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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 María de Zayas's *Novellas*

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María de Zayas  
y Sotomayor

EXEMPLARY  
TALES OF LOVE  
AND TALES OF  
DISILLUSION

Edited and Translated by  
Margaret R. Greer and  
Elizabeth Rhodes

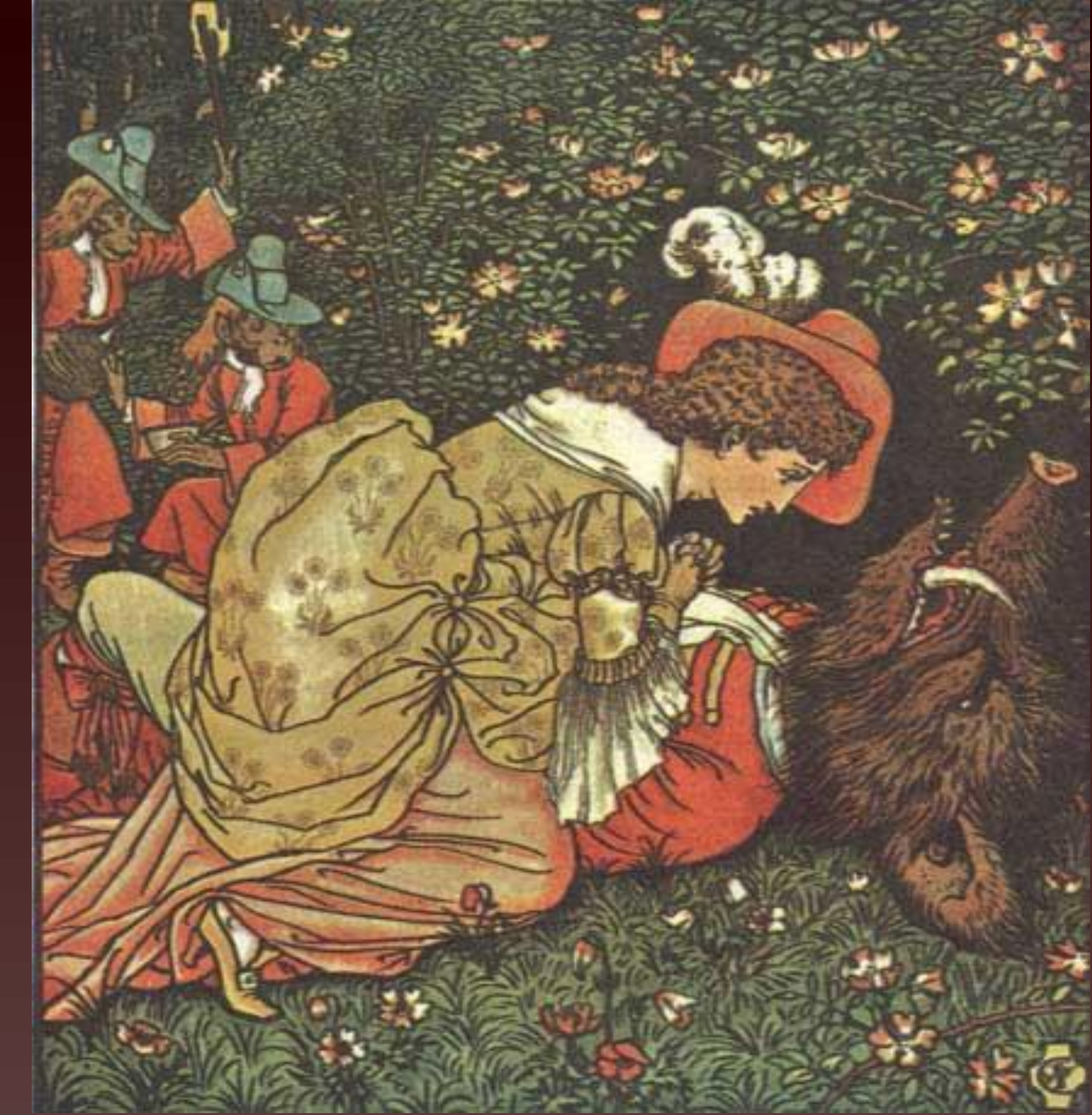


Illustration by Walter Crane

## Introduction & Background Information

María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1591-1661?) was a feminist female author in seventeenth-century Spain. Her most famous works are two collections of *novellas*: *Amorous and Exemplary Novels* (1637) and *The Disenchantments of Love* (1647). The fiction begins with a frame tale that encompasses both volumes: Lisís, a young and noble woman from Madrid, hosts two series of *soirees* where guests tell a story of an amorous experience. Both collections detail violence against women, but the second one—told entirely by the women—focuses on the abuse of women at the hands of husbands or male relatives. In Zayas's works, the female protagonists are commonly described as beautiful, yet they suffer numerous misfortunes in their lives.

For centuries, artists and philosophers have unsuccessfully tried to define beauty. Umberto Eco, an Italian medievalist and writer, noted that “beautiful is an adjective that we often employ to indicate something that we like... [and] in this sense it seems that what is beautiful is the same as what is good” (8). While beauty is considered to be either a subjective quality or an objective one, American philosopher, Crispin Sartwell believes it is a combination of the two, “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 vary throughout history— but the standards of the past are not the same as the beauty standards of today— but it has been invariably associated with women.

## Research Questions:

1. What is Zayas's definition of beauty?
2. Why are all her heroines beautiful?
3. How is this quality connected to misfortune?

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## RQ 1. Zayas's definition of Beauty

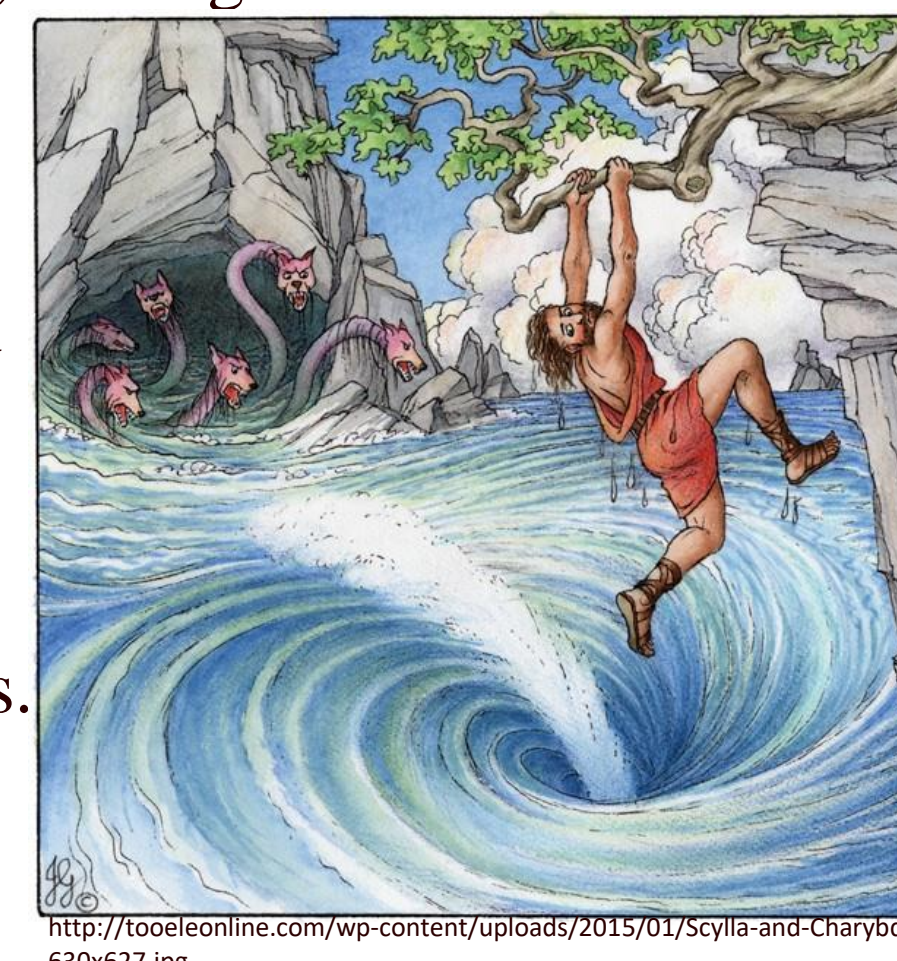


<https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/greekgoddesses/images/e/eb/Medusa.jpg/revision/latest?cb=2013110131831>

In Zayas's *novellas*, as well as in Greek mythology, many women who were initially considered beautiful, are seen as monsters by the end of their stories.

Like her Greek ancestors— Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis— the character of Aminta in Zayas's “Aminta Deceived and Honor's Revenge,” was a young, discrete, and chaste woman who became the object of desire of an ill-intentioned man (don Jacinto). With the risk of her honor and reputation being ruined, Aminta killed both don Jacinto and his mistress, turning herself into a monster.

In both Greek mythology and Zayas's *novellas*, a woman's beauty is presented as something a man could not control, but rather something that controlled them. By turning women into monsters, these men were able to gain back their control of the narrative. The dual nature of a woman's beauty results in misfortunate ends.



<http://booksonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/scylla-and-charybdis-630x627.jpg>

## RQ 2. Beautiful Heroines

One of the most common traits of beauty seen in Greek mythology and fairy tales as well as throughout Zayas's *novellas* was youth. Male antagonists' sexual influence over young girls resulted in the misfortune of naïve young women. The telling of *Sleeping Beauty* by Giambattista Basile in “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” follows the traditional story of a young princess who is put under a sleeping curse but is awoken after she is raped by a young king and gives birth to twins. This sleeping curse has been studied as a manner of maturation for the mind and body of young girls. Talia, who was Sleeping Beauty in Basile's telling, had the time to mature while under her sleeping curse, but Laurela in Zayas's *novella* “Love for the Sake of Conquest” was not given this time of maturation. She is described as a young child, which shows her emotional and physical immaturity. After losing her virginity,



<https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/fairytales/images/0/02/6a0e54efdf11288330174412e4b09970c.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/180?cb=20160125004348>

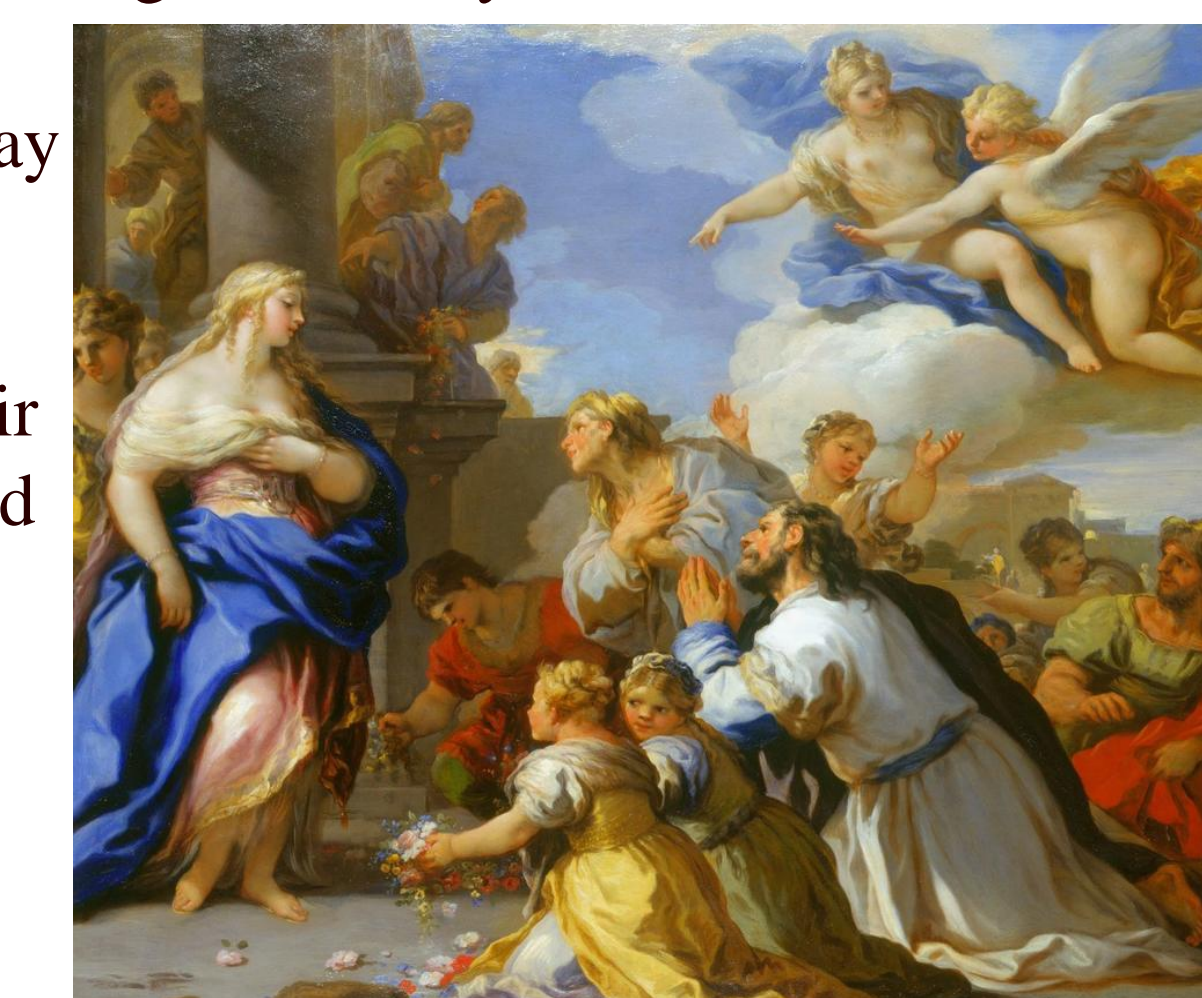
Laurela was no longer desirable to any man. The shame she brought to her family left her without a place in society, ultimately resulting in her murder by her dad and uncle.

An explanation to this tragic ending is that in Golden Age Spain “the social order ... is doubly dependent, first on male-honor, which, in turn, depends on control imposed upon women” (Mary Elizabeth Perry 7).

## RQ 3. Beauty and Misfortune

As seen throughout Greek mythology, fairy tales, and María de Zayas's *novellas*, men are commonly presented as overcome with desire for beautiful women and without control of their actions. Poseidon cannot contain his sexual need for Medusa, the dishonorable actions of Scylla and Charybdis resulted in their becoming sea monsters, and the king in “Sun, Moon, and Talia” rapes Talia's unconscious body because he was overcome with extreme desire. In Zayas's *novellas* don Jacinto in “Aminta Deceived and Honor's Revenge” cannot control his desire for Aminta, “Her beauty, her dress, and her attendants attracted so much attention that when don Jacinto set eyes on that beautiful sight, an intense emotion touched his very soul. Oh, what power beauty has over vicious minds” (Zayas 50). The character don Esteban in “Love for the Sake of Conquest,” seduces Laurela just to abandon her the next day.

Blaming the female victim for her irresistible beauty covers up the extreme lack of control of these men. The Roman tale of Cupid and Psyche, considered the original telling of “Beauty and the Beast,” showcases this idea of female victim blaming. Psyche had to pay the price for Cupid's mistake. By turning the blame towards women, men have preserved their power over women and cemented their privileged position in western societies.



<https://www.rct.uk/sites/default/files/styles/rctr-scale-1010w/public/collection-online/2/3/255260-1330620711.jpg?tok=2n8d45y>

## Results & Conclusion

Beauty and misfortune have been tied to each other for centuries. All these stories come from different origins, yet they share underlying themes of beauty, misfortune, and the desirous men who cannot control themselves.

To answer the research questions proposed, the women in Zayas's collections are defined as dual natured – both beautiful and monstrous, the male protagonists determined the status of a woman, which also determined her beauty/worth, and the connection between beauty and misfortune depended on a man's ability to control himself around women. Beautiful women are commonly misfortunate because desirous men cannot control themselves and blame the female victim in order to maintain control.