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BLAMING THE VICTIM: DECONSTRUCTING MARÍA DE ZAYAS'S FEMINISM

By

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ABSTRACT

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Blaming the Victim: Deconstructing María de Zayas's Feminism

Faculty Mentor: Jannine Montauban

María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1591 – 1661?) was the best-selling author of two extant collections of novellas, *Novelas Amorosas y Ejemplares (Exemplary Tales of Love)* (1637) and *Desengaños Amorosos (The Disenchantments of Love)* (1647). Both collections, consisting of stories of love, marriage, and gendered violence between aristocratic men and women, are explicitly and unapologetically pro-woman. Zayas condemns systemic misogyny and calls for institutional inclusion and protection of women, earning her place as an early modern feminist. Despite her depictions of violence against women and her denunciation of patriarchal institutions, Zayas does not advocate for a radical restructuring of society. She fails to condemn hierarchical race, class, and gender structures, and to advocate radical structural changes that could protect women from male-authored violence. Instead of envisioning and advocating for a just society, Zayas endorses the convent as the best option for women, sending our protagonist and other narrative women to the religious life.

At the root of her inability to call for a societal restructuring is a misanalysis of oppression and oppressive structures. She frequently blames the most marginalized and oppressed for the plight of women, failing to understand the complexities and intersections of oppressive systems. Without being critical of the oppression of people of color and poor people, who, of course, include women, Zayas is unable to offer liberation even to her fictional women characters.

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At the root of her inability to call for a societal restructuring is a misanalysis of oppression and oppressive structures. She frequently blames the most marginalized and oppressed for the plight of women, failing to understand the complexities and intersections of oppressive systems. Without being critical of the oppression of people of color and poor people, who, of course, include women, Zayas is unable to offer liberation to her fictional women characters, though she claims to give us the happiest ending one can imagine (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 405). At the surface, Zayas's racism and classism are upsetting for the modern reader but can be brushed off as the mode of the time. Upon deeper analysis, it becomes apparent that Zayas's oppressive victim-blaming perception of the marginalized washes over her texts, often translating into sexist rhetoric and leading to her advocacy of women's isolation in the convent, which, as seen in her novellas, does not always protect women and certainly isn't liberating.

Drawing from works such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) and Cervantes's *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613), Zayas sets up her collections in the tradition of the frame narrative, which complicates any analysis of Zayas's feminism. Not only do we have Zayas and our protagonist, Lisis, but we have characters, both women and men, narrating tales within, and frequently there are stories within these. These female and male narrators provide insight into different

perceptions of gender and gendered violence. It is not, however, only male-narrated tales that are guilty of perpetuating prejudice. In both male- and female-narrated stories, including our final tale told by our protagonist, hegemonic racism, classism, and sexism bleed through. Despite creating this complex narrative structure, Zayas collapses the layers throughout the *Desengaños* and speaks through Lisis to address her readers.

Both collections take place at a soiree that Lisis is hosting “for Christmas Eve and the other days of Christmas” (*Exemplary Tales of Love*, 55). In *Novelas Amorasas y Ejemplares* we have five men and five women narrate exemplary tales of love. These stories depict violence against women, sexual odysseys, manipulation and miscommunication, and many other characteristics of aristocratic relationships in Spain at the time—though many of these themes transcend time and place, and some transcend class. As literary scholar Ruth El Saffar notes, Zayas genders the stories according to the narrator (20). Regardless of the events that transpire, male narrators tend to favor resolutions that end in marriage (20) while stories told by female narrators tend to end in female death, or in the woman entering a convent. While *Novelas Amorasas y Ejemplares* is not the most encouraging take on heterosexual relationships, women seem to have three fates: marriage, death, or the convent.

Desengaños Amorasas, which was written a decade later and takes place one fictional year after the first collection, is darker and more didactic than *Novelas*. As we begin our second collection, Lisis announces that only women will tell stories, which are to be called “disenchantments” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 37), and that these stories should all be true cases. The explicit rationale for this is “to defend women’s good name (so denigrated and defamed by men’s bad opinion that there is scarcely anyone who speaks well of them)” and because “men preside over everything,” never telling about the “evil deeds they do,” only the ones done to them (*The Disenchantments of Love* 37). Thus, Lisis calls upon the women of the soiree to become disenchantresses, disenchanting men of their misogynistic perceptions of women and, perhaps more importantly, disenchanting women of any disillusionments that they can be safe around men. Of the ten tales told in this collection, six result in women’s deaths and four end in women entering the convent. While *Novelas* seems to offer women three options, *Desengaños* has equated marriage with death. Women must then choose: coexist with men and face death or isolate themselves in the convent. Zayas strongly urges women to choose the

convent, since, as Lisa Vollendorf has noted, she mainly “depicts women’s friendship and an all female environment as antidotes to male –dominated society.” (Vollendorf, 116).

With her graphic depictions of violence against women, her lamentation of a patriarchal society that denies women education and arms, and her condemnation of male-authored violence, it comes as no surprise that many women scholars have argued that Zayas is a precursor to our modern conception of feminism. Ruth El Saffar examines Zayas’s pro-woman texts by conducting a literary analysis of the “‘writing woman’ in a social order that obstructs female autonomy and authority” (8). Patricia E. Grieve places Zayas’s work within the context of the *querelle de femmes* (or the woman question), a recurrent literary and academic debate over the nature and status of women, which started in the 15th century and lasted well into the 18th century. Grieve argues that Zayas is intentionally and pointedly responding to Cervantes, rewriting some of his works to challenge his attitude and treatment of women (86). Nina Cox Davis conducts an analysis of Zayas’s writing through the lens of *écriture féminine*, focusing on authoritative agency of the woman writing. Lisa Vollendorf tries to define the limits of Zayas’s feminism. According to her, “it is with the understanding that Zayas articulates feminist ideas without striving for a full-scale reorganization of all patriarchal social structures that she can be understood as a feminist” (105). Vollendorf further characterizes Zayas’s feminism as “body-based feminism” for using the female body to depict violence against women (106).

A few of these authors have noted Zayas’s classism, though it is only in passing disclaimers praising her pro-woman writing.¹ They focus on the radical and liberal aspects of Zayas’s texts, glancing over the conservative elements. There are few that mention her conservative rhetoric, and none that explicitly analyze it. Zayas’s failure to condemn racial, class, and gendered hierarchies deserves deeper analysis. Though it is not surprising that a 17th-century aristocrat perpetuates racism, classism, and sexism, when examined through a modern lens, a rhetorical analysis allows us to examine the ways in which she perpetuates these oppressive systems, and how this leads her to endorse the convent as the best of all possible endings.

¹ Lisa Vollendorf, for example, mentions that confessors, judicial authorities, and Lisis all blame the servant in “The Ravages of Vice,” instead of Florentina’s complicity or Diego’s responsibility for what the text portrays as irrational rage. This singular paragraph serves to remind us that Zayas’s texts are complex and by no means unproblematic, but it serves as an addendum, not a focal point, to an analysis of Zayas’s feminism (115 – 116).

Recognizing and analyzing the gaps in Zayas's feminism does not detract from the remarkably impressive feat of a woman publishing widely read books that condemn misogyny and urge the better treatment of women in 17th-century Spain. Zayas rightfully deserves commemoration as an early modern feminist, especially for the many radical aspects of these collections.² Zayas has rightfully been praised for her depictions of male-authored violence against women and for defending women against the hegemonic masculinist views of the time. This essay does not serve to contest her merit nor her praises, and it is written with an explicit awareness that Zayas lived in an historical context of extreme and largely unchallenged racism, class hierarchies, and patriarchy, and that she cannot be expected to conceive of race, class, and gender through a modern lens.³ Therefore, my intentions are not to undermine Zayas's grand contributions to feminism and women's writing, but rather to enrich the literature surrounding Zayas by resisting a whitewashed interpretation of her texts and analyzing the ways in which her racism and classism undermine her goal for equality, even if she is only preoccupied with equality amongst aristocratic men and women.

In terms of race, Zayas tends to dehumanize and demonize characters of color, blaming them for corrupting or wronging the white characters. "Forewarned but Fooled," is a tale from *Exemplary Tales of Love*, that narrates don Fadrique's sexual odyssey throughout Spain and Italy, and features Zayas's first relatively developed black character. Don Fadrique, who increasingly distrusts and loathes women, has relationships with seven women throughout the course of the story, three of whom are married, one he beats for taking another lover, and one sixteen-year old, Gracia, who he had formerly considered "as his daughter" and subsequently marries and manipulates (*Exemplary Tales of Love*, 116). His second affair in the story is with a widow named doña Beatriz, whom he intends to marry. One night, he follows her to the stables without her knowledge, where he witnesses her comforting Antonio, her dying black lover. Antonio is described as "so ugly and abominable...it seemed...the devil could not be so [ugly]" (*Exemplary Tales of Love*, 116). Though Antonio's story hardly lasts two pages, he is twice referred to as abominable and thrice compared to the devil.

² As one example, our protagonist, Lisis, begins the final story by declaring, "because all men are declared enemies of women, I have declared my war against all men," a statement in line with radical feminism, 367.

³ i.e. a post-Marx, post-suffrage, post-colonial lens

Zayas presents Antonio, as she does with many other oppressed characters, as inherently immoral and therefore subhuman. Though he is enslaved and dying because of Beatriz's sexual appetite (*Exemplary Tales of Love*, 117), he is presented as the villain, corrupting doña Beatriz and therefore disrupting don Fadrique's plans of marriage. In contrast, don Fadrique is described as having great valor for being able to stay and watch a white woman care for a black man (*Exemplary Tales of Love*, 116). Don Fadrique, who was spying on doña Beatriz, remains our misguided hero who can't seem to find a virtuous woman. The moral is not to forgive women who have wronged you, or that Beatriz and the other women are actually good, but rather that one cannot say that all women are bad because a few have wronged.

The other prominent black character in the two collections, for there are only two, is in "Too Late Undeceived" from *Desengaños*. "Too Late Undeceived" is the tale of don Martin and his comrade, who encounter a tempest and are shipwrecked. Washed up on the Great Canary Island, they meet don Jaime de Aragon who offers them hospitality. When they arrive at his home, they are appalled to see a "breathtakingly beautiful" white prisoner dressed in rags who is only permitted to eat scraps from a skull while sitting beneath the table, and a black woman dressed elegantly with jewels sitting beside don Jaime, receiving his affections (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 146). The nameless black woman is referred to as the "negress" and is described in similar terms as Antonio, though her physical description is more in depth and even harsher:

She was of such fierce aspect that don Martin thought if she wasn't the devil she was his very likeness. Her nose was as broad as the nose of the highly prized bloodhound. Her mouth, or snout, had thick protruding lips resembling the gaping maw of a lion and the rest of her was similarly repulsive (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 146).

She is further referred to as "the fierce and abominable Negress," a "diabolical black lady," an "abominable creature," and as "the very portrait of Lucifer" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 146, 147, 160, 163, respectively).

Despite these gross depictions, it seems, at first, as if the story could be quite progressive for the times; perhaps the message will be that love can transcend race? Even when don Jaime begins to tell don Martin his story, it seems that this could be the direction it is taking. Don Jaime tells the story of being blindfolded and taken to a woman in the night. Though he cannot see her,

he imagines her to be a goddess based on touch. He spends the night with her, receiving a purse full of riches in the morning, and leaves, repeating this for a month without ever seeing her. It seems possible, as he never sees her, that the woman will be revealed to be black, and that since he has already fallen so in love with her, he does not care to make her his wife. Instead, the woman, Lucrecia, is revealed to be a white princess, who orders don Jaime to be killed, unsuccessfully, for not keeping her identity a secret, and does not reappear again in the story. After some time, don Jaime sees Elena, the “ill-fated woman” prisoner, who is the spitting image of Lucrecia (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 156). They marry and lead happy lives, until the black woman, Jaime’s slave at the time, informs him that Elena is having an affair with her cousin. Almost immediately, Jaime burns the cousin alive, preserving his skull as a chalice for Elena. Jaime then takes the black woman as his wife, explaining to Martin:

To hurt her more, I regaled the Negress with all of Elena’s finery, clothing and jewels. I announced that she would be my wife and would be served as such and she would enjoy full command over all my possessions, servants, and slaves, and sleep in my bed. This last I have not done, and I intend to put her to death before Elena’s life ends (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 158)

That night, the black woman, suddenly dying, confesses that Elena was not having an affair. She says she lied because she loved Elena’s cousin and Elena had castigated her for being disrespectful. Zayas writes that her death was a God-given reward to Elena, further aligning her white characters with God while associating her characters of color with the devil (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 159). If Antonio, from “Forewarned but Fooled,” is portrayed as corrupting Beatriz and disrupting Fadrique’s love life, in this story, the black woman ruins the lives of the innocent white woman and the white man whose fault was acting without evidence. Though Zayas could have written a story primarily condemning Jaime for being violent and acting rashly, she wrote a story where a jealous black slave is blamed for the man’s actions and the white woman’s defamation.

Zayas’s characterization of Muslims is also striking. Though her islamophobia is certainly a form of religious discrimination, it is rooted in racism. Many scholars, including the British Pakistani professor Tariq Modood, define Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism (3). Islamophobia, as a form of xenophobia, functions in much the same way as other forms of racism.

Like with the black characters, Zayas dehumanizes and demonizes her Muslim characters, which are consistently portrayed as fundamentally immoral. In “Innocence Punished,” a novella in *Desengaños*, don Diego pursues doña Inés, an innocent and virtuous married woman. When she does not return his affections, don Diego searches for a “Moorish necromancer and magician” to make doña Inés love him “through witchcraft and magical spells” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 185). The narrator remarks that “These things aren’t hard for people who aren’t Catholic and who, in difficult cases, don’t hesitate to press the devil into service” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 185). The magician, like the black characters, is aligned with the devil and presented as inherently immoral, manipulating and wronging white women out of greed.

The “necromancer” gives don Diego a statue of doña Inés that, when the candle is lit, compels her to unconsciously walk to the statue. Don Diego proceeds to rape doña Inés for over a month, leaving her in a confused and emotionally devastated state each day, though she can’t remember the nights (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 188). When everything is found out, the mayor sends don Diego to jail and sends the Inquisition to find the necromancer. Though don Diego is condemned and punished, he is still presented as complex character who acted immorally out of love. In contrast, our Muslim character is not given a name or a motive other than greed. And it is not that he acted immorally, but that he is, due to his religion, an immoral being and necromancer.

Many of the servants who play an active role in the novellas are portrayed, like the Muslim characters, as greedy and manipulative. Perhaps the most damning example of Zayas’s classism comes in the book’s conclusion. Lisis narrates the final tale of *Desengaños*, “Ravages of Vice.” In this story, doña Florentina tells the tale of having an affair with don Dionís, her sister’s husband. Conflicted about her actions, Florentina confesses to her maid who was brought up with her since childhood. After disclosing everything, she asks the maid for advice. The maid, remarking that she can only think of one solution and that it is cruel, suggests that her sister Magdalena must die, for it is “better for the innocent person to die for she’ll go directly to Heaven wearing a martyr’s crown, than for [Florentina] to go on damned” as she was (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 390). So, with only little hesitation, Florentina permits the maid to set a plan in motion. She convinces don Dionís that Magdalena is having an affair with a page, assuming that in response he will kill his wife with very little to no evidence. Dionís not only

kills Magdalena, but everyone in the house including himself. Only Florentina survived, though she was badly wounded. Lisis (Zayas?) ends this story not by blaming the cunning Florentina or the violent don Dionís but the maid.

Zayas concludes this collection, intended to disillusion women of any faith in men, by criticizing servants. It is strikingly revealing that one of the collections' best and most famous paragraphs summarizing the oppression of women ends with a condemnation, not of men, but of maids: "It did doña Magdalena no good to be chaste and virtuous to free herself from the treachery of an infamous maid, from whom no one in the world is safe" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 402 – 3). In the same passage Zayas writes: "Servants are domestic animals and privileged enemies whom we spoil and on whom we spend our patience and our wealth. In the end, they're like the lion that turns against his keeper and kills him if he is negligent in feeding and pampering him" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 403). She depicts servants as "privileged enemies," though they are actually victims of class structures. If servants are to be considered enemies, it is the fault of their wealthy oppressors. Similarly, women are victims of gender structures and "enemies of men", as Zayas argues, only because men have declared war on women (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 367). Zayas is correct in arguing that patriarchy is largely to blame for women's immoral actions, but never considers that servants and other oppressed persons might be "greedy" or "immoral" because they are poor, or, like the aristocratic women, marginalized in society.

Even when Zayas presents servants in positive lights, it is without the condemnation of oppressive hierarchical class structures. Servants and slaves may have the capacity to do good, but their plights are rarely acknowledged. The best servants are dutiful, outwardly content, and not disruptive. Perhaps the most compassionate portrayal of a servant is Octavio in "Slave to Her Own Lover," the first of the *Desengaños*. Doña Isabel, who is narrating her own story as a victim of rape and her need to pass as a Moorish slave to regain her honor, expresses sorrow and compassion for Octavio's poverty. Even in this context where Isabel feels sympathetic toward Octavio, who is dutiful and cares for her, she states that he was obligated "to obey and remain silent" because she had given him monetary assistance several times (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 66). The narrative does not present her actions as a form of manipulation, though she is using her money to silence him. It is this failure to condemn poverty as anything more than an

individual problem and the continued, uncritical exercise of power over poor people and servants that are at the heart of Zayas's failure to suggest structural changes.

Wealth, on the other hand, is presented as a divine endowment to individuals, directly from God and the heavens. To condemn hierarchical class structures, Zayas would have to identify herself as an oppressor. It doesn't, however, appear that the reason for Zayas's classism is her wish to maintain her privilege, but as H. Patsy Boyer states, her depiction of the only world Zayas knew:

The novellas are courtly and pertain to the life of the nobility, as opposed to the variety of social classes we find depicted in Boccaccio, Chaucer, Marguerite de Navarre, and Cervantes. This is undoubtedly the only world Zayas experienced directly. Her class and gender denied freedom of movement; she could not get out and make contact with other ways of life as could any man. (*The Enchantments of Love*, xxvii)

While it makes sense that an aristocratic woman wouldn't have had many outside experiences with other cultures and social classes, it's doubtful that Zayas wouldn't have had servants or slaves. Her inability to provide them full humanity in her novellas, and her underlying belief that wealth and poverty are not only natural but divine wouldn't come from not knowing servants, slaves, or poor people, but from having direct power over the ones she did know. Furthermore, Boyer's argument falls with her own acknowledgement that Marguerite de Navarre (a princess, queen, and duchess) wrote across classes. While we can't expect many aristocratic women in the 17th century to condemn the existing class structures, we also wouldn't expect many 17th century men to condemn patriarchal structures, and that's exactly what Zayas wanted from them.

Zayas deploys dehumanizing rhetoric to depict her marginalized characters, demonizing black people, Muslims, and servants, and ultimately blaming them for many of the negative fates of white aristocratic women. The foundation of Zayas's criticism of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity rests on a belief in racial and class hierarchies, indicating that her lamentations against the treatment of women refer exclusively to aristocratic white women. In her prologue to both collections, Zayas argues for the education of women by asserting that the soul is genderless ("since souls are neither male nor female" (*Exemplary Tales of Love*, 47), but a careful reading of her novellas seems to indicate that, for her, souls belong to a race and class (*Exemplary Tales*,

47). Her conservatism is not, however, relegated to her conception of race and class, but bleeds into her own conception of gender, tainting her calls for societal change.

Zayas's depiction of women characters is intentionally complicated. Much of her depiction of male violence and hypocrisy stems from her argument that all women are victims, regardless of how guilty or innocent they may be. She doesn't portray women purely as innocent martyrs, but as complex humans who are capable of good and bad deeds, and who are ultimately victims of proprietary male views that can arbitrarily end their lives, regardless of who the individual women are. Therefore, an analysis of Zayas's conservative gender politics is most accurate when looking at her rhetoric, particularly when the distinct narrative frames and narrating entities collapse.

Though we can see the parallels between Zayas and our protagonist Lisis at various points throughout the collections, it becomes most explicit in our final novella, "The Ravages of Vice," which is told by Lisis. She, like our author, is a writer who excels at writing different poetic compositions, and whose goal is to disenchant. At the beginning of her tale, Lisis states, "it's not my purpose to be canonized for my intelligence but for being a good disenchantress" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 367). If there was any doubt before, it has become explicitly clear that Zayas's goal and Lisis's are one and the same. They both seek to disillusion women through their stories. Lisis as a proxy of Zayas is further understood when she addresses her readers, not just her soiree guests. As she finishes up her introduction to her disenchantment, she says, "Let us turn the *page* (emphasis added) here and get on with the disenchantment," making it impossible to perceive Lisis as simply a character and hostess of the soiree; she represents the author of these collections, Zayas herself (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 369). The dissolution of any rigid separation between our author and protagonist leaves our final tale as the best site for discursive analysis. Its conclusion reaffirms threads of Zayas's conservatism in her rhetoric that blames certain types of women, as she does people of color and servants, for misogyny, and her romanticization of the past, including gender dynamics under the Catholic Monarchs of the 15th century.

Despite her conscious creation of complex women characters, the conclusion perpetuates the dichotomous view of women as being "good" or "bad." Of these "bad" women, Lisis states that they are "rather wild beasts than ordinary women because they neglect their obligations and give cause for disrespect" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 399). Again, she deploys

dehumanizing rhetoric, this time distance virtuous women who deserve respect from those who “cause” men’s disrespect. Zayas frequently employs this rhetoric that blames the victim to assign guilt to black characters, Muslims, and servants. After finishing “Ravages of Vice,” the final novella, Lisis uses a similar rhetoric to refer to women: “Still, I must confess that there are many women who, through their mistakes and vices, give motive to men for their widespread lack of regard for women” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 398).

This sentiment that the actions of some women are at the root of men’s misogyny is coupled with her romanticization of the past. These sentiments coalesce in her statement that “There are in this day and age more loose and vicious women than there have ever before been” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 399). This longing for a perceived morality of the past is clearly seen in her lamentation of the loss of chivalry. On the final page of *Desengaños*, Lisis/Zayas begs “the gentlemen to act like gentlemen by honoring women as is proper for them. Otherwise, they should consider themselves under challenge because they fail to keep the laws of chivalry when they fail to defend women” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 404 – 5).

In another passage that glorifies past chivalry, she simultaneously praises King Fernando, positively linking chivalrous attitudes with colonialism: “I swear if you [men] did love and cherish women as was the way in former times, you’d volunteer not just to go to war and fight but to die...This is the way it was in earlier days, particularly under King Fernando the Catholic” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 400). As she begs men to stop speaking poorly of women, Lisis/Zayas declares, “Even if there were no other good woman than our saintly and serene queen, doña Isabel de Borbón (whom God has taken from us, to Spain’s great loss, because the world was unworthy of her), for her sake alone women deserve a good name” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 401). King Fernando and his wife Queen Isabel, the Catholic Monarchs, are, of course, best known for sponsoring Columbus’s voyage and were largely responsible for the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain. Not only does Zayas’s feminism largely exclude poor women and women of color, but it is based in colonialism.

Of course, one could reasonably make the argument that Zayas is employing rhetoric that would resonate with her audience in order to insure her books were read and relatively well-received. We can, even must, assume this is true to a degree, but there are many points where Zayas’s condemnation of men is so explicit, that there’s no way she is pandering, at least entirely, to a male audience. In the *Desengaños*, Lisis declares war on all men (367) and states

that she doesn't need them: "I don't think I need you, except to speak well or ill of this soiree, and in this there's little at stake" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 368 – 9). Perhaps earlier in the collections Zayas was preoccupied with making sure her writings would be easily digestible for her male audience, but by the end of the second collection that has seemingly gone.

In the last disenchantment in particular, where all of the narrative layers collapse, any problematic rhetoric could mostly be attributed to Zayas's personal perspective, rather than to a deliberate literary mechanism to engage audiences or to create nuanced characters.

While Zayas calls for education for women and other reformist measures, her reliance on rhetoric that maintains hierarchies and perpetuates racism, classism, and sexism leaves us with a largely unchallenged societal structure built on feudalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. When Lisis announces that she will be leaving for the convent, it seems to be a radical rejection of heterosexual marriage and relationships. Indeed, Zayas writes that "This end is not tragic but rather the happiest one you can imagine for" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 405). However, advocating for the convent isn't radical, and it certainly doesn't work to liberate women. At best, it works to protect Lisis and other aristocratic women by removing them from a male-dominated society but does nothing for the vast majority of women. Lisis herself states that "from behind a safety barricade" she intends to "observe what happens to everybody else" and that she is going to "save [herself] from the deceptions of men" (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 403). She isn't choosing what she wants from life; she is choosing a largely accepted path⁴ of self-isolation in order to avoid the fate of so many women from the novellas: abuse, rape, or death.

This choice is further complicated by the role of the convent throughout the collections. While many women throughout, particularly in *Desengaños*, opt for the convent and are saved from male violence, not all who enter the convent are better off. In "Forewarned but Fooled," don Fadrique places the baby Gracia in a convent. There, she remains unlearned and naïve, so when don Fadrique removes her at age 16 and marries her, he manipulates and abuses her, using her ignorance to do so. Additionally, as a nun narrator tells us, women are not completely separate from men when they enter convents. Though they might be physically separated, men

⁴ According to Boyer, "It was not uncommon for an upper-class Spanish woman to retire to a convent. This did not necessarily mean that she became a nun or took vows, but rather that she chose to live her life in an environment protected from a society that had no place for the single woman." (*The Enchantments of Love: Amorous and Exemplary Novels*, xxv)

would continue to court nuns from outside the convent, with the knowledge that nothing would come from it. In the words of the nun doña Estefanía, “many ignorant men...cling to the bars of convents, unable to tear themselves away” (*The Disenchantments of Love*, 310). While this is certainly favorable to death and physical violence, even in the convent women are not safe from verbal harassment. The convent may be depicted as an all-female haven, but it is at best a safehouse for individual women which does not protect or liberate women at all levels of society.

Having women’s enclosure and separation from society be the only way certain women can survive demonstrates how oppressive patriarchy can be. Zayas’s failure to criticize oppressive structures and advocacy of a more tolerable patriarchy leaves even her fictional women with a restrictive future. She employs much of the same rhetoric and perceptions toward people of color and servants that she criticizes men for using against women. Her perception of these marginalized people as culpable in women’s plight leaves her incapable of analyzing the structures that keep women, especially poor women of color, oppressed, and therefore leads to her weak endorsement of the convent.

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