

WOMEN IN THE PROSE OF MARÍA DE ZAYAS

Eavan O'Brien



Monografías

EAVAN O'BRIEN

WOMEN IN THE PROSE OF MARÍA
DE ZAYAS

TAMESIS

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WOMEN IN THE PROSE OF MARÍA DE ZAYAS

María de Zayas y Sotomayor published two volumes of novellas, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (1637) and *Desengaños amorosos* (1647), which enjoyed immense popularity in her day. She has recently been reinstated as a major figure of the Spanish Golden Age.

This study examines Zayas's prose through a gynocentric lens. Drawing on an extensive array of primary and secondary sources, and referring to the ideas of Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous, Raymond, and Genette, O'Brien reflects on the interactions of Zayas's women in such relationships as friendship, sisterhood, and motherhood, analyzing these interactions through the collections as a whole, and connecting the novellas with the frame stories, an aspect of Zayas's writing which has often been overlooked by critics.

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An earlier, more detailed study of *El jardín engañoso* appeared in 'Games in "The Garden of Deceit": A Seventeenth-Century Novella by María de Zayas y Sotomayor', *Modern Language Review*, 104 (October 2009) 4, 955–65. I am thankful to the *MLR* and to the Modern Humanities Research Association for permission to reprint some of this material.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BC</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Comediantes</i>
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Bulletin of Hispanic Studies</i>
<i>BSS</i>	<i>Bulletin of Spanish Studies</i>
<i>CI</i>	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
<i>CRR</i>	<i>Cincinnati Romance Review</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>Desengaños amorosos</i>
<i>HisJ</i>	<i>Hispanic Journal</i>
<i>HR</i>	<i>Hispanic Review</i>
<i>JHisP</i>	<i>Journal of Hispanic Philology</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MonR</i>	<i>Monographic Review</i>
<i>NAE</i>	<i>Novelas amorosas y ejemplares</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>RCEH</i>	<i>Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos</i>
<i>REH</i>	<i>Revista de estudios hispánicos</i>
<i>RFE</i>	<i>Revista de filología española</i>
<i>RLA</i>	<i>Romance Languages Annual</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Renaissance Quarterly</i>
<i>RR</i>	<i>Romanic Review</i>
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>

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Introduction

Zayas's Prose, a Feminine World

Quién duda, lector mío, que te causará admiración que una mujer tenga despejo no sólo para escribir un libro, sino para darle a la estampa, que es el crisol donde se averigua la pureza de los ingenios [...]

Quién duda, digo otra vez, que habrá muchos que atribuyan a locura esta virtuosa osadía de sacar a luz mis borrones, siendo mujer, que en opinión de algunos necios es lo mismo que una cosa incapaz.¹

In this defensive manner, María de Zayas y Sotomayor first addresses the readership of her *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (1637) in the 'Al que leyere' prologue. Through her confident defence of female intelligence, she strips her *captatio benevolentiae* of even the barest veil of humility. By contrast, Mariana de Carvajal, one of her successors in the Spanish novella genre, would later adopt a more bashful stance, seeking allowances to be made for 'los defectos de una tan mal cortada pluma' and referring to her *Navidades de Madrid* (1663) as 'aborto inútil de mi ingenio'.² Zayas's audacity is all the more striking when one takes into account the context of her literary enterprise; her introductory discourse is that of a 'Defensa de las mujeres', pre-dating Fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo's 1726 essay by almost ninety years.

We possess very little information regarding the life of María de Zayas, most of which derives from the findings of Manuel Serrano y Sanz. Documentation suggests that she was probably baptised in the Madrid parish of San Sebastián on September 12th 1590. She was the daughter of Fernando de Zayas y Sotomayor, an infantry captain who was granted a knighthood in

¹ Zayas y Sotomayor, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* [NAE], ed. J. Olivares, p. 159; *Desengaños amorosos* [DA], ed. A. Yllera. Henceforth, page numbers from these editions of Zayas's works will be included in parentheses after the relevant quotations.

² The modesty *topos* is also evident in Ana Caro's *Valor, agravio y mujer*, the closing lines of which read: 'Aquí, senado discreto, / *Valor, agravio y mujer* / acaban. Pídeos su dueño, / por mujer y por humilde, / que perdonéis sus defectos.' Such measures may have been intended to make the publication of women's writing more palatable to a broad readership. Caro, *Valor, agravio y mujer*, III. 2753; Carvajal y Saavedra, 'Al lector', in *Navidades de Madrid*, p. 5.

the prestigious military Order of Santiago, and of Doña María de Barasa.³ Apparently, she resided for most of her life in Madrid. Don Fernando served the seventh Count of Lemos during the period when the latter acted as Viceroy of Naples (1610–16). It is uncertain whether or not the Zayas family accompanied Don Fernando at this time; had the author experienced an Italian sojourn, it is conceivable that this could have exposed her to their popular novella genre, inspiring her creative interest.⁴ Certainly, she was in Madrid on 18th October 1617, when she added her signature to a book of the *Hermandad de defensores de la Inmaculada Concepción*.⁵ With regard to her literary output, she first became known as a poet, taking part in Madrid literary academies.⁶ From the 1620s, she composed verse eulogies to honour her eminent contemporary writers, including Miguel de Botello, Juan Pérez de Montalbán, Francisco de la Cueva, Antonio del Castillo de Larzával, and Lope de Vega. She evidently achieved recognition as a literary figure, receiving, for example, the hyperbolic praise of Lope de Vega in his *Laurel de Apolo* (1630):

¡Oh dulces hipocrénides hermosas!
 Los espinos pangeos
 aprisa desnudad, y de las rosas
 tejed ricas guirnaldas y trofeos
 a la inmortal doña María de Zayas,
 que sin pasar a Lesbos, ni a las playas
 del vasto mar Egeo,
 que hoy llora el negro velo de Teseo,
 a Safo gozará mitilenea
 quien ver milagros de mujer desea;
 porque su ingenio, vivamente claro,
 es tan único y raro
 que ella sola pudiera,

³ Serrano y Sanz mistakenly calls the author's mother 'Catalina de Barrasa', but 'María de Barasa' appears on her birth certificate (Serrano y Sanz, pp. 584–5).

⁴ Textual evidence makes a Neapolitan interlude appear likely. *La fuerza del amor* and the second part of *El traidor contra su sangre* take place in Naples during the Count of Lemos's reign as Viceroy. In *La fuerza del amor*, Zayas eulogises this Viceroy, 'Pedro Fernández de Castro, Conde de Lemos, nobilísimo, sabio y piadoso príncipe, cuyas raras virtudes y excelencias no son para escritas en papeles, sino en láminas de bronce y en las lenguas de la fama' (NAE 368). On the second night of the second set of *saraos*, the narrator refers to Isabel's song as inspired by 'mi señora', the wife of the ninth Count of Lemos, which suggests a continuing relationship between the author and this illustrious family (DA 259). See Yllera, 'Introducción', pp. 16–17.

⁵ Barbeito Carneiro, 'El Madrid Inmaculista', p. 477, note 20. Zayas signed this book at the 'Convento de la Concepción Jerónima de Madrid'.

⁶ Namely, she participated in Francisco de Mendoza's *academia*, and possibly in that of Sebastián Francisco de Medrano also. See King, p. 59, note 81.

no sólo pretender la verde rama,
 pero sola ser sol de tu ribera,
 y tú por ella conseguir más fama
 que Nápoles por Claudia, por Cornelia
 la sacra Roma y Tesbas por Targelia.⁷

She reciprocated this courtesy by glorifying 'aquel príncipe del Parnaso, Lope de Vega Carpio, cuya memoria no morirá mientras el mundo no tuviere fin' (*DA* 369).⁸ Scholars have postulated that she knew at first hand the cities that she enthusiastically describes in her novellas, although this is by no means certain; however, there is strong evidence to prove that she was in Barcelona in 1643.⁹ There are no further contemporary references to her after publication of the *Desengaños amorosos* in 1647, and the date and place of her death are unknown. Two death certificates (dated 1661 and 1669) bear her name – not an uncommon one – neither of which may be authentic. The paucity of information has led many scholars to lose their footing in the terrain of conjecture, speculating whether she spent the last years of her life in a convent, like many of her prose protagonists.

The only known example of Zayas's writing for the theatre is *La traición en la amistad*.¹⁰ Today, her fame rests primarily upon twenty short prose narratives distributed evenly in two collections – *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* and *Parte segunda del sarao, y entretenimiento honesto*, later known as *Desengaños amorosos* – which were first published in Zaragoza, in 1637 and 1647, respectively. Jaime Moll demonstrates that she had probably prepared a version of the former work as early as 1626, but the Consejo de Castilla's suspension of licences for printing *comedias* and novellas (between 1625 and 1634) delayed publication.¹¹ Once published, her prose was widely read in her lifetime, only lagging behind works by Miguel de Cervantes, Francisco de Quevedo, and Mateo Alemán in terms of commercial success.¹² In *La garduña de Sevilla y anzuelo de las bolsas* (1642), Alonso de Castillo Solórzano lavishly praised her first prose work:

⁷ Lope de Vega, *Laurel de Apolo*, VIII. 579.

⁸ Zayas also composed panegyric poems to commemorate the deaths of Lope (1636) and Pérez de Montalbán (1639).

⁹ See Kenneth Brown.

¹⁰ There is much debate among scholars with regard to the composition date of this *comedia*. In *Para todos* (1632), Pérez de Montalbán mentions that Zayas 'tiene acabada una comedia de excelentes coplas, y un libro para dar á la estampa, en prosa y verso, de ocho novelas ejemplares' (Serrano y Sanz, p. 584). If we assume that he was referring to *La traición en la amistad*, we can estimate that Zayas completed this play not long before 1632. It pre-dates the complete version of the *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, which includes ten novellas.

¹¹ Moll, 'La primera edición'.

¹² Brownlee, *The Cultural Labyrinth of María de Zayas*, p. 6.

En estos tiempos luce y campea con felices aplausos el ingenio de doña María de Zayas y Sotomayor, que con justo título ha merecido el nombre de Sibila de Madrid, adquirido por sus admirables versos, por su felice ingenio y gran prudencia; habiendo sacado de la estampa un libro de diez novelas, que son diez asombros para los que escriben este género; pues la meditada prosa, el artificio de ellas y los versos que interpola es todo tan admirable, que acobarda las más valientes plumas de nuestra España.¹³

Famously, Cervantes had already claimed in the *Novelas ejemplares* (1613) to be 'el primero que [ha] novelado en lengua castellana', reinventing the Italian novella as a Spanish genre; Lope de Vega later brought his own creative genius to bear on his *Novelas a Marcia Leonarda* (1621/1624).¹⁴ The Italian novella had immoral connotations; for this reason, in Zayas's *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, Laura names their stories *maravillas*, 'que con este nombre quiso desempalagar al vulgo del de novelas, título tan enfadoso que ya en todas partes le aborrecen' (NAE 168).

The genre to which Zayas's prose pertains has belatedly acquired the title of *novela cortesana*, this being coined by Agustín González de Amezúa y Mayo in his *Formación y elementos de la novela cortesana* (1929). He described the genre thus:

La novela cortesana, tal como la desarrollaron la mayoría de sus cultivadores en el siglo XVII, tiene por escenario y campo de sus proezas [...] casi exclusivamente a la Corte y ciudades populosas, y esta circunstancia, tan peculiar, es la que me ha movido a denominarla así. El fondo de la intriga es también, invariablemente, con muy raras excepciones, el amor; sus protagonistas, caballeros, hidalgos, gente de viso, en fin, que vegeta en la ociosidad y opulencia de estas metrópolis. A su vez, la privativa condición social de sus personajes impondrá los valores morales que en ella juegan. Las dos ideas dominantes en todo caballero castellano de aquel tiempo, los dos polos en cuyo derredor gira su vida son el Amor y el Honor.¹⁵

Zayas's novellas share the genre's common features: the urban setting, protagonists of noble birth, and amorous intrigues. By the time that she penned her novellas, the conventions of this seventeenth-century genre were well on their way towards becoming established. Nonetheless, she put her personal stamp on the stylised subject matter of the novella genre. Notably, as Amezúa

¹³ Castillo Solórzano, p. 184.

¹⁴ Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, p. 45. The title of Zayas's first volume may have been inspired by Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares*; the titular emphasis on the works' exemplary qualities is probably designed to mitigate the detrimental effect of association with the salacious Italian novella genre.

¹⁵ Amezúa y Mayo, *Formación y elementos*, pp. 38, 48.

observes, 'el galán y la dama' are the principal protagonists of the *novela cortesana*. In Zayas's novellas, the importance of the *dama* expands, and she becomes more than a mere type. The complex ramifications of women's interaction in her prose will be the subject of my study.

Zayas's originality is undimmed by the fact that it was attained after having assimilated miscellaneous works by several authors, including Italian *novelle* by Giovanni Boccaccio and Matteo Bandello. Moreover, this knowledge of literary source materials demonstrates her remarkably extensive reading.¹⁶ In 'Al que leyere' (*NAE*), she includes a list of illustrious women, linking herself to her foremothers to legitimise her own literary endeavour.¹⁷ Perhaps this measure is also intuitively designed to alleviate what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar would later call women's 'anxiety of authorship'.¹⁸ The novella became a relatively popular genre for seventeenth-century women writers in the Spanish-speaking world, as evidenced by the Portuguese Leonor de Meneses's *El desdeñado más firme* (1655), in addition to the aforementioned novellas of Zayas and Mariana de Carvajal.

The changing reception of Zayas's novellas reveals much about the world beyond her text. In relation to the time-bound reception of the French *Amadis de Gaule*, Marian Rothstein observes that 'a text requires completion by a reader and that reading is a non-neutral activity, strongly marked by the moment, by the world, in which it is performed'.¹⁹ Zayas apparently escaped immediate censure, despite writing under the strictures of post-Tridentine conditions, and the popularity of her prose continued unabated through the eighteenth century, declining thereafter.²⁰ More than two hundred years later, critics schooled in Victorian standards of decency, such as George Ticknor and Ludwig Pfandl, condemned her works on moral grounds.²¹ They deemed her works to be inappropriate and immodest, as well as morally reprehensible.

¹⁶ Edwin B. Place justifiably considers Zayas's novellas to be 'patchwork' compositions. They continue to provide fertile ground for literary source studies. Place, *María de Zayas*, p. 10.

¹⁷ For an excellent study of the foremothers whom Zayas cites in her prologue, see Greer, *María de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales*, pp. 72–8.

¹⁸ This is the female author's 'radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her [...] Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.' Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 49 (Gilbert and Gubar's italics).

¹⁹ Rothstein, p. 886.

²⁰ Welles and Gossy, p. 508. For further information regarding the reception of Zayas's collections, see Greer, *María de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales*, Chapter 2.

²¹ Pfandl and Ticknor were particularly appalled by Zayas's *El prevenido engañado*, referring to it as 'la obscena novela' and 'one of the most gross I remember to have read [...] [a tale of] shameless indecency'. Pfandl, p. 369; Ticknor, II, 143, note 34.

sible. Later still, the emergence of the feminist movement induced a welcome surge of critical interest in Zayas's works, leading early twentieth-century critics to view the novellas through the lens of feminism. Since the recent 'rediscovery' of Zayas's prose, several studies have praised her exploration of the erotic in her novellas.²²

There has been a steady output of journal-length articles on Zayas's novellas, many of which are worthy of merit, although short studies run the risk of losing sight of broad tendencies and patterns across the novellas. In particular, the novellas' interconnectedness with the frame narrative tends to be overlooked by scholars, in favour of the tales' more sensational events. Also, focusing on the novellas as a patriarchal world creates the inherent danger of sidelining women. Relations of courtship and marriage are undeniably of import, although they do not solely populate the world of Zayas's texts, nor can they be examined, in isolation, to explain how a conclusion that is almost devoid of heterosexual pairings is 'el más felice que se pudo dar' (DA 510). By the final paragraphs of the *Desengaños amorosos*, male protagonists are conspicuous by their absence. Thus, my study represents a new contribution to the study of Zayas's prose, unearthing a neglected and innovative aspect: its gynocentrism.

María Jesús Fariña Busto and Beatriz Suárez Briones have observed astutely that 'el universo emocional más importante tanto dentro de las *Novelas* como de los *Desengaños* es un universo femenino'.²³ Relatively recently, the significance of women's interrelationships has also come to the attention of psychoanalysts. For example, according to Nancy Chodorow's female personality theory, a girl forms her gender identity positively, in becoming like the mother with whom she begins life in symbiotic merger, and the self continues to be defined through social relationships for the rest of women's lives.²⁴ Where apposite, I will make reference to the poststructuralist theories of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, among others. Across five chapters, I will view the social world of Zayas's twenty novellas through a feminine lens. This effectively represents a novel approach to Zayas's prose works. In so doing, I will pay particular attention to the frame narrative, which binds these stories together. For the study of the texts' narrative levels, I have recourse to Gérard Genette's structuralist theory.

Specifically, the first two chapters will examine Zayas's portrayal of women's friendships and sisterhood and will also detail their subversion, conceptualising the novellas and frame narrative cohesively. Then, in the third chapter, I organise women's interaction as represented by Zayas's prose

²² Goytisolo and Parrilla have focused on the erotic theme; also, several scholars have studied homoerotic undercurrents in the novellas.

²³ Fariña Busto and Suárez Briones, 'Desde/hacia la Otra', p. 123.

²⁴ See Gardiner, p. 352.

along the axis of class (and, to a limited degree, that of race). The fourth and fifth chapters analyse mother–daughter relationships, including secular and surrogate variants, as well as the divine role of Mary, as Mother of God. Thus, I will concentrate on the gynocentric aspect of Zayas’s ‘virtuosa osadía’ in publishing these two collections of novellas (*NAE* 159): her depiction, through literature, of a feminine world.