Is Yellow the New Orange? The Transnational Phenomenon of Female Prison Dramas

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Prisons usually feature in popular media as narrative ecosystems detached from the outside world. The self-sufficient universes of these narratives have often resulted in a rather formulaic genre, generally criticized for its deep-rooted conservatism, especially in the case of US commercial cinema (Jarvis 2004, 171). One of the main arguments for such criticism has been the male-centeredness of the genre. Classic prison films such as *The Great Escape* (1963), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), and *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), as well as the string of popular films released in the 1990s, like *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Dead Man Walking* (1996), and *The Green Mile* (1999), all confirm the fact that this has traditionally been a genre that, in Brian Jarvis's words, "consistently marginalizes women" (2004, 174).

In the last few years, however, this tendency seems to have been subverted by the emergence of a number of stories that take place inside women's prisons. The Netflix original series *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019) might be the most significant instance of this trend. Despite Netflix's secrecy over audience rates, the streaming platform recognized it being its "most-watched original series" by the end of its second season (Littleton 2016). The series' international success has indeed triggered an unprecedented interest over the women-in-prison genre. Documentaries and reality shows like *Women in Prison* (Investigation Discovery 2015), *Girls Incarcerated* (Netflix 2018), and

the British *Women Behind Bars with Trevor McDonald* (ITV 2013) and *Killer Women with Piers Morgan* (ITV 2016–2017) all feed on the growing fascination over what had previously been a marginal subgenre.

But *Orange Is the New Black* is far from being the first television series set in a female prison. In fact, the transnational impulse of this subgenre is patent not only in the global success of a US product like the Netflix show, but rather, in the corresponding stories that such varied countries as Australia, the UK, Mexico, and, as I will explore here, Spain have produced and exported over the years. The groundbreaking Australian soap opera *Prisoner* (aka *Prisoner: Cell Block H*, Network 10), set in the fictional female prison of Wentworth, was aired from 1979 to 1986, and was distributed in seven countries, becoming particularly popular in the UK (Deans 2002). The series' exploration of such issues as lesbianism and sexual identity, as well as "the absence of a 'male gaze' in its portrayal of women" (Turnbull 2017, 185), makes it, despite its soap quality, a transgressive forerunner of the genre. For its part, the UK produced its own TV prison dramas, *Within These Walls* (ITV 1974–1978), mainly centered around the lives of the prison's staff, and *Bad Girls* (ITV 1999–2006), the latter influenced by the success of the Australian show. *Cappadocia* (*Cappadocia,* HBO 2008–2012) was Mexico's take on the genre. More recently, the critically acclaimed Australian series *Wentworth* (SoHo/Showcase 2013–), an updated reimagining of the original *Prisoner*, came out merely two months before the release of *Orange Is the New Black*, and has also been broadcast in more than twenty countries (Batty 2014). *Wentworth* provides a much cruder look into prison life, portraying, like its US counterpart, underexplored models of femininity.

It is amid this flux of prison texts that the Spanish television series *Vis a vis* (*Locked Up*, Antena 3/Fox 2015–2019) has emerged. Like most of its counterparts, the series focuses on naïve newcomer Macarena Ferreiro (Maggie Civantos), an upper middle-class young woman who is accused of misappropriation after having been manipulated by her boss and lover into embezzling the company's funds. Macarena is, like the staple "fresh fish" of prison narratives, "ill-equipped for prison life" (Jarvis 2004, 167), a fact that prompts the spectator's identification with her. It is through Macarena's incarceration that we get access to a rich panoply of racially, sexually, age, and class-diverse characters. Not unlike Piper (Taylor Schilling) in *Orange Is the New Black*, whose showrunner Jenji Kohan referred to as the "Trojan horse" that allowed the show to explore underrepresented identities (Tan 2016), the normative white middle-class character in *Vis a vis* is the pretext for the series' introduction of a varied cast previously unseen in Spanish television.

As this chapter will discuss, *Vis a vis* is representative of the current process of internationalization that local televisions are undergoing as a result of the proliferation of streaming platforms and shifting global markets. *Vis a vis*, like other recent Spanish shows, has revitalized the trite terrain of low-quality

television series of Spain's recession years by importing foreign ideas and production values which, in turn, have been exported abroad. The show adheres to the rules of the popular women-in-prison subgenre, a popularity that can be inscribed within what scholar Milly Buonanno has called the recent "antiheroine" trend in global television (2017, 3). Morally ambiguous characters seemed to be reserved for male antiheroes in the so-called third "Golden Age" of US television (Martin 2013). *Vis a vis*, like its Australian and US counterparts, subverts that norm with its all-female cast of morally dubious characters.

This chapter aims to understand *Vis a vis* as a hybrid, "glocal" product. The Spanish show is influenced, on the one hand, by global tropes and standards of television-making while at the same time retaining some of the national stereotypes that have haunted the Spanish television landscape. The chapter will first situate *Vis a vis* within the Spanish television production context and its upgrade into a more quality, global-oriented medium. Secondly, it will provide a close analysis of the series focusing on the transgressive microcosm that the prison space enables. As the show proves, the prison genre manages to transform a claustrophobic space into a haven of diversity and, paradoxically, of liberty, serving as self-reflection on the internationalization of the medium.

The Rise of Spanish TV

Unlike Spanish cinema, which has generally been regarded as a serious object of study and has generated a fair amount of academic literature outside Spain, Spanish television has long been dismissed as an inferior, low-quality form of mass entertainment, especially among Spanish people themselves (Smith 2006, 1). The origins and development of Spanish television parallel those of the country's recent history. The first channel, the state-owned TVE, was born in 1956 under Franco's dictatorship and was highly centralized and at the ideological service of the regime (Bustamante 2013). This monopoly would continue during the whole dictatorship, with the addition of a second public channel ten years later. It was not until the Transition period to democracy, after Franco's death in 1975, that several laws like the Statute of Radio and Television (1980) were passed to reform the state-owned television. These measures included the launching of new regional channels, which aimed to decentralize public television and adapt it to the new democratic era (Maxwell 1995, 8). A decade later, in 1990, private television started its journey. Pay channels like Canal+and the two free-to-air private channels Antena 3 and Telecinco were launched, expanding the television market and, in the case of the last two, becoming the most-watched channels in the country until today (Barlovento 2019, 17).

The transition to the digital terrestrial television, which started in 2005 and was completed in 2010 with the so-called *apagón analógico*

("analogue switch-off"), opened the way to a wider and more diversified TV offer. New free-to-air private channels were launched with niche-oriented contents. Cable television also continued expanding, even though its levels were still far below those of the US and other European countries (García-Guardia and Estupiñán-Estupiñán 2011, 106). However, this apparent renewal was drastically curtailed when the global economic crisis hit the country in 2008. Both public and private televisions suffered the cuts in public expenditure and advertising. Some regional public channels closed down and other private ones were absorbed into the two main media production companies, Mediaset and Atresmedia. The economic recession had a major negative impact on the quality and creative content of fiction series. As García de Castro and Caffarel Serra sustain (2016, 190), the Spanish television series from 2010 to 2015 period reveal the stagnation of the industry and the lack of "risky" original ideas on the part of producers and screenwriters. The fiction series of the crisis years have mainly consisted of period soap operas, comedies of customs, and "sentimental intrigues," all targeting a homogeneous family audience and revolving around local manners and stereotypes (García de Castro and Caffarel Serra 2016, 189).

It is certainly problematic to determine what "quality" television means. Robert Thompson ventured to define the features of quality TV series in 1996 by alluding mainly to the artistic, literary values to which certain products aspire. According to Thompson, these include sophisticated overlaying narratives that develop along different episodes, complex characters, a striking visual style, and "careful attention to detail," both in form and content (1997, 35). Following Thompson's criteria, García de Castro and Caffarel Serra argue that, while the US and the public Scandinavian televisions were enjoying a golden age, the Spanish series of the crisis period were characterized by local naturalism, an excess of affective romantic plots, stereotyped gender, age, and social class roles, and Manichean moral judgments (184). The authors see this as a clear regression to a conventional, low-quality model of Spanish television that is far away from acclaimed international trends.

Yet, in the last few years, this situation seems to have drastically reverted. Álex Pina, co-creator, executive producer, and scriptwriter of *Vis a vis*, might be the best paradigm of that turnaround. Pina has a relatively long career in Spanish television. He worked for the production company Globomedia for twenty years, creating popular series such as *Periodistas* (Telecinco 1998–2002), *Los Serrano* (Telecinco 2003–2008), and *Los hombres de Paco* (Antena 3 2005–2010), all of them falling under the above-mentioned model of localism and family-oriented content. In 2014, the failure of his series *Bienvenidos al Lolita* (Antena 3) made him realize the need to regenerate the prevailing model of national television. As he claims, that flop was a turning point in his career, after which he took a break and started looking into series like *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008–2013) as points of reference and inspiration (Ruiz de Elvira 2018a). Pina points out that, in an era

where serialized fiction has reached an unprecedented artistic momentum, even surpassing literature and cinema, a new type of spectator, well-versed in international series, has arisen, demanding more specialized quality content (Ruiz de Elvira 2018a).

Vis a vis was born out of this pivotal realization. As Pina recounts, Atresmedia, the owner of the private channel Antena 3, presented a report to the production company Globomedia about the transnational trend of the women-in-prison genre, asking them to develop an idea around it (Jabonero 2015). Pina claims they were soon immersed in the project, taking inspiration from foreign series, especially *Wentworth* (Marcos 2015), and releasing the first two seasons in Antena 3 from 2015 to 2016. Initially, the series was inevitably compared to the comedy-drama *Orange Is the New Black*. Both presented naïve lookalike protagonists who were forced to leave their well-off lives for a life behind bars. Both protagonists initiated similar journeys of transformation into tougher women. Both series explored issues of homosexuality, race, drug abuse, sexual harassment, and violence. The only thing distinguishing them at first sight appeared to be the orange and yellow suits of the inmates. Yet the Spanish show offered a darker, more violent tone and a thrilleresque narrative that was, indeed, more in tune with the Australian series *Wentworth*, especially in Bea's (Danielle Cormack) comparable rise into the jail's "top dog."

Vis a vis can be said to comply with the parameters that Thompson uses to describe what constitutes a quality series. The most conspicuous aspect is the sophisticated visual style that shies away from the conventional cardboard studio sets and plain lighting of traditional Spanish series. Miguel Amoedo, its cinematographer, was determined to upgrade the production values of national television and equip them with a more cinematic look (Aunión 2019). Amoedo had been previously fired from other Spanish projects for wishing to use fixed focal length lenses instead of the widespread zoom lens used in television series, and in *Vis a vis*, he had to stand against Globomedia in order to explore new photographic venues (Aunión 2019). In *Vis a vis*, Amoedo was able to experiment with alternative camera angles, mobile cameras, and fixed focal length lenses. The series was also entirely shot on location, using a refurbished industrial unit as the prison so as to make it more realistic. The result is a series that feels more cinematic than any previous Spanish one. Dark lightning and, especially, the aesthetic use of a yellow color palette infuse the prison with a mysterious and appealing mood that adds a quality layer to the narrative.

Secondly, the series introduces a group of morally questionable characters that also elude any sentimentalized characterization. Even though there are certain prototypical and heteronormative romantic relations, especially between Macarena and a male warden, Fabio (Roberto Enríquez), the series attempts not to wallow in their comings and goings. Instead, much more narrative prominence is given to Maca's conflicted exploration of her

sexual identity through the lesbian relationship she establishes with her cellmate Rizos (Berta Vázquez). Although this is not the first Spanish series to include lesbian characters, former representations usually eluded any references to their sexual lives, adhering to "prude," non-threatening portrayals of lesbianism (Calvo and Escudero 2009, 43). *Vis a vis* knocks down those barriers by normalizing onscreen lesbian sex, even though Macarena's sexual choices seem to be constantly justified by her loneliness and need of affection. The series' cast also stands out among traditional Spanish television. It is probably the most diverse, multicultural cast ever shown in a Spanish series. The fact that it is mostly made up of unknown actresses reinforces the show's realistic aspirations. The exception to this is renowned actress Najwa Nimri, who has a prestigious career especially in the independent film industry, having worked with such filmmakers as Julio Medem. With the hiring of Nimri, the series replicates the current model of US television, attracting cinema talent to what was previously considered to be an inferior medium. Nimri herself affirms that Spanish television is living its most energetic and creative momentum, just like the 1990s independent cinema, a fact that persuaded her to join a TV series for the first time (Losinterrogantes 2018). Her tremendous success as prison villain and comic-like icon Zulema has actually reinvigorated her career after years of stagnation, further indicating the drive of contemporary television.

Finally, in narrative terms, and following Thompson's criteria, the series develops an overarching storyline that surpasses each individual episode. In season one, for instance, the main plot is the hunt for a nine-million-euro loot for which Macarena and her family get entangled with the dangerous criminal Zulema. Macarena's family evolves from being a normative upper middle-class family to breaking the law trying to help Macarena from the outside in a *Breaking Bad*-kind of tribute that even involves an RV. Yet, this narrative line is arguably the weakest point in the series, and Macarena's family's conundrums reinstate the "costumbrist" camp values of traditional Spanish television. The prison, on the other hand, becomes the most alluring scenario and the place where the most elaborate relationships are built. One of the most original touches of the series is the addition of documentary-type asides breaking the fourth wall in which the inmates directly address the camera relating their experiences in jail and the crimes that brought them there, a technique that serves the function of the flashbacks used in previous prison series like *Orange Is the New Black*. These asides not only grant realism and more prominence to secondary characters but also pay an ironic self-conscious homage to the popularity of real-crime documentaries and of the prison genre as a whole.

With its flaws and virtues, *Vis a vis* opens a new path for television-making in Spain. Álex Pina describes *Vis a vis* as an enormous test-bed where he was able to flirt for the first time with a new narrative style more akin to US cable fiction (Sanguino 2018). The levels of violence, nudity, and realism set

it apart from any previous Spanish series and, especially, from the bland family sitcoms that used to pervade Spanish free-to-air channels like Antena 3. The series was indeed a bold move on the part of the network, and one that called for a much more restrictive target audience. Thus, it came as no surprise to Pina when Antena 3 decided to cancel the show after its first two seasons. Despite its remarkable beginnings, the series could not compete with the massive audience rates of other prime-time products like reality shows (Sanz Ezquerro 2016). Nevertheless, *Vis a vis* carved out a devoted cult following that gave themselves the name of "*La marea amarilla*" ("The Yellow Tide") in honor of the color of the inmates' uniforms. The two seasons were exported and adapted to many countries in Latin America and Europe (Morel 2018), where they gained an equally enthusiastic fan base and received outstanding critiques. This was especially the case of the UK, where it became the first Spanish series to be broadcast by the public free-to-air network Channel 4 (Lawson 2017).

After the series' cancellation, La marea amarilla led a strong campaign on social media demanding its continuation. In an unprecedented move, the cable network Fox España bought the rights to Antena 3 and produced, together with Globomedia, two more seasons, which aired in 2018 and 2019, providing closure to the story. The unexpected revival of the series, and its change from free-to-air to cable, confirmed the renaissance of national fiction. It was the first time Fox produced a Spanish show, and the cable network attempted to maintain the series' essence, although there were inevitable changes to its production values. Fox adjusted the old free-to-air canons to more international standards. The series acquired an even darker and more sordid tone with its new distributor, as the pressure to attract a large audience was no longer so critical. Also, the length of each episode was cut down from seventy to less than fifty minutes, following international television standards.[1] The series' new showrunner, Iván Escobar, praised this change, as it allowed them to cut unnecessary "filling" plotlines (Ruiz de Elvira 2018b), getting rid altogether of Macarena's family.

In the transition, part of the original creative team was lost, as well as part of the cast, including its main actress, Maggie Civantos, due to professional commitments, a fact that also had an impact on its narrative coherence. Álex Pina, the former heart of the series, had left Globomedia in 2016 after the cancellation of *Vis a vis* and had founded his own production company, Vancouver Media, taking part of his team with him. It was with his new company that Pina started working on what was going to be the major hit of his career, *La casa de papel* (*Money Heist*), also released initially by Antena 3 and later by Netflix. *La casa de papel* can be said to be the epitome of the global renaissance of Spanish television. Like *Vis a vis*, the series enjoyed a second life thanks to the streaming platform, which also rearranged the episodes' duration and relaunched them internationally. Pina's series has become the most-watched non-English speaking series on Netflix (Dams 2018), and Pina himself has been the first Spanish showrunner to be exclusively hired by the platform.

Vis a vis embodies the transition of Spanish television from localism to a more international and ambitious type of art form. The audiovisual crisis suffered during the economic recession provided creative stimulus to take risks and look for formulae beyond Spanish borders. At the same time, the emergence of new ways of watching serial fiction, and the birth of streaming platforms, has favored the global fluctuation of national products despite the geographical limitations and territorial licensing that still partially hinder these services (Lobato 2017, 183). The success of *Vis a vis* and of other Spanish series reflects what scholar Milly Buonanno calls the "international television flows" that are able to de-territorialize audiences and foster their encounter with "cultural otherness" (2008, 105). The prison space becomes the ideal place to recreate this encounter with the Other, as the following section will explore.

The Prison as Cosmopolitan Space

Ever since Macarena sets foot in Cruz del Sur, *Vis a vis*' fictional private prison, she encounters a universe that is far from her conventional white upper middle-class background. Her brother is about to marry a well-off judge, her parents are a retired police officer and a housewife, and she works for an important company she has just embezzled, following the directions of her boss (and lover). Macarena's conservative and normative upbringing, as well as her meek and submissive personality, clash with an intimidating atmosphere that transgresses any set of moral codes. Right from the beginning, the prison is presented as a site of excess. The women in prison behave in an overtly sexual manner and address Macarena with vulgar language, subverting the stereotypes of refinement and restraint which Macarena incarnates.

The prison is coded both as a perilous and yet liberating space. The lawbreaking that the female characters represent enables the series to explore an unorthodox universe with its parallel set of rules, its own hierarchy, and its own system of justice. Crimes like murder, drug smuggling, slavery, and extortion routinely take place inside, applying the conventions of the typically male-centered crime genre to a feminine context. In order to survive, Macarena needs to take an active role and learn to play by the prison's rules, undergoing a process of empowerment and open-mindedness with which she progressively deconstructs her previously learned systems. The imprisoned women constitute a wide cross-section of society, a mixture of different social classes, ages, races, sexualities, nationalities, and body types that diverge from Macarena's restricted sociocultural background.

The coral panoply of characters includes Zulema, played by the half-Jordanian half-Basque actress Najwa Nimri, who in the series is coded as Muslim, usually dubbed "reina mora" ("Moorish queen"); Zulema's lesbian and gypsy sidekick Saray (Alba Flores), played by the granddaughter of flamenco legend Lola Flores; Macarena's black lover Estefanía (Berta Vázquez); her Cuban

cellmate Sole (María Isabel Díaz); drug addict Tere (Marta Aledo); and the Romani woman Antonia (Laura Baena). From season three onwards, new characters are introduced coinciding with the inmates' transfer to the high-security prison Cruz de Norte. These include a corrupt politician, Mercedes (Ruth Díaz); the overweight and brutish Goya (Itziar Castro); Luna, played by the transgender actress Abril Zamora; and two new wardens, Altagracia and Antonio, played by Mexican Adriana Paz and Chilean Benjamín Vicuña, respectively. With its diverse, multiethnic cast, the show not only provides visibility to underrepresented body types and racial and LGBT+ minorities but also constructs a fictionalized cosmopolitan space that fosters, through Macarena's normative focalization, the spectator's close encounter with the "other."

Unlike *Orange Is the New Black*, where characters form mostly racially based ghettoes, *Vis a vis* introduces a cross-cultural "community" where diversity is almost normalized, and where, except for some blatant cases that bring to mind the stereotyping of traditional Spanish television,[2] the women inmates are not "labeled" or defined according to these markers. The prison is portrayed, hence, as a liberating and thrilling space, far-removed from the stifling and mundane lives of people like Macarena's family.

Yet, at the same time, the series underscores the idea that the domineering heteronormative and masculine forces of the outside keep interfering with that supposed liberty. In the case of Macarena, it is due to her lover's deceit that she is kept imprisoned. And some of the male workers, like the prison's doctor, Sandoval (Ramiro Blas), sexually abuse the inmates on a regular basis. These repressive outside forces are made especially evident through the character of Saray Vargas. Saray needs to confront her traditional Romani family, who deny her lesbian sexuality, arrange her marriage with a gypsy man, and repudiate her for life when they discover she is pregnant with another man, without knowing that Saray's pregnancy is the result of having been raped by the prison's doctor. Saray's mother visits her in jail to tell her that, once the baby girl is born, they want to take her away from her so that the child can live free outside in their community. In a passionate monologue (Season 3, Episode 6), Saray says:

> Free? What for? Free so that you can de-school her and make her work as a child? Free so that you can arrange her marriage after her first period? Free so that it is forbidden for her to fall in love with a woman if she wants to? Free so that she cannot even smoke in dad's presence? Nor get her driver's license? No, free to act as your human shield every time dad hits you. No, mom, my Estrella is going to be freer here inside with me than out there with you. It is you who live in a prison, not me.[3]

Saray's monologue encapsulates one of the series' main tropes. Despite the drama of being incarcerated, the women in *Vis a vis* are able to shake off the prejudices and the imposed social conventions that govern their outside world. Through the example of an orthodox Romani

family, the series underlines the collision of two worlds, the prison standing for a progressive universe that, though tainted by its violence and by these underlying structural forces, offers a diverse and promising scenario. The sisterhood forged between these women eventually stands out among their discord. They support each other in the clashes with the most traditionalist structures—Zulema defends Saray's sexuality in front of her parents; Saray avenges the woman she loves, Rizos, when she is raped by a warden; and, in the end, all the women organize a riot in order to stop Sole's transfer to another prison because she is suffering from Alzheimer's. In the final riot, the women circle the prison's doctor (now also the prison director), Sandoval, and kill him all together in a symbolic act that suggests the ending of these traditionalist, abusive structures. The series confirms in that way its insistence on diversity and female (re)action against heteropatriarchal structures and, symbolically, against a traditional television fiction, and a prison genre, that are customarily cliched and male-dominated.

CONCLUSION

Through its emphasis on diversity, *Vis a vis* makes a comment on its own nature as a product in transition from the old stereotyped television to a more inclusive, transnational scenario. The series reaches its most self-conscious point in its final episode, tellingly titled "La marea amarilla." In it, Sole gets to the prison's microphone and addresses her prison mates. However, as we soon realize, Sole is not only addressing her friends; she is also speaking to us, "la marea amarilla," on behalf of the creative team and of the series. Sole explains that she has lived her best moments with each of her friends, stating: "In prison I've been much happier and much freer than I ever was out there, and I owe that to you, la marea amarilla." She then continues to bid farewell by saying that she is leaving, but that she leaves feeling loved, and looking straight into camera, she adds: "I also love you a lot, my girls." The series' farewell is, at the same time, a recognition of the new television that is starting to liberate itself from the old precepts that burdened its production values. With the prison of *Vis a vis*, the creative team seems to acknowledge having felt freer than with any previous projects, opening thus the path to a new way of making television.

Vis a vis blends together the international standards of television-making—including the women-in-prison genre—with a culturally rich and diverse Spanish context. This hybridity is nowhere clearer than at the end of the final episode, where the series' main theme, the English-language song "Agnus Dei," is merged with the Spanish lyrics of well-known singer La Mala Rodríguez. The series reclaims in that way its position as a crossbred product, a product influenced by global trends while at the same time contributing to them. With its call for diversity and its almost all-female cast, the series partakes in a wider movement that is opening the way to national televisions and to complex, ambiguous female characters that are taking control of the story.

NOTES

1. Free-to-air television in Spain is well-known for its lengthy shows that finish late at night due to excessively long publicity cuts and to a "prime time" that gets progressively delayed, starting at around 22:50, the latest in Europe (Ruiz Jiménez 2017).
2. There are notable exceptions to this normalization. First, the plotline of Zulema's boyfriend, "The Egyptian," a fugitive who tries to help her escape, epitomizes the "Islamic menace," offering a sketched view of Islamic religion. Secondly, there is an ongoing in-joke on the deaths of inspector Castillo's (Jesús Castejón) stereotyped assistants, the former, Ling Chun (Marcos Zan) being called "El Chino" ("The Chinese"), the second, a Mexican, being nicknamed "Jalapeño" (Hugo Guzmán), and the latter Nerea Rojas (Irene Anula), a lesbian who is also killed. Finally, in season three, a group of Chinese mafia women rules the prison, constituting a blatantly underdeveloped and offensively stereotyped set of characters whose only function is that of presenting a menace to the character of Zulema.
3. My translation.

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