

*Aurora Cáceres*

A DEAD  
ROSE

*Translation, foreword & notes*  
*Laura Kanost*

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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

In 1909, Zoila Aurora Cáceres (1877-1958) stated in her book *Mujeres de ayer y de hoy* [Women of Yesterday and Today] that most women writers “are not creators, nor do they impress upon the art of literature the wholesome, benevolent hallmark that ought to characterize every woman.” She went on: “In general, feminine novels do not differ from those written by men: they are just as audacious, pornographic, impetuous, and passionate as those produced by the masculine pen” (343-44).<sup>1</sup> It sounds like condemnation, but five years later, in her own novel *La rosa muerta* (*A Dead Rose*), Cáceres pulled out all the stops. She dared to write a detailed account of a uterine ailment and a sexual relationship between a woman and her gynecologist. Defying cultural conventions of feminine modesty to speak openly about women’s health and sexuality is only part of what made this novel scandalous, however. Just as audacious was the way Cáceres positioned her novel within an artistic context that silenced women.

Planting her work firmly within a Spanish American *modernista* tradition of male artists obsessed with perfect forms that objectified women as muses or *femmes fatales*, Zoila Aurora Cáceres fashioned a female character who plays all of those roles. Her protagonist, Laura (whose name happens to overlap with the author’s, *Zoi-LA a-U-ro-RA*), is an artist who has created a stylized, perfect form –her body– that harbors a hidden threat. Ultimately, this artist embraces her inner *femme fatale* even though it means confronting death, and in doing

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1 “Salvo raros casos, no son creadoras, ni imponen al arte literario el sello sano y benévolo que debería caracterizar a toda mujer; no revelan un temperamento que emane de las bondades y ternuras de su alma. Por lo general, las novelas femeninas no difieren de las que escriben los hombres: son tan osadas, pornográficas, impetuosas y apasionadas como las que produce la pluma masculina.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

so she chooses to destroy her perfect work of art, leaving only copies in the form of painting and sculpture. In conflating the artist, the work, the muse, and the *femme fatale*, Cáceres signaled the impossibility of writing as a woman within the discourse of *modernismo* even as she did just that. As she narrated gynecological treatment and sexual encounters from Laura's vantage point, Cáceres rewrote naturalist and positivist scripts that objectified women's bodies as laboratory specimens and sites of social control. She defied sociocultural restrictions on women's sexuality, as well as artistic expectations – which she herself had voiced in [Women of Yesterday and Today] – that women writers should imbue their work with their delicate spirits.

Why did Cáceres dare to write *A Dead Rose*, a book so scandalous that nearly a century went by before it saw a second edition? The novel must have come as a shock to many of the readers who had followed Cáceres's earlier writings, often published under her pseudonym, Evangelina or Eva Angelina (evoking the gospels or *evangelios*) or with her initials, ZAC. In many ways, however, *A Dead Rose* is an extension of Cáceres's cosmopolitan identity and feminist stance developed over a lifetime of travel and scholarship.

As the daughter of Andrés Avelino Cáceres, the Peruvian president (1886-1890, 1894-1895) known for his military leadership in the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), young Aurora spent much of her childhood on the move. Her mother, Antonia Moreno, took her three daughters along with her as she bravely provided support for her husband's troops fighting against the Chilean invasion, and the family was exiled to Argentina when her father's first presidency ended in a coup (Pachas Maceda 21-25). The family's social position allowed Aurora to devote her time to learning, writing, and developing her social network. Illustrating this privilege, in July 1906 diary entries from her autobiography, Cáceres complains about picking up a broom to sweep the floor for the first time in her life, as she has not yet been able to hire a servant for her new household (*Mi vida* 101). Aurora's parents sent her to the best schools, not only in Peru, but also England, Germany, and France, where she developed a love of art and multilingual skills that she would later apply as a literary translator. The character *Laura* in *A Dead Rose* shares a similar education and knowledge of painting (Pachas Maceda 90-91).



Cáceres developed a broad social and intellectual network, publishing essays and stories in a multitude of periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic. Fellow Peruvian Clorinda Matto de Turner, who was exiled in Argentina at the same time as the Cáceres family, published Evangelina's early feminist essay "La emancipación de la mujer" (The Emancipation of Woman, 1896) in an early issue of her publication *Búcaro Americano*. An argument in favor of women's education in this early essay – "How much nicer would it be for a man to find in his companion, not an ignorant being for whom he must seek light conversation within her comprehension, but a woman whose intellect is on his level, a woman with whom he could share all the troubles of his soul, future projects, present fears or joys?"<sup>2</sup> (Glickman 106)–reappears nearly two decades later in *A Dead Rose*, in an explanation of how Laura's lover, Dr. Castel, grew distanced from his wife: "the young woman's frivolity distanced her intellectually from her husband, and with that moral remoteness, physical detachment soon followed."

Beginning in about 1902, Cáceres spent much of her time in Europe. She completed studies at the Sorbonne culminating in a thesis on feminism in Berlin, accompanied her father on diplomatic travels in Europe, and visited her sister Hortensia, who lived in Paris (Pachas Maceda 28). In 1905, she combined a European model with her extensive Peruvian social network to found the Centro Social de Señoras in Peru, promoting women's vocational education and supporting child development to, in her words, "expand woman's field of action, emancipating her from the needle" (Araujo 174-75).<sup>3</sup>

In the Spanish illustrated periodical *Álbum Salón* in 1902, Emilia Serrano, Baronesa de Wilson included Cáceres in her series "Inmortales americanas," paying homage to nine great women of the Americas including writers Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera and Soledad Acosta de Samper. Accompanied by a photograph, the tribute presents Cáceres as a beautiful, very young woman whose admirable intellect developed at the incredibly rapid new pace of

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2 "¿Cuánto más agradable no sería para un hombre encontrar en su compañera, en vez del ser ignorante, para con el cual tiene que buscar conversaciones frívolas que le sean comprensibles, a una mujer cuyo intelectual le haya puesto a su altura, es decir, con la que pueda compartir todas las cuitas de su alma, proyectos para el porvenir, temores o alegrías del presente?"

3 "abrir campo de acción a la mujer emancipándola de la aguja"

modern life, and whose writing in several Spanish American periodicals on topics including psychology, law, science, art, and literature quickly gained admirers due to her skill for observation and “the most exquisite, most pure sentiment.”<sup>4</sup> This assessment, like Amado Nervo’s later prologue for *A Dead Rose*, dovetails with the expectation for “poetisas” or poetesses of the time to write “‘intimist’ verse about matters of the heart”, poetry that was “emotive but self-abnegating, devoid of excessive passion, and expressive of ‘feminine’ qualities of gentleness, softness, purity, beauty, fragility, and moral superiority” (Unruh 42). But the Baronesa de Wilson goes further, praising Evangelina’s curiosity and perceptive treatment of “social and sensational problems.”<sup>5</sup> The essay reinforces Cáceres’s image as a cosmopolitan intellectual, characterizing her as “American by birth and European by her deep, expansive education.”<sup>6</sup>

Cáceres’s personal album includes clippings of two 1903 profiles in the Argentine publication *América Literaria*, both accompanied by photographic portraits. One, signed “Saint Just,” celebrates Cáceres’s rapid rise to stardom as an example of what women can achieve when they have access to education, quoting from the essay by the Baronesa de Wilson. Another, signed “R.B.S.,” praises the artistic merit and prodigious imagination of Cáceres’s publications, as well as her modesty. Like the 1902 feature, this one goes beyond complimenting the “feminine” features of Cáceres’s writing: “We know that she works hard; she studies more; she has penned pages of profound sentiment in which a woman’s heart beats with every pulse of a man’s!”<sup>7</sup> This writer emphasizes the role of Cáceres’s experiences of war and exile in shaping her intelligence, sure to produce “treasures of beauty yet to be discovered.”<sup>8</sup> In her many visual portraits (three sketches, three oil paintings, and a sculpture, plus numerous photographs) Cáceres cultivated a stylized image of an elegant, confident woman (see Pachas Maceda).

Cáceres’s literary network put her in touch with famed Guatemalan *modernista* writer Enrique Gómez Carrillo, and they ex-

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4 “el sentimiento más exquisito y más puro”

5 “los problemas sociales y sensacionales”

6 “americana por su nacimiento y europea por lo profundo y vasto de su educación”

7 “Sabemos que trabaja mucho; que estudia más; que tiene páginas de un sentimiento profundo en que palpita un corazón de muger con todas las pulsaciones de un hombre!”

8 “tesoros de belleza no descubiertos todavía”

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## PROLOGUE BY AMADO NERVO

I believe that women with a divine calling to follow the errant path of letters should devote themselves to writing novels, especially novels of love. By nature, man is polygamous and woman is monogamous. Now then, polygamy and love –Christian love, at least– are unrelated; has it not been said, perchance, that love is the egoism of two? No one would think to call love the egoism of four... or five!

Man –particularly modern man– continues to understand love in a rather old-fashioned way, that is, as a simple natural function, more or less idealized by art and poetry. For woman, in contrast, unless she is aberrant, love constitutes the fundamental purpose of life. It should lead to marriage, or in any case, to the tranquility of complete possession. On the other hand, since woman is so instinctive, she possesses superior knowledge of love's every contour and detail; in woman's guile, which is likewise quite superior to masculine guile, she is content to follow the footpaths of love, rather than taking the king's highway. For all of these reasons, and others lost among the steel bars of my typewriter, woman is the ideal writer of love novels or stories. Englishwomen have understood this very well, and in Old England, love novels written by men are scarcely published these days; men concentrate, if you will, on starrng in them, which is something else... and those men who do feel called to write opt for the sciences, history, criticism, etc.

In Spain and Spanish America, there are few women novelists, because there are few women intellectuals. Religious concerns and the mockery that certain people make of women writers must contribute to this in some small part; nevertheless, Emilia Pardo Bazán has produced a veritable library of novels, and Blanca de los Ríos has

several imaginative books with polished style, great lexical fertility, and an expert eye for observation.

How, then, could Mrs. Aurora Cáceres's good intention to write a novel not draw applause? She is more than familiar with Paris, this "Mecca" of our ingenuous Spanish American souls; she allows herself to be penetrated by this atmosphere which is so propitious for the work of the spirit, and in the rather motley cosmopolitanism of the great *civitas* she spots interesting types with whom we cannot but sympathize after a few pages: her Spanish Laura, deliciously Parisianized, and that Oriental doctor; they fall in love amid the décor of a white clinic smelling of disinfectant; they possess one another upon a nickel operating table, and there, where the cry of unsparring human pain has so often resounded, they can be heard crying out in sensuous love, which perhaps is but another sort of pain, the greatest on earth... But Laura is ill, with an ailment that Aurora Cáceres describes fearlessly (revealing a certain study, a certain clinical eye which—alas!—doctors often lack), and with the laudable modesty of her sad flesh, she stifles her cries when possession hurts her, and sensing that the doctor (who treated her before becoming her lover) will realize the progression of the disease and perhaps feel repulsed by her, the poor heroine runs far away to hide her misery, going to a clinic in Berlin to die, leaving her beloved a delicate letter of romantic feminism:

*"Forgive me for hiding so much from you, and for preferring in my womanly vanity to die abroad, far from you, rather than leave you with the image of my mutilated, wrecked body associated with the memory of our love. I have said nothing to you of the physical pains that have come over me during our hours of love; the improvement I always spoke of was a lie, as were my happiness and laughter. Only my love was true, and the only thing that was indestructible was this passion, so intense that it burns my soul and overflows from my chest, such that the world would seem a small audience to hear me proclaim it.*

*I wanted my love to brighten your existence, for my youthful soul like a fragrant incarnate flower to delight your eyes, weary of the sight of suffering; but today, as my adverse destiny transforms me from an astonishing Venus—as you used to call me—into sad hospital waste, annihilated and exhausted, I prefer to run away, to distance myself from you and thus await my death... at least I will leave you the memory of the mysterious woman of the Bosphorus, 'with tresses of seagrass and eyes of the Oriental night,' and not the painful picture of my dying moments amid bandages, chloroform, and bloody scalpels."*



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These lovely novels of male doctors and female patients are favored now, one might say. I recently read one in the *El Temps* feuilleton that had been translated from German; its author's name is Hans Land and its protagonist is a great surgeon of Berlin: Arthur Imhoff. I recommend this novel, lovely in every way, to 50-year-old men who intend to marry 18-year-old girls... It will be instructive!...

As for Mrs. Cáceres's little book, I could perhaps quibble with certain syntactical constructions, or vocabulary that is rather cosmopolitan... like the protagonists, or the sudden intrusion of some crude naturalist detail that is no longer in style, perhaps for good reason; but I understand that my distinguished and kind friend, doing me the honor of requesting a few lines by way of a prologue for her book, does not precisely desire criticism. That will arrive by other channels than this, and I hope it does come, so that the book endures and the novelist feels stimulated to create new works as worthy as this one.

That said, after offering the author *tous mes hommages*, "to my solitudes I go," as another man said.



A DEAD  
ROSE



## CHAPTER I

Laura slowly ascended the staircase to the second floor of a beautiful house in Paris. The stony bluish pallor of her marble-white face accentuated the shadow of large violet circles beneath her dark, almond-shaped eyes. Her bright, commanding gaze seemed tempered by an expression of immense sorrow. Her full lips, reddened with carmine, smiled timidly, the dissembling smile of the fearful, threatening to dissolve into a pained grimace...

The staircase was not steep, nor were the stairs tall; wide steps covered by a plush carpet offered the visitor a comfortable ascent. Laura climbed slowly, striving in vain to conceal the breathlessness weighing on her chest as though her heart were being torn out. Her heart was beating so violently that she stopped for a moment to catch her breath; then she continued slowly on her way, the swishing fluid silk of her dress rustling gently next to her body.

Suddenly uneasy, as though caught off guard, she stopped on the second floor and fixed her eyes upon the door through which she must pass; she was paralyzed with terror at the prospect that her fate would be sealed there in but a few short moments.

This would be her final dolorous excursion; she did not wish to suffer any additional shame or disappointment; there, in that tormented chamber of joy and pain, science and art, life and death, her destiny would be determined when that door opened, breaking a silence that concealed, like a human mystery, something of love, of pain, and of vice –when she was granted entrance to the dwelling she had designated as the final refuge for her woes.

She had to summon the last remaining energy sustaining her after many hours of indescribable sorrow, to go through with ringing the

bell which shone impertinently upon the dark wood like a golden bud.

A servant, a courteous young man with curly hair and a kind face, ushered her attentively into a small waiting room, which without appearing luxurious, nevertheless denoted the prosperity of the man of the house. There were velvety oriental carpets, large Louis XVI-style armchairs, Aubusson tapestry divans and chairs, quilted silk curtains in time-worn hues, and Japanese porcelain adorning a modern bargeño cabinet. No detail betrayed a personal taste, nor did the smallest object suggest the hand of a woman.

## CHAPTER II

Her voice trembling, Laura asked the servant, “May I see the doctor?”

He replied, “Please wait a moment, madam. The doctor is out, but he will return without delay. Your appointment begins at two o’clock, which is in just a few minutes.” He then disappeared, quickly shutting a tall white door with gilded stucco and trim.

Laura checked her watch: she had fifteen minutes left to wait. She looked at herself in the hearth mirror across from her, seeking her image in the small spaces between a colossal pendulum and heavy china lamps serving as vases.

Her beautiful classical features were poorly disguised by the black veil fitted to her hat. Far from extinguished, the dazzling brilliance of her eyes produced a mysterious charm. She concealed her body in an ample otter-fur coat that covered her down to her feet, and her *musume* hands were ensconced in a large muff of the same material. Leaning back comfortably in an armchair, her body rested, while her soul was anxious.

In vain, she endeavored to contain her restlessness.

She saw her past play out before her with the force of the present moment. She recalled her peregrination of pain through the clinics of Berlin. It was a pilgrimage of sacrifice, of slaughter. She still shivered in terror at the vision of that first day, not long ago, when a physician told her: “Take care of yourself, madam; what you have may be serious.”

Was it possible in the space of a few weeks to live the tragedy of existence and its infinite anguish in dark solitude?

“This burden is cruel, it’s inhuman,” she longed to shout, but the pride of her blood rose up like a furious sea, signaling that sorrow must keep silent.

Spring came to an end, and with jubilation, Paris felt the first warmth after a winter of rain and inclement storms.

At the house of a female friend late one afternoon, Laura had seen Dr. Barrios, a compatriot of hers who, if he did not enjoy a reputation as a great doctor, had instead great fame for being frank, a good friend, a man of conscience, a scrupulous professional, and a ladies’ man true to his race.

It was a hot, summery evening with light as clear as crystal and love in the air.

The last tea of the season was taking place at the home of Mrs. D... All were in agreement that the time had come to close the salons and gather in the Bois under the shade of the green and white blossoming chestnut trees, to hear the languid music of the gypsies under the open sky.

Dr. Barrios walked over to Laura and looked about, and once he was convinced that they were among people who did not understand Spanish, he began to speak with exuberant loquacity, unconcerned with those nearby.

That day, Laura was wearing an elegant hand-embroidered batiste ensemble with Venetian lace insets and foam-light Valencian ruffles, over a soft rose-colored satin slip that was fitted to her body, lending a daring nude appearance. She was not unaware that she had the impeccable contours of a Venus, and she took advantage of fashion’s permissiveness to display her statuesque Levantine figure.

“That waist!,” Dr. Barrios exclaimed when he caught sight of her as a ray of sunlight illuminated their nook under the canopy of a languishing palm tree. Dr. Barrios believed it polite to direct a compliment to Laura, having kept her for some time, recounting a recent romantic escapade.

Laura would often say, “I can divide my male friends into two categories: those who fall in love with me and those who tell me about their love lives.” On this occasion, she was not mistaken: Dr. Barrios was of the second sort; he confided in her. A single utterance from



Laura was enough: “Doctor, what is it? You’re happier than usual today.”

“You bet I’m happy, with good reason. I’ve never been one to have a romance with a female patient, never wanting to mix professional affairs with love, but it so happens that a female friend of mine has become my patient. I met her at a ball at the *Élysée*. I didn’t know who she was... One day, after meeting a few times, she didn’t attend as planned, and she sent me a pneumatic letter.<sup>22</sup>

“The poor thing was ill, and she was asking me to go see her, in the capacity of physician. Imagine my surprise: she was married to a respectable judge, who showered me with attention. That day I learned her true name for the first time. What misfortune! She has been seriously ill, it could not be more serious. There she was, dying, and me by her side, spending entire nights without sleeping, seeing that I was losing her, that science was useless. You can’t imagine, Laura, how horrible it is for a doctor to sense a loved one’s life slipping away. Fortunately, my fears are allayed now: all danger has passed. It’s as though I, too, have come back to life along with her. Now you see I have reason to rejoice, which is why I look so happy.”

“The husband, too?” Laura said innocently, grinning like a mischievous schoolgirl.

“Of course!” Dr. Barrios replied ingenuously...

After unleashing his effusive spirit, Dr. Barrios paused and looked searchingly at Laura’s body, no doubt because of the tightness of her corset. Rather than a woman’s waist, it resembled a flower’s stem.

Laura answered his gaze: “I don’t feel well, Doctor.”

“What’s the matter? Careful!”

“It’s my abdomen, Doctor. It feels heavy and it hurts so much that anyone else in my place would be in bed. This isn’t the first time I’ve had this pain. It’s been like this on other occasions, but I paid no heed. I didn’t take care of myself and the ailment went away on its own, just as it began. I hope the same thing happens this time.”

Dr. Barrios looked hard at her and sternly repeated the word “Careful!” adding: “Seek an examination without delay.”

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22 Translator’s note: Mail was delivered rapidly via the Parisian system of pneumatic tubes.

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Laura went pale for an instant, and a deathly cold chilled her blood; then she tried to compose herself, and as though casting out a horror, she strove to banish from her mind the notion of an internal illness.

Like a radiant sun she was proud of her body's beauty; would she lose it? Would she lose her delicate slenderness? Would she stop wearing corsets and the Louis XVI heels that lent her gait an undulating rhythm? If she truly was seriously ill, the news of her misfortune would greatly please the women who envied her success as a beautiful, elegant, and distinguished woman, celebrated in society.

Because of her beauty, grace, and habit of reclining on a sofa, as well as her virtue, her friends nicknamed her Madame de Récamier.<sup>23</sup>

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Artfully frivolous and attractive like a doll, impassive, she devoted her entire existence to maintaining the prestige of being fashionable, her dresses dazzling in their exotic artistic taste. If at times she aroused passion, she responded with smiles and glances, and the moment a man began to flatter her insistently and she detected his passionate love, her spirit was overcome with such displeasure that she broke off their friendship completely, and fled the bothersome suitor, avoiding all contact.

She had become a widow at a very young age. Her married life was unhappy; she loved her husband with the sacred devotion of first love, but her husband's infidelity, and the long sleepless nights of delirious rage dissolving in tears, had submerged her in lethargic apathy.

This disillusionment suffered early in life shocked her young soul so violently that she found the world empty and impotent to kindle

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23 Translator's note: Juliette Récamier was an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian salon hostess of legendary beauty whose name became synonymous with the type of sofa upon which she reclined. She was said to have never had sexual relations with her husband, who was rumored to be her biological father.