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Objectifying Patriarchy: The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez

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Through Ellen Perry Berkeley's verses we see how social arrangements affect the quality of everyday life and personal feelings. Patriarchy is such a big, all-encompassing entity—even bigger and more general than social class—that stepping outside it is particularly difficult. *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, set in the past (1900), and in a cultural setting peripheral to ours (the Mexican-Texas border), enables us to do just that, to step outside our subjective experience and contemplate the power of a patriarchal culture. The writer managed all this without saying so explicitly; the theme lies in the film's structure.

The story is about the chase of a horse thief by a posse of rangers. We discover that at the source of a misunderstanding, ensuing crime, daring escapes, and final capture is a linguistic error, the mistranslation of the Spanish word for "mare" into the more generic English word "horse." To see the patriarchal theme of the film requires understanding the implicit equation of language with matriarchal activities and values. Language is traditionally part of the female domain. Mothers are primarily the ones who teach language to newborns; girls generally acquire language skills in their native and foreign tongues more readily than boys. In this film, the crucial linguistic nuance is

overlooked by a male deputy. A female translator discovers the error while Gregorio Cortez is being interviewed in prison. Here we see the opposition of white male attitudes to more gentle female ones. And the intermediary between female understanding and the white patriarchy is a gentle, almost hermaphroditic, fattish white male lawyer—a man of words, not action.

Looking back through the film one sees consistent polarities. For example, intimacy, trust, and pleasure in Mexican family life offer a counter vision to the male Anglo world. In one sunny afternoon scene, the children are playing, while Cortez' wife, serving but not subservient, shaves him. His brother is also part of the scene, so no rigid lines are drawn around the family—as that which the breadwinner owns and doesn't own.

Gregorio Cortez, as a representative of the matriarchal world, is at one with nature—his horse and the land he traverses. He thanks his horses lovingly for their valiant endurance; he knows the gullies and flora that can offer him protection. He even outruns the nineteenth-century symbol of man's dominance over nature, the locomotive, which the white male news reporters view as a humiliation. Fittingly, in the very end, the train takes

Gregorio away from his family to prison.

The only symbolism muffed by the filmmakers is the use of architecture to express the polarity established elsewhere. The places created by the dominant culture—most notably its jail—are horrifying, but one needs a visually fuller and more sympathetic treatment of the domestic architecture of the Mexican families. The sensuality, openness, and intimate scale of the adobe houses could be emphasized, so that the house scenes would not seem like rural poverty to twentieth-century urban eyes and the counterpoint to the jail would not be lost.

The film's analysis is sophisticated because the culture with its emphasis on power and money, rather than white men *per se*, is blamed. Accordingly, men of color also get caught up in and serve the dominant culture. The Indian, Skin, is used as a tracker to help locate Cortez after his stealthy escape. And, in the end, a Mexican man turns in Cortez (just as he is about to cross the river and escape) for the reward offered for his capture. Moreover, the culture of white men and not the men are blamed; in fact, the men are depicted as real, and even pleasant, at their victory dinner as they discuss the importance of having captured Cortez in order to insure Federal

continuance of the ranger program.

This film is neither sentimental nor blaming; its analysis is powerful, without being didactic. The film works at the level of sheer narrative excitement; it is extremely moving, profoundly sad. Cinematically *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* is interesting for its efforts to unify camera style with story line. The opening shots are hand-held, unfocused, blurred, jumbled, confused, just as the incident itself is open to interpretation by many different people throughout the first half of the film until the puzzle is finally unraveled and the linguistic misunderstandings at heart are discovered. From this point on the camera style is clear and steady and the flashbacks are orderly, although not linear.

In a period when feminism can often be divorced from movements for the liberation of people of color, this film offers a rare but welcome chance to place ourselves outside the everyday to reflect upon the harshness of structures that ensnare us all.