OUR BODIES, OUR SELVES: VENGEANCE IN THE NOVELLAS OF MARÍA DE ZAYAS

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Is Justice . . .
Governed by greed and lust?
Just the strong doing what they can
And the weak suffering what they must?
. . . . . .
And sex sells everything,
And sex kills . . .
Sex kills . . .

–Joni Mitchell

In the above quote from a song that hinges on the refrain "sex kills," Joni Mitchell laments the dangers of modern society and duly notes the interconnectedness of power, sex, and death. These are the same issues that María de Zayas was struggling with as she sought to voice a feminist critique of the treatment of women in seventeenth-century Spanish society. In accordance with the emphasis on social control and maintenance of the social order seen in Spain's socio-political spectrum of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the themes of vengeance, justice, and sexual transgression abound in Golden Age literature, particularly in the *comedia* where many women fall victim to the vindictive plots of their overly-suspicious and obsessively jealous male counterparts.[1] In María de Zayas's two novella collections (published in 1637 and 1647), the dynamics of vengeance figure prominently among the representations of the perils facing women in the sexual economy. In the historical context, the thirst for vengeance was legally sanctioned, of course, by the *Nueva recopilación* of the mid-sixteenth century which preserved the ancient secular law allowing men to kill their wives if the women were caught in the act of adultery. And although few cases of such uxoricide appear on the legal records of the time, the law is in fact emblematic of the double standards applied with regard to gender and sexuality: while men's promiscuity was tacitly accepted, women were condemned even upon mere suspicion of sexual misconduct.

Zayas streamlines her critique of the treatment of women under patriarchal rule by focusing on the ways in which the female body is imperiled within an honor code that sacrificed and oppressed the

feminine to preserve masculine honor. Over thirty female characters suffer at the hands of men in her texts. These violent acts are perpetrated by lovers, husbands, fathers, and other male family members whose proprietary attitudes toward their female counterparts lead them to violate the feminine at will. In a collective attempt to silence or remove the women who are perceived as sexually tainted, resolution to questions of honor is sought through violence. Women who are raped or suspected of adultery, for example, are later killed by their husbands or fathers. Falsified sexual promiscuity is also contrived by men as a justification for murdering women. In sum, Zayas represents myriad variations on the hypocrisies and injustices affecting women in her society.

In the *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, two novellas seemingly invert the paradigm of male-authored violence by portraying women in the role of avengers. Aminta in "La burlada Aminta" and Hipólita in "Al fin se paga todo" both kill the men who wronged them. Embedded in texts which repeatedly narrate emotional and physical violations of the feminine, the violence perpetrated by these female characters empowers them to resolve their own problems independently of men. In "La burlada Aminta," Jacinto entices Aminta to have sex with him by making a false marriage promise to her. Abandoned and disgraced after the consummation of the relationship, Aminta devises an elaborate scheme to follow her lover, crossdress in order to gain employment in his house, and, ultimately, to kill him and his current lover in order to avenge her honor. While another man presents himself as a rescuer, Aminta refuses anything but minimal assistance from him, choosing instead to carry out the plan on her own. When she finally lets the dagger fall and kills Jacinto and Flora as they sleep, Aminta completes the cycle of vengeance. Aminta's crossdressing is important here, for she is shown to be mimicking (violent) male behavior and borrowing the freedom of movement afforded to men.

As the other female avenger, Hipólita does not need to crossdress to attain freedom of movement: she has access to her rapist's home because he is her brother-in-law. Sneaking into his house in the middle of the night, she, too, wields a dagger to restore her honor. And while Aminta successfully escapes the authorities by dropping her male identity and changing her name (significantly, her new name Victoria underscores her victory over the man who deceived her), Hipólita suffers more violence before she is finally pardoned by the authorities.

Beaten by her lover when she goes to him for help after the murder, Hipólita only finds release from such violence when she finally is pardoned by the king and enters a convent. These displays of female-authored violence constitute an insertion of the feminine into an honor code from which women were traditionally excluded. That both characters escape punishment from the authorities sanctions this portrayal of feminine violence as a legitimate means through which women may protect and avenge their honor in order to gain agency in a system which continually figures them as victims.

The portrayal of female agency and empowerment seen in these two novellas conforms to the representation of strong female characters throughout the *Novelas amorosas*. From the crossdressed characters who secure agency after being spurned by their lovers to the woman who dupes a miser into marrying her to another who becomes a viceroy and saves the king's life, female characters in this first volume are, by and large, portrayed as autonomous. And, in direct contrast to the pervasive victimization and terrorization of the second volume, the *Novelas amorosas* all end happily, with the characters either marrying the men they love or entering convents of their own free will. The marked contrast in tone and thematics between the *Novelas amorosas* and the *Desengaños amorosos* has led many critics to equate the "disenchanted" attitude of the second volume with either a change in Zayas's personal life or with the definitive political decay of the 1640s in Spain.[2] Given that we know little about Zayas's life, such statements are purely speculative and entirely unfounded. Examination of the texts, however, and particularly of the frame tale which connects the two volumes, provides insight into this shift toward *desengaño* or disenchantment.

The texts do provide motivation for the intensified focus on the violations of the female body which come as a result of heterosexual relationships. As the frame-tale protagonist, Lisis serves as president to both soirées which themselves provide a reason for the twenty tales to be told. Rejected by Juan at the outset of the *Novelas amorosas*, Lisis engages in her own act of vengeance by flirting with Diego on the first night of the soirée and authorizing him to contract marriage with her on the second night. Jealousy arises among all four players, with Lisis and Juan purposefully provoking each other on several occasions. At times these characters' behavior is flirtatious and childish. After "La burlada Aminta" is told, for example, they each lavish attention on their

new lovers because, as the narrator indicates, "Juan [hizo] mil regalos a Lisarda por picar a Lisis, y Lisis a don Diego por desesperar a don Juan" (*Novelas* 102).[3] Juan's response to Lisis's new-found love and to her authority as president of the soirée becomes increasingly belligerent, however. On the second night of the soirée he usurps her assigned role of poet/singer, for example, when, unbeknownst to Lisis, he requests that the musicians sing a song he has written rather than one of her own. His most impertinent moment comes with his turn at narration when he acknowledges that he had not taken women's authority seriously. He states,

> Por burla había tenido, discreto auditorio, el llegar yo a este punto para contar alguna historia. Y así, no me había prevenido de ninguna; mas anoche que el Presidente hermoso desta bellísima escuadra me mandó que lo hiciese, tomé la pluma y escribí unos borrones; ellos son parte de mi poco entendimiento; mas, supliendo los vuestros mis faltas, digo así . . . (*Novelas* 290)

Juan's statements undermine feminine authority in that he admits to having completely disregarded the initial assignment to tell a story. By stating that he took the mandate as a joke ("por burla"), Juan diminishes women's authority, even after it has been established and respected throughout the soirée.

Eventually Juan's mistreatment of and disregard for women take a toll on Lisis, and her body begins to suffer the adverse effects of frivolity in such serious matters as love and marriage. In the year that passes before the second soirée, Lisis falls deathly ill. Even Juan recognizes that her illness is directly related to his treatment of her, for the principal narrator states, "Bien sentía el ingrato Juan ser él la causa de la enfermedad de Lisis, pues el frío de sus tibiezas eran [sic] la mayor calentura de la dama" (*Desengaños* 331). The figuring of Lisis's body as a text upon which the dangers of heterosexual love are inscribed provides the basis for the representation of the feminine body and self as violated throughout the *Desengaños*. Just as Lisis's sickness becomes critical, with the doctors administering last rites and her life all but lost to fever, so too do the novellas expose the crisis which threatens women's emotional and physical well being.

Once Lisis recovers with the help of her slave-friend Zelima, she

agrees to proceed with her marriage to Diego, and so the second soirée is planned with the motive of celebrating the upcoming union. Although Lisis agrees out of obedience to her mother to marry Diego, she is not prepared to relinquish her autonomy entirely. Conscious of the detrimental effects of deceit on the body, Lisis mandates that women voice tales similar to her own, providing them with a safe space in which to expose the ways women are mistreated by men. With Lisis's own disillusionment cast in terms of illness, the female body is immediately figured as imperiled, and the stage is set for the exploration of the entire range of the ways in which masculine deceit and hypocrisy make themselves manifest at the expense of feminine safety and health.

When Lisis lays down the rules that only women may narrate and that they must tell true tales of masculine deceit, she engages in a multi-faceted act of vengeance. Most obviously, this move ensures that the men, and specifically Juan (who proved his resistance to feminine authority in the first soirée and caused Lisis extreme distress), will be silent. In fact, the principal narrator indicates that the men, who previously were allowed to participate as narrators of the *Novelas amorosas*, are unhappy with being relegated to silence: "[T]odos los hombres [estaban] mal contentos de que, por no serles concedido el novelar, no podían dar muestra de las intenciones" (*Desengaños* 334). With the men sitting in silence, the female characters are free to narrate myriad violations of the female body and self which result from the generalized oppression and mistreatment of women in love relationships.

By excluding men from the narrative act, the *Desengaños amorosos* seek to restore women's good name or *fama* which is described as "tan postrada y abatida por su mal juicio, que apenas hay quien hable bien de ellas" (*Desengaños* 333). Vengeance is sought not only in response to Juan's impertinent behavior, but also on a literary level: masculinist literature and anti-woman ideologies are criticized throughout the texts as the female characters speak out against the abuses suffered by women and the acceptance of such abuses within the cultural system and the dominant discourses. Like the focus on Lisis's body in the Introduction to the *Desengaños*, then, each of the ten *desengaños* narrates the effects of these abuses on the female body and self. From psychological terrorization (the wife in "Tarde llega el desengaño" is kept like a dog in a small room for years because her

husband wrongly believes that she had an affair) to physical abuse (Queen Beatriz's eyes are gouged out at her husband's request) to torture (Inés is imprisoned for six years in a tiny space behind a wall), the novellas display the female body and the oppressed feminine self in order to underscore the message that women do indeed suffer at the hands of their male counterparts.

While no avenging female characters appear in the *Desengaños amorosos*, the woman-only structure of narration, the marginalization of men, and the emphasis on feminine biography mark a consolidated attempt to allow women's voices to be heard. The many displays of the bleeding, dying, crying, tortured, and festering female bodies focus and re-focus our attention on the need for social reform. When Lisis again takes the stage as the final narrator, it is no coincidence, then, that she returns to the discourse of the body in order to prefigure her decision to enter a convent rather than marry Diego. Underscoring the connection between the focus on the body in the novellas proper and the bodily discourse of the frame tale, Lisis phrases her decision to retreat to the feminine realm of the convent as evidence that she herself is the greatest *desengaño* of all. Before telling her tale, she states,

> De manera, que aquí me he puesto a hablar sin engaño, *y yo misma he de ser el mayor desengaño*, porque sería morir del engaño y no vivir del aviso, si desengañando a todas, me dexase yo engañar. (*Desengaños* 634, emphasis added)

This statement partially explains Lisis's motivation for the plot turn after the final tale: she chooses the convent over marriage in an effort to avoid hypocrisy and deceit. For, as she has learned from her own experiences with men and from the tales themselves, men constantly deceive, abuse, and victimize women.

Citing the predicaments of the women discussed in the novellas, Lisis summarizes her ideas about men:

> Pues si una triste vidilla tiene tantos enemigos, y el mayor es un marido, ¿quién me ha de obligar a que entre yo en lid de que tantas han salido vencidas, y saldrán mientras

> durare el mundo, no siendo más valiente ni más dichosa? (*Desengaños* 668)

Lisis thus figures her own body as "el mayor desengaño," for she is keenly aware of the body as text. By promising to be the greatest disenchantment of all, she equates herself with the tales themselves, enticing the reader to "read" her for signs of disenchantment. Her surprise announcement made, Lisis departs for the convent holding Isabel and Estefanía's hands and leaving her fiance and the others shocked. Taking charge of her self, she escapes with her life and retreats with other women to the safety of the convent, thereby achieving a non-violent vengeance by taking control of her ailing body and turning herself into a text of feminine autonomy. With this final act, Lisis circumvents the marriage market and thereby exacts her vengeance on Juan, Diego, and, more generally, on a sexual economy that devalues women. In the end, her realization about the dangers of love is indeed in line with Joni Mitchell's lamentation that "sex kills": Lisis recognizes that she is lucky to have come to understand the subjugation of the feminine body and self and uses this knowledge to preserve the integrity of her body and her self. Lisis refuses, in other words, to let sex kill her.

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NOTES

[1] Matthew Stroud's study on the uxoricide plays addresses the complexities of reading this disturbing sub-genre of *comedias*, concluding that questions of guilt and innocence are too problematic to arrive at any single epistemological approach through which the plays might be read.

[2] José Hesse and Agustín González de Amezúa are two in a long line of critics who take great liberties inventing assertions about Zayas's life and personality in order to fit their own interpretations of her writing and of her as an author. While Hesse laments the fact that Zayas "debió de ser también desgraciada" because she never married

(19), Amezúa states that she must have been "poco agraciada" since no other poet lauds her beauty (quoted in Portal 12).

[3] All citations from Zayas are taken from María Martínez del Portal's edition of her *Novelas completas*. For clarity, I indicate in parentheses whether the quote is taken from the *Novelas amorosas* or the *Desengaños amorosos*.

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