

María de Zayas: The Said and the Unsaid [1]

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“Are you sick of Zayas yet?” That’s the question one friend asked me on hearing that my long-in-process book on her novella collection was finally in print. That was easy to answer, with a resounding “No”. Another friend’s question was tougher. She asked, “Can you think of other ways to read Zayas?” – other than my own, that is. That was harder to answer, and my first reaction was, “What, you mean 450+ pages aren’t enough?” On the one hand, the reason the book grew so fat was that I could see so many ways to explore her work that it was hard to reach the point of leaving well enough alone. On the other hand, having combined my study of Zayas with a self-educating immersion in feminist and psychoanalytic theory, my own dedication to that path made it hard at that moment to imagine other equally fruitful approaches to her novellas. That may be a natural pull-up-the-gangplank reaction after completing any major endeavor. However, basic to my own interpretation of Zayas is the conclusion that in her work, what is left unsaid is as important as what is said, and that the unsaid will always leave more for new critics to say.

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The first working title for my study was not *María de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men*, but rather “Desiring Readers: The Novellas of María de Zayas y Sotomayor.” Although I later moved the key phrase “Desiring Readers” to that of title of the introduction, it remained central in my approach to understanding Zayas. In the first place, it refers to Zayas’s desire for readers. She--like virtually all writers--designed her tales to lure them [2]. However, as a woman writing in an overwhelmingly masculine literary tradition, in an era in which literate males outnumbered reading women by at least 5 to 1 and in a largely misogynist, patriarchal culture that enjoined women to silence, her first words in her prologue “Al que leyere” address the daring of her endeavor [3]. In this preface and in the frame narrative that surrounds the collection and links the stories, Zayas demonstrates repeatedly her concern for establishing and maintaining contact with a “listening” or reading public, male as well as female.

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More importantly, however, I chose that title to invoke the role of desire in narration, in reading and in interpretation. Desire and narrativity are intimately linked, as narratives tell some story of desire—sexual or other, and employ it as a dynamic of signification [4]. Within the plot, it is the desire for an object; driving the plot, both for teller and hearer/reader, it is the desire for meaning, the ordering force that narrative provides for temporal existence.

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Zayas offers her readers twenty stories of sexual desire, while reiterating from beginning to end that the purpose of her narration is to warn them against the power and the danger of that desire. Through the device of the male and female characters in the overarching narrative frame who narrate, listen to, and criticize those stories, Zayas demonstrates how gender and one's position within and toward the circuit of desire condition the construction of meaning, both by narrators and interpreters of their tales. We may believe ourselves to speak and read with conscious processes, but as Zayas shows, the energy, and much of the shape and direction of that

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speaking, reading, and interpreting emerge from the place of the unconscious. The first episode in Zayas's first story is an exploration of the mysterious origins of sexual desire, as a lonely young girl brings her lover to life and then to death in two violent dreams. It was my own first experience of reading this story with students, and our attempts to understand the knowledge, conscious and unconscious, with which Zayas animates her fictions that launched me on an investigation of that other avenue of exploration of desire, psychoanalytic theory. This course led me from Freud's explanation of the unconscious and its symbolic expression in dreams and creative daydreams, to Lacanian theory of the crucial role of language in the formation of gendered, desiring subjects, and thence to Kristeva and other feminist critiques of Freudian and Lacanian theory, on the one hand, and on the other, back to Zayas's day and to philosophical/theological and medical explanations of the psyche available to her and to her readers.

The structure of María de Zayas's stories presents the critic with two primary problems: first, the loose, episodic nature of a number of her stories; and second, the apparent discrepancy between her fiery advocacy of women's rights in the prologue "Al que leyere" and some sections of the frame narrative and the relative conservatism of the plotting of male-female relations in the enclosed tales. Despite Zayas's impassioned authorial championing of women's capacities, in the stories she tells through her female narrators she was not able to break out of the loop between narrative possibility and lived experience to envision any viable alternative for 'good' women beyond those sanctioned in the paternal order: marriage, life in a convent (either as a nun or secular resident), or a martyr's death. Where she does narrate detours from these routes, she does so consistently through the vision and voice of male narrators, so that most cases of apparent agency for "good" women are mediated by masculine fantasies or fears of feminine power. She does subtly alter the masculine narrative paradigm, however. Zayas uses the motor of Oedipal desire to drive narrative, but extends its route beyond the traditional happy ending of a love story. In her collection the dream of love and the fulfillment of sexual satisfaction is a fantasy that must be lived through in some form, but marriage is more often a way-station than a final destination in the narratives of women's lives [5]. Love fades, or is serialized, or brings death in its wake.

I connect Zayas's narration of the dilemma of woman's position in the patriarchal family to the fundamental ideological tension that pervades and animates her stories--the impasse between gender and class identity for this aristocratic, proto-feminist writer. As Frederic Jameson observes in discussing the role of envy and loathing in animating the dialectic of group and class identity: "whatever group or identity investment may be at work in envy, its libidinal opposite always tends to transcend the dynamics of group relationship in the direction of that of class proper" (36). While Zayas painted in lurid colors the unjust treatment of women as a group, she defended with equal passion the superiority of her aristocratic class and its value system [6]. With that defense, Zayas paradoxically accepted the legitimacy of the very institutions that also prescribed the repression of women whose injustice she protested.

In my reading of Zayas's works, I have concluded that the loose episodic structure of her stories enables her to negotiate the irresolvable gender-class tension that underlies and animates her narratives, by leaving unspoken the key term in the unconscious logic that links all their elements.

Paul Julian Smith (38) has connected the disrupted syntax of both Santa Teresa and Zayas with a feminine language such as that described by Irigaray that makes its gender felt within the masculine mold of language through gaps and ruptures, negation and strategic silence. I believe that this disjunctive signifying process extends beyond the level of the sentence to the articulation of the narrative as a whole, and is what requires a metonymic reading; i.e., one that locates the central object not in a locus that is textually labeled as such, but rather represented by laterally related allusion.

While Roman Jakobson (90-96) connects metonymy with the realistic novel, it seems to me that its function therein is different from that which is operative in Zayas' work; that in the realistic novel, it is deliberately productive of meaning, encouraging the reader to complete imaginatively a "possible world" of the novel from the partial, or synecdochic descriptions actually present. The metonymical articulation of Zayas's stories, in contrast, would seem to function as much to repress as to produce meaning, to say without saying what cannot be directly confronted in the female psyche under patriarchy or contained in the rational mold of the Oedipal master-plot. To summarize briefly one example of this practice, the first male-narrated story, *El castigo de la miseria*, is a radical revision of Cervantes's paired stories *El casamiento engañoso*, and *El coloquio de los perros*, in which Cervantes' talking dogs are replaced by a tortured cat who drives the miserly protagonist don Marcos to his death [7]. There is no overt link between don Marcos, Zayas's avaricious bridegroom, doña Isidora, the deceiving bride, and the particular cat tormented in this story. This is characteristic of the structure of most Zayas stories, whose meaningful elements accumulate paratactically in a manner akin to the rambling construction of her long, looping sentences. After doña Isidora, her "nephew" Agustín and her maid-servant Inés have fled with don Marcos's treasure, he happens to meet her other maid-servant, Marcela, in the street. Marcela poses as a fellow victim of her mistress and convinces him to pay for a magic seance, staged by her lover, in which a devil is to appear to tell don Marco where Isidora and her beau have gone with his money. The devil whose appearance climaxes the seance is in fact a cat, trained through torture, that bursts into the room with its fur aflame and exploding firecrackers tied to its tail and claws Marcos' face so severely before escaping through a window to expire in the street outside that don Marcos is left in a nearly fatal swoon. He recovers to receive a letter from "Doña Isidora de la Venganza" saying that she has only given just desserts to "don Marcos Miseria" and offering to repeat the lesson if he saves another 6,000 ducats. From the combined shock of the exploding cat and the devastating letter, he sickens and dies--or in the first edition of 1637, he commits suicide with a rope furnished to him by the marriage broker who arranged the fatal match. In an epilogue to the story, the male narrator tells us that the tables were later turned against doña Isidora. As they waited in Barcelona for a ship to Naples, Agustín and Inés stole off one night while Isidora was sleeping, taking with them don Marcos' 6,000 ducats. Isidora returned to Madrid, where she was reduced to begging for alms.

Whereas Cervantes's philosophizing dogs work a "talking cure" on Campuzano, Zayas makes a tortured cat a key agent in don Marcos' fatal disillusionment. In part, we might attribute this alteration to the increasingly pessimistic climate of seventeenth-century Spain, [8] as well as to Zayas' gender perspective. But why the change from dogs to a cat? The first answer might be that there is a cruelly comic logic to the use of a cat to chastise a simpleton who has so amply illustrated the dangers of buying "gato por liebre". However, looking at the historic association between cats,

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magic, and women and more specifically, female sexuality, discloses a more interesting explanation, one more revealing of Zayas' understanding of male attitudes toward women [9].

I suggest that if we read this and other Zayas stories metonymically, looking for the relation of contiguity between the more-or-less discontinuous elements, we find a meaning that is as much repressed as revealed by their articulation. By such a metonymic reading, we can find in the articulation of *El castigo de la miseria* Zayas's intuition of the unconscious logic behind masculine anxiety fantasies regarding the opposite sex. The logic is that imputed to her male narrator who would punish "pussy" to evoke and exorcise from it the devil that makes a fool of man, while also punishing the foolish man whose libidinal investment was in accumulating and hoarding gold "marcos" rather than in a productive desire for the opposite sex.

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To articulate meaning through the sort of metonymic reading I suggest requires that the reader acknowledge that s/he, in positing the points of contiguity supposedly hidden in the ellipses of narrative, is as much writing as reading meaning. To read thus becomes a dialectic between what Kristeva calls two *sujets en procès*, subjects in process or on trial, author and reader, in which meaning is never fully and finally inscribed, but always emerging in the intersections of their dialogue. Zayas's inscribed listeners model the process as they react divergently to the stories they "hear," and Zayas herself, in her closing paragraph to Fabio, invites him to visit the frame-tale protagonist Lisis in her convent to continue the conversation. As long as we critics keep that dialogue active, there will always be more to say about Zayas, as we each bring own concerns to the interchange, filling differently the ellipses of the unsaid, resolving differently her contradictions and paradoxes. Even other practitioners of psychoanalytic criticism are not likely to coincide completely in their analysis; compare, for example, my analysis of Zayas's fourth *desengaño*, *Tarde llega el desengaño* with that of Marcia Welles and Helen B. Levine, which highlights similar elements of the tale but takes a somewhat divergent path in interpreting them. Our analyzes were written concurrently but independently, and the result is two readings that complement each other in interesting ways [10].

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Whether or not the multiple students of Zayas employ psychoanalytic theory in reading her tales, I would venture to say that we too invite critical identification of our personal "hang-ups"/obsessions/symptoms as they are revealed in the analytical angles through which we interpret her tales. As I observe this pattern in reading our several interpretations, I am reminded that this is precisely the analytical function that Kristeva attributes to the interaction of the symbolic and the semiotic in the interactive process of reading. In this practice as in the analytic situation, says Kristeva, the subject is realized within language, as the analysand assumes the power of discourse initially attributed only to the analyst; but in the text,

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The absence of a represented focal point of transference prevents this process from becoming locked into an identification that can do no more than adapt the subject to social and family structures. To hamper transference, the text's analysis must produce the certainty that the analyst's place is empty, that "he" is dead, and that rejection can only attack signifying structures. . .

The text . . . comes to be the empty site of a process in which its readers become involved. The text turns out to be the analyst and every reader the analyzed. But since the structure

and function of language take the place of the focus of transference in the text, this opens the way for all linguistic, symbolic, and social structures to be put in process/on trial (emphasis in the original) (209-210).

Returning, then, to the question of what other productive ways I can envision for reading Zayas there are several paths that I see deserving more investigation. One is further rhetorical analysis, of Zayas's grammar as (il)logic and the ideological assumptions it reveals. I explored briefly in the last chapter of my book the telling effect of her abundant pre-positioning of adjectives, and her use of the rhetoric of exemplum, but I am sure that a combination of linguistic, psychoanalytic and Marxist analysis such as that done so well by Malcolm Read would be productive in studying Zayas. Similarly promising is the study now in progress by Nieves Romero-Díaz of the relationship between the work of Zayas and other *noveleros*, male and female, the growth of cities and the emergence of an urban bourgeoisie in early modern Spain.

The topic of Zayas's sources is probably inexhaustible, but heeding the clues she leaves in her writing can provide us with a better sense of the reading habits of the small group of literate women to which she belonged. She says in her "Al que leyere" preface that voracious reading habits such as her own can teach women literary skills despite their limited formal education. In identifying the selection of "foremothers" Zayas listed in that prologue—Argentaria, Temistoclea, Diotima, Aspano [Aspasia], Eudocia, Cenobia y Cornelia-- I suggested that Calderón's drama *La gran Cenobia* might have inspired Zayas's inclusion of that queen of Palmyra. That may indeed be partly the case, at least in reinforcing her fame; the influence of *El médico de su honra* is clearly visible in Zayas's *desengaños* 7 and 8, *Mal presagio casar lejos* and *El traidor contra su sangre*.. But I now believe that Lope de Vega's plays are a much more probable direct source for Zayas's selection of foremothers. Other than Ana Caro, Lope is the only living author singled out by name for praise by a Zayas narrator. Her debt to Lope de Vega's ironic contribution to the short-story genre, the *Novelas a Marcia Leonarda* (1621/1624) is clear and has already been explored; she rewrites his story *Las fortunas de Diana* as her ninth novella, *El juez de su causa*, taking her title too from an early Lope play.

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The lengthy list of learned women cited by the protagonist in Lope's play *La donzella Teodor* includes in one form or another all but one of those whom Zayas cites, in some cases in very similar terms. The defense of women's equality with men by Florela in *La prueba de los ingenios*, which precedes *La donzella Teodora* in Lope's *Novena parte*, may also be relevant to Zayas's arguments, although the textual parallels are less direct. Zayas says:

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Veremos lo que hicieron las que por algún accidente trataron de buenas letras, para que ya que no baste para disculpa de mi ignorancia, sirva para exemplar de mis atrevimientos. De Argentaria, esposa del poeta Lucano, refiere él mismo que le ayudó en la corrección de los tres libros de *La Farsalia*, y le hizo muchos versos que pasaron por suyos. Temistoclea, hermana de Pitágoras, escribió un libro doctísimo de varias sentencias. Diotima fué venerada de Sócrates por eminente. Aspano [Aspasia] hizo muchas lecciones de opinión en las academias. Eudoxa dexó escrito un libro de consejos políticos. Cenobia, un epítome de la *Historia Oriental*. Y Cornelia mujer de Africano, unas epístolas familiares, con

suma elegancia. (*Novelas 22*).

The list Lope gives his learned Teodor includes the following, along with many other names:

Sapho fue del verso autora,
que aora Saphico se llama,
Los versos de su marido
Lucano emendó Argentaria;
enseñó Filosofía
al gran Pericles Aspasia.
Damofila escriuió versos
dulces, a honor de Diana;
epístolas sentenciosas
Cornelia con Anastasia.
Astrología leyó
en Alexandria Hipathia,
Femonia halló el verso heroico,
y el lírico halló Theana.
Escriuió contra Teophrastro
Leoncia materias raras,
y por deidad fue tenida
por sus ciencias Sosipatra.
Cenobia escriuió la historia
de Oriente; Delbora sacra
fue Profeta de Israel,
y en Troya la gran Casandra.
Fue diuina en Teología
en Roma la Inglesa Iuana,
y Socrates de Diotima
aprendió cosas tan altas.
Leyó Areta muerto Aristipo,
y al Filosofo Pitagoras,
declaró Dama, . . . (28) (emphasis added).

The “Dama” linked with Pythagoras is probably Lope’s rendition of Themistoclea, or Aristoclea, the Delphic priestess said to have taught Pythagoras. Thus, Lope’s list includes all those whom Zayas names except Eudocia.. Since Lope’s listing continues to an exaggerated length, we might also attribute to his influence the fact that Zayas concludes her list of foremothers with a rhetorical “etcetera” indicating that the list could be extended indefinitely: “Y otras infinitas de la antigüedad, y de nuestros tiempos, que paso en silencio por no alargarme, y porque ya tendrás noticias de todo, aunque seas lego, y no hayas estudiado” [11].

If this play did in fact influence Zayas’s selection, her omission of Sappho is noteworthy, since it appears in Lope’s list just before Argentaria and Aspasia, whom she does include. The Greek poetess of Lesbos was commonly named in praise of women writers in Zayas’s time, and Lope compared Zayas to Sappho in the accolade to her in his *Laurel de Apolo*. Combining this omission with the sexual innuendos in Francesc Fontanella’s poetic roast of Zayas and her denial of the possibility of love between women seems to me to increase the possibility I raised in my book that Zayas was carefully avoiding association with Sappho as a foremother in sexual orientation as well as literary accomplishment [12].

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More exploration should also be done of the *Polyantheas* and *Summas of Morals* she suggests as sources in her “Al que leyere” preface. “Y que

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después que hay *Polianteas* en latín, y *Sumas morales* en Romance, los seglares, y las mujeres pueden ser letrados” (*Novelas* 22). Polyantheas were a kind of encyclopedic compendium of knowledge, of the sort parodied by Cervantes in the “Prólogo” to *Don Quixote*. They existed in Spanish as well as in Latin, a good example being the *Para todos* of Zayas’s friend Pérez de Montalban. The *Summas* in Spanish were comprehensive surveys of religious doctrine intended for laymen, in contrast to *Summae* in Latin, written either for theologians or for the use of secular clergy. Without the irony of a Cervantes or Lope, Zayas apparently sees in these tools a medium in which women can find the learning to enter the literary world. It would be instructive, therefore, to have a study that balanced her reliance on them in comparison with her use of the plays and novels from which she also drew.

Zayas’s “political” biography, so to speak, also presents a challenge for present and future Zayas scholars. Just why was this *madrileña* present in Barcelona in 1643 while French and Spanish troops fought outside the city for control of Cataluña? That is only the first of several puzzles raised by Francesc Fontanella’s treatment of her in the *Vejamen* he composed to conclude a poetic competition celebrated by the Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas in Barcelona that year. Given that presence in Cataluña, and the publication of both the *Novelas* and the *Desengaños* in Zaragoza, attempts to find more information on her later life should probably focus on archives in Cataluña. Furthermore, noting her dedication of the *Desengaños amorosos* to the Duke of Híjar, Shifra Armon’s study *Picking Wedlock* suggests a possible relationship to anti-Olivares factions during the Catalán rebellion that is intriguing.

And finally, a “whodunit” sort of question intrigues me: Who was (Zayas’s) Fabio? Despite what has been said repeatedly, the Fabio whom Zayas addresses in her concluding paragraph does not appear mysteriously, like a narrative rabbit from the hat. A Fabio *has* appeared before within her fictional world, in the opening story of the collection, as the pilgrim climbing Montserrat who discovered Jacinta, listened to her story and brought her back to society, where she chose exactly the same secular life in the convent that Lisis has just elected, consoled by visits from Celio. Hence, Zayas’s address to Fabio and her invitation to satisfy his desire to see Lisis with chaste visits to her convent binds together the ending of this last tale, the frame plot, and that of the first narrative. We might even say that it makes the entire collection one long multi-episodic exemplary story of the education of Jacinta/Lisis told to Fabio from beginning to end. Ruth El Saffar too overlooked the first Fabio, but noting a poetic exchange between Marfisa and Fabio sung between the last two novellas of the first volume, she posed the possibility that her work might be seen as a kind of riddle, an encoded message between another pair of lovers. Should we take this seriously? To do so risks falling back into the overworked and apparently naïve reading of Zayas’s stories as autobiographical. Or should we see that invocation through Marina Brownlee’s post-modern lens, as one more “marketing strategy” designed to titillate gossip-addicted readers? If so, it is a strategy that has hooked me, as it is the one “unsaid” that might one day lure me down just more path in Zayas studies. Whether I do in fact pursue it, however, I have no doubt that present and future students of Zayas will continue to identify new fields to explore as they engage in their own dialectic with both the said and the unsaid in her texts.

NOTES

1. I presented an initial version of this paper at a panel on Zayas organized by Marina Brownlee and chaired by Elizabeth Rhodes. Other panelists were Lisa Vollendorf and Sherry Velasco.
2. Marina Brownlee sees Zayas's desire for readers as absolutely central to the nature of her narratives. Brownlee lists as "marketing strategies" her titillating appealing to a "mass" readership drawn to ephemera, the tabloid "press" of her day and its sensational stories, her use of magic, the frequent appearance of sadomasochistic violence, and the paradoxical nature of her stories, whose unresolved tensions Brownlee sees as another market strategy, one that allows her to resist monological gendered typecasting and appeal to a diverse readership, while also defending herself against censorship. She also attributes to Zayas a conscious appeal to a human pleasure in gossip, which, rather contradictorily, Brownlee considers both a cultural constant and something particular to Early Modern Spain, a period obsessed with surveillance.
3. According to statistics offered by Sarah Nalle approximately 10 or 11 percent of the female population of Cuenca, Madrid and Toledo could read, as opposed to perhaps 60 percent of the male population.
4. For a more complete discussion, see Brooks, and also Clayton, who analyzes the approaches to the role of desire in narration in Brooks, Leo Bersani and Teresa de Lauretis.
5. See also the excellent article by Lou Charon-Deutsch.
6. Atienza Hernández in his article "Las mujeres nobles: Clase dominante, grupo dominado. Familia y orden social en el antiguo régimen" demonstrates this phenomenon historically in his analysis of noblewomen's position based on females in the family of the Duke of Osuna.
7. For a full analysis, see chapters 6 and 9 of Greer, 2000.
8. This is Foa's interpretation of the difference in the tales. She sees the general seventeenth-century climate of political and social *desengaño* in Spain reflected in the war between the sexes in Zayas' novels, and more particularly in the dominance of this tale by "la astucia, primera ley de la vida. . . . Zayas presenta aquí un cuadro bastante sombrío de la humanidad. En su novela no hay ni una nota de esperanza: todo es engaño, crueldad, falta de piedad y de compasión. La visión del mundo que expone María de Zayas es mucho menos optimista que la de Cervantes--en su novela no hay absolutamente ninguna esperanza de redención. Esto explica gran parte de los cambios que ella ha introducido en su obra" (1979, 144-45).
9. For details of this association, see Greer 2000, Chapter 6.
10. While our analyses both depart from Freud, Levine and Welles complement his work with that of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, whereas I draw on Lacan and Kristeva. Among many other insights, they point out the only partly expressed link in Zayas between Moorish castration of Christian captives and male restriction of female education and expression, which I also highlight in a more recent article (Greer, 2001). My gratitude to Marcia for kindly sending me a copy of this article in advance of the appearance of the Whitenack and Campbell collection of essays in which it appears. Reading it made me notice elements of *Tarde llega el desengaño* that I had overlooked, and gave a new angle on other aspects of this fascinating tale.
11. The text is in this case that of the first edition of Zaragoza, 1637, [f.q 7]. Between this princeps and the later version used by Amezuá, certain corrections were made in the text.
12. See Brown's edition of the Fontanella *Vejamen* and Greer 2000, chapters 1, 3 and 7.

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