

### **Zayas Unchained: A Perverse God, or Theological Kitsch?**

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In the climactic scene of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, there is a curious encounter between the bounty hunter/German dentist/con man, Dr. King Schultz, and Calvin Candie, a Mississippi slave owner renowned for his brutality, in particular his taste for Mandingo fighting—an antebellum “sport” in which slave owners place wagers on whose “Mandingo” survives a fight to the death.<sup>1</sup> When his elaborate ruse to free Django's wife from Candie's plantation fails, and Schultz is forced to pay “a ridiculous sum” for Broomhilda's release, he refuses to shake the slave owner's hand, evidently required by Southern “gentlemen” for the completion of a sale. This is an interesting moment because Schultz is also an incredibly violent man who makes his living by turning in the dead bodies of fugitives to local authorities in order to collect his reward. The first chapter of the movie follows Schultz and Django, a slave freed by Schultz, through a settled if not completely civilized American West, documenting their discovery and execution of a litany of wanted criminals. As the bodies (and the money) pile up, Schultz educates Django on the finer points of long-gun marksmanship while imparting his cold-blooded approach to capitalism. In one memorable scene, Schultz cajoles Django into shooting a wanted man who is teaching his son how to handle a plow. In a ‘law-and-order of things,’ Schultz explains, one's crimes are not erased simply because one puts away

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the guns in order to raise a family. The lesson is hard, but Django shoots the man, who dies in his son's arms. It is an instructive moment in what is otherwise a darkly comical and rather unsuspenseful series of executions of "bad guys," because our enjoyment of the kitschy redemption of soulless bodies, like so many empty cans, is interrupted in order to consider the broader implications of old-style "Western" justice.<sup>2</sup>

It also serves as a transition to the second half of the movie, where truly disturbing violence is portrayed under the enjoyment-laden gaze of Candie, owner of the perversely named plantation Candieland.<sup>3</sup> Here, Tarantino establishes a hard frontier between the comparatively free-flowing and unpredictable capitalism of the North and what Juan Carlos Rodríguez would call the residual "substantialist," or "organicist," ideology of the South, where the differences between those who own property and those who are property are based not so much on success in the "free" market but rather on essentializing ideologies that freely use pseudoscientific notions of blood and race.<sup>4</sup> In the antebellum South, the genteel salon of a gentleman's club can and does become the fighting ring for two Mandingos who have no choice but to fight to the death. This truly disturbing and pathos-filled scene, witnessed simultaneously from the viewpoint of Candie, the uncomfortable Schultz, and the desperate black slaves, makes it very clear that neither slave wants to die, or to kill: in other words, both lots are completely dehumanizing. It is also clear that in order for Schultz's con game to unfold, he must "play ball" with Candie, no matter how morally repulsive he finds this world. There is no other way to free Broomhilda. This, of course, is the point. The spectator will have to travel through and try to understand Candieland from the inside. Rather than watch cops and robbers punch, kick, and shoot at each other over cash, in Candieland we watch as a victorious Mandingo is slowly ripped apart by his owner's dogs because he would prefer not to fight. And it is here, eventually, where Schultz refuses to shake hands with Candie, after concluding his purchase of Broomhilda (yes, Tarantino brings nineteenth-century, Wagnerian operatic tones to his version of the South, as Broomhilda was taught German as a child). As should be clear by now, in contrast to Steven Spielberg's epic paean to Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln*, Tarantino's goal is not to dramatize the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment as an important chapter in American history and national unity, but rather to display the irreconcilable differences between an enlightened humanism and a retrograde economic and social institution that cohabitated with early American democracy. Instead of portraying slavery as a necessary, albeit mistaken, stage in the evolution of America, or obscure it behind Lincoln's political machinations, the director of *Pulp Fiction* forces the spectator to bear witness to the unbearable violence in his or her national history. More importantly, he forces us to consider what it means to shake hands—make a deal—with the U.S.'s role in the perpetuation of slavery at a time when Europeans were rejecting it. Rather than conceal the *real*

antagonisms, in Lacanian terms, of history behind kitschy references to southern hospitality, mint juleps, and apolitically-framed “negro” spirituals, Tarantino annihilates the distance between our twenty-first-century mores and the deep prejudices that produced and were produced by slavery.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent essay on María de Zayas, Malcolm Read finds an analogous tension in the *Desengaños amorosos* between “organicist” ideals and “animist” lines of escape that he uses to track Zayas’s proto-feminist inclinations and what he sees as their limits. 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*. 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 one’s true existence means that the obscene violence that is repeatedly and ritualistically inflicted upon women should not be read as an indictment of the fundamental immorality of gender relations in early modern Spain.<sup>6</sup> Nor should it be taken as a sign of Zayas’s desire for a feminist aesthetic and politics homologous to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century feminisms. On the contrary, although Zayas carries out a relentless attack on the nobility, especially what she repeatedly highlights as its feminization (and Frenchification), her true desire is that men be men, according to the ideological tradition of the nobility, and that they control their fascination with novelty and excess, including excessively novel and violent novels and plays: “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). Put another way, Read would seem to be claiming that, unlike Tarantino’s King Schultz, Zayas does shake hands with racial, ethnic, and sexual pseudoscientific essentialisms from her position as an artist hopelessly (hopefully?) caught in the capitalistic circulation of the cultural marketplace.

Although Read is convincing on a structural level, on a textual level I find that Zayas is more complex and ambiguous—less literal—than Read or Alicia Yllera are willing to allow. In fact, I think that *Desengaños* is one of the most confusing and confounding works of early modern Spain, which is why I have chosen to approach it through a contemporary movie that refuses historical and ideological closure (although on a narrative level, at least, the boy gets the girl). But my approach does not seek to place Zayas in what Read has described as a postmodern liberal context, in spite of the provenance of my frame tale. Rather, I will use Read’s framework in order to focus on what I will claim are the philosophical deadlocks and ironies in

*Desengaños*. In Slavoj Žižek's take on understanding *the other*, be it the historical, ethnic, sexual, or ideological *other*, what inhabitants from different chrono- or geo-topes have in common are the unresolvable antagonisms and conflicts that arise from the fact that what is offered by any ideological order of identity is incommensurate with the sacrifice demanded from the subject: "the common ground that allows cultures to talk to each other, to exchange messages, is not some presupposed shared set of universal values, etc., but rather its opposite, some shared *deadlock*; cultures 'communicate' insofar as they can recognize in each other a different answer to the same fundamental 'antagonism,' deadlock, point of failure" (31). I think that what Zayas shows us about medieval organicism is what one might expect from an educated feminine (not feminist) point of view: that concepts like free will and providence do not function as they do for subjects created in the image of God, i.e., men. To elaborate, the movement between sometimes organicist and sometimes animist explanations of female behavior<sup>7</sup>; the insistent zombie-like, i.e., mindlessly driven, behavior of male and female characters alike; and the mounting evidence that female souls lack free will and are caught in a non-providential cosmos, in spite of the formulaic and repetitive invocations of God's providential will, all point to the possibility that Zayas does not foresee a time when organicist and animist ideologies will "shake hands," as it were. Or, perhaps better stated, they only shake hands over the mutilated and moribund bodies of women, the *real* symptom of the ideological deadlock.

The three factors mentioned above all correspond to early modern notions of monstrosity, in that animate, supposedly reasonable beings either commit acts that are in direct opposition to their ontological purpose, i.e., the will of the Father, or are possessed by forces proceeding from another source, forces which compel them to act in seemingly demonic ways with incredible violence. According to Zakiya Hanafi, "Matter that moves of its own accord constitutes an unthinkable breach of hierarchy in the natural and social orders, potential threats to civic and cosmic harmony, and a deformation of the formative power that could result in violent discord" (97). If the Christian soul roughly corresponds to Aristotelian form, the unthinking and soulless violence that populates Zayas's text can only be regarded as monstrous. On the other hand, it could also be argued that Zayas herself, by early modern standards, is the most monstrous figure of all, as her incredibly virile quill penetrates the inner workings of the honor code's trafficking of female commodities. In their attempt to define Zayas's particular manner of transgression, Irene Albers and Uta Felten write: "The transgressions found in her novels—and this constitutes the fundamental ambiguity in her novels—are neither conservative or *restorative* nor *revolutionary*, but they act like experiments and perturbations that show how order and dominant sociocultural forces function, whether we are talking about the discursive order or the order of literary genres" (28–29).

In line with this, the claim of Zayas's female narrators that they are presenting "true histories" rather than highly stylized "fictional entertainments" may be said to strategically deploy a commonplace in early modern definitions of feminine monstrousness: monstrous births were often blamed on the maternal imagination's inability to distinguish between art and reality. According to Mari-Hélène Huet:

The maternal imagination is thought faithfully to reproduce what it sees and feels. *It is truthful and literal*, almost impersonal to the extent that the images' impressions left on the monstrous brain of the fetus show no sign of critical intervention, that is, of interpretation or judgment. Yet, for the same reason, the maternal imagination is a source of errors, because appearances are deceiving, and the imagination of women is concerned only with "the surface of things"; images are dangerous and the maternal imagination cannot differentiate between the model and its representation. (55)<sup>8</sup>

By insisting on the veracity of her narrators' stories, Zayas takes an orthodox view on early modern science, which holds that women are literally incapable of representing anything other than what they see. This is not to say that she uses the theorem in good faith, but she certainly does put it into play. This is what Albers and Felten mean by ambiguity. I find this to be a more satisfying interpretation of the constant collision between contradictory statements concerning the meaning of the violence in the tales and the tales themselves than Read's insistence that such confusion arises from the failure of feudal substantialism to produce an "ideological notion of the subject": "The result is the logjam of paratactic structures characteristic of Zayas's text and reminiscent of substantialist prose in its purest form" (170). The specific paratactic structures that interest me in this essay are the relentless and monstrous violence committed against female characters and the constant invocations of divine providence that precede and follow said violence. As Hanafi observes, "nothing can happen in this world without God's knowledge and will; furthermore, Nature not only generates monsters, she also nourishes them and preserves them" (30). All of which begs the questions: Is this specific genre of monstrousness part of God's providential plan and, if so, what role does it play in a providential world?

There are at least two answers to this question in Counter-Reformation Europe, and each one proves problematic on several levels. Providence, of course, is directly related to the issue of free will, and there are competing doctrines concerning free will at the time Zayas is writing her novellas. In fact, the main bone of contention in early modern scientific debates goes to the heart of Neoscholastic thought concerning free will, specifically, as it relates to what God knows absolutely and/or hypothetically about an individual's future actions. Contrary to what is generally supposed, "the

Counter-Reformation gave birth to two different Thomist interpretations embedded in different institutional settings, with different problems and goals, different ideological frameworks, and different attitudes to knowledge” (Feldhay 197). The “pure” Thomists were the Dominicans, who believed that God’s foreknowledge of man’s actions is absolute and that God’s knowledge and will must remain inseparable if his omnipotence is to be absolute. In response to this closed dynamic, the Jesuits attempt to resituate God’s knowledge and will according to a temporal relationship in which the exercise of his will in the realization of a divine decree is postponed, similar to the way a *deus ex machina* enters a theatrical play to decree the meaning and status of a dramatic representation when the action comes to a halt. (It is probably more correct to say that the action does not come to a halt until the king establishes its meaning.) In this new form, until such time as the decree is willed, God’s foreknowledge remains “hypothetical.” In this way, the Jesuits are able to destabilize the rigid Thomist dichotomy between the hypothetical and the real, the sensible and the intelligible, and the probable and the necessary, and thereby open a space of indeterminacy for free will to operate.<sup>9</sup>

Neither one of these doctrines comes out of Zayas’s laboratory of sexual violence unscathed. As we will see in a closer consideration of *El verdugo de su esposa*, as well as some interesting scenes from other novels, either God has to take responsibility on some level for the violent destinies of his female creations; or an “animist” aristocratic culture has transformed theological doctrine into an *abecedario* of tropes and maxims for justifying sexual and other kinds of violence. If we follow the Dominican model, God’s will, knowledge, and decree all coincide in man’s actions. Now, of course, there are two kinds of grace, sufficient and efficient, and a believer in God’s providence cannot believe that God’s efficient grace freely coincides with the torture, murder, and desecration of women by, more often than not, their husbands. Still, 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. Notwithstanding, the most oft-repeated invocation of God inevitably occurs right before or right after some monstrous act has been committed by a man against a woman, and it concerns not only God’s permissive role in allowing man the freedom to commit sinful acts but, more problematically, the *necessary* role of said monstrosity in his providential plan. The same can be stated with respect to the Jesuit doctrine of free will. Here, God’s hypothetical knowledge embraces all possible human decisions and actions, even though His active knowledge, as it is decreed at the time that it comes into existence—not before—is limited to those actual, providential worlds created, in part, by

“secondary agents” of history, i.e., human beings, through the exercise of their free will.

In either case, Zayas’s narrators repeatedly place monstrous sexual violence within God’s natural knowledge and providential plan for the world. It can be argued, as Read has done, that men commit these acts—and that women are seemingly senselessly punished for them—because the species is irremediably condemned to die a sinful death, as our nature makes any claims to innocence an oxymoron, and any mundane claims to truth or justice illogical. It will be my claim, however, that the myriad ways in which Zayas introduces God, religious symbolism, and ritualistic tropes into her stories offer a different set of propositions, if not conclusions. On the one hand, the presence of ritualized sexual violence against women provides strong evidence that God’s providence is a monstrous historical and eschatological form; a less revolutionary reading, and more sustainable, I would argue, is that the systematic oppression and abuse of women because they are women, i.e., femicide, although permitted by God, is a portentous (monstrous) sign that Spanish social institutions have transformed divine providence into a tragic and monstrous parody.<sup>10</sup> Divine providence, in other words, is a tool and means to an illegitimate end, and not an end in itself.

This would particularly be the case in *El verdugo de su esposa*, a tale structured along similar lines to Cervantes’s *El curioso impertinente*, the intercalated story of betrayed friendships and marriages in *Don Quixote I*. Nise prefaces her tale by proclaiming to her listeners that it is a true tale. What is more, she states that “Diferente cosa es novelar sólo con la inventiva un caso que ni fue, ni pudo ser, y ése no sirve de desengaño, sino de entretenimiento, a contar un caso verdadero, que no sólo sirve de entretener, sino de avisar” (199–200) (It is one thing to fictionalize, using only one’s invention, a case that never was, nor could ever have been, it does not serve to disenchant but rather to entertain, and another to tell a true case, which not only entertains, but also instructs). The true tale she tells takes place in Palermo, Sicily, where we meet Don Pedro and Don Juan, two friends who are so famously close that simply saying “the two friends” informs any listener from the island whom one is talking about: “aunque vivían en casas distintas, todo lo más tiempo estaban juntos” (202) (although they lived in different houses, all of the other time they were together). As in Cervantes’s tale, Don Pedro gets married—to Roseleta—and Don Juan, in order to respect his friend’s changed status, no longer enters Pedro’s house with the freedom he enjoyed earlier. Don Pedro beseeches his friend to resume his frequent visits and make himself at home, which Don Juan does; and it is at this point that Don Juan falls crazily in love with his friend’s wife. He attempts to control his passions, but he becomes like a man possessed, thus introducing the first sign of monstrous desire into the story (of course, Don Pedro’s imprudent need to have Don Juan underfoot can be likewise classified as monstrous). Although Roseleta rejects Don Juan’s advances

with rhetorical violence, explaining that just because a man declares his love to a woman, the woman is in no way obligated to return the favors, Don Juan begins to harass her with love poems. After five letters, Roseleta threatens to tell her husband about Don Juan's pretensions, which merely results in a sixth letter. Roseleta's ire leads her to tear up the letters and inform her husband that his best friend has been besieging her with love missives. Don Pedro advises Roseleta to lead Don Juan on so that he can catch him in the act and take his revenge. So husband and wife arrange to lead Don Juan into an ambush outside of the city near their country house.

This is where the story gets interesting from a theological point of view, because when he leaves the city on his way to the rendezvous, Don Juan hears church bells playing *Ave Maria*. In spite of the nature of his journey, or perhaps because of the risk involved, he gets down from his horse, and "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" (213) (and 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). This begs the question of where the Church stands on indulgences for premeditated adultery—and other sins—but it is only the beginning.<sup>11</sup> As Don Juan travels to his friend's country house, he passes a place in the road where three thieves have been hanged by city authorities. When he rides by this aerial Calvary one of the executed men calls out his name. Astounded, Don Juan stops to ask what the ostensibly dead man wants, which is for Don Juan to cut him down. When Don Juan asks him how it is possible that he's still alive, the man answers that God has preserved his life because he was innocent of the crime he was accused of committing. He had untruthfully confessed under torture, which is why the authorities unjustly hanged him. Don Juan cuts the man down, and they both proceed to Don Pedro's farm. When they get close, the man tells Don Juan to dismount, since he, and not the erstwhile lover, is meant to continue on. Don Juan argues, of course, because he is anxious to see his "lover," but the man insists, and Don Juan relents. The man mounts the horse and rides towards the farmhouse. When he is lost from sight, Don Juan overhears as the man is ambushed, "killed," and buried under a pile of rocks. When Don Pedro and his men ride off, the man rises from the stones and returns to Don Juan, covered in blood, and tells him that Don Pedro, thinking he was Don Juan, attacked him. When Don Juan asks him for an explanation, this is what the man says:

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 que has visto. . . [para que] tú tengas lugar de arrepentirte y enmendarte. (217)

(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 Herself, the Ave Maria that you said obliged her, when, leaving the city, they played the oration, and from a mass performed every Saturday in your chapel, where you will have your funeral and that of your parents, 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 . . . [so that] you would repent and reform yourself.)

When he finishes his discourse, the man/specter disappears, and Don Juan, stupefied, returns to the city. On the way he notices that there are once again three men hanging by the side of the road. At this point he undergoes a conversion experience, striking in its resemblance to St. Paul's encounter with Jesus and his subsequent conversion on the way to Damascus.

When he returns to Palermo, Don Juan confesses his sins to Don Pedro, apparently vindicating Roseleta, and then decides to abandon the city and become a monk. Like the previous Christ figure, he disappears from the story. If this were the end, we would be looking at a conventional miracle story. But of course this is not the end. Due in part to the waves of gossip that the miraculous events set in motion, Don Pedro begins to have doubts about Roseleta's fidelity and honor. And aided and abetted by Don Juan's spurned lover, the ironically named Angeliana, he waits until Roseleta falls ill and has need of a surgeon. After the surgeon bleeds Roseleta, Pedro sneaks into her room and opens 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*, "hallaron la hermosa dama muerta, que como se había desangrado, estaba la más bella cosa que los ojos humanos habían visto" (221) (they found the beautiful lady dead, and having bled out, she was the most beautiful thing that human eyes had ever seen).

There are many problematic aspects in this story from a theological point of view. A man who has dedicated himself to commit adultery says a prayer to the Virgin Mary as he rushes to consummate his illegitimate desire.

The Virgin Mother of God is then obligated to intercede on his behalf with Christ. A Christ-like figure, who has been executed in spite of his innocence, then takes the place of the guilty party and suffers the violence meant for the hopeful adulterer. In his parting sermon, the mysterious specter emphasizes that Don Juan's sinful prayer was somehow redeemed through the daily masses performed in his family's chapel, not unlike how Dr. Schultz's dead bodies are redeemed for cash. The erstwhile adulterer then decides to commit himself to the Church, much as St. Paul did after his accident on the way to Damascus. Later on, the innocent Roseleta is murdered by her adulterous husband—to whom she has been faithful—aided by his lover, Angeliana. Although the etymology of *monstrum* includes the idea of “a prodigy” as well as “a sign” to be interpreted, it is hard to pin down what exactly we are to make of *El verdugo de su esposa qua* sign. It certainly responds affirmatively to Hanafi's definition:

The 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)

According to this definition, there are several monstrous entities in Zayas's story. The first one that comes to mind is the undead being that Don Juan cuts down from the tree, who erodes the barriers between life and death, man and demon. It is tempting to see him as a Christ-figure, but in order to do so, we must bracket off the evil intent of the recipient of his sacrifice and grace; or we must question the wisdom of a doctrine that allows the forgiveness of sins yet to be committed. We could also accept that adulterers may be more deserving of grace than the women they plan to dishonor, or that ritual acts create powerful effects whether their celebrants are sincere or not.<sup>12</sup> The most unsatisfying solution, however, would be to accept that God works in mysterious ways and to cease our attempts to make sense of this drama within the drama.<sup>13</sup> Because in none of these readings does it make any sense to be a faithful wife, since it leads to death as surely as being unfaithful. This would be one example of taking the theology of *desengaño* to its logical limits, as it leads to a topsy-turvy world in which nothing makes sense, what Read calls an “animist literalism” (184).

Don Pedro and Angeliana can, of course, be seen as monsters in this story, transgressing marital bonds and notions of innocence and guilt in their murder of Roseleta. But it is also fair to say that the Virgin Mary is a nodal point of the monstrous. First, she is compelled to come to the aid of Don Juan simply because he carries out a number of rituals for which his sincerity is suspect, to say the least. Moreover, the “obligation” signaled by

Don Juan's prayers and daily masses works in opposition to the idea that she has decided through her own free will to intercede on behalf of this deceitful man. Given the nature of Don Juan's quest, the ostensible difference between, say, Celestina's invocation of the Devil in *La Celestina* and Don Juan's command over the Virgin begins to crumble. Second, by liberating Don Juan, she paves the way for the eventual murder of an innocent wife, since Juan's mysterious return to Palermo and the gossip surrounding his miraculous tale result in Pedro's losing faith in his wife. In this sense, she is as responsible as Angeliana for Roseleta's death. And what of the disquieting deployment of the Pauline conversion allegory to paint Don Juan's salvation in miraculous colors? Or the fact that Roseleta is more beautiful in death than in life, an oft-used trope in hagiographical literature?

One does not have to go as far as questioning Zayas's religious beliefs to come to some interesting propositions concerning her representation of an arguably monstrous complicity between religion, religious authorities, and violence against women. Every tale in the *Desengaños* contains disturbing religious elements, although Roseleta's story is probably the most explicit. In *La esclava de su amante*, Isabel uses the stolen jewels from the suicidal Zaida to finance her religious vocation.<sup>14</sup> When Carlos poisons his innocent wife in *La más infame venganza*, the narrator exclaims that "debía de querer Dios que esta desdichada y santa señora padeciese más martirios para darle en el cielo el premio de ellos" (195) (God must have wanted this unfortunate and saintly lady to suffer more torments in order to reward her in heaven with the prize for them). The protagonist of *Tarde llega el desengaño*, Don Martín, miraculously survives a shipwreck and ends up in the Canary Islands, where he undertakes an amorous adventure with a mysterious princess who nightly leads him blindfolded through the streets of Tenerife to her bedroom. In order to learn her identity, Martín brings a sponge and a vial of blood with him to mark the doors of the houses he passes in order to track his quarry. This is the very same sign used by the Jews in Egypt to preserve their firstborn sons from the terrible plague that descended on Pharaoh's house. It is also the ritual that Christians misread and converted into the famous blood libel used to persecute Jews. Later in the story, when the princess learns that she has been discovered, she sends assassins to do away with Martín, who escapes because "Heaven did not want to execute the sentence at that time" (246). Let us recall that it is Don Martín who falsely accuses his young wife Elena of adultery with her cousin, whom he proceeds to burn alive. He then imprisons Elena in a small closet, feeding her table scraps and forcing her to drink out of the skull of her murdered cousin. If Heaven is responsible for saving Martín from an ocean storm as well as an attempted assassination, can it not also be held responsible for Elena's (and her cousin's) horrible death? Or, as Hanafi states, "how can an event be contrary to nature when it happens by the will of God, since the will of the great Creator assuredly *is* the nature of every created thing?" (13).

Nevertheless, Read's argument concerning the philosophy-theology of *desengaño* may still be used to preserve Zayas's orthodoxy, at least formally, since it is "secondary agents" who carry out the actual tortures and murders. But what if Zayas is taking *desengaño* to its logical—monstrous?—ends and explicitly showing how it allows men (and immoral women) to justify perverse violence in the name of God? 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, for 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 simultaneous guilt and despair, the servant advises Florentina to have Magdalena killed so that she can have Don Dionís all to herself. Strikingly, the advice of the servant is drawn from the very same source as the confessor's admonishments, theology and the Bible: "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) (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). When Florentina asks if this might make things even worse for her, since God will punish her for killing someone she should not, the servant reaches into biblical history to answer her mistress's doubts: "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) (Do what David did, the young lady said: let's kill Uriah, and after we will do penance. By marrying your lover, to restore the offense with sacrifices; since sin is pardoned through penance, just as the saintly king did). It is useful to remember that this scheme triggers the most horrific killing spree in the collection, as Don Dionís, convinced that his innocent wife is having an affair, murders everyone in his house, including himself. Florentina escapes with a couple of flesh wounds, and it is only for this reason that we hear her tale. When her interlocutor, Don Gaspar, nurtures her to good health, the latter communicates her tale to the king (of Portugal), and Florentina is pardoned and sent to live in a convent, just as her servant predicted—at least the part about being pardoned.

In *The Persistence of Presence*, I describe how Baltasar Gracián takes the philosophy of *desengaño* to its logical limits and, subsequently, liberates the human intellect from its servile status according to Augustinian hierarchies. In her sly and complex use of theological commonplaces and biblical allegories, Zayas seems to be asking the same questions as Gracián: "What if this human lack were regarded in a different way, and instead of a sign of absolute interdiction, it suddenly appeared as a positive possibility? What if the very validity of human activity—political, artistic, and

historical—were seen to arise from its categorically immanent condition?” (169). Is this not what happens when Florentina’s servant advises her mistress to take the logic of *desengaño* to its very limits by sending her sister directly to God, while she remains behind to do penance? By wrenching David’s murder of his lover’s husband out of the Book of Samuel in support of a personal enterprise, does the servant, who is suddenly referred to as a *doncella*, not imitate one of any number of noble characters from a Lopean *comedia*? What Zayas is modeling here are the ways in which religious discourse can be used to justify, and even motivate, monstrous crimes. Moreover, by repeatedly displaying the “beautiful” and saintly mutilated corpses of the victims of these monstrous crimes, she may even be hinting that the Church itself is largely responsible for converting theological doctrine into a monstrous machine that devours the innocent and then displays them as martyrs for the cause. After all, isn’t Florentina’s servant providing a recipe for the creation of a martyr in order to justify murder and adultery?<sup>15</sup>

What we are talking about here is not secondary causes, or efficient grace, but rather divine necessity. In the brief debate after Nise finishes *El verdugo de su esposa*, Lisis defends God from those who marvel that

hubiese Dios librado a don Juan por tan cauteloso modo y permitido que padeciese Roseleta. A lo cual 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 la debió de hallar en tiempo de merecerle. (223)

(God had freed Don Juan through such a prudent-cunning manner and had permitted Roseleta to suffer. To which Lisis responded that one should not feel anything other than that one cannot ask God why he does these miracles, because his miracles are incomprehensible, and thus, some he frees and others he lets suffer; that it seemed to her, with the shallow depth of her wit, that God had granted heaven to Roseleta in suffering her martyrdom, because he must have found that at the time she had deserved it.)

There are several things one can say about this passage, but of course the most obvious is that Lisis frames a historical contingency as an instantiation of divine necessity. She even goes so far as to take the human actors out of the equation by dwelling on God’s possible reasons for allowing Roseleta to die innocently.<sup>16</sup> This would be in line with ancient views on the cosmological necessity of monsters, as Hanafi notes: “Neither artificial nor natural beings (‘all things, including those produced by art, that are

generated by Nature’) can be products of chance or fortune. By definition they must have a final cause, a reason for being” (30). There is literally no way to remove sexual violence from a providential view of the world, which is where Zayas’s religious orthodoxy becomes problematic, again, not by taking a heterodox approach to the sanctity of uxoricide but rather by maintaining a relentless and disquieting orthodoxy. As David Castillo argues, “Zayas seems to appropriate the aesthetics of ‘holy masochism’ to expose the violence of the patriarchal system in a language that erases the ‘proper distance’ from which the reader or spectator of Calderonian and Lopean dramas can safely enjoy the suspense of spectacular actions and the rhetorical exchanges of archetypal characters on matters of love, marriage, honor, and loyalty” (124). Moreover, she seems to do so by linking what Castillo calls holy masochism to the emergent phenomenon of popular culture.

In a previous essay on Zayas, I argued that the more sumptuous and extravagant descriptions of the food, attire, and habits of the guests of Lisis’s *sarao* can be read as a critique of the way in which *taste* becomes not merely an aesthetic category, but a moral one as well.<sup>17</sup> By having male spectators comment on how their misogynistic attitudes have become more of a custom than the expression of a belief, or having a narrator observe that laws are judged good or bad depending on the *gusto* of the nobility, or tarrying on the dainty underwear of a decapitated woman, Zayas critiques this emergent ideology as she serves up one abomination after another to be hungrily consumed by the reader. Her use of theological notions and biblical allegories runs parallel to this discourse on and critique of the emergent concept of taste. Through the disturbing, ritualistic even, repetition of providential maxims and sentences, the religious doctrine of *desengaño* is shown to be a tasteful way to make sexual violence more palatable, more digestible. Following Castillo, I think that it is quite possible that by using religious doctrine in such an explicit and problematic way, Zayas is attempting to break up the gentleman’s agreement between aesthetics, theology, and sexual violence that predominates in early modern Spain. What she serves up, in fact, can be equated to a particular kind of theological kitsch, but not in the way it is usually presented.

According to what is generally stated about Zayas’s preference for tradition and what we might call high culture (Yllera), she would probably not disagree with José Antonio Maravall’s definition of kitsch: “In saying *bad* we are tying this unfavorable qualifier to the conditions giving rise to kitsch: a popular culture characterized by the establishment of types with a standardized repetition of genres representing a tendency toward social conservatism and corresponding to a manipulated consumption” (83). By framing the performance of these violent tales within the sumptuous space of an urban palace and equating the badmouthing of women with the consumption of tobacco in terms of a bad yet popular habit, and by

underlining that “men” judge the validity of laws by whether they are tasteful or not, it is not a great leap to suggest that theological doctrine and allegories are also subject to the leveling influence of kitsch.

This argument would corroborate an observation I made in “The Aesthetics of Rape” concerning the way in which sexual violence in Zayas becomes mundane, the norm, much as does King Schultz’s and Django’s ridiculously macabre resume as bounty hunters. Portraying femicide as the norm, however, does not normalize it as a historical phenomenon so much as underline the monstrous real at the core of early modern gender relations. In his *Encyclopedia of Murder*, Colin Wilson points out that “belief in the abnormality of the murderer is a part of the delusion of normality on which society is based” (qtd. in Bland 250). By insisting on the apparent necessity of sexual violence, Zayas likewise underlines the delusion of normalcy surrounding marriage and the violence it perpetuates. As in Castillo’s anamorphic approach to Zayas’s use of spectacular violence, one must either accept the necessity of femicide or recognize the kitschy status of the rhetoric used to justify and rationalize it. But these two views can in no way come together through a gentleman’s handshake.

In conclusion, I recognize that Zayas may be advocating a return to a time when men were men, women were safely enclosed, and words meant something, or *one* thing. In this case, Read’s argument holds and my analysis actually strengthens his Althusserian approach to Zayas by equating theology with kitsch. Furthermore, the *Desengaños* would be a brilliant example of early modern Aristotelian rationalism, in which “reason is no longer forced to play the role of ‘servant’ to the faith (of the Lord), as under scholasticism, but itself aspires to a certain phallic pre-eminence” (Read 185). On the other hand, as my analysis of Gracián’s and Zayas’s treatment of *desengaño* argues, this liberating gesture cannot be undone, once the concomitant ideological and linguistic ambivalence are set in motion. As Read himself states, “Such, then, was the advantage and, indeed, the *raison d’être* of a non-organicist Aristotelian discourse, namely that it could be bent to any purpose, ideologically speaking, while being, in the last instance, a prop to seigniorial relations” (191). It is one thing to actually be a prop to seigniorial relations and quite another to treat such props as examples of kitsch. We can never know Zayas’s true intent, but we should not foreclose the possibility that her oeuvre was fashioned as a truly monstrous sign.

## Notes

1. It is debatable whether this practice actually existed. There are no known textual references.
2. Although it is not germane to this part of the essay, it is apparent that Tarantino is systematically subverting the conventions through which the violence in Westerns is

packaged and sold as a necessary by-product of the civilization of the West. This is probably the most important reason that his movies are often perceived as more violent than conventional examples of crime or horror genres. Violence in movies like *Pulp Fiction* or *Reservoir Dogs* seems senseless by comparison to the carnage witnessed in a Steven Seagal or Jean-Claude Van Damme bloodbath.

3. Using the name of a children's game for the plantation highlights the contrast between the institutionalized hatred and violence of slavery and the benign way in which antebellum history and culture are often represented in U.S. political and popular culture. It also can be read as an ironic critique of the way in which Hollywood feeds violence to the movie spectator like so much candy to be greedily consumed, no small irony itself, given Tarantino's filmography.
4. In one telling scene, Candie explains the natural inferiority of the black brain according to the latest "scientific" findings of phrenology, not unlike Zayas's curious use of Galenic medicine to explain the "natural" inferiority of women (see Greer 67).
5. In *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek describes the *real* as a kind of remainder or placeholder for the irresolvable antagonism either within an ideology or between two ideologies such as liberalism and slave-based mercantilism, or animism and organicism, in J.C. Rodríguez's Althusserian approach to early modern history: "Ultimately, the status of the Real is purely parallaxic and, as such, non-substantial: it has no substantial density in itself, it is just a gap between two points of perspective, perceptible only in the shift from the one to the other . . . the parallax Real is . . . that which accounts for the very *multiplicity* of appearances" (*Parallax* 26).
6. Read writes: "Zayas' texts protest not the 'innocence' of the 'individual,' 'until proven guilty,' but the collective guilt of 'servants of the lord/Lord.' Their logic is inexorable: we are always already as 'guilty as sin' by virtue of our status as sinner" (171).
7. Margaret Greer writes: "Zayas's seeming constructionist/essentialist shift—first attributing women's apparent intellectual inferiority to educational disadvantages, then claiming that women's coldness and dampness make them potentially men's intellectual superiors—are thus, in fact, two different attacks on constructed gender hierarchy, first as it operated in social practice, and second, as inscribed in scientific or philosophical discourse" (71).
8. Doña Inés's susceptibility to the diabolically magical powers of the sensuous and machine-like candle used by Don Diego in his seduction of her in *La inocencia castigada* exemplifies this characterization of the maternal imagination.
9. For a more detailed description and analysis of the early modern debates over Molinism, see my "Signs of the Times."
10. Hanafi writes: "*Monstrum* and *teratos*, the Latin and Greek roots of *monster* did not signify a deformed being, but a *sign* in the same category as *portentum*, *prodigium*, and *ostentum*, terms belonging to the divinatory sciences, only migrating later through association to the natural sciences" (3).
11. It is worth recalling here that in *El traidor contra su sangre*, Don Alonso compels a priest, under the threat of death, to give his sister Mencía her last rites before he murders her, in yet another parody of a religious rite.
12. This is actually a view held by scholars of ritual as well as Lacanian psychoanalysts, among others. See chapter 6 of *The Persistence of Presence*.
13. In fact, this is how Lisis closes the spirited theological debate that takes place in the *sarao* at the conclusion of Nise's tale: "a Dios no se le puede preguntar por qué hace esos milagros, supuesto que sus secretos son incomprensibles" (223) (one cannot ask God why he does those miracles, since his secrets are incomprehensible).



14. See my “The Aesthetics of Rape; and the Rape of Aesthetics.”
15. Mary Elizabeth Perry quotes a sixteenth-century priest’s comments on femicide: “This is not a tragedy . . . ‘because the crown of martyrdom in heaven will not be denied her, who . . . to avoid an offense to God is willing to die in this world’” (32).
16. Cristina Salamanca de Enríquez, on the other hand, keeps the human factor squarely in the foreground in her analysis of another novel: “Just as saints had to die for fidelity to their faith, Elena, we are told, likewise has to die, although for a conjugal fidelity that she has not broken. The power that such a comparison confers upon the husband directly equates his position with that of God” (245). Amy Williamsen makes a similar observation on Zayas’s unconventional use of the honor code: “The text clearly suggests that the honor code may serve as a pretext to allow a man to rid himself of an unwanted wife, a possibility explored in greater depth in “El verdugo de su esposa” (146).
17. “The Aesthetics of Rape; and the Rape of Aesthetics.”

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