The Role of Women’s Discourse, Men’s Honor, and Domestic Abuse in María de Zayas’s The Disenchantments of Love

Horacio Sierra

This work examines Zayas’s *The Disenchantments of Love* and finds the frame narrative’s *sarao* functioning as a convent-like rhetorical space that engenders the free discussion of women’s issues. By examining these disenchantments through close readings and a sociohistorical context that pays attention to the influence of the *Siete Partidas* of Alfonso the Wise, popular conceptions of infamy and men’s honor, and the power of women’s gossip in Golden Age Spain, this essay emphasizes how Zayas exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal society by creating a discursive community of women’s voices that functions like a convent. By including characters both in the novellas and in the frame narrative that circumvent their role in the sexual economy by retiring to a convent, Zayas employs the nun as a literary trope for interrogating gendered power structures and engaging in a *querelle des femmes* discussion that rejects all forms of domestic abuse. This paper analyzes the strategies that women in the text use to respond to patriarchal violence.

Zayas’s female characters refuse to be silent about their abuse, and by telling their stories, they not only question the “honor” of their abusers, but also recuperate women’s gossip as a potent social weapon. The analysis juxtaposes Zayas’s tales of domestic violence with those of Cervantes, arguing that Zayas offers a subversive *imitation* of her predecessor’s work.
Zayas’s tales not only offer readers the voyeuristic pleasure of eavesdropping on the conversations of a quasi-aristocratic academia, but they also subversively expose the power of women to take revenge on men for the wrongs they have committed against women by constructing a man’s mala fama, which could lead to his being labeled an infame. Zayas’s subversive empowerment of nuns and secular women subsequently diminishes the importance of the most common form through which a man was thought to be dishonored—a wife’s, fiancée’s, sister’s, mother’s, or daughter’s infidelity—and asserts the power inherent in a woman’s ability to truly dishonor a man by publicly revealing his sins and shortcomings through talk and story-telling. Women telling other women tales about their female brethren empowers them in one of the only ways non-aristocratic women had available—by telling stories that repudiate the lies told by men about women, by sharing information about the safety and opportunities that a convent affords women, and by creating narratives that inject a feminist discourse into the male-dominated culture. Such conversations can flourish within the walls of convents that function as same-sex communities of discourse.

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