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### The Beauty and the Beast: Beauty and Misfortune in Maria de Zayas's Novellas

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The Beauty and the Beast: Beauty and Misfortune in Maria de Zayas's *Novellas*

What is beauty? For centuries, artists and philosophers have unsuccessfully tried to find answers to this question. Umberto Eco, the Italian medievalist and writer, notes that “beautiful is an adjective that we often employ to indicate something that we like... [and] in this it seems that what is beautiful is the same as what is good” (8). The most beautiful thing you have ever seen could be a person, a painting in a museum, or even a sunset on a beach, but it will probably be something far different from what another person perceives as beautiful. While the common saying, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”- presents beauty as a subjective quality, some consider it an objective feature. According to the philosopher Crispin Sartwell, it is actually a combination of the two since “we give beauty to objects, and they give beauty to us; beauty is something that we make in cooperation with the world” (5). Perceptions of beauty also vary throughout history— the standards of the past are not the same as the beauty standards of today— but it has been invariably associated with women. Since beauty it is not universal or changeless or a function of evolution (Wolf 12), “[t]he qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that the period considers desirable” (Wolf 13). In literature, desirable heroines of traditional folktales, novellas and novels are almost automatically described as beautiful. Their beauty was always determined by a man, and it always included the notions of virginity and purity. These concepts were characteristics considered to be good by men and were desirable as Eco explains, “There is an infinite number

of things that we consider good, a love requited, wealth honestly acquired, a refined delicacy, and in all these cases we should like to possess that good. A good is that which stimulates our desire” (Eco 8). The concepts of beauty from the ancient Greeks to today helps us to understand the value women had in society and helps explain the commonality of beautiful heroines throughout literature.

María de Zayas y Sotomayor, a feminist female author of the Spanish Golden Age, is no exception to this rule. Her two *novella* collections —*Amorous and Exemplary Novels* (1637) and *The Disenchantments of Love* (1647)— follow the lives of beautiful women who suffer misfortunes from the deceit of men. The text frequently points towards beauty as the cause of their misfortune. After reading, several questions arise: What is Zayas’s definition of beauty, why are all her heroines beautiful, and how is this quality connected to misfortune? To answer these questions, this essay will trace back the relationship between beauty and misfortune from Zayas’s *novellas* to classical mythology and traditional fairy tales. This examination will show the underlying notion of women as dual natured, both beautiful and monstrous, and the status and value of women in Golden Age Spain. Zayas’s emphasis on the heroines’ beauty also denounces the traditional western narrative of blaming the female victim instead of the male perpetrator.

In literature, women have consistently been portrayed as beautiful, yet at the end of their stories they are viewed as monsters. Medusa, Scylla, and Charybdis are some of the examples in Greek mythology of beautiful women who became monsters. The women seen throughout Zayas’s *novellas* are not immune to this transformation, but how and why do these beautiful women become so monstrous? The comparison between Greek mythology and Maria de Zayas’s

*novellas* helps bridge the connection between beauty and misfortune and shows light into society's notion of women as dual natured.

While many people today see Medusa as a monster, she was the most beautiful of her sisters, but this beauty was the reason for her devastatingly misfortune life. All the variations of the story of Medusa share the themes of beauty, betrayal, and jealousy. Medusa was a mortal Gorgon and the youngest sister of two immortal monsters. She was labeled the prettiest of the sisters; she did not always have snakes for hair but was a beautiful young, chaste woman who attracted male attention easily. Among these male suitors was Poseidon, the god of the sea, who was enamored with Medusa's beauty and had sex with her in Athena's temple. Whether it was rape or a consensual act as different versions state, Athena, goddess of wisdom and war strategy, became so enraged with Medusa that turned her into the monster we know her as (Athena). In some retellings, this was a curse that Athena put on Medusa for breaking her vow of celibacy, while others describe this curse more as a blessing because Athena was protecting Medusa so no man could ever hurt her again (Watkins). The Medusa persona is seen throughout the *novellas* by Zayas in the description of her female characters as monstrous with eyes like basilisks.

Much like the story of Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis were both beautiful women at the beginning of their lives but were turned into monsters who preyed on passing mariners in the Straits of Messina. One of the many accounts of the two women explains that Scylla was the daughter of Hecate and was later turned into a monster with six heads and twelve feet. She was thought to have been having affairs with Poseidon, Minos of Crete, and the sea god Glaucus, and turned into the sea monster either by the sorceress Circe or the sea nymph Amphitrite in a fit of jealousy. Charybdis, a daughter of Poseidon, was turned into a monster similar to a whirlpool, by Zeus's lightning bolt because of her lustful behavior (Cartwright). These women were turned

into monsters because of their “inappropriate” behavior with men, yet the men suffered no repercussions. The issue at stake here -literally and figuratively presented through literature- is the resulting anxiety of society’s inability to control them.

In Zayas’s *novellas*, women are regularly compared to basilisks or monsters like Medusa or Scylla and Charybdis. One *novella* of her first collection is particularly illustrative since the protagonist, is a beautiful girl between the ages 12 and 14, who becomes the object of desire for an ill-intentioned man. “Aminta Deceived and Honor’s Revenge,” follows the life of a young girl, who, after her parent’s death, goes to live with her uncle and becomes betrothed to her cousin. While awaiting the return of her betrothed, don Jacinto comes to town and is immediately enamored with Aminta’s youth, discretion, wealth, modesty, and chastity. This man conspires with his mistress, Flora, to make fall in love with him so he can enjoy all of her favors. After Aminta falls for don Jacinto’s ploy and becomes disillusioned with his deceit, she starts exacting her own revenge. By the end of the disillusionment, Aminta has gotten away with the murders of both don Jacinto and Flora, she recovered her honor, and she moved to Madrid with a husband who has made her very happy.

In the Greek myths of Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis and the story of Aminta, the women start out as beautiful but are turned monstrous because of their relationships with men. But there are several other parallels between their stories. Although Scylla and Charybdis were not necessarily chaste and virtuous, they alone lost their beauty as a consequence of their actions while the men had no repercussions. All of these women find themselves with blood on their hands, and their reputations tarnished. At one point, Aminta is described as having eyes “of the mythical basilisk that struck the beholder dead” (Zayas 49), her monstrous beauty has the power of killing a man, which can be seen through the murder of don Jacinto. (Maybe split the

paragraph here) While Flora is not a goddess like Athena, she displays similar attributes, as do Circe and Amphitrite. All these women are close with men who have been involved in the loss of honor of other women, so there are instances of jealousy and betrayal. Flora, Athena, and Circe and Amphitrite are jealous of the male attention that Aminta, Medusa, and Scylla, respectively, attract, so they turn the women into monsters. Athena turns Medusa into a real monster with snakes for hair, Scylla and Charybdis are turned into sea monsters and Flora tries to turn Aminta into a dishonorable, unwanted woman. She helps don Jacinto in his seduction of Aminta, so he will come back to her. Both Medusa and Aminta attracted dishonorable and dishonest men with their beauty but saw misfortune in their lives because of it. The beauty of Scylla and Charybdis was taken away from them because of their personal sexual desires that society deemed as dishonorable and undesirable. Medusa became such a notorious monster that she was hunted down and killed, while Aminta was able to exact her revenge on don Jacinto and Flora, but she still experienced misfortune because, “[t]he only thing lacking for her to be completely happy is children” (Zayas 75). Some may say that Aminta was never able to have children as a punishment for her relationship with don Jacinto, but another interpretation is that her inability to have children was a way to protect those unborn children, especially if they were girls, from the deceit of men. What distinguishes these women is their exceptional beauty, which actually controls men. This is a scary concept for men, so by turning these women into monsters, they gain back some of their control. In these instances, a woman’s beauty has worked against her and brought misfortune, in the form of losing their beauty.

In Zayas’s *novellas*, virtue, chastity, and nobility/wealth were deemed as good traits, so women who had these attributes were desirable to men. In addition to these traits, youth has been a very common description of beauty. Youth usually comes with innocence, and along with

innocence comes the inexperience and lack of knowledge which attracts ill-intentioned men. By preying among young girls, these male antagonists were able to have sexual influence over them that the women were too naïve to understand, causing them a misfortunate end to their stories.

Fairy tales were not originally written for children. The roots of the genre are centuries-old stories that have appeared, with variations, in multiple cultures around the world. Some of the earliest tellings of fairy tales centered around torture, murder and rape. In one of the earliest versions of “Sleeping Beauty” -Giambattista Basile’s version titled “Sun, Moon, and Talia” (1634)- Talia falls under a sleeping curse and is left in a country manor alone. A passing king finds her and is so overcome with desire that he rapes her. This leads to her becoming pregnant with twins and giving birth nine months later, which wakes her from the curse and progresses her development into full adulthood. Later in the story, it is revealed that the king’s wife, out of jealousy, plots to kill them all. When the king hears about this, he throws the queen into the flames meant for the others and lives happily ever after with Talia and their children (Ashliman). Sleeping curses, like the one seen in this fairy tale, have been studied in association with adolescence and adulthood. The word ‘curse’ gives a false understanding as something bad, when, in reality, these “curses” have been analyzed as blessings, “Many princes try to reach Sleeping Beauty before her time of maturing is over; all these precocious suitors perish in the thorns. This is a warning to child and parents that sexual arousal before mind and body are ready for it is very destructive” (Bettelheim 233). Because Sleeping Beauty was under this “curse” for so long, her body and mind were able to mature to a point where she was ready for sex and understood its implications.

Laurela, from Zayas’s “Love for the Sake of Conquest,” did not have the time to mature. She was the youngest of three daughters and the most beautiful when her misfortunes began, so

her life ended in misfortune after the dishonor of an ill-intentioned man. Among the men who fell for Laurela's beauty was don Esteban, a young servant who lived in the same town as her. Because his attempts at courting Laurela were unavailing, don Esteban came up with a plan to dress as a woman and become one of Laurela's servants. Once he deceived the whole house into believing him a woman, don Esteban became Laurela's most favorite servant whom she spent the most time with. He went on with this charade for more than a year, but finally told Laurela his true identity because her father was arranging her marriage. Don Esteban's confession confused Laurela because she "was a child unread in the book of deception [and] found herself in love with don Esteban" (Zayas 229). Laurela's description as a child indicates that she is not physically or mentally mature and signals the destructive nature of don Esteban's seduction. When he abandons her, she is left at the mercy of her uncle and father who make her death look like an accident.

As seen in "Sun, Moon, and Talia" and "Love for the Sake of Conquest," both women are young and easily influenced. Talia matures, mentally and physically, during her sleeping curse, while Laurela is not given that time to mature and learn about healthy sexual relationships. While the men in these stories go unpunished, the women face scrutiny for their involvement with dishonorable men even though they had little to no control. Talia is labeled as a man stealer, but has a happy ending, while Laurela is sentenced to death by her own family because of the shame and dishonor she put on their names. According to Mary Elizabeth Perry, in *Golden Age Spain* "the social order ... is doubly dependent, first on male-honor, which, in turn, depends on control imposed upon women" (Perry 7). Since Don Esteban no longer had a use for Laurela after receiving all her favors, and her father and uncle did not want the shame she brought to their family, death is the only possible outcome for Laurela.



In Greek Mythology, original fairy tales, and María de Zayas's *novellas*, men are commonly overcome with desire for beautiful women. Poseidon cannot contain his sexual need for Medusa, yet she is turned into a monster. The lustful behavior of Scylla and Charybdis resulted in their conversion to sea monsters, who preyed upon sailors. The king in "Sun, Moon and Talia" rapes the young woman's unconscious body because he was overcome with extreme desire. In "Aminta Deceived and Honor's Revenge," as soon as "don Jacinto set eyes on that beautiful sight [Aminta], an intense emotion touched his very soul. Oh, what power beauty has over vicious minds" (Zayas 50). Don Jacinto's intentions with the beautiful Aminta were not pure, yet Aminta was the one whose name was stained with dishonor. The same can be said for don Esteban's all-encompassing desire to have Laurela. He turns himself into a woman to deceive her, only to leave her alone to face all the consequences of their relationship. This female victim blaming covers up the fact that men in all these stories show an extreme lack of control. The way in which men were viewed during this time was dependent on the outward control they showcased, but their inability to control themselves around beautiful women caused them to shift the blame of their own actions onto women.

Perhaps the most extreme case of victim blaming can be traced back to Lucius Apuleius' tale "Cupid and Psyche." In this story, which is the original telling of the fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast," Psyche's beauty brought adoration from men from all over who worshiped and compared her to the goddess Venus. Overcome by jealousy, Venus commanded her son, Cupid, to make Psyche fall in love with the ugliest thing there is. While following his mother's orders, Cupid instantly falls in love with Psyche when he accidentally pricks himself with his own arrow of love. After seeking out the oracle of Apollo, Psyche's family discovers that she is destined to marry a monster and they are instructed to leave Psyche on a mountain to await her husband.

When the monster comes to her at night, he instructs her to never try to see his face. After Psyche disobeys the orders and looks at the monster's face with candlelight only to discover the most beautiful man she's ever seen, Cupid, leaves her. Psyche must go through three unsurpassable tests by Venus to win back her love and his mom's approval. Psyche was able to pass the tests with Cupid's help but why was she blamed for Cupid's mistake in the first place? As these stories show, men have cemented their place in society and have preserved their power over women by turning the blame towards them.

As seen throughout Greek Mythology and original fairy tales, beauty, and misfortune have been tied to one another for centuries. The comparisons between Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, and María de Zayas's collections have shown how Zayas defined beauty as dual-natured, how men controlled a woman's place and value in society, and explained the correlation between female victim blaming and men's lack of self-control. The protagonists of María de Zayas's *novellas* are beautiful young women who after being deceived by men, face the scrutiny of dishonor within their society. Commonly seen throughout the examples of beauty and misfortune, one major commonality is that beauty is an excuse for the lack of self-control men express, which, in turn, leads to the misfortune of women. All these stories come from different origins, yet they all still have similar underlying themes of beauty, misfortune, and the desirous men who cannot control themselves.

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