

Félix Varela (1)
***Jicoténcal* (1826) (2)**
Excerpt from the "Fifth Book" (i.e., chapter) of this
novel
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Magiscatzin's Death and the Preliminaries to Doña Marina's (3)
Conversion

[...] These good seeds began to germinate in Marina's heart when the death of Magiscatzin (4) at last and irrevocably moved her to convert to virtue.

As his last hour was approaching the old prevaricator contemplated the prospect of such a fearful future life that awaited the wicked. Cruel remorse, panic, and terror, messengers of a vengeful God of justice, tormented his soul, and, unable to ignore the horrible portrait of his life that his intrusive memory placed before him, he is shaken by the horrified, accusatory cry of his conscience's titanic voice. His anguished sighs and pitiful groans are manifest signs of the unbearable torment that is tearing him apart.

Shuddering, Doña Marina views this man's terrifying struggle against a voice coming from deep within him that begins with heat exhorting him to repent—the single and extremely sad solace that's left to an evil man at death's door. Magiscatzin then, with insistent requests, asks that the old patriarch Jicoténcal, Ordaz, and Teutila (5) be brought before him. When all, including Doña Marina, his relatives, and friends, are gathered around his sick bed, he spoke in the following manner:

"Happy are you, a thousand and one times, venerable Jicoténcal! You are going down to the grave with the sweet tranquility of a laborer who retires to his home after diligently caring for the field that sustains him and his fortunate family, while I am approaching my end with the anxiety, apprehension, and fear of a criminal who in vain attempts to hide his remorse in the dark cavern in which he will be buried. Indeed, no matter how dark and deep we imagine the animal's lair that awaits us, here inside ourselves there is a light against which we try to close our eyes in vain.

"How many evil deeds I've committed! And how terrible must be my punishment! ... If it is possible, let us reduce the horror of the torments that await us, humbly recognizing the enormity of my crimes. But no. What limits would there be to the torment of the author of the unjust war against Zocoatlán (6) and for the one who sold his homeland to an outsider just to satisfy his iniquities and his base passions? If only this foreigner could witness the torment that

I'm suffering now, perhaps the enormous evil I've caused could somehow be made amends for.

"This is the object that has moved me to summon you to this horrific spectacle. All of you, come closer, and each of you paint a picture for him of the cruel anguish with which your favorite criminal is leaving this life. You will never even begin to describe the wild emotions that are destroying my spirit. The infernal furies, with crawling snakes covering their heads are surrounding my bed threatening me with gaping mouths and sharp finger nails. The evil genius has set his torches on fire filling this room with foetid smoke. And beyond all these hideous specters there appears, glowing like lightning, the terrible sword that the strong arm of a vengeful God is thrusting at me. Ah! Stop, stay your blow, terrible God! ... Wow is me! Rage and suffer, wicked man... assassin ... traitor! This is the reward for your parricide triumphs! Let it be done, at last... Be damned!"

A gruesome convulsion followed by the cruelest agony put an end such a strong scene and the life of the iniquitous Tlaxcalan senator. All the witnesses were shaken with terror, fell prostrate to the ground, and sank into the deepest silence as if they were waiting for the supreme and invisible tribunal that had just executed such an immense and exemplary justice to vanish.

The sobs and tears of Doña Marina broke the lugubrious silence of those present. They rushed to comfort her thinking she was deranged. This sad woman felt all the weight of her past conduct in her soul; however, being prepared beforehand by the sweet effects of virtue, her tears were a consoling sign of the struggle in a soul to finally shake off the yoke of vice.

At this moment Fray Bartolomé de Olmedo (7) came in, having been sent by Hernán Cortés to give solace the suffering Magiscatzin in his last hour. Doña Marina turns toward him and says:

"Foreigner, my ambition to change my condition from slave to the lover of a powerful man induced me to foreswear the religion of my forebears and instead embrace yours. Although I have but little instruction in the doctrine of your religion, about which you yourself vacillate and continually contradict yourself, nevertheless I see in all of you the monstrous mixture of the sweetest and most just maxims and the most atrocious, most iniquitous deeds and the most profound and subtle speeches alongside the most silly and contemptible absurdities.

"When I was a follower of my simple and pure religion, it flowed from my heart; when I was an idolater, as you were wont to call me, I was a virtuous woman, and my humble and unlucky fortune kept me far from the heroism of that matron you hold in your sight; but since I became a Christian, the steps I took on the path of my crimes were greater than the beautiful virtues of Teutila.

"I abjure forever a religion you've taught me with lies, intrigues, greed, and outrageousness, and, above all, with indifference to the most atrocious crimes. Doctrine must be preached with example, and when example has earned respect understanding is wedded to conviction. Tell Hernán Cortés that his slave will knead his bread, that she will wash his clothes, but she will no longer be the collaborator in his ambitious plans nor an accomplice in his disordered life."

Thus spoke poor Marina, constructing with her overheated imagination a nebulous mix of things and people and their speech. Her untutored mind could not comprehend the pious arguments with which the zealous priest was trying to corral that wayward sheep teetering on the edge of a precipice. She desired to remain in neither the love nor confidence of Hernán Cortés, and with all her strength she held on to the thought that, if she continued in her amorous and political intrigues, she would infallibly distance herself from the path of virtue.

(1) For information about Varela, see: => [Félix Varela](#).

(2) This version is translated from the Spanish original as edited in the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project Publication series by Luis Leal and Rodolfo J. Cortina in their 1995 publication of *Jicoténcal* (Arte Público Press, Houston, Texas, 1995, 108-110). The original edition published in 1826 in Philadelphia appeared with no attribution of an author (i.e., anonymous or unknown); however, in their introduction, professors Leal and Cortina establish convincingly, though tentatively, that the author in fact is Félix Varela (1788-1853), who was born in Cuba, spent his early years in Florida, returned to Cuba for his higher education, was exiled to the United States (New York City, Baltimore, and Philadelphia), died and was buried in St. Augustine, Florida, and in the 20th century was re-buried in the Aula Magnum at the University of Havana. This novel fictionalizes from a somewhat revisionist historical viewpoint—though typical of the Latin American rejection of the lionizing approach to the conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés (1519-1521)—the resistance of the tragic Tlascalan hero Xicoténcal to the Spanish invasion of indigenous México. Cortés's concubine and tri-lingual interpreter Malinalli (or Malintzin), who was baptized as Doña Marina, and who was seen as a traitor to her Mesoamerican people, is seen first as a treacherous and dissembling termagant, is then seen, in this passage, which is typical of Romantic literature, as turning from evil to virtue.

(3) For more information about Doña Marina, see: => [Malinalli](#).

(4) Magiscatzin (Varela's spelling of the historical figure of Maxicatzin) was the next to last (c. 1510) lord of the second of the seven seignorial regions of the pre-conquest nation of Tlaxcallan (modern Tlaxcala). In 1348 C.E. the social and political organization of Tlaxcallan began with a single priest-ruler. The latter divided his kingdom, giving his brother in 1384 the largest and best part of his domain. This feudal estate, called Ocotelulco was ruled by Maxicatzin, who temporized and allied with Cortés in the Spanish war against the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán. Varela's narrator portrays Magiscatzin as an evil, manipulative traitor to his people.

(5) The patriarch Jicoténcal is the young hero Jicoténcal's father, who is portrayed as a wise and virtuous patriot of the what is called optimistically by Varela the Tlaxcalan Republic. Diego de Ordaz (1480-1532) was an officer in Cortés's army that conquered Tenochtitlán. In historical fact, Ordaz was sent back to Spain in 1521 carrying Cortés's famous letters about the conquest to emperor Charles V. In the novel he is given the virtuous and noble character of the fictional character of the young hero Jicoténcal's beautiful and equally tragic Texcocan lover, Teutila, and he is dispatched to Spain to separate him from Teutila, whom Cortés lasciviously tries in vain to seduce. She, however, resists Cortés's violent advances and remains faithful to her beloved Jicoténcal, dying a martyr's suicidal death in a failed attempt to kill Cortés.

(6) Magiscatzin allied with Cortés to make war on the neighboring indigenous state of Zocoatlán, according to the Spanish chronicler Antonio de Solís.

(7) Bartolomé de Olmedo (1484-1524) was a medical doctor and Franciscan friar who accompanied Cortés in the conquest of New Spain. He was the first friar charged with converting the indigenous people of México. Scholars say he used less force for conversion than Cortés. In particular, he was tasked with the conversion of Malinalli, whom he baptized as Doña Marina; he celebrated the first mass in Tenochtitlán; and he attempted to teach Christian doctrine to Moctezuma, who died before he could be baptized.