rhetorical appeal of the *Brevísima relación* is more to the emotions than to the intellect, while the *Historia* presents a relatively balanced appeal to pathos and logos.

The third point of comparison concerns other characteristic uses of irony: Once again there is a certain economy of expression and controlled understatement

in the *Historia*, as when Enriquillo tells the *encomendero* who has assaulted his wife, impoverished his people, and abused him both verbally and physically, "Agradeced, Valenzuela, que no os mato; andad, id y no volváis más acá; guardáos" 'Be glad I didn't kill you, Valenzuela! Go! And the rest of you! And don't come back here again! And keep an eye out!' or, when the act of taking up arms in self defense is pithily summarized as "alzarse y ser rebelde," rising up and rebelling (3:261; bk. 3, ch. 125).

The *Brevísima relación*'s irony is more graphic and heavy-handed. In addition to the antiphrastic "Christian," which appears in most every sentence, the brief passages we analyze in class include ironic references to sacrilegious methods of torture ("de trece en trece, a honor y reverencia de Nuestro Redemptor e de los doce apóstoles, poniéndoles leña y fuego" '[Stringing their victims up] and burn[ing] them alive thirteen at a time, in honour of our Savior and the twelve Apostles' ([81; *Short Account* 15]) and to the great benefits conferred on the Indians by European letters ("otros . . . cortábanles ambas manos y dellas llevaban colgando, y decíanles: 'Andad con cartas', conviene a saber, lleva las nuevas a las gentes que estaban huidas por los montes" 'Some they chose to . . . cut their wrists, leaving their hands dangling, saying to them: "Take this letter"—meaning that their sorry condition would act as a warning to those hiding in the hills' [81; 15]). Class discussion tends to revolve around Las Casas's inversion of religious preconceptions—most Indian converts are better Christians than those who boast the name Christians; the *buen cristiano* is defined by acts, not heredity—and also his development of the Aristotelian conception of civil society along with the Thomistic conception of natural law into a theory of natural rights (Hanke, *Aristotle*; Pagden, *Fall*; and García).

Instructors will also want to track the use of hyperbole: the ironic understatement of the *Historia* contrasts with the unremittingly emphatic tone of the *Brevísima relación*, achieved through the prolific use of grammatical superlatives ("sumario brevísimo," "vastísimo y nuevo mundo," "tierras grandísimas," "gravísimos pecados mortals," "cosa . . . convenientísima," "perros bravísimos"; 'briefest of summaries,' 'most vast and newfound world,' 'exceedingly great lands,' 'gravest of mortal sins,' 'a matter of utmost convenience,' 'most ferocious dogs'), extreme descriptors ("destruición," "terribles y eternos suplicios," "inmensa copia de sangre humana," "cosas arriba dichas y otras infinitas"; 'destruction,' 'terrible and eternal torments,' 'copious amounts of human blood,' 'aforesaid matters and infinite others'), and quantitative and qualitative amplifications ("mil cuentos de gentes," "cincuenta años y más de experiencia," "tantos y tan grandes y tales reinos," "tan sin piedad y tan feroces bestias"; 'peoples by the scores of thousands,' 'experience of fifty years and more,' 'so many kingdoms, each and every one of such greatness,' 'so merciless and of such bestial ferocity' [72–82]). When the charged language is combined with the abundant use of congeries, as when Las Casas refers to the conquests as "inicuas, tiránicas, y por toda ley natural, divina y humana condenadas, detestadas y malditas" 'iniquitous, tyrannical, and condemned, detested, and accursed by every natu-

ral, divine, and human law,' (72) the overall impression created in the reader is one of sustained verbal assault.

It is important to distinguish between the use of exaggeration for dramatic effect, without intent to deceive, and the deliberate misrepresentation of historically verifiable figures and events. Las Casas's rhetorical excesses are consistently of the first type, not the second. Indeed, taken individually, the above examples do not differ substantially from the use of hyperbole by Las Casas's contemporaries, as when the historian Francisco López de Gómara refers to the discovery of the Spanish Indies as "la mayor cosa después de la creación del mundo, sacando la encarnación y muerte del que lo crió" 'the greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it)' (qtd. in Elliot, *Old World* 10). Rather, it is the cumulative effect of so many in such a condensed narration that contributes to the impression of "aglomeración saturada" 'saturated conglomeration' (Veres 5). Which leads to the question of why Las Casas overplays his hand, so to speak, in the *Brevísima relación*—why he is not more circumspect in his use of this trope. No less an authority than the classical rhetorician Quintilian suggests a possible rationale:

> Hyperbole only has positive value when the thing about which we have to speak transcends the ordinary limits of nature. We are then allowed to amplify, because the real size of the thing cannot be expressed, and it is better to go too far than not to go far enough. (469; bk. 8, ch. 6)

The task Las Casas sets for himself in the *Brevísima relación* is not only to convince his readers of the validity of his moral and theological arguments but also to persuade them of the unprecedented nature of what is happening in the Spanish Indies, so they feel compelled to either join with him in putting an end to the abuses or to cover their ears and decry the shamelessness of such allegations. In giving voice to the unspeakable—the incomprehensibility of extreme violence—Las Casas crosses the boundary of decorum into the realm of absolutes.

Finally, there is Las Casas's use of *descriptio* (vivid description). The concise characterization in the *Historia* of individuals (e.g., Becerillo, Enriquillo), of places (e.g., Hispaniola as a *locus amoenus* before the conquest), and of events (e.g., the rapid sketching of action through sequences of verbs such as "tornóse . . . suénase . . . provéese . . . juntáronse"; 'returned . . . proclaimed . . . provided . . . set forth' [3:261; bk. 3, ch. 125]) contrasts with the excruciating enumeration of the physicality of torture in the *Brevísima relación*: the detailing of body parts (smashed or severed heads, disemboweled entrails, amputated hands, roasting feet, screaming mouths), of types of people slaughtered (the aged, pregnant women, infants, caciques), of particular techniques favored by diverse executioners (stabbing, dismembering, drowning, burning on gallows or lashed to grids of rods).

The figure of ocular demonstration (Cicero's *sub oculos subjectio*) involves not just the recounting of events but actually showing them before the eyes of

the mind. It thus constitutes a reality of its own making, which becomes self-evident and readily reproducible. In this sense, Theodor de Bry's images illustrating the 1598 Latin edition of the *Brevísima relación* simply take Las Casas's verbal pictures to the next logical stage of rhetorical intensification. (The de Bry engraving we tend to concentrate on in class is that of the thirteen naked men and women hanging from a gallows and slowly burning, along with the infant whose brains are about to be dashed against a wall [*Narratio regionum* 10]; for more on this topic, see Conley.)

The virtue of the preceding point-by-point comparison between Las Casas as historian and as preacher-prophet is that, when the class finally gets around to discussing the Black Legend, we can concentrate on the crux of the matter: namely, whether the publication of the *Brevísima relación* in 1552 was Las Casas's greatest mistake (in accordance with the thesis of Rómulo Carbia, among others); or whether, considered retrospectively, its positive contributions (to the development of protest and testimonial literature, to the theology of liberation, to the doctrine of natural human rights) outweigh the negatives of its key propagandistic role in establishing the myth of Spanish perfidy's exceptionalism. An alternate approach, for those who prefer to put a somewhat different spin on the debate, is whether those who disagree with their government's policies do well in openly voicing their objections so as to influence the course of foreign policy, both in the short and long term, or whether to do so is intrinsically unpatriotic.

## NOTES

I follow André Saint-Lu's edition of the Brevísima *relación* (Catédra, 2005). All translations from the Spanish are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[1] This summation is from a retrospectively oriented historiographic treatise by Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, first published in 1611.

[2] For more information on the life of Las Casas, see the article by Rolena Adorno in this volume. The best full-length study is still the 1967 biography by Wagner and Parish.

[3] Available online at www.puc.cl/sw_educ/historia/conquista/parte3/html/index.html, path: sermón de Montecinos.

[4] Enriquillo is described as "a tall, impressive man, finely proportioned, his face neither handsome nor homely. It was the face of a serious and stern man" (Las Casas, *Indian Freedom* 189).