

Elizabeth Rhodes. *Dressed to Kill: Death and Meaning in Zayas's Desengaños*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. xiii + 234 pp. \$55. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4350-5.

As a woman, I can say that it is unusual to find a book by a noted female scholar that privileges class over gender. But Elizabeth Rhodes's new book on Zayas does precisely that. Her argument is essentially that María de Zayas's concerns as an aristocrat with consolidating the power of her own social class trump even her desire to defend women in general, to the point that she defends noblewomen only — not all women — and refuses to take said defense very much further than she is willing to take a similar apology for noblemen. Although Rhodes states the ramifications of her argument in more modest terms than these, her book has the potential to revolutionize Zayas scholarship, which has traditionally relied on feminist interpretations that don't quite fit satisfactorily the stories they purport to explain. In the course of her work, Professor Rhodes brings us to the salutary realization that we as a generation of female scholars have brought too many of our own concerns to the text, to detrimental effect. This will be the most lasting legacy of her book. There are others, however, including the tracing of a prehistory in Zayas for Gothic fiction, where the dead or mutilated female corpse finds pride of place. In her conclusion in particular, she expertly demonstrates that there is a relationship between these two traditions, but that Zayas does not actually indulge in a full-blown Gothic aesthetic.

The book consists of four main chapters and a postscript, surrounded by an introduction and conclusion and embellished by useful plot summaries. One of the other more novel arguments contained in this book occurs in the chapter on the convent, suitably titled "Dead End." In it, the author lays out a persuasive case for not viewing the female characters' enclosure in a conventual setting — one of the conventional endings recurring frequently throughout Zayas's fiction — in light of any sort of religious vocation or spiritual transcendence. This point is persuasive, and dissuades us from making further unwarranted assumptions that could only cloud our view of Zayas's work.

In a study of this length, there will always be a few minor points of disagreement, but in this case they are very minor. The author somewhat arbitrarily lumps together certain sins — lust and greed under the umbrella of lasciviousness, for example — but not others; I have found at least as many couplings of lust with gluttony in moral and didactic treatises from this time period. Throughout the book she relies perhaps too heavily on an odd phrase, "functional nobility," to describe the nobly-born who do indeed act nobly, as opposed to those representatives of their class who disappoint. But to postmodern ears the phrase sounds a bit too much like "functional alcoholic" or "functional depressive," both with very different connotations than she intends. This occasional distraction could perhaps have been prevented through a better choice of words. The rhetoric occasionally slips into what might be termed instances of the intentional fallacy, as in "Zayas clearly designed her second book this way on purpose" (8). While she is

probably right in each instance, again these claims could have been restated in a different way to avoid the attributions of motive to dead authors from which we tell our students to shy away.

But all in all, this is a fine book that lives up to its beautiful packaging. Rhodes makes excellent use of artistic as well as literary evidence, incorporating carefully chosen illustrations into the body of her discussion. I especially appreciate her refusal to genuflect at the altar of political correctness; indeed, at one point she even urges us to “respect the terms of Zayas’s racism” (24). We cannot truly acknowledge the Otherness of seventeenth-century authors if we continue to insist upon remaking them in our own image. Similarly, she deflects recent critical moves to read Zayas as critiquing the institution of marriage by deftly underscoring the obvious: nearly all of her heroines want to either get or stay married. This new effort to read Zayas on her own terms can only enhance our experience of her texts. I applaud Elizabeth Rhodes for having the courage of her convictions.

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