

Do you think zayas is
supporting or
subverting the
dominant ideology of
seventeen...



The period in Spain between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed what has come to be known as the greatest era of Spanish history.

Not only did Spain see the peak of its power as an empire, the era also produced magnificent pieces of art and literature. This was all in a time where new fundamentals and ideals shaped the Spanish culture into unfamiliar territories. These ideals were experimented by artists in their works in order to criticize or commend them, or at least to make the reader/audience identify the society in which they lived and question it for themselves. Maria de Zayas y Sotomayor did just that in her *Novelas Amorasas y Ejemplares*. She used seventeenth century ideology to challenge the verbal disapproval women received at the time.

Whether she subverted or supported this ideology can be seen by examining her views on the fundamental ideals of the time, primarily honour, the Church, and gender roles. A seventeenth century Spanish gentleman could only have a significant social standing if he had honour. Honour was the most highly regarded attribute of a man at the time, and could sometimes quite literally ‘make or break’ him. Honour was more important than love or marriage, and very often a couple’s marriage was carried out only if it ensured that both were marrying into honourable blood. However, a man’s honour rested primarily in the hands of his wife. If his wife behaved in a suitable and honourable manner, it reflected on her husband.

1 Quite ironic, seeing that the seventeenth century Spanish woman had few freedoms and powers to exercise, yet she controlled the fate of her husband, who would have had many freedoms, by ruling society’s perception of him. If

a woman had acted in a dishonourable way, for example, having relations with another man, there was an unwritten law that the husband should avenge his honour. A popular way of avenging this honour in Golden Age drama was to murder the wife and her lover, without needing witnesses, which was required in real laws, but nevertheless occurred in Golden Age society. ² In the Novellas, honour represents women's vulnerability, or the power that men hold over them. For this reason, there is insistence that women assume responsibility for their own honour, to such a degree that they should defend themselves and women's good name.

This message is underlying in *La Burlada Aminta y venganza del honour*. It is a feminist message, one that sees Zayas trying to maintain equality between men and women, and that they are both entitled to avenge honour. The theme of avenging honour remains in *La Burlada Aminta*, only it is a woman who seeks revenge for her inflicted dishonour. Maria de Zayas regarded female honour and the related concept of female vengeance as a vital aspect of the feminist question. ³ The heroine of the story seeks out the man who imposed the dishonour on her and murders him.

This assumes that Zayas is not against the traditional way of maintaining honour or even against regaining it in an immoral way. The only idea subverted is that a woman has the right to avenge honour as well, and should not be the victim. Therefore the dominant ideology in terms of avenging honour is supported by Zayas, but only somewhat subverted with the substitution of a male for a female. Religion was also a highly regarded part of Golden Age society. In Zayas' stories, there is usually a scene in a

church, or a reference to God, or Satan. Satan makes an appearance in *El Jardin Enganoso*, but he is shown in a good light.

He eventually helps out the main characters so that none need die: “ Y asi, para que el mundo se admre de que en mi pudo haber virtud, toma don Jorge”.....

. “ yo te suelto la obligacion, que no quiero alma de quien tan bien se sabe vencer”(p. 532, *Novelas*) In a society where Christianity is very important, a positive reference to Satan would deem to be blasphemous. In *Aminta*, Jacinto's lover Flora addresses Aminta in what could be taken as a lesbian manner, referring to her beauty and elegance. Aminta returns the favour, by also praising Flora for her looks.

She also mentions that if Flora looked at herself in the mirror, she would satisfy herself, implying that a woman, not a man, would please her. The audacity of Zayas to have such a sexual conversation in a church makes a statement about her view of religion. Since we are not well informed of the details of Zayas' personal life, we can only make assumptions about her own sexuality. If she was a lesbian, this may be her condemnation of the Christian church's disapproval of gay couples. In *El Jardin Enganoso*, Satan may be a metaphor for her sexuality, and although the church condemns Satan (i. e.

lesbianism) she presents Satan in a considerate and compassionate way, thereby rebuking the Church's stance on such issues. It is not so much an attack on the church, but on its opinions and beliefs. She regularly mentions

the Church in her stories, so it may be taken that she does not completely
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deplore the Christian faith. So we can assume she supports the seventeenth century regard for the Church, but has her own variation on it, and slightly challenges it.

The gender issue that Zayas confronts in her stories seems to be established in her introductory passage, *Al que leyere*. She says that the reason women are considered incompetent and inadequate compared to men, is due to the lack of education and opportunities that women receive, and not down to nature which is what the majority of men would think in the seventeenth century. Thus, in her stories, she reinstates this observation, by giving her female protagonists 'masculine' characteristics, such as bravery, honour, and even goes to the extent of cross-dressing to complete the crossover between male and female characteristics. But ultimately it is a woman behind all these 'masculine' qualities, which Zayas draws on to reinstate her point that a woman is just as smart and capable as a man. 4 In two stories, *La Burlada Aminta* and *El Juez de su Causa* does Zayas use the cross dressing to promote her feminist views.

In *La Burlada Aminta*, the minute Aminta dresses as a man to avenge her honour, she adopts a braver persona and even vows to undertake the task of actually killing her enemy. Her partner in this task is a man, and it would be naturally understood that the man in the pair would be the avenger of the lady's honour, and would himself commit the murder. But as it is, Aminta carries out the murder, she assumes the masculine role, thereby reducing her partner to the feminine role, an evident reversal or subversion of the masculine/feminine roles. It is even taken to the extent that in the closing end of this story, the narrator makes reference to the couple's happiness, <https://assignbuster.com/do-you-think-zayas-is-supporting-or-subverting-the-dominant-ideology-of-seventeenth-century-spain-essay/>

but mentions that they are lacking children to completely fulfil this happiness: ...

que solo le falta a esta buena senora tener hijos, para ser del todo dichosa (p. 247, Novelas) This exaggerates the extent to which Aminta has become 'masculine', so much so that she does not perform the most feminine act of all, that of child-bearing. In *El Juez de su causa*, after Estela has been kidnapped and then rescued, she dresses as a man and joins the army, eventually reaching the highly esteemed post of viceroy. Whilst in *La Burlada* Aminta, the reason for cross-dressing is because Aminta wants to avenge her honour, there is no reason for Estela's masquerade.

Nevertheless, she becomes a great warrior, which consequently warrants her title of viceroy. Here Zayas is saying that a woman cannot only be equalled to a man by honour, but intellectually and physically too. It is not until both heroines, Aminta and Estela, don men's clothing that they adopt these masculine roles. For instance, before Estela turned into 'Don Fernando' she used the feminine way of screaming when a man attacks her; she shows no masculine qualities there.

However, once dressed up as a man, she becomes a brave and skilled warrior. Aminta too, develops a brave attitude once she is in disguise as a man. This plays on the idea that despite Zayas' argument that a woman is just as able as a man, appearance as a man plays a strong role in this. Could the protagonists employ the same male characteristics had they not dressed as men? In this sense, the idea that 'men' are the more competent gender is supported, but the fact remains that it is actually women performing the acts

of bravery and honour, another slight twist to the principal ideology. One cannot deny that Zayas is a feminist, but she does not condemn men.

Her views are balanced. Her collection does not seek to invoke a revolt against men; she simply highlights the oppression and few opportunities that women faced in that era. In an age where ideas were contradicted and opposites were frequently used in drama, Zayas simply draws on these contradictions to accentuate this oppression. Her message is only derogatory to sexism, not Spanish society as a whole. Margaret Greer said in her book: *Maria de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men*: “‘ Al que le yere ‘ is, in its rhetorical strategy, the linguistic equivalent of hurling a gauntlet at one’s opponent and then curtsying to him” (p.

64) Zayas undoubtedly questions areas of Spanish society, but maintains a certain loyalty to it as well. She both supports and subverts common realities. She does not directly denounce any area of seventeenth century Spanish society, but only asks that women are included in these areas.