The Amacuitlapilco Passion Play

Nican pehua in pasión in ipantzinco omochiuh in totecuiyo Jesu Cristo inic omocalaquih in ipan altepetl Jerusalén ipan Domingoh de ramos

Archivo General de la Nación, Indiferente Virreynal, Clero regular y secular, exp. 040, caja 6610

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In 1757 the archbishop of Mexico, Manuel José Rubio y Salinas, ordered all Indigenous Passion plays suspended and all scripts and associated papers submitted to his office. How broadly priests in the archdiocese complied with his order is unknown, but one of them, fray Miguel de Torres, collected six Passion scripts and sent them in. Fray Miguel was the parish priest of Jonacatepec and its surrounding district, now in the state of Morelos. We know of his action because of notes he wrote on one of the scripts, where he mentions the six *cuadernos* (notebooks) he remitted, and labels this particular script as coming from Amacuitlapilco, located at the northwest of the town of Jonacatepec. His handwriting matches notes on the plays from Tepalcingo and Axochiapan, also located near Jonacatepec. It is only from his notes that we can link these three plays to these specific locations.

The three plays ended up in different repositories; the fate of the other three Jonacatepec manuscripts is unknown. The three are also linked in that almost all of the Axochiapan play is closely cognate with either the Amacuitlapilco text or the Tepalcingo text, suggesting that the Axochiapan scriptwriter used these or other copies of the locally available versions of the play in order to construct his own script. In 2018 Nadia Marín-Guadarrama was able to photograph the entire document at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City. My transcriptions and translations are based on her photographs. The play has not been previously published. We are very grateful to the AGN for authorizing the publication of Nadia’s photographs on our website.

The Amacuitlapilco play is the longest of the six Passion plays in this project. It is written in a clear and easily legible Indigenous scribal hand over 57 leaves of paper. The first leaf was blank until fray Miguel wrote his notes there in 1757. The second leaf bears a lengthy title in Nahuatl, dated September 11, 1732, with the script proper beginning on the verso side. The play, including this introductory note, is written in a single hand. A later editor added small additions or changes here and there, sometimes to add an additional bit of polite speech, such as making sure Jesus addresses the apostles as “my beloved students”; in some places, the additions do not suit the context. Footnotes on the English translation record these additions when they alter the text in any meaningful way. Discoloration near the outer margin in the middle area of every page attests to the many fingers that turned these pages as the script was in use.

We are indebted to the Amacuitlapilco scriptwriter for providing the most expansive and detailed stage directions of any script in the corpus. Whether these are his own ideas or copied from an earlier manuscript, he provides many clues about the actual staging of the plays, not just the actors’ movements but even their expressions. Samuel is to look angry as he strikes the table during the Jewish leaders’ meeting (27v), and Caiaphas is to tear his cloak in anger that will be obvious to the audience (*huel teixpan neciz*; 34r). Judas is to stare at Jesus when he is brought out of jail (36r). The scriptwriter also wants it to be very clear to the audience that Notary is actually writing something on paper (34r), and that Christ retains his loincloth when he is stripped before the flagellation (43r). His directions that Christ dismount from the donkey, speak some lines on the ground, and then get up on the stage (10v–11r) helps us to visualize how the procession with the donkey approaches from offstage, the action then shifting to the stage, which represents Jerusalem. He provides a partial seating chart for the Last Supper, placing six apostles at each of Jesus at what must have been a long table (as in Leonardo da Vinci’s fresco). Peter is to sit at Jesus's right and John at his left, with Judas at one of the ends (19v). This scriptwriter is also the only one who instructs the Judas actor to go to a tree and (pretend to) hang himself with a rope (38r), though the suicide may have been staged in other performances as well.

The play's opening dialogue among Jesus and his students is unique to this play; the others begin either with the farewell between Jesus and Mary or Jesus dispatching two students to fetch the donkey he will ride to Jerusalem. In Amacuitlapilco, the opening conversation (folios 2v-4r) gives an overview of the events to come, including a preview of the command to love another that is always part of his speech at the Last Supper. After this, the play moves right on to the farewell scene and then the donkey dispatch. Here the apostles equip the donkey with a particular fine seat for Jesus, John bringing a white cloak and Andrew bringing a piece of taffeta.

Another unique feature is the four little children (*pipiltotontin*) who, each in turn, speak to Jesus as he rides to Jerusalem (9r–9v). The Penn play (4v–5r) has a speech by "Israelites," whom the preceding stage direction explains are children, but they are to speak in unison, reciting or singing the Latin Hosanna text from Matthew 21:9 and then translating it into Nahuatl. The four children in Amacuitlapilco give four different speeches in Nahuatl, resembling but not precisely cognate with the Hosanna lines. In the Tepalcingo and Axochiapan plays, one of the Jewish characters tells Jesus to make the children stop talking (from Matthew 21:16), but no children are given actual lines.

During Amacuitlapilco's farewell scene, only Mary Magdalene attends Mary as she speaks with her son, omitting the role Martha has in Penn and Tepalcingo. Later, when John comes to escort Mary and her companions to Jerusalem to witness the crucifixion, the script places Mary Salome in the company of Mary and Magdalene—a place filled by Martha in Penn and Tepalcingo and by Veronica in Princeton. She has one short turn at speech (47r). Placing this woman in the scene is consistent with Mark 15:40, where Salome is named as one of the women present at the cross. Later Christian tradition added Mary to her name, making her one of the "three Marys," and identified her as the mother of John and James.[1] It may have been a common practice to include additional women in this scene as companions to Mary, but this is the only instance in which an additional "Mary" is named in the scripts and provided with lines.

The other Jonacatepec plays present very similar texts for Jesus's death warrant, but Amacuitlapilco's scriptwriter calls for the reading of a text not actually included in the script, as if Notary is to read from a separate document displayed as a prop (46r). This may indicate the use of some version of the longer and more graphic death sentence circulating in Nahuatl by the time the Princeton and Penn plays were written (by 1750 in the case of Princeton). Two variants of the text in Spanish were swept up in the 1768 Inquisition investigation. This death warrant derived from a text supposedly discovered in L'Aquila, in the kingdom of Naples, in 1580, which quickly circulated around western Europe with claims of authenticity.[2] At the very end of the Amacuitlapilco play, another writer had the intention of copying in the death sentence, which would have facilitated performance of the play. However, after writing *yn Nehuatl ponÇion* ("I, Pontius"), this person abandoned the attempt. Had no death sentence been available to use in a particular performance, the Town Crier's very truncated reiteration at 49r served something of the same purpose. This speech has no cognate in the other plays.

The Amacuitlapilco and Axochiapan play share some features that suggest a historical connection to the Penn play or another version with similar features. In a number of cases, the two Jonacatepec plays record a reduced or streamlined version of the parallel Penn content. An exception occurs at the end of the play. All three of these scripts split Joseph of Arimathea, the into two people, reading "Joseph" and "*ab* [Latin "from"] Arimathea" as two different names. In each of the Gospels, Joseph of Arimathea obtains permission from Pontius Pilate to bury Jesus in a tomb that he provides; in Matthew, Nicodemus assists with the burial. Along this line of Passion play transmission, Nicodemus was being replaced with "Abarimatia" (which I regularize as "Arimathea"). In Penn, Joseph and Nicodemus go to talk to Pilate, but then Joseph and Arimathea return to Calvary and remove Jesus's body from the cross, with John giving directions and consulting with Mary (43r–45r). Along the Amacuitlapilco/Axochiapan line of transmission, the visit to Pilate took on an expanded form, while the scene at the cross was truncated before the removal of the body. Neither scriptwriter mentions Nicodemus. But the later editor of the Amacuitlapilco play noticed something was odd, and corrected not "Abaramatia" but "Juseph" to "Nicodemus" at the beginning of the scene (56r). On their first attempt, Pilate refuses to cooperate, complaining that the visitors are giving him problems and a headache. They return to Calvary and pray to Jesus on the cross. Then they return to Pilate and, apparently through Jesus's intervention, he grants their request, though not before repeating his complaints. The play then ends with them beseeching Jesus on the cross for leave to take him down (56v–57r).

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[1] See newadvent.org/cathen/13403a.htm; udayton.edu/imri/mary/h/holy-kindred.php.

[2] On the L'Aquila warrant see, for example, Rudolf Berliner, 2003, "Das Urteil des Pilatus," in *Rudolf Berliner (1886-1967): "The Freedom of Medieval Art" und andere Studie zum christlichen Bild,* ed. Robert Suckale, Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 50–52; Per Beskow, 1983, *Strange Tales about Jesus: A Survey of Unfamiliar Gospels*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 19–20. I discuss the text further in Chapter 2 of my monograph on the Passion plays.

The Amacuitlapilco play is notable for its rich dialogue and detailed mise-en-scène, but it offers a limited choral soundscape. None of the three plays from Jonacatepec features much music, compared to the rich choral entries in the Penn and Princeton dramas. The Amacuitlapilco scriptwriter also seems to have had limited musical knowledge, as he calls the two pieces he does include motets (*motete*). Motets are short, stand-alone polyphonic compositions. His songs, rather, most likely derive from Juan Navarro's 1604 book of Passion chants, and his second bit of Latin is quite garbled (see notes at 36v and 48v in the translation or standardized transcription). We may wonder whether Amacuitlapilco’s choirmaster recognized these references and supplied the requested music. Performers may have used other music, or staged a performance without Latin singing.