Dressed to Kill

Death and Meaning in Zayas’s
Desengaños
Contents

List of Illustrations  ix
Acknowledgments  xi
Abbreviations  xiii

Introduction: Setting the Interpretative Baseline  3
1 The Desengaños at a Distance  16
2 Attending the Soirée  50
3 Dressed to Kill: Death and Meaning in the Desengaños  80
4 Dead End: The Convent  122
5 Postscript: Laurela  154
Conclusion  160
Plot Summaries  176

Notes  184
Works Cited  203
Index  225
Introduction:
Setting the Interpretative Baseline

It is time for Zayas ... to be dealt with as an artist.  

Susan Griswold

In 1647, María de Zayas published a collection of ten stories in Zaragoza with a rather insipid title, the Parte segunda del sarno y entretenimiento honesto (Second Part of the Soirée and Decorous Entertainment). Its original readers were probably not deceived by this lacklustre marketing, for a spate of similar titles had followed the 1625–34 ban on novella publication, designed to protect public morality. On the surface, the Parte segunda promised what the public had come to expect from such books, which were all the rage on the literary scene of mid-seventeenth-century Spain: prose fiction tales about love and marriage, sprinkled with poetry, tales themselves fictionalized as true stories.

The novellas of Zayas’s Parte segunda are told by noblewomen to an elite gathering at the Madrid home of Lisis, the charming, smart protagonist of the book’s frame tale. Lisis was a familiar character to fans of Zayas’s 1637 Novelas amorosas y ejemplares (Exemplary Tales of Love), in which she also figures as the hostess of a holiday soirée at which ten tales are told. Enthusiasts of Zayas’s prose waited ten long years to see how Lisis’s life would be resolved, and double that time separates the dates on the two books’ aprobaciones, or approvals for printing. The first edition of the Novelas, published in Zaragoza in 1637, contains a permit by the Vicar General of Madrid dated 1626, which suggests that twenty years separate the moment when Zayas presented her Parte primera to the censors and when they saw the Parte segunda. It is also likely that
under the guise of licit entertainment, may virtue be illuminated in the precious light of disillusion

(a sombra de lícito divertimiento [la virtud] se halle alumbrada de la preciosa luz del desengaño)

Calderón de la Barca

Readers of the Desengaños find themselves seeking meaning in a jumble of things, reminiscent of Antonio de Pereda’s couple searching for virtue in the painting on the left. As anyone knows who has hunted for something in similar conditions, it is helpful to step back and assess one’s position. This is a particularly difficult enterprise when under duress, and the Desengaños are designed to pressure the reader. However, like Pereda’s subjects, Zayas’s original readers would find what they sought, not only by calm re-vision, but also by looking at themselves: the key to virtue hangs on a ribbon tied around the woman’s waist, exactly where it should be.

If one steps away from Zayas’s book with an eye on the patterns in which everything accumulates, it becomes evident that the way in which marriages are unrealized or destroyed is surprisingly straightforward, even though the plots are complex: first one, then several nobly born characters act ignobly, which opens the door to misbehaviour for others in the community who collude with nobility to overwhelm the virtuous. The virtuous are always characters seeking to marry or live a married life.
2 Attending the Soirée

'Oh, would that my understanding
were equal to my desire
to know how to defend women
and please men!'

¡Oh, quién tuviera
el entendimiento como el deseo
para saber defender a las hembras
y agradar a los varones!

Lisis, desengaño 10 (470)

The Desengaños are universally read as a defence of women, and indeed, Lisis summarizes her soirée forensically, concluding, 'I believe the defence of women has been quite well aired '(Bien ventilada me parece que queda ... la defensa de las mujeres, 503). However, even refining the author's meaning of 'women' to noblewomen, as I have suggested, still misses Zayas's mark for her book. She points directly to that mark in her narrators' comments across the text and uses the plots of her tales to illuminate it negatively, as if with a black light. It is impossible to determine the meaning of the dying and dead women in Zayas's book without deciphering the multiple objectives she claims to achieve with the text and the tools she crafted to do so, and only precise attention to the text - a somewhat tedious exercise - can bring its fundamental coherence into view under the rubric of those objectives. The reader
The worst is only a place to start.

Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*

The story is always the same.

*Step one.* She is young, she is virtuous, and she is beautiful or wealthy, or both. She marries her husband by consent, not choice, for like a good noblewoman, she does not desire anything or anyone until she is married, and thereafter she seeks only her husband’s happiness and her honour.

A man desires her to an uncontrollable extreme and pursues her. If this man is the one she marries, he marries her in knowing violation of his or her father’s will. If she is already married, the pursuing man is not her husband, and he tracks her down in total disregard of her integrity and that of her spouse. This illegitimate desire for her, real or believed to be real by the man who matters, dishonours her and her family. This unworthy man is in collusion with someone else, sometimes a jealous noblewoman or a flawed member of the family, sometimes a lower class, non-white, or non-Catholic person who represents evil: a black female slave, a Moorish necromancer, a commoner who pretends to be noble, the devil disguised as a scholar.

Sometimes she is aware of the corner into which the pursuing man and his accomplices have painted her and knows there is no escape: to seek help is to manifest her dishonour, and to be silent is to be complicit in it. The pursuing man’s desire, whether realized or not, ruins her rep-
There is a potential in goodbyes.
This may not be freedom,
but it feels like wine.

Intiaz Dharker, ‘Announcing the Arrival’

The characters in the Desengaños who die for the right reasons inscribe justice in the narrative, and the wrongly dead are a precious and select few. But not everyone dies. Carefully manipulating the ends of her characters’ fictional lives, Zayas weaves a fragile thread that leads out of the dark labyrinth of misdeeds that block the paths of the innocent in the book. It is virtue, whose standards determine which characters attain the convent, her book’s final ending. Whether virtuous by dint of innocence or repentance, all the virtuous characters in the Desengaños who reach the convent survive, at least in the flesh. However, the merits of survival, and the convent, are strictly relative and completely symbolic.

Because they are diegetically unsatisfying, the Desengaños move readers to determine how the ten lamentable stories could have been avoided. Zayas renders the answer particularly difficult because the end of the book — the female frame characters’ retreat to the convent — constitutes a reaction to the problem, not its solution. Examination of the convent motif in the Desengaños reveals how she musters that institution in the service of her negative aesthetics, which relies on what is not, but should be, for its foundational meaning. We must begin with the
The youngest victim character of the Desengaños is Laurela (d6), into whose house, life, and honour the vicious Esteban inserts himself, bringing lies and death in with him. The most horrifying of all Zayas’s victims because of her age, Laurela is twelve years old when Esteban sees her for the first time, and is but fourteen when he enters her house disguised as a maid and becomes her intimate companion. She is fifteen when her family kills her. She is the only unwed noblewoman who dies as a consequence of social corruption, and her story is the only one in which Zayas blurs the boundaries between her perfect and imperfect victims, to great effect. The author manages to bring everything that can go wrong in a courtship and honour plot down on the head of her youngest protagonist, literally killing her. Seduced like an unmarried noblewoman, Laurela is punished like a perfect wife but not exalted like one.¹

At the time when Esteban disguises himself as Estefanía and presents himself as the ideal candidate to be Laurela’s maid because of his musical talent, the narrator specifies that Laurela does not know what love is or anything about it. Still a girl (niña), she is absorbed by her passion and talent for music, an interest on which Esteban plays by offering skills in precisely that area. Once he enters her family’s house, the reader recalls the narrators’ diatribes against servants and begins to prepare for the worst. The worst begins when Laurela’s father starts to share his daughter’s enthusiasm for Estefanía, albeit for different reasons.

Zayas paints Laurela into the corner in which all of her noblewomen characters die literally or figuratively, for she is not only deceived by a deeply flawed man but also related to flawed members of the nobility.
Conclusion

It is not a tragic ending,
but rather the happiest one that could be offered.

(No es trágico fin,
sino el más felice que se pudo dar.)

Narrator, *Desengaños*

Reading the *Desengaños* in light of Zayas’s objectives not only reconciles the text with itself but also sheds light on two of its important features that are otherwise invisible. The first is how a female author positions herself in the Spanish honour code, a ritual system universally defined as one that objectifies and victimizes women. Second, illuminating the multiple but coordinated systems of meaning operative in the *Desengaños* makes it possible to see how influential the book was.

There is no evidence that the reform to which Zayas urgently calls her readers was heeded. If it was, it proved ultimately unsuccessful, and the Spanish empire collapsed under its own weight. The aesthetics of the *Desengaños*, however, ascended, wielding particular influence on British authors, and it is likely that Zayas’s systematic blocking of transcendence opened the creaking door leading down into the dungeons of Gothic literature, in whose depths writers explored the realm of terror.

To evaluate the question of how a woman defending female subjectivity negotiates the honour code, it is helpful to step back and assess
All main characters are members of the nobility. Titles added by an editor in 1734 are in brackets.

FIRST EVENING

Frame tale
Lisis, recovering from an illness, organizes a soirée at her Madrid house. Enamored of Don Juan, who desires her cousin Lisarda, Lisis nonetheless accepts the proposal of the noble Diego, and the soirée is to culminate in their nuptials. After stipulating that all storytellers be women, and all tales serve the purpose of delivering a rude awakening (desengaño), Lisis presides over three nights of entertainment, at which ten stories are told.

d1
Her Lover’s Slave
Isabel / Manuel, failed courtship
Zaragoza, Murcia, Alicante, Sicily, Algiers, Cartagena, Zaragoza
Isabel, courted, raped, and abandoned by Manuel, dresses and brands herself as a Moorish slave and follows him around the Mediterranean in an attempt to convince him to marry her. Manuel alternately promises to do so and refuses to make good on that promise. Years later, Isabel, Manuel, her other suitor Felipe, and Manuel’s intended Moorish bride Zaide return to Manuel’s house where the story began. There, Felipe definitively refuses to marry Isabel, Felipe kills Manuel, and Zaide kills herself. Isabel sells herself into slavery once more, and winds up as