

Betta Lyon-Delsordo

Prof. Jannine Montauban

Spanish 315

23 November 2020

The Bewitching Eye: Women as Basilisks in the Writing of María de Zayas

A woman's gaze is often referenced in any form of romantic literature, and those who meet a woman's gaze can only be expected to fall hopelessly in love. For some, this female seductive power is something to be feared, and it is likened to the gaze of a basilisk, a monstrous serpent that can kill by locking eyes with its prey. One author who makes heavy use of this comparison is María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1590 - c. 1661), author of the *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (1637) and the *Desengaños amorosos* (1647), two collections of short stories that bring to light the experiences of Spanish noblewomen in the 17th century. Not much is known about her life, but she was able to earn a living as a novelist and garnered fame for her participation in poetry contests with the top male writers of her day.

Zayas's two collections each feature a series of short stories set in a frame narrative where characters share tales during a soiree, similar in structure to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) and with many borrowed themes from Miguel de Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares* (1613). These didactic novellas allow the author to both flaunt her literary skills and caution other women about the cruelty of men. The first collection focuses on amorous tales of lust and rejection, and women are often blamed for bringing misfortune upon their families. Zayas describes women as basilisks a total of ten times in this first work, but her later collection demonstrates a significant shift in her use of this metaphor. Dark and violent, the second set of

novellas point to misogyny as the root of female suffering. Here, the word basilisk only appears three times, which suggests that Zayas's use of this symbolism evolved into a more targeted critique of male discourse in her later novellas.

I propose that in the writing of María de Zayas, women are frequently described as basilisks in an effort to place the blame on them for generating male desire, and as a symbolic representation of the dangerous power of females to seduce and reproduce. Zayas's basilisk references may be the result of the dominant male discourse of the time, but the fact that her novellas tend to place the blame on men instead of women suggests otherwise. The result is that male characters often describe women as basilisks to justify their attempts to seduce these women. In order to analyze the textual implications of this symbolism, it is necessary to examine the mythical connotations of a basilisk and explore how examples of women as basilisks evolve in Zayas's writing.

Modern readers may be familiar with the basilisk as a terrifying serpent from the *Harry Potter* universe that can petrify everything it sees, but it is a monster whose existence was recorded by Pliny the Elder during the Roman Empire. Though its form may vary, the identifying feature of a basilisk is its ability to kill anything that looks into its eyes. References to this monster appear in the Bible, as well as in medieval and classical literature. San Isidoro de Sevilla writes in *Etimologías* that “el basilisco es nombre griego, que se interpreta en latín como *regulus*, porque es el rey de las serpientes... al hombre le causa la muerte si le pone la vista encima” (81). He references the Greek meaning of “basilisk” as “little king” (being the king of serpents) and its fatal glance. This is the feature that causes the basilisk to be so feared and so powerful, and it is why it is likened to the gaze of a woman.

Accounts of the basilisk's origins add important variations to the myth. For San Isidoro, the basilisk is born from the spine of a dead man: “en el cerrado sepulcro la espina dorsal se corrompe, la medula humana se transforma en serpiente... resulta que tal metamorfosis... si por la serpiente surgió la muerte del hombre, es lógico que también por la muerte del hombre surja la serpiente” (91). This compelling observation suggests that human flesh can undergo a metamorphosis into this demonic serpent. In *El Bestiario de Cristo*, L. Charbonneau-Lassay offers a different origin story for the basilisk. He writes that the basilisk is half chicken, half serpent, representing a perversion of the holy image of the rooster: “así como a menudo el gallo era la imagen emblemática del Salvador, el Basilisco lo fue de Satán, el Adversario, el Anticristo... tiene cuerpo de gallo que termina en forma de saurio o de serpiente” (641). He finds many instances of Christian references to the basilisk as the symbol of the Antichrist, such as in the Book of Isaiah, where the antichrist is described as “de la raza de la serpiente nacerá el basilisco, / Parirá al dragón volante” (642). In addition, Charbonneau-Lassay explains that the basilisk (and therefore the Antichrist) represents the power and horror of immortality since it cannot die. He writes that for Christians, the basilisk symbolized “la idea de Eternidad” and because of this “vieron en el basilisco la imagen del poder desastroso del Mal” (642). These ancient references to the basilisk show it to be a creature of pure evil, and one that represents a perversion of correctness and order, whether grown from a human spine or as a rooster changeling.

In other literary examples of the basilisk, its origins are more closely tied to women. William Newman explains that this creature was also commonly thought to be spawned from a mix of menstrual blood and semen. He quotes Lucretius in *De natura rerum* as stating that “the

basilisk has the poison in its glance and eyes... it has such a characteristic and origin from impure [i.e. menstruating] women... the basilisk grows and is born out of and from the greatest impurity of women, from the menses and the blood of the sperm” (qtd. in Newman para. 3). He later ties this to Paracelsus in *De virtute imaginativa*, which states that “the menstrual power of the female imagination is akin to the deathly gaze of a basilisk... For what it does, the imagination does, which lies so strong in jealousy that it wishes and desires everything that its eyes see, to be dead” (qtd. in Newman para. 14). This is a crucial extension, since it presents basilisks as the product of female blood and their deadly gaze as inherited from women, who must presumably already have the power to kill through a glance.

The development of female blood into a terrifying monster mirrors that of the serpents born from the human spine, and as a perversion of correctness and order like the rooster-basilisk. Since women were already considered perversions of the male body (in the way that Eve was formed from the bent rib of Adam), the comparison with a changeling monster would have seemed natural, which was further supported by the Aristotelian theory per which females were the result of birth defects in male fetuses. The form of a basilisk often includes the body of a snake, also associated with the deceptive power of women through the tale of Eve and the serpent in Eden. These connections between the serpent, basilisk, women, and deception were further consolidated in literature by male writers of the time. Lance K. Donaldson-Evans describes the similar ability of women in literature to be able to bewitch men through only a glance as the origins of the “love at first sight” trope. He states: “when love is portrayed as something sudden, irresistible and excruciating at the Lover's first encounter with the Beloved, when love is born not simply as a result of seeing the Beloved but by the active participation of

the Beloved's own glance, then we are dealing with a specific tradition which... we propose to call the Aggressive Eye Topos" (Donaldson-Evans 202). Here, women can cause a man to fall in love through an active glance, by which he becomes "bewitched" and falls under her power. This new term, the "Aggressive Eye Topos" is referenced by many other authors as further evidence that the female gaze is the same as the gaze of a basilisk.

Claims about the deadly power of the female gaze do not just exist in literature; there were also many pseudo-scientific theories put forth on the topic. Male philosophers and doctors used "scientific" evidence to support their own prejudices about women and their fear of female sexuality. When combined with popular myth, these theories became widespread. One especially good synthesis of the known theories on basilisks is given by Nancy M. Frelick:

From a medical perspective, the eye and the gaze have long been associated with fascination, as well as contagion and the transmission of bodily fluids at a distance. Marsilio Ficino discusses the ocular transmission of disease, including lovesickness-which he describes as a kind of bewitchment (*fascinatio*)—through sanguine vapors emitted by the eyes, which are like glass windows (*uitreas phenestras*). As proof, he cites Aristotle's claim (in *De insomnis*) that women can stain mirrors with fine droplets of menstrual blood emitted by the eyes (VII, 4). According to Berthold Hub, the motifs of the "bloody mirror" (the mirror stained by the gaze of a menstruating woman) and of the deadly gaze of the basilisk (who can only be killed by a mirror) became inseparably linked in the Middle Ages and early modern period, where they were used as scientific "proofs of the materiality of the [...] visual ray" (41). The phenomenon Hub names "the performative gaze"—frequently linked with the captivating alterity of the

female gaze, which could cause the deadly disease of lovesickness, described by Ficino as worse than any other ailment (VII, 5)—was also associated with the "evil eye," which had important implications for "the witch-hunting craze" (38-39) (qtd. in Frelick 290).

This passage brings to light the fact that women and basilisks are inextricably tied, in particular through the influences of menstrual blood and a deadly gaze. Frelick's analysis also demonstrates the lengths to which male intellectuals attempted to "prove" the inherent inferiority of women and cast their reproductive powers in a negative light. In the context of sixteenth-century Seville, Mary Elizabeth Perry describes that even some of the leading male physicians of the era believed in the power of women to curse others with the evil eye. She states:

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, physicians as well as healers believed in *aojamiento*, or illness caused by cursing. Pero Mexía warned of "...women, who have poison in their eyes, and who with looking at something intensely, visible rays intervening, inflict and make notable damage that is called *aojar*, especially in children." Martín de Castañeda explained the *aojamiento* as the expulsion of impurities from the body through the eyes and noted especially the woman who, "being with her [menstrual] flow," looks at a new clean mirror and "fills it with specks and rays that leave the eyes." (Perry 29).

These examples provide yet another link between the ability of women to kill through their eyes and the root of this power in menstruation. The 'mirror stained by menstrual blood' is a recurring image here, and explains why one of the ways to kill a basilisk was reportedly with a mirror. Mirrors are meant to reveal someone's true nature, and if a woman's true nature is evil,

the mirror will show it. For these reasons, it is clear why the basilisk was such a popular choice for a comparison with women.

Due to its popularity, the myth of the basilisk was eventually blended with several other European myths about women and the power of their gaze. Frelick references the evil eye, which was another superstition common in European culture. Dennis O'Neil writes that “a common type of soul loss in Latin America and around the Mediterranean Basin is the ‘evil eye’ or *mal de ojo*... when a strong person stares at a weak individual, the eyes of the strong person can drain the power and/or soul from the weak one” (para. 16). The power of the evil eye is almost identical to that of the basilisk, which is the ability to subdue and exterminate victims, often associated with witches (and therefore women). For example, the region of Galicia in Spain is known as the “Land of Witches” or *tierra de brujas*, and there the *mal de ojo* is strongly associated with the power of seduction, used by witches and mermaids on unsuspecting fishermen. Galicia is also known for having a more matriarchal society than the rest of Spain, since farms in the mountains were often left in the hands of women while men left to fish, and this resulted in local witches and female religious authorities having considerable social power. According to David Williams, the eyes of the basilisk are closely related to many other European superstitions, and their legendary powers are perhaps an amalgamation of these other stories:

“A different sense of monstrous eyes is found in the basilisk... it would seem that here, in a development of the flaming, angelic eye, we have a variation of the “evil eye” concept, an ancient tradition that Pliny attributes to Greek sources... who also bewitch with a glance and kill those they stare at for a longer time, especially with a look of anger....

The gorgons, monstrous women of classical myth, become one of the literary extensions of this idea” (151).

These many sources tie together a more complete picture of the basilisk: a serpentine monster born from menstrual blood with the ability to control and kill anyone who meets its gaze, all features that make it a prime choice for symbolizing the dangerous seductive powers of women.

In her *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, María de Zayas does just that. Throughout her novellas, Zayas repeatedly describes her female characters as basilisks and the effects that their gaze can have on her male characters. The word “basilisco” appears ten times in her novellas: seven times in the first collection (*Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*) and three times in the second (*Desengaños amorosos*). As the link is a rather sexist one, this could be interpreted as an adherence to male discourse, but Zayas also uses this imagery to critique male hypocrisy. One clear example from the *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* can be found in the tale told by Phylis to close the third night of the soiree. In the story “Disillusionment in Love and Virtue Rewarded,” a sorrowful Octavio declares to Juana: “my ungrateful beauty, basilisk of my life, farewell forever” (Zayas, *The Enchantments* 193). In this story Juana was once courted by Octavio, but then turned him away after she was seduced by another man, whom she plans to marry. He however, blames her for bewitching him with her beauty and calls her ungrateful for not submitting to his demands. Octavio later dies in battle and visits Juana as a ghost, further evidence that she has “killed him” by attracting and rejecting him. Another example can be found in the tale “Forewarned but Fooled,” where a doña Beatriz who has “bewitched” her suitor don Fadrique sings a pastoral ballad that reads: “this shepherd lass was / the village prodigy, / the death of its eyes, / of its life the death, / fierce basilisk, / cause of misfortunes” (Zayas,

Exemplary Tales 114). Here, the basilisk metaphor is more extensively developed, to describe a maiden as a fierce basilisk that brings death and misfortune to her village. The contrast between the pastoral content of the ballad and this dark symbolism foreshadows a turn of events in the novella: the lovely Beatriz is revealed to be a sex-crazed woman who keeps her own sex slave. With her frequent use of this imagery, it is clear that Zayas was quite familiar with the myth of the basilisk and expected her readers to understand her references. In “Aminta Deceived and Honor’s Revenge”, the beautiful, young Aminta is worshiped by all the men in Segovia, and is twice described as a basilisk. Zayas writes: “they saw in her eyes the glance of the mythical basilisk that struck the beholder dead, leaving him no hope of surviving” (Zayas, *The Enchantments* 49). This is a direct reference to the ability of the basilisk to kill through eye contact, and demonstrates the author’s familiarity with the subject. Aminta is again described in this way when the nefarious Flora tells her: “you must be the beautiful and discreet Aminta, whose elegance and beauty are the basilisk of the whole city” (Zayas, *The Enchantments* 56). Flora later helps her lover seduce Aminta, as a sort of punishment for causing him to obsess over her. Flora’s complicitness with this method of retribution demonstrates that she has internalized the masculine ideology of punishing women who are seen as holding sexual power over men.

Another common motif in Zayas’s writing is women who go out “to see and be seen” by the men in their cities, where they become the subjects of the male gaze. This is frequently paired with another basilisk reference, as in the novella “The Power of Love,” which takes place in Naples, known for its galas where women and men could interact. In this story, Zayas writes, “Laura went forth to see and be seen... her splendid eyes were mortal basilisks to men’s souls, her grace, a monster to endanger their lives, her wealth and noble condition, bait to the desires of

a thousand gallant youths of the city” (Zayas, *The Enchantments* 160). This passage presents Laura as both a passive subject of the male gaze and as an active seducer with her basilisk’s gaze. This is an important parallel, because it is precisely the unintentional activeness of the female gaze that supposedly activates the male one, and makes women to blame for the rash actions of enamored men. Whether a beautiful woman intends to or not, she will always be a basilisk, and she has an inherent power to control the men around her, which is precisely why she is feared. The combination of a woman who is a basilisk and also subject to the male gaze can be seen again in the fifth tale of Zayas’s *Desengaños amorosos*, where the beautiful Inés is blinded after attracting too much attention. She is described in a similar fashion to Laura: “while she had been a maiden, she was never seen... but once married... she was seen by all, some praising her loveliness... others envying her and resenting not having chosen her for themselves, and others loving her illicitly and unchastely” (Zayas, *Exemplary Tales* 260). Margaret Greer finds particular meaning in this passage, in which a female character shifts from an innocent girl to a temptress, synonymous with the passage from a child to a menstruating and sexually mature woman. Inés’s punishment is blindness, on which Greer comments: “blindness... is inflicted on the eyes of the woman whose beauty arouses desire in the eyes of others, envy in those who do not possess her, and a thirst to punish her in the flesh” (275). She notes that Inés is punished for the unintentional power that her eyes have on men, and so the power of her eyes is removed from her.

Later on in the same collection, the ninth disenchantment and its preceding frame tale also center on women as basilisk and a woman who loses her eyes. Before the tale is told, the frame characters are regaled with a song about a woman who rejects her suitor, with him

lamenting her cruelty. The song starts with “Of the disdainful Anarda, / new sun at court, / basilisk to men’s lives, / prison for their souls... / the aggressor punishes; / and the insulted is humiliated” (Zayas, *The Disenchantments* 307). Her suitor tells her: “It pleased heaven / to grant you the splendor of the sun / so that each one of your rays can kill... Oh, would that my eyes had never seen / in the blackness of your eyes / the mourning for my death... / alas, eyes, whoever gave you... / jurisdiction to kill!” (Zayas, *The Disenchantments* 308). Here, Anarda is described as a basilisk whose eyes will kill this suitor. This extended metaphor is heightened by the depictions of her eyes as black and deadly, with extending rays that will strike this man dead. In the end, it is Anarda who wields the power to reject a man she doesn’t want, though she is vilified for it. This song serves as foreshadowing for the novella that follows it, in which Beatriz, Queen of Hungary, has her eyes slashed out. The story closely follows the topos of the “persecuted wife”: Beatriz continually resists the advances of her brother-in-law Federico, and succeeds in protecting herself by locking him in a cage while her husband is away. However, this prompts Federico to frame her for adultery, for which she is sent to the wilderness, eyes taken. Her blindness is symbolic of the fact that she did not “see it coming”, and subsequently has her power taken from her. Beatriz is eventually saved by Mary the Virgin, and with her eyes restored she retires to a convent. The story closes with a monologue from the narrator Estefanía, in which Zayas’s voice comes through to clearly state her intent for writing these novellas:

Alas, beautiful ladies!... The power of the Mother of God is necessary to free Beatriz from a man. She resisted him, she separated herself from him, she dissimulated, and she imprisoned him, but none of this sufficed to free her from him... Doesn’t this affront you? Doesn’t it fill you with rage?... You who struggle against them all and without her

favor, how can you defend yourselves? Stand up for yourselves! Stand up for yourselves!
 (Zayas, *The Disenchantments* 356).

It is clear that Zayas's advocacy for the rights of women became much more prominent in her second collection of stories, and this novella is a prime example. Instead of crafting a predictable tale about the cruelty of basilisk women who seduce and reject men, she uses this symbolism to comment on the hypocrisy of men who simultaneously attempt to seduce women and blame them for their actions. The song in the frame tale tells of a woman who rejects a suitor, who in turn uses the basilisk label to blame her for his suffering. In the subsequent novella, Beatriz is blinded, as punishment for the sexual power she possesses. Zayas openly criticizes this behavior and calls her female readers to action by asking them to stand up for themselves. This would suggest that her use of basilisk imagery evolved into a more targeted critique of male discourse in her later novellas. Through examining textual examples of women with the power of a basilisk gaze in Zayas's writing, it is evident that there is a trend of women being blamed and punished for the power that their gaze has over men. Although this could initially be read as a result of the dominant male discourse of the time, in the second collection it evolved into a purposeful tactic on Zayas's part to highlight male hypocrisy.

The frequent use of basilisk imagery in Zayas's novellas is not an accident; rather, it serves to highlight attitudes toward the dangerous power of female sexuality in 17th century Spain. If women are comparable to basilisks, their seductive power is something to be feared, and it must be subdued if it has the possibility to enable them to have control over men. This is a recurring theme across studies in history, literature, and psychology, and authors of varying

backgrounds have all tied basilisk imagery to male attempts to control female sexuality.

According to Frelick:

The bewitchment associated with the gaze of the basilisk or Medusa (which could petrify the onlooker) is what Donaldson-Evans terms the "aggressive eye topos." It makes women responsible for male desires. Ficino goes so far as to accuse a beloved who catches a victim in the web of love without reciprocating, of theft, homicide, and sacrilege and thus deserving the most severe of punishments (II, 8) (qtd. in Frelick 290).

Again, the gaze of a woman, whether as a basilisk, the evil eye, or the aggressive eye, is something to be feared and punished since it has the power to bewitch men. Recalling that the origins of a basilisk are in menstrual blood, the basilisk gaze takes on a more complex sexual metaphor, one about the essential differences between men and women. According to Sarah Colburn, "the male construct of female plurality makes [a woman] a sexual being endowed with a dangerous excess of sexuality that may lure weak men to their doom, but at the same time she may be defined as sexually deficient." (413). Here, she describes the dual existence of women as sexually dangerous, but also as subject to male sexuality and lacking in male sexual organs. Frelick takes this a step further, tying it into Donaldson-Evans's theory on the "aggressive eye." She writes: "associated with radical alterity—with death—through what Lance Donaldson-Evans terms "love's fatal glance," the woman whose gaze stuns the lover in the *innamoramento* is sometimes presented as a Medusa or basilisk" (Frelick 285). Interestingly enough, Greer makes the same comparison of women as Medusa. She states: "Freud compared the horror of the sight of the severed head of Medusa with its writhing, snakelike hair to the sight of the female genitals for the young boy; seeing the absence of the penis, a 'nothing to see' surrounded by hair, he is

horrified at the possibility of his own castration (equivalent for him to decapitation)” (Greer 162). This analysis opens a whole new connection between the imagery of women as basilisk or Medusa and the fear that their gaze happens to generate in men. What women lack—a penis—makes them dangerous, and yet the “void” is what draws men to them, with the mysteries of the vagina, uterus, menstruation, and their reproductive power.

The inherent power of a woman’s reproductive system is something that really could give women societal power. If women recognized that the entire future of any society rests solely in their hands, they could in fact demand more rights and recognition from men. In addition, if women realized the power that their sexuality has over men, this would prevent them from falling victim to male sexual advances. Both of these are good reasons why men have for so many centuries done all they could to subdue and punish female sexuality. Their efforts gave rise to the myth of the basilisk, a monstrous serpent with a deadly gaze, born from menstrual blood, that exemplifies everything that is to be feared in a woman. In her novellas, María de Zayas uses basilisk imagery and its negative connotation to her advantage, thereby highlighting the violent ways in which men attempt to blame and subdue women. Her constant use of basilisk women allows her audience to uncover the deeper connections between the fear of the female gaze and the fear of female sexuality. In reading Zayas’s work, we can all gain a better understanding of the misogynistic attitudes toward female sexuality that still persist in modern society, and begin to determine how we can dismantle them once and for all.

Works Cited

- Charbonneau-Lassay, L. *El Bestiario de Cristo: El Simbolismo Animal en la Antigüedad y la Edad Media*. Francesc Gutiérrez, translator. Olañeta, 1997.
- Colburn, Sarah. "Subjectivity, Sexual Difference, and Fantasy in María de Zayas's *Estragos Que Causa El Vicio*". *Romance Languages Annual*, vol. 8, 1997, pp. 413-416.
- Donaldson-Evans, Lance K. "Love's Fatal Glance: Eye Imagery and Maurice Sceve's *Delie*". *Neophilologus*, vol. 62, 1978, pp. 202-211.
- Frelick, Nancy M. "Woman as Other: Medusa and Basilisk in Early Modern French Literature". *French Forum*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2018.
- Greer, Margaret. *María de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.
- Isidoro de Sevilla, San. *Etimologías II: Edición Bilingüe*. Jose Oroz Reta & Manuel A. Marcos Casquero, translators. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid, 1983.
- Newman, William R. "Bad Chemistry: Basilisks and Women in Paracelsus and pseudo-Paracelsus". *Ambix*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2020.
- O'Neil, Dennis. "Explanations of Illness". *Wayback Machine Internet Archive*. Alexa Internet, 17 Aug. 2012. web.archive.org/web/20120817130521/http://anthro.palomar.edu/medical/med_1.htm. Accessed 13 Oct. 2020.
- Perry, Mary Elizabeth. *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville*. Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Williams, David. *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.

Zayas, María de. *The Disenchantments of Love*. H. Patsy Boyer, translator. State University of New York Press, 1997.

---. *The Enchantments of Love: Amorous and Exemplary Novels*. H. Patsy Boyer, translator. University of California Press, 1990.

---. *Exemplary Tales of Love and Tales of Disillusion*. Margaret Greer & Elizabeth Rhodes, translators. University of Chicago Press, 2009.