# **Observations of Malintzin**

# Malintzin was a Nahua slave woman given to Hernan Cortes as a peace offering by the Tabascan people. He renamed her Marina, but today she is often called a traitor and called La Malinche. Malintzin serve as a translator for Cortes as he moved into Mexico and conquered the Aztec Empire. Pay attention to what the source suggests about Malintzin’s importance and what reasons she had for aiding Cortes

“It was not simply that the Spanish needed their translators in order to find their way and obtain requisite food and water. They needed them for far more than this — for the conquest itself. . .

[Malintzin] knew that her survival was dependent on the Spaniards’ survival, so she was motivated to observe them carefully; undoubtedly her years as a slave had honed her skills in that regard…[B]y all accounts she learned Spanish and Spanish ways quickly… By 1524… Malintzin did all his [Cortés’] translation between Spanish, Nahuatl, and Maya.

For Malintzin could do more than repeat what others said in a foreign vocabulary..[S]he could speak in different registers and thus make a necessary point more effectively…[The] Spaniards who depended on her competence seemed to like and admire her. Bernal Diaz [a Spanish conquistador who wrote a history of the conquest]…conveys that she spoke to them archly or coquettishly if need be — in other words, that she knew how to handle her Spanish male audience. Such an approach, however, would never have worked with her Nahua audiences, who were also largely male. With them, she spoke like…‘a lady of power,’ not…like a playful girl. A playful girl should respect her elders, not tell them what to do. She knew this and adjusted her tone accordingly.

She was to need all her skills, linguistic and otherwise, as they [the Spanish army] marched from the sea to Tenochtitlan.”

Source: Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin’s Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 58-59.