

## Religion and Sex Crimes in Baroque Spain

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

*The focus of this essay is Zayas's use of the Ave Maria, a hymn or prayer that celebrates the immaculate purity of God's chosen vessel for the birth of Christ and then pleads with her to "pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death". I will claim that Zayas's arguably blasphemous use of the religious hymn, which is situated within her ironic use of the Christian theology of revelation, pulls the curtain back on a morally bankrupt aristocratic class that has bent theological thought and religious ritual toward the perpetuation and defense of sexual violence in early modern Spanish social and political institutions.*

# Religion and Sex Crimes in Baroque Spain

The *Ave Maria* as Alibi in *His Wife's Executioner*  
by María de Zayas

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It was a happy coincidence that the writing of this essay coincided with the debut of Darren Aronofsky's challenging and controversial film *Mother!* This uproarious and terrifying reworking of the conception, birth, and sacrifice of life and/or Christ, set in rural America, makes for an excellent jumping-off point for an essay on a seventeenth-century experimental novel that combines religious allegory, theological satire, and femicide. Every recognizable biblical narrative motif in *Mother!* begins in violence, proceeds through fear to a temporary and false resolution, and returns to violence, and this includes the conception of a newborn who is eventually consumed—literally eaten—by adoring masses who seek to consume a piece of *Him's* progeny. *Mother!*'s plot basically consists of a constant assault on the mother figure, who is forced to capitulate to *Him* and an increasingly invasive and numerous series of guests/interlopers until the very end of the movie, when she blows up herself and the house where the action takes place. The conception of *Him's* baby (the protagonists in this film are never named) occurs when Mother asks him how they are going to have a family if he never « fucks » her, which leads to what can only be called a rape scene between

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*Him* and the future Mother. The eventual bliss of Mother's orgasm cannot erase the violence of its origins, just as the beautiful scenes between the newborn baby and the enraptured mother cannot be separated from the eventual macabre sacrifice and consumption of the baby. If we apply a Christian framework to the film, it can be argued that Aronofsky stages the implicit violence in the «immaculate» encounter between the already-betrothed virgin Mary and God's proxy, the winged angel Gabriel. The director captures perfectly the terror in William Butler Yeats's poetic translation of Luke's New Testament portrayal of Mary's fear and foreboding at the secret and forbidden arrival of Gabriel: «The threefold terror of love: a fallen flare / Through the hollow of an ear; / Wings beating about the room; / The terror of all terrors that I bore / The Heavens in my womb» (*Poems* 244). Both Yeats and Aronofsky recognize the violence involved in God's indirect penetration of the mortal sphere—not to mention Judaic conjugal law—embodied by Gabriel's secret nighttime emission, all of which makes for an excellent platform for approaching the daring Baroque fiction of María de Zayas.

Zayas (1590-1661) was a seventeenth-century Spanish noblewoman who wrote two collections of *novelas* (short novels) that have received much critical and scholarly attention over the last thirty years, due to their entertainment value, the modernity of their spectacular representation of intrigue and violence, and their potential to further feminist inquiries into Western history, literature, and aesthetics. That being said, all of these lines of inquiry are complicated by how little is known about Zayas's personal life. Moreover, the time period in which she produced her marvelous collections of stories about love and marriage—and sexual violence and femicide—was dominated by Counter Reformation religious and political institutions, including censorship, making it difficult—and dangerous—for early modern writers to publish anything that could be perceived as either heterodox in relation to Counter Reformation theology, or critical of what José Antonio Maravall has called the «monarchical-seigniorial» elements of Spanish Baroque society (*The Culture of the Baroque*). In the end, the lack of biographical context in combination with the inquisitorial matrix in which she produced her oeuvre complicate our efforts to identify what we might call the *authoritative narrative voice* in her works and, thus, to exercise a sure hand when attempting to explicate her aesthetic framework, especially her irony. On the other hand, Baroque aesthetics in general tend to destabilize narrative voices, as can be seen in Miguel de Cervantes's many experimental works.

Adding to this complexity in the plots of Zayas's *novelas* are the carnivalesque extra-diegetic elements of the two collections, *Novelas Amatorias y Ejemplares* (The Enchantments of Love), and *Desengaños Amatorios* (The Disenchantments of Love). The anthologies are framed as live oral and spontaneous performances of very involved stories that, in and of themselves, move between prose and verse, with the verse portions supposedly being sung, quite possibly to the sound of a lute or *vihuela*. These performances are the centerpieces of a multiday aristocratic party called a *sarao*, during which a sumptuous series of repasts is offered to break up the storytelling, while the guests, men included, debate the merits and moral significance of this or that story. The constant movement between the female narrators, a unifying and often ironic narrative voice that describes in great detail the spectacle of the *sarao*—decadent food and wine, ostentatious clothing and jewels, the beauty of the storytellers, etc.,—along with the critical voices of the male spectators makes for a dizzying reading experience in which meaning becomes unstable, and social and moral conventions lose their metaphysical grounding. As such, the graphic and macabre spectacles of decapitated, horribly disfigured, or beautifully languid, if lifeless, bodies of largely innocent women are situated within a complex play of courtly wit, theatrical masks, and generic multiplicity, opening up a range of potentially valid readings.

The focus of this essay is Zayas's use of the *Ave Maria*, a hymn or prayer that celebrates the immaculate purity of God's chosen vessel for the birth of Christ and then pleads with her to «pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death.» I will claim that Zayas's arguably blasphemous use of the religious hymn, which is situated within her ironic use of the Christian theology of revelation, pulls the curtain back on a morally bankrupt aristocratic class that has bent theological thought and religious ritual toward the perpetuation and defence of sexual violence in early modern Spanish social and political institutions.

In a recent essay, I frame an analysis of what I characterize as Zayas's monstrous representation of religious and theological thought according to a comparison with Quentin Tarantino's movie *Django Unchained*. I argue that, much as Tarantino exposes and then blows up the gentleman's agreement between contemporary neoliberal capitalism and its violent roots in slavery and human trafficking, Zayas reveals the violence and hypocrisy that is created when theological concepts and religious symbolism are used to justify the extreme sexual violence at the heart of her *Desengaños amorosos*. Early modern notions of monstrosity prove useful

for unlocking Zayas's cleverly corrosive deployment of the theological cornerstones of *divine providence*, *free will*, and *metaphysical necessity*, concepts that appear in many of her tales as well as in the literary discussions of the nobles that take place during the breaks between the narrative performances of the *sarao*.

According to Zakiya Hanafi:

[T]he monster [...] was distinguished by making several senses: by providing an oppositional corporeal limit to human definition; by eroding the strong conceptual differentiation between man and beast, man and demon, or man and god, pointing to pollution, transgression, a breakdown in social order; and by bearing a sign of warning from the forces of the sacred. (3)

It is the last part of Hanafi's quote, the part about the monstrous « bearing a sign of warning from the forces of the sacred », that I am taking up in this development and extension of the arguments presented in my previous essay. If this is how the monstrous functions, then the question I would now like to pose concerns whether Zayas is positioning herself and her text as a monstrous sign, or warning, through her simultaneously literal *and* ironic use of the *Ave Maria* and the theology of revelation.

I would argue that what sets these essays apart from other feminist approaches to Zayas is their insistence on situating the discussion of Zayas's feminism within Counter Reformation theology, in particular, emergent and residual notions of free will and divine providence and their relation to *efficient* and *sufficient grace*. In fact, working on early modern notions of free will and their dependence on the Neo-scholastic concept of *ciencia media* led me to a conundrum of sorts. In short, if God knows all possible outcomes of all possible decisions made by what the treatises refer to as *secondary agents*—human beings—then what is the role of miracles? Wouldn't these represent a kind of an extravagance if He knows what could happen in any given scenario anyway? Why intervene if you know the ending of everyone's story?

Playing the role of the confused heretic eventually led me to René Latourelle's canonical study on the theology of revelation, which explains, through an exhaustive philological apparatus, the meaning and function of miracles and divine revelation according to Christian theology. And even though Zayas, herself, may not have been thinking in exactly the same way about said theology, her use of miraculous tropes becomes fascinating, even politically subversive, when viewed within this

body of thought. This is useful for the feminist consideration of Zayas's oeuvre because it provides a non-anachronistic pathway for engaging with critics such as Malcolm Read, who argues that recent feminist work on Zayas does not hold up in light of Zayas's use of the theology of *desengaño* and her explicit defence of aristocratic institutions and values. In his deployment of J. C. Rodríguez's Althusserian approach to early modern Spanish literature, Read finds that the contemporary feminist approaches of Lisa Vollendorf, Margaret Rich Greer, Amy Kaminsky, Amy Williamsen, and Judith Whitenack, among others, cannot be sustained due to Zayas's explicit nostalgia for an aristocratic golden age as well as her implicit reification of the philosophy of *desengaño*: «Such is the logic not of a postmodern liberalism, focused as it is upon issues of gender equality, but of a seigniorial organicism, of eminently feudal extraction, based on a hierarchy of «blood» and «lineage»» (171). According to this reading, although Zayas's female heroes are innocent and wrongly, often spuriously, accused of acts of disobedience, unfaithfulness, adultery, etc., the fact that all human souls are by definition sinful and that life *after* death is man's true existence means that the obscene violence that is repeatedly and ritualistically inflicted upon women should not be read as an intentional indictment of the fundamental immorality and criminality of gender relations in early modern Spain and the Church's and nobility's active complicity therein. Rather, it's a collateral, if tragically violent, ideological residue that is picked up by modern feminists as an intentional proto-feminist strategy by Zayas. One of my goals in writing this paper is to take a rigorously historical approach in order to unlock Zayas's ironic use of theology, which is why I will also delve into issues of free will, grace, determinism, etc., through early modern thinking on the monstrous. My objective is to use Latourelle's study to complete the circle that moves from God to the monstrous and back to divine revelation in a way that recognizes Zayas's wit and power while contesting Read's conservative reading where Zayas's feminist trajectory is concerned.

The main argument of Latourelle's study is that «revelation is the first fact, the first mystery, the first category» (10). With this declaration, the theologian prepares his reader for the doctrine that God's self-revelation through signs, miracles, and prophecies is his way of communicating his presence and influence (power, love, control) to his creation, i.e., man. Without revelation, God's creations have no way of knowing what and who he is and, therefore, what and who they are. Following on this, the

use of miracles in literature can be seen to have a direct bearing on what an author is proposing concerning the identity of humanity as a creation of God. Zayas's tale *El verdugo de su esposa* (His wife's executioner), with its Marian and Christological themes of divine intervention, situates itself in direct relation to the theology of revelation.

Similar to Cervantes's *Curioso impertinente*, *El verdugo's* plot begins with a «bromance», in this case between two nobles named don Pedro and don Juan, which flourishes until the friendship is interrupted by Pedro's marriage to the beautiful Roseleta. In order to respect his friend's new status, don Juan stops visiting don Pedro's house as often as he used to, which leads the latter to beseech his friend to resume his visits and make himself at home. Pedro's turn away from married life is entirely consistent with the laments of Zayas's female storytellers: a husband's infatuation soon wanes, leaving his wife in a precarious position, lonely and alone. Predictably, it is at this point that Juan becomes infatuated with his best friend's wife. Even though, or perhaps, because Roseleta rejects his advances with rhetorical violence, he begins to bombard her with love poems.

Given the eventual importance of the Virgin Mary in the *novela*, it may be worth noting that in analogous fashion to Roseleta's married status, the young Mary was betrothed to Joseph before the nocturnal and unbidden visit from the angel Gabriel. Mary's surprise and trepidation at the appearance of the interloper is captured in the Gospel of Luke: «In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be » (Luke 1: 26-38). The coincidence between the betrothed Mary's plight, the married Roseleta's trials, and what will be shown to be the comparative powerlessness of the Virgin Mary's role and actions in the tale, serves to underline the secondary and sacrificial role of women in theology and literature. In support of this ambivalent framework of feminine holiness (and beauty) and servitude, we see Zayas's narrator commenting on the besieged wife's *divinity*, at least in don Juan's eyes: «although he wanted to hold back his gaze, when he began to look once more at a human woman with traces of divinity, he was lost all over again; since he contemplated under her grave honesty such grace, combined with a divine understanding, not only did he risk

losing his honorable designs, but his very life » (que en llegando a mirar una mujer humana con asomos de divinidad, quedaba otra vez perdido; pues que si contemplaba debajo de una honesta gravedad tal donaire y gracia, mezclado con un divino entendimiento, no sólo aventuraba a perder sus honrados designios, mas la misma vida) (my translation; 203)<sup>1</sup>.

Roseleta's anger leads her to tear up Juan's letters and inform her husband that his best friend has been courting her behind his back. Pedro advises Roseleta to lead Juan on so that he can take his revenge; and so it is that husband and wife conspire to lead the aspiring adulterer into an ambush outside of the city near their country house. In Roseleta's words, « Now, see what remedy is required, because I don't see any other than to kill him » (Ahora, ved qué remedio se ha de poner, porque yo no hallo otro sino quitarle la vida) (211). This is the where the story starts to get interesting from a theological point of view, because when Juan leaves the city on his way to the rendezvous, he hears church bells playing *Ave Maria*. In spite of the reason for his journey, or perhaps because of the risk involved, and « although distracted by his amorous cares, his devotion won out, and stopping where he heard the bells, he began to pray, asking the Virgin Mary, our most pure Lady, in spite of the offense he was about to commit, to deliver him from danger and extend to him the pardon of her precious Son. And, finished with his devout prayer, he continued on his way » (aunque divertido en sus amorosos cuidados, pudo más la devoción, y parando adonde oyó la campana, se puso a rezar, pidiendo a la Virgen María, nuestra purísima señora, que no mirando la ofensa que iba a hacerle, le librase de peligro y le alcanzase perdón de su precioso Hijo. Y acabada su devota oración, siguió su camino) (213). Juan's piety begs the question of where the Church stands on indulgences for premeditated adultery—and other sins—and it is only the beginning of Zayas's questioning of the relationship between theology and sexual violence. Her juxtaposition of Juan's malevolent intention and his supposed devotion to the Virgen can only be ironic; it also underlines the utilitarian use of religion by the nobility to shroud its immoral and sexually violent behavior behind liturgical tropes.

As Juan travels to his friend's country house, he passes a place in the road where three thieves have been hanged « because they had murdered some travelers in order to rob them » (porque habían allí muerto unos caminantes por robarlos) (213). As Juan rides by this aerial Calvary, one of the executed men calls out to him; in fact, he has to call out to him three

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish are my own.



times before Juan stops. When he asks the hanged man how it is possible that he's still alive, the specter answers that God has preserved his life because he was innocent of the crime he was accused of committing. According to his story, he had untruthfully confessed under torture, which is why the authorities unjustly hanged him, and also why God performed this miracle, apparently raising him from the dead: «It is the most rare and miraculous thing ever seen» («La cosa más rara y milagrosa que se ha visto es ésta», 214). It seems sacrilegious, at best, for the specter to proclaim his miracle to be the most rare and miraculous *ever*, especially given the central miracle and sacrament of Christianity, which is yet another indication that Zayas is using religious tropes ironically. The irony continues when don Juan agrees with the hanged man and then proceeds to compare this miracle with those performed by Santo Domingo de la Calzada, who saved an innocent man from being wrongly hanged, and then made a rooster that was roasting on a spit crow out loud when a reluctant judge refused to free the innocent man after he was released from the gallows (214). Indeed, the crowing of the roasting cock makes for an interesting motif in a miracle story given its importance in the story of Saint Peter. And our narrative becomes even more complex, since it appears that Zayas is merging two different miracle stories here: the sixth miracle in Gonzalo de Berceo's *Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora*; and the legend of Santo Domingo de la Calzada. Both tales belong to the folk/literary tradition surrounding the *Camino de Santiago*, a medieval pilgrimage route that generally started in France and passed through northern Spain on its way to Santiago de Compostela in Northwestern Spain (Galicia). In Gonzalo's version, an incorrigible thief is saved by the Virgin Mary not once, but twice, from execution by the authorities—once by hanging and a second time by having his throat cut—all due to his faith in the Virgin<sup>2</sup>. His religious faith overcomes his criminal and sinful past, which is a central motif in *Los Milagros*. In the Santo Domingo story, whose provenance is much murkier, an innocent youth who was wrongly accused of stealing is saved by the saint from hanging<sup>3</sup>. In Zayas's story we have both an innocent hanged man and a guilty pilgrim on his way to carry out his sinful intent, and both miraculous frame tales serve to underline the importance of the theology of revelation in interpreting Zayas's difficult meaning as well as her irony.

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2. See Gonzalo de Berceo.

3. See Pérez Escotado, 34-35.

Returning to the narrative, Juan cuts the undead creature down from his perch, and they both proceed to Pedro's estate on the back of Juan's horse, making for a confounding image: a nobleman who has prayed to the Virgin to ask Christ to protect him on his unholy errand seated in front of a specter who was punished for supposedly falsely confessing to a murder. When they get close to Pedro's country estate, the undead man tells Juan to dismount, since he, and not the would-be adulterer, is meant to continue on. Juan resists, of course, because he is anxious to see his best friend's wife; but the specter insists, and Juan relents. Don Juan dismounts, and the hanged man rides towards the farmhouse. When he is lost from sight, Juan overhears as the ghost is ambushed, «killed», and buried under a pile of rocks. While all of this is happening, Juan is frantically crossing himself over and over again, afraid to look at what is happening. When Pedro and his men ride off, the specter rises from the stones and returns to Juan, covered in blood, to tell him that Pedro, thinking he was Juan, attacked and «killed» him...again. Like Gonzalo's miracle, the hanged man is resuscitated twice; and like the Santo Domingo story, he was innocent. As for the man with the sinful intent, when Juan asks the undead man for an explanation, this is what he says:

Behold what we Christian sinners owe to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our Lady, that by coming, as you did, to offend her precious Son and Her, the *Avemaria* that you prayed obliged her, when, leaving the city, they played the oration and from a mass performed every Saturday in your chapel, where you and your parents will be buried, and she asked her precious Son to deliver you from this danger which you, yourself, had sought; and her Divine Majesty, by her will (perhaps so that this case, being so prodigious and admirable, would lead you and all of those who would know of it to be more truly devoted to your Mother), commanded me to come in the manner you have seen, taking your form in the eyes of Don Pedro and his servants, so that they would believe that they left you dead and buried in that well, so that you would repent and reform yourself<sup>4</sup>. (217; translation taken from Greer)

4. «Y mira lo que los cristianos pecadores debemos a la Virgen María, Madre de Dios y Señora nuestra, que con venir, como venías, a ofender a su precioso Hijo y a Ella, se obligó de aquella Avemaría que le rezaste, cuando, saliendo de la ciudad, tocaron a la oración, y de una misa que todos los sábados le haces decir en tu capilla, donde tienes tu entierro y el de tus padres, y le pidió a su precioso Hijo te librase de este peligro que tú mismo ibas a buscar; y su Divina Majestad, por su voluntad (quizá para que siendo este caso tan prodigioso y de admiración, tú y los demás que lo supieren sean con más veras devotos de su Madre), me mandó viniese de la manera

When the miraculous intercessor finishes his discourse, he disappears, and a stupefied Juan returns to the city. On the way back, he notices that there are once again three men hanging by the side of the road, which is a bit strange since the man is still innocent and, in fact, doubly so. It seems to indicate that nothing has changed, at least for the man who was twice raised from the dead, in marked contrast to both the Gonzalo de Berceo *milagro* and the legend of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, in which the resuscitated men serve as exemplars and revelatory signs of God's and the Virgin's forgiveness and power over death and Satan. It is in fact don Juan who undergoes a conversion experience, apparently moved by the terrifying acts and mysterious signs he has witnessed.

When he returns to Palermo, Juan confesses his sins to Pedro, who thinks he is speaking to a ghost, since Juan should be dead. Like the previous *messenger*, Juan then disappears from the story, making his way to a Carmelite monastery to dedicate the rest of his life to the Virgin Mary. If Juan's confession served as the lead-up to the denouement, we would be looking at a conventional miracle story in the hagiographical tradition. But this is not the end, as Zayas compels the reader to witness what is normally placed out of frame in the hagiographies: the aftermath and collateral damage. Due in part to the waves of gossip that the miraculous events set in motion, and in part to the fact that he has taken up with Juan's former lover Angeliana—who desires to avenge Juan's infatuation with Roseleta and subsequent abandonment of her—Pedro begins to have doubts about Roseleta's fidelity and honor, to such a degree that «in his eyes she was a monster and a wild beast» (ante sus ojos era un monstruo y una bestia fiera) (220). Thus, spurred on by the ironically named Angeliana—haven't we already seen one guardian angel?—he sets out to murder his wife. When Roseleta falls ill he calls in a surgeon, who subjects the sick woman to a bloodletting. That same evening Pedro sneaks into her room and reopens her veins so that the faithful wife is murdered in what appears to be an accident. As is so often the case in the *Desengaños*, «they found the beautiful lady dead, and having bled out, she was the most beautiful thing that human eyes had ever seen» (221). This is necrophilia at its purest.

There are so many problematic aspects in this story from a theological point of view that it is difficult to know where to begin. For starters, a man

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que has visto, para que tomando a los ojos de don Pedro y sus criados tu forma, lleven creído que te dejan muerto y sepultado en aquel pozo, y tú tengas lugar de arrepentirte y enmendarte.»

on his way to commit adultery with the unwilling wife of his best friend hears the singing of the *Ave Maria*, which inspires him to dismount and say a prayer to the Virgin Mary. It is significant that the specter specifies that this particular performance of the *Ave Maria* occurred in the chapel of don Juan's family, because it tells us a number of things about Juan's family as well as the place of religion amongst the nobility of Counter Reformation Spain. It also bears mentioning that the first reaction of don Juan to the words of the specter is to offer to pay for intercessory prayers in his family's chapel. Carlos Eire writes:

Spaniards, on the whole, invested enormous amounts of time and money in elaborate funerals and Masses for the dead. They also tended to focus a great deal of attention on the social dimensions of such rituals, as markers of rank and status and as a means of dealing with grief and of interacting with their kin and neighbors. Whether or not everyone understood the theology of the afterlife was immaterial too, for participation in ritual did not demand total or even partial comprehension of the beliefs concerned. (9)<sup>5</sup>

The last part of Eire's observation bears directly on Zayas's tale, because although don Juan's momentary affliction of consciousness serves to interrupt his errand, it does not deter him from attempting to consummate his illegitimate and unwanted desire with his best friend's wife. Incredibly, nor does it deter the Virgin Mary from sending an emissary, or surrogate, to stand in for don Juan, giving a whole new meaning to the notion of intercessor. Unlike Gonzalo de Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, there is no Satan character goading Juan on; nor is there any remorse or consciousness of having sinned before the Virgin intercedes; but neither is there an actual act of fornication. There is something hypothetical about Juan's sins and, therefore, the Virgin's intercession. But there is nothing hypothetical about Roseleta's death.

It also points at another common way in which the Spanish nobility collaborated with Church officials in cementing their power: the purchase of indulgences. This practice extended at least as far back as the sixteenth century when one could « purchase Bulls of the Crusade, special papal indulgences originally intended to raise money for the Reconquest, which gave the buyer the right to have most vows commuted by any priest »

5. See also Collen Baade, who writes: « For wealthy Spaniards concerned with their well-being in the hereafter, the foundation of a monastery ensured that Masses and intercessory prayers would be offered on behalf of the donor long after his or her death » (282).

(Christian 32). The specific vows in play with don Juan would have to be considered sinful, at the very least and, more likely, an abomination, since they involve having sex with his best friend's wife, underlining even more darkly the relationship between religion, theology, and social rank in Zayas's tale. Eire continues:

Prayer in baroque Spain was all about bridging the gap between heaven and earth as well as the ideal and the actual and about gaining access to the divine. But the bridging relied on social relations on earth as much as in heaven: patronage and intercession were essential, for the heavenly court was imagined very much as an earthly one, in which only a select few have direct access to the ultimate power. Prayer had a distinctly social and pragmatic dimension as well as a spiritual one, and both realms were hierarchically structured. (260)

Thus, what seems like a small and common thing—the fact that the *Ave Maria* is performed in a chapel owned by don Juan's noble family—throws a penetrating ray of light onto a violent landscape of social, economic, political, and religious power relations in early modern Spain. And if Juan misses what can be called the first signpost according to the theology of revelation, evidenced by his insistence on completing his unholy errand, the informed reader certainly does not.

Indeed, since the nobleman persists, the virgin mother of Christ is then obligated to intercede on his behalf, setting up an interesting problem around the issue of divine free knowledge and free will: «the Avemaria that you prayed *obliged her*» (217; my emphasis). The question of grace is vitally important here. Don Juan's sinful actions would normally place his freely chosen acts on the *sufficient* side of the grace doctrine, since his actions take place in spite of God's will that he not sin. However, the intercession of the Virgin Mary is a direct expression of the will of God, which can only be *efficient* in terms of grace. In essence, the *Ave Maria* subsidized by his family has placed God's efficient grace at Juan's disposal; or, Zayas is drawing an association between the behavior of the nobility and the perversion of Christian theology. In either case, «there is nothing that exists outside of God's plan, and so sexual violence would be included in God's natural knowledge of the universe, which is akin to saying that it is an ontological necessity, even though man's willingness to realize sexual violence is merely permitted by God and not actively willed, or decreed, by him» (Nelson 2014, 47). Keeping in mind the Virgin's passive and non-consensual role in the immaculate conception, Zayas could also be pointing at a violently misogynistic act at the very heart of the conception

and birth of Christ by bringing her in as a theological mediator, or pimp, of sorts for the attempted sexual encounter with Roseleta.

Thanks to the Virgin's efficiently graceful intervention, a Christ-like figure, who claims that he has been executed in spite of his innocence, comes down from a gallows/cross where he has been unjustly hung, takes the place of Juan, and suffers the punishment intended for the hopeful adulterer. This would be the second missed sign. In his parting sermon, the mysterious specter emphasizes that Juan's sinful, even cynical, prayer was somehow redeemed through the daily masses performed in his family's chapel, masses that inevitably feature the singing of the *Ave Maria*. It is this third sign—not the original *Ave Maria*, nor the resurrection of the innocent 'prophet' and his punishment for the intended sins of don Juan—that pushes the would-be adulterer to commit himself to the Church. In the end, Juan suffers nothing, does nothing, and is apparently saved from potential danger by his family's ability to build a chapel and employ musicians to sing the *Ave Maria*<sup>6</sup>.

Later on, the forthright, innocent, and active Roseleta is murdered by her husband, who was goaded by Juan's former lover. Of all of these characters—innocent victim (Roseleta), sexual predator (Juan), murderous husband (Pedro), and vengeful lover (Angeliana)—the only one characterized as monstrous in the story is the murder victim herself. As previously stated, the etymology of *monstrum* includes the idea of «a prodigy» as well as «a sign» to be interpreted, but it is hard to pin down exactly what to make of *El verdugo de su esposa qua* sign, since the carriers of the signs (and monstrosity) are an undead specter and a very dead, if beautiful, wife. In the words of Margaret Rich Greer:

Even the miraculous resurrection of a dead man serves only to save a guilty man, not an innocent woman. In the patriarchal order of her stories, men may even overcome the silence of death, but Symbolic Order language affords virtuous women no medium for survival. Women, [Zayas's] tales of disillusionment imply, can only speak their innocence through their bodies, in death. (264)

Nevertheless, if we approach the signs as divine miracles, we can come to some interesting hypotheses.

In terms of the salvific economy of revelation, it is important to recognize that «Throughout the biblical tradition, the miracle has the function

6. See Ruiz Jiménez on the professionalization of musicians and minstrels in sixteenth-century Toledo and Seville (201-07).

of guaranteeing a mission as divine. It is a work of God that testifies to the authenticity of a mission entrusted by him. Under this aspect, the miracle has a certain juridical value; they are the credentials of the messenger of God » (489). Latourelle stresses here how the biblical tradition of revelation and miracles plays a legitimizing role in the workings of a religious and/or political institution. Moreover, as stated earlier, the theology of revelation stipulates an economy of salvation: « *It manifests* the salvific presence and action of Christ » (Latourelle 489). According to this, Christ and his salvific actions would be made present through the use of miracles, which should justify the salvation of Juan. Moreover, given the importance of rocks and stones in the story: « The word of God is like the hammer that breaks the rock [opening the road to] liberation from slavery to Egypt, the march through the desert, and the conquest of the promised land » (36). Juan's undead proxy rises from the stones in an almost exact fulfillment of the miraculous economy only to be hoisted back onto the gallows. But what has Juan actually done, and what kind of slavery are we talking about here? The only bondage that comes to mind is that of Roseleta, bound by an honor code that requires that she be free of all temptation in spite of the fact that said temptation, in the form of Juan's poetry, is aggressively foisted upon her thanks to her own husband's insistence.

In light of Latourelle's definitions, Zayas's manipulation of Marian and Christological images and motifs in the story can be seen as heretical or hilarious, or both. It is also an excellent example of what William Egginton, following Gilles Deleuze's analysis of Franz Kafka, calls the Baroque's *minor strategy*, in the sense that Zayas presents theological concepts in a very literal fashion, and then she allows them to clash with an equally literal representation of the immoral and criminal actions of the nobility. In Egginton's words, « what the Baroque's minor strategy does is take the major strategy too seriously; it nestles into the representation and refuses to refer it to some other reality, but instead affirms it, albeit ironically, as its only reality » (6). This becomes patently clear when the *damas y caballeros* in the *sarao* discuss the possible meaning of Nise's difficult story. The noblemen all excuse Pedro's femicidal actions, while the women link them to his desire to be with Angeliana. Greer observes, « the men exonerate don Pedro on the grounds that a husband has the right to defend his honor against the slurs of the public, whether well or ill-founded » (263). What is particularly galling to the women is how Juan is liberated so surreptitiously by God, who then permits Roseleta to be murdered.

Lisis, the hostess of the party, explains God's actions in these terms:

Lisis responded that as far as that was concerned there was nothing to be sorry about other than that you cannot ask God why he performs those miracles, since his secrets are incomprehensible, and thus, some he frees and others he lets suffer; it seemed to her, with her short supply of wit, that God had bestowed heaven upon Roseleta, who suffered with that martyrdom, because he must have thought she deserved it, and that he had made don Juan wait until such time as he would merit it with his penitence, and so that he would have a longer life and as many disappointments as it would take to amend it<sup>7</sup>. (223)

If we break this down, what Lisis says, after apologizing for her diminutive wit, is that Roseleta had suffered enough abuse from her aggressive pursuer and ragingly blind husband to merit a quick trip to heaven. In other words, her rather conventional experience as a woman in a noble household—at least, according to the female guests at the party, who are not at all surprised by the actions of either Juan or Pedro, or their consequences—is equivalent to a religious martyrdom. This is strikingly similar to a theological justification from the last tale in Zayas's collection.

In *Estragos que causa el vicio*, doña Florentina despairs at her own sinfulness and unhappiness after speaking with a particularly virulent confessor, who chastises her for being the lover of her sister's husband, don Dionís, over the last four years. One of her servants (who remains nameless, curiously) overhears her weeping and tries to counsel Florentina on her plight. After listening to her mistress's laments of guilt and despair, the servant advises Florentina to have Magdalena killed so that she can have don Dionís all to herself. Notably, the servant's advice is drawn from the very same source as the confessor's admonishments, namely, the Bible: «doña Magdalena must die; for it is better for an innocent to suffer [death], since she will go to delight in God with the crown of martyrdom, than for you to remain lost» (—Que muera doña Magdalena; que más vale que lo padezca una inocente, que se irá a gozar de Dios con la corona del martirio, que no que tú quedes perdida) (493-94). When Florentina

7. Lisis respondió que en eso no había que sentir más de que a Dios no se le puede preguntar por qué hace esos Milagros, supuesto que sus secretos son incomprensibles, y así, a unos libra y a otros deja padecer; que a ella le parecía, con el corto caudal de su ingenio, que a Roseleta le había dado Dios el cielo padeciendo aquel martirio, porque le debió de hallar en el tiempo de merecerle, y que a don Juan le guardó hasta que le mereciese con la penitencia, y que tuviese más larga vida y tantos desengaños para enmendarla.



asks if this might make things even worse for her, since God will punish her for killing someone, the servant again reaches into Biblical history to answer her mistress's doubts: «Do what David did, the young lady said: let us kill Uriah, and after we will do penance. By marrying your lover, repay the offense with sacrifices, since sin is pardoned through penance, just as the saintly king did» (—Hacer lo que hizo David—dijo la doncella—: matemos a Urías, que después haremos penitencia. En casándote con tu amante, restaurar con sacrificios el delito; que por la penitencia se perdona el pecado, y así lo hizo el santo rey) (494). The movement between violent actions and premeditated, quasi-pious religious rituals is identical to what we see in *El verdugo*; and what is even more striking here is that a female servant is advising her mistress to imitate one of the patriarchs of the Bible, King David.

Returning to *El verdugo*, an innocent victim of a State-sponsored torture and execution is brought to life and calls down to an unrepentant would-be adulterer from gallows that feature a trio of victims arranged in a Calvary-like arrangement. This Christ-like figure, sent by the Virgin Mary—whose own free will is overridden, and absurdly so, by her obligation to intercede based on what can only be called a cynical use of Catholic ritual—proceeds to be executed *again* for the sins of a guilty man, once *again* being innocent of a crime that in this case has not even occurred. In sum, an innocent man is sacrificed, not once but twice for crimes he did not commit, or in Christological terms, for the sins of others. But before returning to Latourelle, it is worth following the story to its gruesome conclusion, because there are more sacramental moments to come.

Let us start with Juan's conversion on the road to Palermo, which is closely followed by his confession to Roseleta's husband Pedro. Religious conversion is, of course, one of the most recognizable miracles of the New Testament in the way it brings Jews and pagans alike into the chosen people of Christianity, many of them as prophets. Latourelle explains that the prophet stands in for Christ, guaranteeing his presence, the «authenticity of the divine mission,» and the truth of his word (500). When we consider the vital importance of conversion, Juan's confession should guarantee Roseleta's innocence, especially since it comes from an ostensible prophet chosen by God to be the carrier of His word. However, the dialectic of innocence and guilt, as Zayas has developed it to this point, should forewarn us that another innocent lamb is about to be sacrificed for the sins of others, in this case the sins of the ironically named Angeliana, Juan's former lover. This reversal of the plot from don Juan's obsession with his

friend Pedro's divinely beautiful and intelligent wife towards Pedro's adulterous affair with his best friend's former lover provides a monstrous frame for Roseleta's murder. Here and throughout the tale we bear witness to the appropriation and perversion of the theology of revelation by the ruling class and institutions of Counter Reformation Spain through signs and portents that are supposed to carry and communicate « the intentions of God and give history meaning, a direction » (Latourelle 436).

One aspect of the theology that Zayas develops in a curiously ironic and arguably feminist fashion concerns the fact that not just anyone can interpret the meaning of the miraculous signs and events, since the act of interpretation is restricted to God's chosen people. Those not guided by the internal light of God's grace are not able to interpret and understand the signs. Moreover, God does not communicate to a whole people but rather to specific intermediaries, or prophets (Latourelle 18). What is clear is that Juan, Pedro, and Angeliana are all poor readers of the signs and, thus, should be implicitly ejected from God's chosen people. This would also be the case for a good number of the spectators at the *sarao*, as their ambivalent judgments of the narratives make clear. But this is evidently not the case with Lisis, who has the last word on the theological meaning of the intrigues and violence. And her interpretation is a damning indictment of the actions of the male characters in the plot, including the divinely favored don Juan, which in turn casts doubtful shadows over the actions of the Virgin Mary and their relation to the murder of Roseleta.

With all of this in mind, we can put together a summary of Zayas's more daring uses of the theology of revelation. To begin, the salvific economy of the crucifixion and resurrection are tied to the salvation of a willful adulterer and the sacrifice of an innocent wife. And when we add the question of free will, the problems start to multiply. In orthodox terms, the will of God stands over human expressions of free will, which is what makes it possible to decide whether an act has been committed due to God's freely chosen correspondence with human free will, *efficient* grace, or whether it has been committed in spite of God's will, *sufficient* grace. In this case, the Calvinian prophet makes it clear that the Virgin Mary's free will has been coopted by don Juan's family's socially-motivated subsidies of the singing of the *Ave Maria*, thus compromising the free knowledge of the divine. Rather than standing over and informing Counter Reformation religious and social hierarchies, theology and religion are now shown to be in thrall to the ostentatious religious self-fashioning of the nobility and, more disturbingly, the misogynistic ideologies and vio-

lence Zayas displays throughout her collection. In such a regime, divine providence and God's efficient grace are shown to be necessarily misogynistic in nature. Moreover, the story becomes monstrous in both implication and form by requiring the reader to become a prophet of sorts by interpreting the true and false knowledge contained therein.

This pessimistic vision of gender and human relations squares with Malcolm Read's Marxist reading of Zayas, introduced at the beginning of this essay, in that the patriarchal socio-economic relations in which Zayas lives and writes act to limit the human potential of women and drastically shorten their lives. As Read correctly points out, this disenchanted view of the world is completely in line with Counter Reformation ideology and does not in and of itself suggest that Zayas is promoting a feminist or proto feminist agenda. On the other hand, the fact that every marital relation in the *Desengaños* ends in violence, and that the main storytellers in the *sarao* reject marriage in favor of the convent reveals the author's implicit suggestion that the most dangerous place for a woman in early modern Spain is her own home. Moreover, her witty and potentially scandalous use of religious imagery and theological concepts provides an ironic frame for this knowledge by underlining the intrinsic misogyny of the central miracles of Counter Reformation Christianity, or at least their femicidal appropriation and perversion by the nobility. It is here where feminist scholars have accurately identified Zayas's plotting of a gender-based critique of the highly patriarchal landscape of Baroque society and art.

By way of conclusion, and a return to the musical theme of this volume, Zayas ends *El verdugo de su esposa* with a song performed by one of the women narrators, Isabel, along with the professional musicians hired for the *sarao*. They do not sing the *Ave Maria*, of course, but the lyrics they do sing can be read as a satirical commentary on the horrific events just witnessed by the spectators. They consist of a number of rhetorical questions concerning whether or not anyone has actually seen the marvelous (miraculous) events narrated in classical myths. Paraphrasing: Whoever saw the sun (Apollo) steering the flaming horses that Phaeton upset? Whoever saw Jove decree the punishment of that arrogant youth who fell? Whoever saw Mercury put the many-eyed Argos to sleep so that he could steal Io? ...and so on and so forth. The poem's concluding lament can be used as a frame for interpreting what we have just read in the *novela*:

Thus, a beautiful sun offered jungles to my eyes, and having seen jungles I am praising my good fortune. Envy my good fortune, if I am the orient to

such a sun, being a diamond, I give more worth to his rays. But, woe is me! fortune offered me such favors in *dreams*; because my love never, unless asleep, deserved all of this<sup>8</sup>. (224-25; my emphasis)

What the song seems to be asking is: Who has ever seen an actual miracle other than in dreams or, given our story, prophecies? And given the character flaws of the prophets in this story—don Juan and the specter—what can/should we believe? In the end, the poetic voice celebrates seeing nothing but jungles, thanks to the sun. And if the poetic voice, itself, sees nothing but jungles, how is s/he supposed to communicate clear and significant knowledge to the listener except as in a dream, as the last line declares? Given the structure of *El verdugo*, the principal witness we have is don Juan, who saves his own skin and exits the scene without seeing what happens to the innocent woman who will suffer for his sins. There is another possibility, of course: Lisis is our prophet, and her reading of the monstrous signs of Roseleta's murder and Juan's survival shows us that in this kind of society, with this use of religious thought, the safest place for a woman to be is with God, in other words, dead. Which brings us full circle to Aronofsky's *Mother*!

After Mother blows up herself and the house, *Him* carries her out of the rubble and lays her on a table, or altar. Miraculously, she is still alive, but instead of letting her die peacefully, *Him* tells her that he needs one last thing, her love. She obeys his demand, at which point he reaches into her chest and literally pulls out her heart, which takes the form of a beautiful, misshapen crystal. When he places the crystal in a delicate stand, the world begins to remake itself out of the total and willing sacrifice of the female character. I would argue that, in spite of its excessive violence, Aronofsky's film is ambivalent, or even equivocal, about the sexual politics in play here. No such thing occurs in *Zayas*. The innocence of Roseleta and the craven actions and theological gamesmanship of the nobility underline the misogyny and immorality at the foundation of aristocratic society.

8. «Así, selvas a mis ojos / un bello sol ofreció, / y de haberle visto selvas / mi dicha alabando estoy. / Envídieme la fortuna, / si oriente soy de tal sol, / siendo diamante que alcanzo / a sus rayos más valor. / Mas ¡ay! que tal favor / en sueños la fortuna me ofreció; / porque nunca mi amor, / si no es durmiendo, aquesto mereció.»

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## Résumé

Cet article se focalise sur l'usage que Zayas fait de l'*Ave Maria*, un hymne ou une prière qui célèbre la pureté immaculée du vaisseau que Dieu a choisi pour la naissance de Christ, et qui implore avec elle de « prier pour nous pauvres pécheurs, maintenant et à l'heure de notre mort ». J'avance que l'usage possiblement blasphématoire que Zayas fait de l'hymne religieux, qui se place dans le cadre de son usage ironique de la théologie de la révélation chrétienne, dénonce une classe aristocratique déchue qui a détourné la pensée théologique et le rituel religieux pour perpétuer et défendre une certaine violence sexuelle dans les institutions sociales et politiques du début de l'Espagne moderne.

## Abstract

*The focus of this essay is Zayas's use of the Ave Maria, a hymn or prayer that celebrates the immaculate purity of God's chosen vessel for the birth of Christ and then pleads with her to «pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death». I will claim that Zayas's arguably blasphemous use of the religious hymn, which is situated within her ironic use of the Christian theology of revelation, pulls the curtain back on a morally bankrupt aristocratic class that has bent theological thought and religious ritual toward the perpetuation and defense of sexual violence in early modern Spanish social and political institutions.*