Women at Odds: Female Antagonism and Collusion With Patriarchy in Dulce Chacón’s La voz dormida

Antonia L. Delgado-Poust
University of Mary Washington

Abstract

This article considers the intersection of the themes of female antagonism, internalized dominance—as defined by E.J.R. David and Gail Pheterson—and female collusion with patriarchy in the oppression of incarcerated women in Chacón’s La voz dormida (2002). Whereas many previous critics of the novel fittingly underscore the novelist’s portrayal of the political and psychological solidarity of the Republican female inmates in the Ventas prison, this paper proposes that the cases of female antipathy among the female characters of Chacón’s novel are symptomatic of, and helped contribute to, the Franco regime’s widespread oppression of women in the postwar years. By likening her female antagonists to men, Chacón portrays the fascist-sympathizing women of the novel as agents of patriarchy, but more importantly, as accomplices to terror and even genocide. Diverging from the work of previous scholars, the author posits that Chacón highlights the (double) subjugation of all females—Republicans and Nationalists, nuns/wardens, and prisoners, alike—who were expected to comply with orthodox gender roles and male-defined moral codes, or risk being branded as moral transgressors and, in specific cases, losing any semblance of power they thought they had. This article offers new interpretative possibilities for a popular and highly glossed text.

Key words: Franco, Spain, prisons, collusion, oppression
Despite the fact that the Spanish Civil War officially ended in 1939, in the immediate postwar years another struggle was only just beginning—one that would be almost as devastating as the original military conflict. Still very much ideologically divided, the Spain of the 1940s represented a continuation of the bloody clash between rivaling visions of what Spain was and should be. Moral instruction and repression were some of the ways in which the regime could begin to eradicate the threat of insurgence and ensure its complete victory and domination over the enemy in the postwar era. The Franco regime employed schools, the Church, and penal institutions as centers of indoctrination, ideological retraining, and in the case of the latter, torture. Whereas conventional portrayals of postwar Spain tend to focus on either the male agents or victims of Francoist repression, since the early 2000s, Spanish writers and filmmakers have chosen to reframe the paradigm of the fratricidal struggle between the ideological right and left by placing the female subject at its epicenter. Novels such as Las trece rosas (Jesús Ferrero 2003), Trece rosas rojas (Carlos Fonseca 2004), and Sí a los tres años no he vuelto (Ana R. Cañil 2011), as well as films such as Que mi nombre no se borre de la historia (José María Almela and Verónica Vigil 2006) and Las 13 Rosas (Emilio Martínez Lázaro 2007) draw attention to the complex role women played in wartime and postwar Spain. Along the same lines, in her bestselling novel, La voz dormida (2002), Dulce Chacón likens Franco’s female prisons to fascist, machista spaces characterized by hatred and violence that oppressed women in a variety of ways. Chacón’s fictionalization of Franco’s penal facilities echoes various documented testimonies of female prisoners that highlight not only the oppression and degradation of left-leaning women, often at the hands of female authority figures, but also the palpable antipathy among women of opposing political factions in Madrid’s infamous Ventas prison. That women oppress other women is not a new phenomenon, but the manner in which Chacón portrays the hostility among women points to the crucial role that patriarchy plays in the motivation and actions of its female subjects.

In this study, I consider the intersection of the themes of female antagonism, internalized dominance, and female collusion with patriarchy in the oppression of incarcerated women in Chacón’s La voz dormida. Published at the apex of what Helen Graham and Sebastián Faber have identified as Spain’s “memory wars” (Graham, Interrogating Francoism 10) or “memory battles” (Faber, Memory Battles 2), respectively, and sharing characteristics with the New Historical Novel, Chacón’s narrative recovers the silenced voices and tragic experiences of her female protagonists: direct or indirect victims of fascist repression and violence whose accounts were omitted or discredited by the Franco regime’s official version of history. As Chacón herself states, “El papel de la mujer ha sido condenado al ostracismo. Es necesario que la Historia contemple la presencia de la mujer en la batalla contra el fascismo” (“La mujer” 77). The novel recounts the experiences of women during the War and postwar periods and the indescribable brutality carried out against female political prisoners in Franco’s prisons, as a result of their political dissent and nonconformity, or simply because of their loose affiliation with the left. Indeed, these women had much to lose in Franco’s Spain, as the rights they gained under the Republic were nullified when the right wing party assumed power. Furthermore, Chacón underscores the hypocrisy and callousness of the Catholic Church, along with its female representatives, who frequently occupied positions of power in the penitentiaries, acted on behalf of their male superiors, and were therefore complicit in patriarchal structures of domination. The novelist presents the nuns and female lay functionaries in the prison as tyrannical, vindictive forces who aid in the witch-hunt against leftist women, helping to perpetuate hierarchical relations not only between men and women, but also among women themselves. More importantly, Chacón portrays these antagonists as accomplices to terror and even genocide. Various Hispanists (namely, José Colmeiro, Ana Corbalán, Kathryn Everly, Ofelia Ferrán, Alison Ribeiro de Menezes, 1. As Ignacio Fernández de Mata maintains, Spanish society “had been permeated by the wartime antagonism that the authoritarian state actively commemorated and reproduced” during the thirty-six years of the dictatorship (131).

2. In “The Faces of Terror,” Julián Casanova argues that without the direct involvement of the Catholic Church throughout the dictatorship, Francoist repression would not have been possible. He maintains that under the pretext of complying with Christian moral principles, the Church and the SF forced imprisoned women to endure public humiliations and terrible conditions in order to “exorcise demons from the body” (95).
Virginia Trueba Mira) argue that La voz dormida depicts the political and psychological solidarity of the Republican female characters in Chacón’s representation of the Ventas prison, while seeking to awaken the collective voice of the vanquished in Spain’s Civil War. Although I concur with this assertion, I believe that it is equally important to consider the novel’s portrayal of female antagonism and conflict between the prison functionaries and the female inmates. Moreover, whereas various authors and critics have called attention to the fratricidal nature of the Spanish Civil War, Chacón’s novel offers a nuanced way of understanding and remembering the conflict and its immediate aftermath, as it seems to propose that the “sororicial” aspect of the War must be a part of the memory wars discussion as well. I examine how Chacón’s narrative gives visibility to the complexity of female interrelationships both within and outside Franco’s penitentiaries, paying particular attention to the cases of internalized domination and women’s collusion with male representatives of the regime. Ultimately, I argue that Chacón’s depiction of female antagonism between women on the ideological left and right in the Ventas prison not only mirrors the conflict at the heart of Spain’s Civil War, but it also helps to explain how the dictatorship, with its repressive tactics and policies, persisted for so many years.

I begin my analysis of La voz dormida with a brief historical examination of the bellicose relations between female inmates and Franco’s prison functionaries, who were charged with overseeing the intense moral reeducation of their Republican sisters. Like the antagonists of the aforementioned novels and films, I maintain that Chacón’s female authorities take it upon themselves to represent the regime and its repression of other women as a means of survival, but also out of a desire for retribution. As the novelist underscores, this moral rehabilitation frequently adopts a condescending, patriarchal, and dehumanizing discourse and methodology—undoubtedly inspired by Antonio Vallejo Nágera’s justification of Francoist postwar domination—that inevitably led to the repression of the female inmates. To address this point, I reference the previous scholarship carried out by Gail Pheterson and E.I.R. David, which demonstrates how the oppressive measures employed by women in positions of authority suggest that they have internalized and reproduce the hierarchical power structures of patriarchal society as well as its contempt for the feminine. My contribution to this debate contends that Chacón highlights the (double) subjugation of all females—Republicans and Nationalists, nuns/wardens, and prisoners, alike—who were expected to comply with orthodox gender roles and male-defined moral codes, or risk being branded as moral transgressors and, in specific cases, losing any semblance of power they thought they had. Ultimately, the cases of internalized domination, collusion with both patriarchy and patriarchal behavioral models, as well as an acute female antagonism among the Chacón’s female characters are symptomatic of, and helped contribute to, the regime’s widespread oppression of women in the postwar years.

Divided into three parts, the novel reveals the many ways in which representatives from both the Church and the Franco regime mistreat and attempt to silence Republican and other left leaning individuals as a way of reminding them of their continuous defeat. A third-person narrative voice recounts the story of Hortensia—a pregnant woman and miliciana who is to be killed by firing squad after the birth of her daughter, Tensi, for having stocked provisions for a group of maquis, among whom are Felipe—her partner and the father of her baby—and his comrade, Paulino. The novel also relates the experiences of Hortensia’s younger sister, Pepita, who, upon the death of the former, must raise her niece on her own. The narrating voice also recounts the stories of Elvira, Reme, and Tomasa: Elvira is a young woman who has committed no crime other than the fact that she is the younger sister of El Chaqueta Negra (Paulino), an active communist militant; Reme is the oldest prisoner in Hortensia’s cell, who

3. It is important to note that Chacón’s narrative is not the only work of fiction published in recent years that depicts female antipathy in the immediate postwar era. La voz dormida is thus not an anomaly in this regard, but rather part of a contemporary trend in Spanish historical narrative that attempts to recover the testimonies of women who suffered in and beyond Franco’s prisons. For an extended discussion of this topic, see Tetsu Aguado Mingué’s study of Ferrero’s Las tres rosas (2003) as well as Luz Celestina Souto’s and Marta Kobialka-Kwasieńska’s respective explorations of Cañil’s Si a los tres años no he vuelto (2011). These critics argue that both texts highlight the cruelty of female prison guards and religious figures and the recurrent theme of female antipathy in recent Spanish novels that represent postwar realities. By underscoring these themes, these authors call attention to an aspect of female experience and memory that, until recently, had been ignored in both historical and literary analyses of the Civil War and postwar in Spain.
Las Ventas: a Locus of Internalized Domination and Misogyny

Throughout the postwar period and the Franco dictatorship, nuns and members of the Sección Femenina (SF) functioned as instruments of the State that were responsible for the ideological indoctrination of women, not to mention the re-purification and moral salvation of the nation in Franco’s crusade against communism, atheism, masonic ideals, and feminist thought. In *Individuos de dudosa moral* (2009), Pura Sánchez delineates the sense of duty that the nuns and representatives of the SF, or Auxilio Social, felt towards the Nationalist cause: “[las señoritas de Sección Femenina […] y monjas tenían en común la asunción más absoluta del ideario de los vencedores respecto a las vencidas y la entrega a su labor reeducadora con un impetu tal que la consideraban una especie de sacerdocio” (248). In *Mujeres encarceladas* (2003), Fernando Hernández Holgado maintains that the nuns in female prisons were in charge of “todo el gobierno interior, del mantenimiento de la disciplina entre las reclusas, de las clases de enseñanza y de la dirección de los talleres” (220). Acting on behalf of the “virtuous spirit of Nationalist Spain,” these purportedly righteous women were charged with rehabilitating those who had rendered the nation impure, while modeling and sustaining the ideological profile of the new woman of the Franco regime. As Jo Labanyi (76), Victoria Lorée Enders (377, 382, 387), and Aurora Morcillo Gómez (“Shaping” 62) have suggested, opportunistic female representatives from the Church and the regime—such as Pilar Primo de Rivera—became entrapped in the dominant misogynistic rhetoric of the time, serving as both implicit and explicit accomplices, or mouthpieces, of the Nationalist cause. These women were perhaps seduced by the promise of (limited) power and agency afforded by such leadership roles and felt that they needed to prove their obedience and patriotism to their superiors. The paradox, of course, is that these women, as Morcillo Gómez maintains, “took on a public role while promoting a submissive female model” and created a “space of their own within a public male terrain” (62). Put another way, these religious figures and state functionaries were able to resist the very ideologies that they and the regime imposed on others, all the while reproducing and benefitting, albeit marginally, from traditional patriarchal ideology and power. According to Helen Graham in “Gender and the State,” the control and policing of [other] women became of paramount importance throughout the 1940s, and the dictatorship often relied on women of the middle class or the Church to carry out this type of...
In “El universo penitenciario,” Ricard Vinyes gives voice to a woman who was a political prisoner in Franco’s prisons for sixteen years and who likens prison life and the entire Franco regime to a type of daily guerrilla warfare, in which female inmates and female authorities were in a perpetual state of conflict. She states that “la confrontación era continua con la Dirección de la cárcel, con las monjas, con las funcionarias, por todas aquellas injusticias y maltratos que estábamos sufriendo. […] Por todo ello estábamos en guerra cada día, porque queríamos refutar todo su sistema opresivo al no aceptarlas como vencedoras, sino tan sólo como dominadoras” (175). Likewise, in Testimonio de mujeres (2004), Tomasa Cuevas claims that “[o]n Ventas había una funcionaria a quien llamábamos La Veneno […] porque se había comportado como un verdadero monstruo con las mujeres de aquella cárcel” (254). Chacón not only assigns the same name to one of her most odious of characters, but she also recreates this combative dynamic of female hostility in the narrative by emphasizing both the vindictive, domineering nature of the nuns and other female prison functionaries as well as the fear and abhorrence of all forms of authority on the part of the prisoners. I argue that this paradigm can be further elucidated by considering what Pheterson refers to as “internalized domination” (1990, 148) in female interactions and “internalized oppression” in female-male relations, as well as David’s, Derrhick’s (2014), and Lipsky’s (1987) respective studies on oppression and horizontal hostility.

Pheterson defines internalized domination as “the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others” and “is likely to consist of feelings of superiority […] and self-righteousness” (148). For Pheterson, internalized domination “perpetuates oppression of others and alienation from oneself,” causing one’s humanity and ability to empathize with the Other to be “rigid and repressed” (148). The scholar maintains that the “method of domination becomes collusion with oppressive forces” (159), or more specifically, in the case of the present study, the Church and Franco regime. Chacón’s prison functionaries do little to conceal their feelings of contempt and superiority over their left-leaning sisters and, with few exceptions, appear indifferent to their suffering. One textual example of this apathetic
attitude and behavior is when Don Fernando, a communist medical doctor who arrives at the prison to treat the inmates, is horrifed by the unsanitary conditions of the penal facility. When he asks La Zapatonas, a prison guard, “¿Cuántas enfermas hay aquí?” she replies, “De un día para otro cambian, doctor. […] Unas se mueren, otras no” (80). Here, the author condemns not only the lack of medical attention that both women and children receive, but the guard’s indolence and inability to relate to the less fortunate. In order to maintain their limited degree of power as well as their agency and selfhood, those women in the dominant group feel that they must become accomplices to fascist ideology and male hegemony while superficially divesting themselves of their devalued (female, feminine) identities and mimicking their male oppressors because their ways—and authority—are believed to be intrinsically superior to their own.

In the literary representation of Las Ventas, the nuns and wardens form part of a dominant female group that refuses to acknowledge its shared essential interests with the Other (woman). Consequently, female camaraderie is suppressed, as it ultimately jeopardizes the power secured by the dominant group, and solidarity or empathy among women in the prison is thus only conceivable along corresponding ideological lines. La voz dormida presents the problems of oppression and domination as types of internalized or horizontal violence in which women in positions of authority identify with the dominant group (comprised of Nationalist males)—because of their own privileged status—and collude in the oppression of other members of their own sex, in turn propagating social hierarchies and patriarchal systems of domination and subordination. For E.J.R. David and Annie Derthick, oppression ensues “when one group has more access to power and privilege than another group, and when that power and privilege is used to maintain the status quo (i.e., domination of one group over another)” (3). Due to their ostensible espousal of fascist—and therefore misogynistic—ideology as well as their intimate relationship with the regime, Chacón’s nuns and female wardens naturally enjoy more power and privilege than their Republican female inmates not only because they occupy positions of authority, but because their ranks and actions bring them closer to traditional masculine dominance. This results in the perpetuation of the dichotomies of oppressor/oppressed, superior/inferior, and powerful/powerless among groups of women, as characterized by David and Derthick. Curiously, when these women in power interact with other male authorities (priests or male officers), they tend to show an attitude of subservience and feelings of inferiority and powerlessness that echo Pheterson’s characterization of internalized oppression or even internalized sexism10.

Furthermore, as Lipsky (1987) has maintained in her studies on oppression, the novel’s instances of internalized domination/oppression and horizontal hostility are a direct result of the tremendously repressive context in which all of the female subjects live, whether or not they occupy positions of power, both within or beyond the confines of the prison. Intra-group, or horizontal, hostility is perhaps the most damaging, according to David, as the “oppressed participates in […] her own oppression through self-destruction and violence toward self” (10). Horizontal hostility is a type of marginalization and enmity that occurs within a specific group by some members towards people who lack the same or similar privileges. When nuns, female guards, and informants take part in the oppression of their less fortunate female counterparts, they play a key role in keeping the overall system of sexism, female subordination to male authority, and other fascist systems of domination intact.

**Female Reproduction of Patriarchal Discourse and Abuse**

In “Prisons With/out Walls,” Nancy Vosburg affirms that for women, the
locus of the prison is “a reproduction and magnification of the hierarchy, authoritarianism, repressive mechanisms, and institutionalized violence operating in the social system as a whole” (126). It is clear that Chacón’s depiction of the Ventas facility functions in much the same way as Foucault’s “carceral culture,” or surveillance state, in that it is a microcosm of a repressive, misogynistic, and paranoid Franquist society. As if in an attempt to rid themselves of their “inferior” female qualities, the nuns and female wardens exert a type of authority that derives from their representation of patriarchal hierarchy and traditional masculine power, whose main objective is absolute dominance over the morally, ideologically, or intrinsically inferior female Other. Victoria Sau Sánchez claims in “Feminism—The Total Revolution” (1984), that, in order to move up in the social ranks in patriarchal society, women must defy the essentialism of the sex/gender system and defeminize, or masculinize, themselves (121). Contrastively, in I Love to You (2016), Luce Irigaray argues against (un)conscious, self-imposed masculinization, arguing that women must learn to mediate or else they will behave “like a patriarch, against [their] interests” (5). The female authorities of Las Ventas evidently sense that the only way to overcome, or perhaps benefit from the “fascist machismo” of the time (Enders 379) and enjoy a small degree of agency and authority for themselves, is through a process of self-imposed masculinization, or de-feminization, as Sau Sánchez affirms. This process may be reminiscent of Chacón’s strategic, subversive masculinization of her female heroines and prisoners, who must be re-educated in part so as to return them to acceptable feminine codes of conduct. Yet when applied to the novel’s female antagonists, the novelist seeks to stress their opportunistic nature. Although violence and rage are considered by the patriarchy to be improper of the female sex, the nuns and female wardens of La voz dormida are ostensibly encouraged from above to behave in a manner that challenges widely held beliefs regarding suitable gendered behavior. Chacón suggests that, if not for their uniforms, it would be difficult to distinguish the nuns of Las Ventas from the female prison guards, or even from male Guardia Civil officers. Paradoxically, masculine identification and masculinization, then, were only acceptable for those women who upheld the ideals of the Falange and occupied positions of authority, either within the regime or the Church. As referenced above, the women who occupy positions of power in the narrative ultimately disassociate themselves from their powerless, “immoral” female counterparts and, thanks to their newly acquired clout, identify with and emulate traditional male supremacy and violent behavior, thus substantiating Irigaray’s warning11.

Chacón’s female antagonists manifest a number of stereotypically male characteristics that underscore the omnipresence and the perpetuation of a growing and menacing phallic symbolic order, echoing Richards’s and Ángela Cenarro’s (235) assertions that the regime exalted a type of hyper-virility and violence. Callous and volatile, these women arm themselves as men, controlling the inmates by threatening them with batons or truncheons—blunt instruments that double as phallic symbols and signify male authority, violence, and the potential for figurative penetration. The narrator frequently alludes to the deafening quality of the voices of the female functionaries, likening them to “descargas” (195), or shocks, that are cast into the air. These voices command respect and fear from the inmates, as they reverberate throughout the prison and announce punishment or even the names of those women who have been condemned to die. In these instances, women in positions of power adopt the authoritative language and speech patterns of the male oppressor, as well as the content of his discourse. These vocalizations and pronouncements serve to further oppress the prisoners and allow the female functionaries to maintain their power, for these women hold the fates of the inmates in their hands (and, literally, on their tongues). When it comes to their physical attributes, rather than identifying the guards by their actual names, the narrator typically alludes to them by referencing...
their trademark hairstyles. For example, Mercedes, the newest prison
guard, is known as the woman with the “moño con forma de plátano,”
who uses a “multitud de horquillas a lo largo de su recorrido” (85).
Preferring not to “hundirás del todo, prefieres que se vean” (85), La
Zapatones is described by the narrative voice as “el peinado de Arriba
España” (161). Both synecdocles evoke an amusing and identifiable visual
image for the reader, while also pointing to the omnipresence of virile or
phallic imagery in this chiefly female-inhabited space. Moreover,
Mercedes’s preference to keep her bobby pins in plain sight suggests her
desire for others to see how she deliberately controls her femininity. In a
similar vein, in his 2011 cinematic adaptation of the novel, Benito
Zambrano’s female wardens exhibit robust and commanding physiques,
which hint at their physical strength and traditionally masculine
dominance over the weaker, defenseless other12. With their hair pulled
back and upright off of their necks and shoulders—not to mention their
imposing military uniforms, weapons, and harsh utterances—these
women are made to not only physically resemble men, but to function on
behalf of them as agents and symbols of the repressive apparatus of
women, so as to more convincingly establish hierarchies of domination in
the prisons13. Unlike her depiction of Republican women in the novel,
Chacón’s portrayal of the masculinization of female falangista
sympathizers paints them as imposters, but also as the puppets of the
male leaders of the Church and Falange. In the hostile microcosmic space
that is the Ventas facility, women in positions of power reproduce
patriarchal gender dynamics by assuming traditional male roles, mimicking
male body language—as Labanyi underscores in her essay on the women
of the SF, they adopt “the fascist salute, forcing the body into a rigid erect
position” (80)—and forcing their more “inferior” counterparts to
represent the part of the powerless, alienated “Other” woman. While men
may be physically absent from the prison, male hegemony and discourses
of violence and domination are omnipresent, as it is men who dictate
cfemale behavior, as well as the practices and social structures that
engender women’s alienation. In effect, the hierarchical structure, hyper-
masculinity, and internalized domination and oppression of the Ventas
prison parallel those of Franco’s Spain, albeit on a smaller scale.

Aware of the fact that many of the inmates identify themselves as
agnostics or atheists, the nuns set out to forcefully reeducate or reconvert
these women to Catholicism. Nevertheless, instead of portraying the
desire to evangelize the nonbelievers as an act of benevolence, Chacón
underscores that this forced evangelization is a form of penance intended
to further strip the inmates of any semblance of power or dignity they
might still possess. The incongruity between the severe words and
behavior of the prison authorities and the message they disseminate—one
of morality, female submission, and self-sacrifice—becomes very apparent
throughout the novel. Chacón illustrates the degradation of the “mujeres
rojas” at the hands of the nuns and female prison authorities in a scene in
which the prisoners are forced to either lean over and kiss the feet of the
figure of a baby Jesus or relinquish their visitation privileges for the rest
of the month after a hostile Christmas mass. In his homily, the prison
priest declared that the inmates were “escoria” (119), not only for being
“Reds,” but also for having refused to take holy communion. As a result of
their perceived misconduct in the presence of the curate, the nuns and
female prison functionaries consider it their responsibility as his
subordinates to reiterate his feelings of revulsion of the inmates and
impose their own punishment on the unruly prisoners. In this instance,
these women act on behalf of a more powerful male authority, echoing
not only his religious fervor and wrath, but also his choice of words. The
most formidable nun in the prison, Sor María de los Serafines—La Veneno:
“El culto religioso forma parte de su reeducación. No han querido
cumular y hoy ha nacido Cristo. Van a darle todas un beso, y la que no se
lo dé se queda sin comunicar esta tarde” (120). Both the nuns and the
inmates know very well that this act of “reverence” functions as a type of

12. Due to the limited scope of this essay, I am unable to include in this analysis a detailed
consideration of Zambrano’s 2011 film adaptation of Chacón’s novel. The director’s
disdain for the franquistas, Falange, and Church representatives is evidenced in a
selection of provocative images that are designed to incite shock and disgust in the
audience. Severely beaten, bloodied, tortured, or executed bodies abound throughout the film, in turn, forcing the
viewer to witness many of the atrocities committed by those representing the
Nationalist side. Perhaps in an effort to further disturb his audience, the director
includes the unsettling and emotionally charged scene of Pepita’s interrogation and
torture at the hands of the Guardia Civil—a scene that does not appear explicitly in the
novel. The inferred rape of the innocent young woman underscores for the viewer the
injustices that were carried out against (female) Republican sympathizers and even
those who remained neutral throughout the war, as is the case of Pepita.

13. In Individuos, Sánchez recounts the experiences of Matilde Donaire Pozo, who,
like so many women at that time, had to complete the obligatory Servicio Social if she
wanted to matriculate in courses at the
University. In her statement, Donaire Pozo
describes the women of the SF as “falangistas
duras,” and then relates that “entre las de la
Sección Femenina había algunas que eran
muy varoniles, que decían es que parecían
mujeres, tenías que caminar con aire más
marcial” (251). Matilde’s testimony underscores the negative connotations that
Falangista women associated with “feminine”
characteristics and the perceived need to
masculinize, or fortify, themselves and others.
punishment for the women, classifying them as sinners. One by one, each prisoner must bend down considerably to kiss the baby idol, for La Veneno holds him at stomach-level to make the act all the more demeaning. When Tomasa, one of the most rebellious inmates of the group, refuses to obey the order, La Veneno forces her head down toward the effigy, and to everyone’s disbelief, the inmate bites off the statue’s foot in an act of insubordination. The nun yells out “¡bestia comunista!” and proceeds to knock the ceramic piece out of the inmate’s mouth with a swift blow to the face. In Zambrano’s film, the scene is represented in a more intense light, as La Veneno beats Tomasa with a truncheon, while Tomasa lies on the ground, defenseless. As the nun strikes the prisoner, the former shouts, “[...] escoria roja, sacrilega, ni mereces el aire que respiras, puta, comunista, vas a ir al infierno eternamente; quita a este demonio de mi vista!” These references to the incarnation of “evil” demonstrate the nun’s internalization of Francoist conjectures regarding Marxist women and closely resemble the vicious words of the priest in his Christmas mass¹⁵. By resorting to the usage of dehumanizing terms, such as “bestia,” “puta,” or “escoria,” the nun reduces her enemy to a mere abstraction that deserves to be purged, or, in extreme cases, exterminated. Imagining the inmates as animals makes compassion impossible for the nun and her fellow female collaborators.

When La Veneno and La Zapatones refuse to bring Tomasa sanitary pads while she is menstruating and serving time in solitary confinement, Chacón suggests that the female authorities employ the same humiliation tactics as their male superiors, as they punish the inmate solely on the basis of her sex: “La Veneno no le hubiera dejado llevarse los, claro que no. Ni La Zapatones tampoco, que es más mala que la quina, o igual” (20). In this brief reference to the two prison authorities indicates, the narrator reiterates the sheer lack of empathy they have for their sisters on the left. In a separate instance, the narrator recounts the time in which Reme is forced to drink a liter of castor oil—a common act of penance for female prisoners at the time—as punishment for embroidering a Republican flag before having her head shaved by Franco’s authorities¹⁶. By cutting off her hair and shaving her head in public—a type of compulsory purification and masculinization—the Guardia Civil symbolically strips Reme of her femininity and dignity, in an effort to remind her and any other onlooker that she has not only behaved in a way that is improper of her sex, but she has also transgressed a moral order upheld by the Franco regime¹⁷. By cutting off her hair and shaving her head in public—a type of compulsory purification and masculinization—the Guardia Civil symbolically strips Reme of her femininity and dignity, in an effort to remind her and any other onlooker that she has not only behaved in a way that is improper of her sex, but she has also transgressed a moral order upheld by the Franco regime¹⁷. As Francisco Cobo Romero argues, by allying with “the Republic to equate themselves to men by entering the public sphere of parties, organizations and politics” (64), female anarchists, communists, socialists, and Republicans were ridiculed and punished in ways that would not have been employed against men accused of similar offenses. By “robbing the victims of their essential feminine traits” (Cobo Romero 65), Franco and religious authorities believed that they were teaching them an important moral lesson for their illicit acts. Nevertheless, the fact that the civil

14. The concept of a gendered morality was the basis of an imagined “new” Catholic-totalitarian community enforced by the Francoist state. Morcillo Gómez maintains that the Nationalists compared Spain to a womb, arguing that it had been rendered impure and sterile by the left, and that with the “reds” vanquished, Franco’s mission was to protect and purify the nation and return it to its once virginal and honorable, albeit virile, state through a militarized sense of morality. Valverde Nágera, the dictatorial psychiatrist and advocate of eugenics, carried out experiments on Republican female prisoners to locate the “red gene” (Preston, The Spanish Civil War 310). The doctor’s “scientific” conclusions helped to justify and reinforce the acute misogyny and racism that characterized the Franco regime. As a result of his studies, Republican women were deemed “peligrosas,” “infernales,” “sanguiñarias,” and “bestias subversivas” (Sánchez 134). As we see in both Chacón’s novel and historical accounts of Francoist Spain, these pervasive disparaging characterizations of the Republican or left-leaning female—frequently disseminated by the Catholic Church, the Sección Feminina, and the regime itself—contributed to a heightened animosity toward and among women, for those women on the political right internalized the unfavorable rhetoric directed at their “immoral” female adversaries and consciously or instinctively collaborated with male authorities to help foment widespread female repression.

15. According to Paul Preston, castor oil—a powerful laxative—was used pervasively by Franco’s soldiers before shaving women’s heads and then parading them through the streets as they soiled themselves. As Michael Richards confirms in his study of morality and women in the Civil War, “Morality and Biology in the Spanish Civil War," ingesting castor oil “was a laxative aid to ‘purging communism from bodies’” (55). In The Spanish Holocaust (2012), Preston cites General Emilio Mola, one of Franco’s senior generals, who allegedly declared, “it is necessary to spread terror. We have to create the impression of mastery, eliminating without scruples or hesitation all those who do not think as we do. There can be no cowardice” (103).

16. Richards affirms in that “the victim with the shaved head was displayed ritually in order to shame, having sinned against the masculine idea of ‘honour’ [sic]” (55).

17. In Blood Cinema, Marsha Kinder considers the prominent trope of shaving/castration in Spanish literature and film, arguing that in certain cases, such as in Tras el cristal (Agustí Villaronga, 1986) or Las edades de Lulú (Almudena Grandes, 1989), the shaving or cutting of hair is a vengeful, dehumanizing rite that often functions as a “prelude to rape and murder” (223), particularly when women are on the receiving end of the shaving act. Films like Pelonas (Laly Zambrano and Ramón de Fonseca, 2003) and De tu ventana a la mía (Paula Ortiz, 2011) call attention to these dehumanizing and gendered acts of violence to which so many women were subjected in the immediate postwar.
guard officers show little interest in her becoming reintegrated into the community—for she is immediately incarcerated—as a result of her presumed “purification,” their motives appear to be more sinister in nature. In a different scene that suggests parallels with Reme’s own penance, the nuns punish the inmates for exhibiting any form of defiance or lack of control over their emotions, and when Elvira cries because she does not know when she will see her brother Paulino again, La Veneno reprimands her by cutting off her red tresses and then throwing them in a box before selling them for profit. Elvira accuses the nun of stealing her hair, as many other inmates could sell their long locks to the nuns so that they might purchase items in the prison store. By shearing her hair against her will, La Veneno defeminizes the prisoner and carries out a figurative female castration and rape, in which Elvira’s hair—a symbol of female power and femininity—represents her most valuable asset. In selling the hair and then keeping the money for herself, La Veneno seeks to create the impression of domination, by appropriating that which is not hers and forcing the victim into a state of submission and impotence. Elvira’s punishment is intended to teach the young inmate that her lack of self-control (specifically over her emotions) will be met with the usurpation of any modicum of agency or dignity that she has left. Whereas some might consider La Veneno’s act of vengeance to be less malicious than those of the Francoist officials, as it is not a prelude to rape or murder, as Kinder would submit, Chacón suggests that both she and her male superiors share a similar objective—the degradation and physical dominance over women who have behaved badly. Ultimately, in this scene, the nun reproduces the cruel behavior and misogynistic attitudes of the male falangista authorities and, consequently, spares these officials the trouble of having to discipline the inmate.

Maureen Tobin Stanley claims that militarism and fascism are traditionally patriarchal and phallocentric in nature, as are their fundamental structures, which are made up of “a violent hierarchy of binary oppositions,” such as “the good versus the bad; us versus the enemy, the stronger versus the weaker, the superior versus the inferior” (n.p.). Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that many of the female characters that have aligned themselves with the political right have adopted these binaries to justify their attitudes and behavior. Their feelings of superiority over the vanquished and “inferior” other reproduce the same destructive power model of oppressor and oppressed. A textual example of this hostile mentality is found at the end of the first third of the novel, in which the narrator describes how, as the inmates visit briefly with family members in the central visiting room, La Zapatones paces the hall, “con el ceño fruncido” (135), scrutinizing their interactions and all the while muttering under her breath Franco’s final war communiqué that she had learned by heart: “En el día de hoy, cautivo y desarmado el ejército rojo, han alcanzado las tropas Nacionales sus últimos objetivos militares. La guerra ha terminado” (135). The warden’s contemptuous repetition of these words serves as a reassuring reminder to her—and to anyone within earshot—of her dominant, superior status over the “Other,” while also highlighting for the reader her belief that the War and its repercussions were now part of an unalterable history. Moreover, La Zapatones’s faithful reiteration of the Generalísimo’s words suggests her appropriation of the discourse of the (male) oppressor. In this scene, Chacón underscores the irony that, while many “creen que reza una oración” (135), La Zapatones instead recites the contents of a contentious dispatch that in no way reveals any semblance of virtue or compassion for the defeated or less fortunate.

This desire for vengeance and power over the “inferior” other is carried out through a string of surveillance and disciplinary measures that evoke Foucault’s theories on the relationship between power and incarceration, and particularly his conceptualization of the panopticon. According to Foucault, “what is fascinating about prisons is that [...] power doesn’t hide
or mask itself; it reveals itself as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is entirely ‘justified’ because its practice can be totally formulated within the framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil, of order over disorder” (210). Similarly, Chacón’s female prison guards and nuns engage in a number of surveillance techniques designed to instill fear, submission, and self-repression in the prisoners and, in so doing, to reinforce the notion that these women are not only powerless in this paradigm, but also that because of their perceived moral inferiority and deviousness, they are not to be left to their own devices. The female prisoners, therefore, are treated as if they were children who are in constant need of “adult” supervision and, whenever necessary, castigation18. Further echoing Foucault’s interpretation of the panoptic model, the narrator makes repeated references to the presence of “la chivata,” or female informant, who is charged with the task of observing the inmates—but also the prison guards—and reporting back to fellow penal authorities with any potentially incriminating evidence. Aware of the consequences of insubordination and of being caught engaging in purportedly illicit activities, Chacón’s prisoners and guards learn to fear, or at the very least, to ostensibly heed the authority of those who are charged with monitoring them. When Hortensia receives a letter in prison from her partner, Felipe—still fighting on behalf of the resistance—and then hears the ominous steps of a prison functionary, she quickly tears up the message into small pieces before swallowing them, for fear that the guard might discover its sensitive contents and thus further endanger him. On the other hand, Mercedes, hired just two weeks prior to the time of narration, must scrutinize the conversations and activities of her subordinates—who are not intimidated by her—and, whenever necessary, report them to her supervisors or punish them herself if she wishes to earn the respect of her superiors and avoid being dismissed from her position. As La Veneno reminds her menacingly, “Tengo mis informadoras […] sé lo que pasa en la prisión a todas horas y a usted se le están subiendo a la chepa. A todas horas, no lo olvide” (133). Consequently, the functionary is regulated by her female supervisors and simultaneously must (demonstrate that she can) control others through a series of repressive surveillance measures. She plays the part of both prison guard—the subject, who has internalized and reproduces patriarchal power relations—as well as prisoner—the Other, or object of the controlling gaze—and therefore must be performing both roles convincingly. In this instance, Chacón reminds the reader that, if not for the fear of being watched, potentially disbarred from one’s job, and publicly humiliated, the repression of women—and other victims of Francoist oppression—may not have happened, at least to the extent that it did.

The novel makes clear that the jurisdiction of the nuns and female prison personnel is limited to the penitentiary walls, as it is primarily Franco’s men who head the military tribunals and conduct the interrogations and torture, and who, needless to say, are the perpetrators of the sexualized violence directed at female Republicans or political sympathizers. Whereas Chacón’s nuns and functionarias control their female counterparts through the threat of violence and solitary confinement as well as the panoptic surveillance measures mentioned above—such as the continuous presence of the informant and relentless scrutiny of the female authorities in each cell block—it becomes clear that they act on behalf of a concealed and vindictive authority, comprised of representatives of the penal system, the military, and the Church. The novelist emphasizes that it is in fact men who pull the proverbial strings and determine the fate of the inmates, while female authorities support a patriarchal system that enables and benefits (the political interests of) their male superiors. Perhaps representative of Franco himself or their male comrades, this ubiquitous, albeit ostensibly invisible, force further oppresses oppression and animosity among women in the novel by obliging females in positions of power to control and subjugate other women. For instance,

18 This echoes both Geraldine Scanlon’s (1976) and Helen Graham’s (1995) descriptions of the inferior legal position of women in Spain under the Civil Code of 1889 as minors before the law.
informants simultaneously control and are supervised by the female functionaries (and vice versa) in the same way in which the latter are monitored by a higher-ranking individual—frequently a man—in the chain of command. Therefore, it seems that, as David Buchbinder posits in his examination of men and masculinity, women are “simultaneously panoptic subjects (the agents of the patriarchal panopticon) and panoptic objects (the focus of the surveillance of the patriarchal panopticon)” (81), or both prison guard and prisoner. Chacón’s female authorities observe on behalf of the male (and la patria), while being patrolled not only by men, but also by one another, thus sustaining and bringing new meaning to Foucault’s model.

The constant scrutinizing presence of a female informant in every cellblock only serves to heighten the feelings of animosity and distrust among the inmates and prison guards, and ultimately benefits neither party. When Tomasa intentionally provokes Mercedes by muttering an insult under her breath, aware that she is inexperienced and unsure of herself, the inmate does so because she realizes that la chivata is watching and will report not only her misconduct to the penal authorities, but Mercedes’s deficiencies as an effective disciplinarian as well. In indirect free discourse, the narrative voice contends that “Mercedes es débil, por eso necesita esconderse de las otras funcionarias para hablar con las internas en voz baja. Y por eso se acerca a ellas, porque es débil y pretende ser buena. A Tomasa no va a engañarla. Tomasa sabe perfectamente de qué lado está” (89). The altercation that ensues serves to emphasize the hostility and power struggle that exists between the two women—who both feel that they must refuse to yield to the other, whatever the repercussions, for they know that their behavior and reactions are on display and under the close surveillance of fellow guards and inmates. The narrative voice highlights the mounting tension and back-and-forth, almost inevitable nature of the exchange through the use of repetition, abbreviated utterances, and antithetical parallelisms: “Mercedes insiste en preguntar. Y Tomasa insiste en su silencio. No es su intención medirse con ella. Pero se mide. No es su intención retarla. Pero la reta. La mira fijamente y levanta la barbilla” (89). When it becomes clear that Tomasa will not comply with the official’s demands and that the only possible resolution to the conflict is a violent one, the narrator’s glance shifts to the informer, who observes the encounter with a malicious smirk on her face, all evident to the prison guard. The informant’s amusement throughout this scene stems from the satisfaction she derives from witnessing the mounting animosity between the two women and the anticipated beating that the insubordinate inmate will inevitably receive, but perhaps more so because she takes pleasure in Mercedes’s transformation from the seemingly naïve, sympathetic prison guard to a more aggressive one. The narrator emphasizes the ability of the spectator and her anticipated reaction to dictate the actions of the participant: “Mercedes ha de reaccionar si no quiere que la chivata la acuse ante sus superiores de falta de autoridad, y que las internas descubran que no sabe qué hacer. Ha de reaccionar, eso es lo único que sabe” (90). Each woman’s belief that she must defiantly remain resolute in the face of her opponent derives from her awareness of an existing audience. Therefore, their behavior is learned, as it is indicative of their internalization of opposing ideologies, and also a performance that must demonstrate to onlookers that they can faithfully and convincingly play their part in the conflict between the right and the left.

As was the case in the postwar, women at every level in the novel—be they wardens or prisoners—are expected to obey their superiors, or risk being rebuked for their insubordination. All of the funcionarias must report to La Veneno, the highest-ranking and most feared nun/functionary in the penal institution. When her underlings display signs of weakness—such as any modicum of mercy or leniency with the inmates—or a lapse in judgment, the nun responds vindictively by ridiculing them publicly and
promptly having them removed from the penitentiary. The fear of not being sufficiently aggressive or authoritative—in other words, not reacting in a stereotypically masculine fashion—with the female prisoners is inculcated in the female authorities from above. While subtle, Chacón paints her female antagonists as simultaneous agents, byproducts, and victims of a repressive patriarchal system in which they are forced to either act in the service of patriarchy or be disenfranchised and silenced, much like their female adversaries. Realizing that she is “incapaz de imponer su autoridad” (154) over the inmates, Mercedes volunteers to help Don Fernando and Sole in the infirmary, believing that by taking care of the sick she will avoid being fired by her superiors. Therefore, the guard’s motives are not merely inspired by her questionable compassion for the sick, but by her desire for self-preservation as well. Furthermore, female functionaries are forbidden from challenging the authority of higher-or lower-ranking male officials—a point that Chacón emphasizes in the scene in which Felipe and Paulino, posing as falangistas, visit the prison and demand that La Zapatones hand over Elvira and Sole, implying to her that the latter is to be transferred to another prison and that they plan on raping and torturing the former before returning her to the penitentiary the following day. The guard hesitates, as she knows that she must not make such an important decision without the approval of La Veneno, but also because she has seen what male officials are capable of doing to the female inmates. Her attempts to impede the “officers” from leaving the prison with the two women are thwarted when one of the two men chastises her for her insubordination and insolence,-retorting, “¿Desde cuándo se da el alto a los salvadores de la patria?” (241). La Zapatones finds herself in a double bind, because whatever authority she believes she has over the female inmates is automatically overruled by those who pose as her male counterparts, but when La Veneno discovers that the falangistas were nothing short of imposters, the nun is forced to fire the prison guard for her subservience to the men and her inability to discern the illegitimacy of their authority. Chacón illustrates in this particular scene that women who conspire with patriarchy in the repression of their Republican sisters are destined to contribute to their own defeat and oppression and that the only individuals who truly have something to gain from the oppression of female Republicans are fascist males.

In her interview with Virginia Olmedo, the novelist claims that with La voz dormida she tried to pay homage to [all of] the women who lost the war, “porque la perdieron dos veces. Una, al ser despojadas de los derechos que habían adquirido en la II República y otra porque fueron las derrotadas. Creo que perdieron tanto las mujeres de izquierdas como las de derechas porque a ambas se les impuso el sometimiento de ser únicamente madres y amas de casas” (6). If left-leaning women lost the war twice over, then, according to the novelist, female allies of the regime should also be counted among the defeated. Chacón’s assertions that all women lost the war underscore the notions that men—the true oppressors of women—were in fact the architects and victors of the civil conflict and that wars and their aftermath typically only benefit men and patriarchal power structures.

**Mercedes: An Alternative to Patriarchal Tyranny**

Whereas both the novel and Zambrano’s film adaptation stress the presence of intense female antipathy in the Ventas prison and the victimization of the inmates at the hands of the guards and nuns, it is Mercedes who blurs the distinction between traditional conceptions of good and evil and Self and Other. As if focalized through the eyes of the inmates—specifically, Tomasa—the narrator exclaims, “Buena no es. Qué coño va a ser ésa buena. Tampoco las monjas son buenas, y eso que tienen la obligación de ser buenas. Pero no lo son, más parecen guardias civiles rancios” (49).
Once more, the narrative voice likens the nuns to Franco’s (male) authorities to emphasize their characteristic depravity and corruption. Nevertheless, whereas the nuns and other prison guards refuse to bring Tomasa hygienic clothes during her menstrual period while remaining in solitary confinement, Mercedes “le ha dejado tirárselas porque no ha sabido decirle que no” (20). The narrative voice presumes that Mercedes’s initial willingness to help her less fortunate sisters in the penitentiary will diminish over time and that she “aprenderá, la muy lagarta. Ya aprenderá, como las otras [La Zapateres and La Veneno]” (20), suggesting that extended time spent in positions of power causes women to become less empathetic to the plight of those who are ostensibly powerless. In this instance, the narrator reveals that the female prisoners, like the nuns and prison guards of Las Ventas, establish their own moral framework rooted in what they believe to be “right” and “wrong,” and because Mercedes dresses like the other guards, answers to the nuns, and ultimately seeks approval from her fanatical superiors, the inmates inevitably view her as the enemy. Whether or not this is true, Mercedes, unlike La Zapateres and La Veneno, is a much more intricate character, who represents neither pure good nor evil, and instead, is a woman attempting to survive in a ruthlessly competitive and misogynistic milieu.

In her exploration of the Spanish Republican female and her struggle against fascism, Tobin Stanley maintains that when women’s voices and actions are not the “ventriloquism of war-faring masculine voices [and interests], they tend to privilege the human bond, the needs of others and the well-being of a collective” (n.p.). In La voz dormida, whereas one-dimensional characters such as La Veneno and La Zapateres are unwavering surrogates of their male, fascist comrades, Chacón depicts Mercedes as a vacillating accomplice to the fascist-Catholic agenda, one that frequently finds herself torn between her necessary alliance to the right and her desire to be liked by, but also to form a meaningful relationship with, the inmates she oversees. The compassion Mercedes shows Elvira, even, at times, Tomasa, and Hortensia in her final hours, poses a dilemma for both the characters and the reader or spectator, for they are unprepared to accept such an ambiguous morality. Perhaps in an effort to placate her own guilt conscience, in Zambrano’s adaptation, Mercedes lives up to her name and allows Hortensia to nurse her daughter one last time. While the two women clearly—at least on a superficial level—represent opposing ideologies and factions, they are able to find common ground and shared sympathy in their maternal roles and suffering. What is more, both characters have lost loved ones in the War, and, in one of the final melodramatic scenes of the film, they agree that the conflict never should have happened in the first place. A consequence of patriarchy, the War and the repression of the postwar were spearheaded and executed primarily by men—despite the fact that, as I have suggested in the present study, women in Franco’s Spain often acted on their behalf to oppress the perceived enemy. The fact, then, that both Hortensia and Mercedes acknowledge the senselessness of the violence of the War—which will ultimately lead to the former’s unnecessary, unlawful death and the compulsory orphanage of her child—indicates a reproach of patriarchal and horizontal female violence. By promising Hortensia that she will deliver her newborn daughter, Tensi, to her aunt Pepita following Hortensia’s execution, Mercedes makes a pact with the perceived enemy and consciously defies (patriarchal, fascist) authority while rejecting what Pheterson identifies as feelings of superiority and indifference to one with which she shares essential interests. In turn, Mercedes obscures difference and breaks with the pattern of internalized misogyny and female antipathy, for in this instance she treats the inmate as an ally with whom she herself identifies. Consequently, thanks to Mercedes, Chacón is able to suggest the presence and power of a shared female experience, as well as the possibility of a budding, yet thwarted, feminist consciousness among her characters, which challenges patriarchal power and female betrayal.
Whether or not it was Chacón’s original intention when writing the novel, Mercedes—and her relationship with Hortensia, the other inmates, and guards—thus embodies the complexity of the Civil War conflict and, as Hans Lauge Hansen articulates, allows for a more varied and “objective” comprehension of recent Spanish history. As such, La voz dormida and its complicated female relationships illustrate the recurrently employed leitmotif of las dos Españas, a paradigm that, if for nothing else, explicates the tense coexistence of two opposing ideological factions—those of revolutionary and traditional Spain—dating back to the nineteenth century. Moreover, the victimization of Republican female prisoners at the hands of their more conservative “sisters” highlights the Cain/Abel theme that has been deployed by various writers, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Ana María Matute, Antonio Muñoz Molina, not to mention Franco himself, to expound upon the fratricidal/sororicidal nature of Spain’s Civil War.

Mercedes’s intention to help Hortensia and her child at the end of the second part of the novel, and near the end of the film, signals a dramatic transformation—a moral conversion of sorts—which implies that she is, in fact, capable of human decency and compassion for the demonized and non-privileged Other. She is an average, imperfect hero, who, in this one instance, willingly contradicts the orders of her superiors at the risk of being demoted, fired, or perhaps being dealt a worse fate. In this example, the narrator of La voz dormida humanizes the “enemy,” as if refusing to condemn her entirely for her political affiliation. These subtle, yet important, examples of human empathy and psychological complexity remind the twenty-first-century reader of the considerable gray area that exists when trying to determine what, or who, was “good” or “evil,” right or wrong, particularly in the context of a bloody civil war and tumultuous postwar era.

20. Miguel de Unamuno’s Abel Sánchez: Una historia de pasión (1917), Ana María Matute’s Los Abel (1948), and Antonio Muñoz Molina’s La noche de los tiempos (2009) are just a few examples of such works.

21. By “moral conversion,” I mean to say that Mercedes experiences a transformation in her actions and moral convictions. As David B. Wong explains in his exploration of moral conversion in literature and film, this change is marked by an adjustment from “an unremarkable or poor moral record to an admirable one. Such conversions are often construed as triggered by an experience or series of experiences that reveals to the agent something he had not seen or felt before” (41). In this case, Mercedes is, perhaps for the first time, forced to choose between her allegiance to her superiors—and perpetuate the repression of the Other in the process—or show compassion to an enemy with whom she comes to identify.
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